Using Book Clubs to Improve Student Identity and Motivation in Reading

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Abstract
In this research study, we interviewed four seventh-grade, under-performing students in Ontario about their experiences as part of a summer book club. We found that students’ identities as readers and their sense of belonging within a learning community was supported in the book club community.

Introduction
This research explores the use of a book club in a classroom of students who were attending summer school because they were identified by their teachers. The following research question guided our study: How does using a book club in summer school influence students’ identities as readers?

Reading is a social practice (Street, 1984), that is facilitated by book clubs. Book clubs are a community of learners where students can take risks, grow and mature, and grapple with difficult, frustrating, or, at times, graphic concepts. In other words, a community of learning is a space in which students can create authentic knowledge and understanding that simply cannot be duplicated (Kaagan & Headley, 2010). In classrooms teachers should create spaces where students can dialogue about their ideas (Polleck, 2010). When students talk and express their ideas, share with and listen to others, they formulate ideas and new understandings. Book clubs allow students to engage in authentic dialogue, share ideas, and create knowledge individually and communally that otherwise would not exist (Kong & Fitch, 2002; Fall & Webb, 2000). Community building activities, such as a book club, allow its participants to feel included in an entity that is larger from themselves, help them explore their own identity which is constantly fluctuating, and engage in meaningful conversations not simply about the book, but about other matters of importance as well (Broughton, 2002).

Research Design
Participants
Robert was teaching a grade 7 summer course on language in an urban Ontario school. This class consisted of approximately 16 students identified as underachieving in literacy. Based on a classroom attitudinal survey, a majority of these students believed they were “stupid” or “dumb”. Many of the students stated that they were unable to read and did not enjoy reading.

The study included four girls from this class who volunteered to take part in an after-school book club. All participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. The participants had not met prior to the course. In the following, we present a brief biography of each student.

Rena: Rena is a reserved student. She volunteered for the study as she was interested in finding out more about the context of Dr. Mortenson and how he accomplished so much so easily. She found him to be a fascinating individual. She is willing to speak during small and large group instructions but rarely challenges peers’ ideas or defends her ideas when challenged by others. In writing, she tends to be very brief and has stated that she does not enjoy writing activities.
Her writing scores are below the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations.

Anita: Anita is a very quiet student who rarely if ever shares ideas orally during classroom or small group conversations. She has stated that she feels she has very little to contribute to these discussions and that her ideas often are not ready to be shared or are not worthy of being said. She also does not enjoy writing activities and her reading and oral communication scores are below the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations.

Lena: Lena is an upbeat student who will share her ideas in group discussions. She appears very artistic and prefers to show her understanding in various ways different than expected of her such as through visual arts instead of writing. She does not mind reading according to her initial response when asked but feels as though she is not a strong reader. Her oral communication grades are approaching the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations but her reading and writing scores are at least one full grade below.

Sarah: Sarah is a very sensitive individual often seeking out how others are feeling and inquiring the reasons behind their feelings. She is easily affected by the mood of others around. She reads, according to her, because she has to but does not find reading to be an enjoyable activity. Her oral communication grades are approaching the academic standard as measured by Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s expectations but her reading and writing scores are at least one full grade below.

Setting Up the Book Club

Prior to setting up this book club, Robert had read the picture book by Greg Mortenson (2009) titled Listen to the Wind. The students requested more information and asked to read the original text in which the picture book was based upon. The students suggested that they should start their own book club and read the author’s book Three Cups of Tea (2008). Robert met with Dalia and asked if she wanted to start a research study in his after-school book club.

During the first book club meeting, we worked with the students to establish the format of the club as well as to provide each student with the text. We also established expectations for the book club. The students wanted the freedom to be able to read more if they were able. Thus, students were allowed to read as much of the text as they wished as long as they met two conditions: 1) they read the minimum agreed upon amount by each week and 2) that if they have read more than the minimum, they would not discuss future events of the book until all other parties had read up until that point.

As it was very informal and there were only six people in the room, we also agreed that there was no need to raise hands and wait for your turn. Instead, individuals were able to speak freely provided we agreed not to speak over one another and were respectful. During these discussions, we implemented a variety of interventions, such as asking probing questions and modeling different reading strategies to support the learning of reading for the students in the group. For example, on several occasions, we asked students if they were able to support their claims or ideas from the text.

We acted as facilitators but encouraged students to take leadership roles in the discussion. Given the context of the book and its connections with world events, several discussions also included the book’s connection and relationship to these events. At times, it
was necessary to provide explanation of these events, which was done by other students in the group as well as the facilitators.

Collaboratively, the students and researchers discussed how they would demonstrate their understanding and knowledge. An initial idea by one of the students was to write a summary of each chapter. After much debate, it was clear that other members did not want to participate in this activity. Instead, the group agreed that they would demonstrate their knowledge in a manner best suited for them. As this was an optional and volunteer group, no formal assessment of knowledge regarding the book took place.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the end of the book club sessions, we interviewed all participants using a semi-structured format. Students were asked to discuss their feelings about the book club as a whole, as well as their individual attitudes towards reading. One follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted with two of the participants, one school semester following the study. They were again asked about their reading habits, performance, and attitudes.

The interview questions used during the semi-structured interview were as follows:

I. How did you enjoy the book club?
II. What would you keep the same and/or what would you change about it?
III. A. Would you participate in another book club? B. Would you participate in a book club in your regular classroom if it was available?

It was a semi-structured follow-up interview question format and was very informal and discussion based. Thus, we loosely followed these questions but, just like the format of our book club, we allowed the individual girls to participate in the creation and direction of the conversation/ interview.

After transcribing all of the interviews and combining the relevant information (i.e., notes on body contact, conversations, discussions, written word, and anecdotal records) from the field notes from the class as well as from the book club, we coded the results into two categories: social interactions and identity as readers.

Findings

Social Interactions

Initially, students were reluctant and shy not wanting to share ideas or discuss the book. For example, when talking about her initial experience in the group, Anita said:

I felt invisible in the group. At first, we didn’t really know anyone, it is just like we knew about five students and then when you like get to know them from the book club you like know who they are and their personality ... in recess we didn’t usually talk but when we started the book club, then we kind of knew each other and we started to talk about the book and then in recess time, we started like to talk to each other when we have free time.

They sat in a traditional sense, one student per chair, feet on the floor. Towards the end of the book club, students demonstrated a positive change in attitude and behavior noted by the observers when seen sitting on desks, sitting on each other’s legs, playing with each other’s
hair, talking with one another in rapid succession instead of waiting and raising their hands, and without waiting for the instructor’s prompts.

Outside of the book club, the students became collegial with one another calling each other at home, and making plans to socialize in events outside of the book club. Rena stated, "For us in summer school, we didn’t really know anyone, it is just like we knew about five students and then when you like get to know them from the book club you like know who they are and their personality". It also led to a deep, connected friendship with one another because they shared their thoughts about the book. This is not only exclusive to the book club members, as through time other students in the class started to ask book club members and talk with them. Gradually, those students began communicating with one another more regularly and friendships slowly developed, which extended beyond the class. More importantly their discussions also extended beyond assigned class work to include facts from their life and other topics.

Members of the book club displayed a greater level of confidence speaking in the class. This was observed by the number of times they independently offered to share their ideas and participate in whole-class discussions. Rena said, "I learned new things about myself and others ... [i]f I think I have a good point I share it ... [book clubs] help you participate more in class discussions". The quality of their ideas shared appeared to be well-thought out and logical compared to their previous whole-class responses which seemed scattered and hesitant. This led to a richer, deeper, and more meaningful discussion which included the entire class.

Identity as Readers
Initially, members of the book club shared that they were not readers and writers, that they didn’t like the activities, and believed they were not able to complete activities that involved these skills with any degree of success. Following the book club, these same students felt as though they could read and write successfully. They gained a significant amount of self-confidence and no longer believed they were under-performing or under-achieving as they were labelling upon entering the summer school program. The students now felt that they could attempt most of the work that they had and would be presented with in school and, outside of school. They began to enjoy literacy rich activities such as reading to a relative and keeping a journal or diary. The lens in which these students used to view their selves was completely transformed. Sarah said, "I enjoy reading to my own limit", while Anita said, "I did enjoy the book club. It was an amazing experience. I would organize a book club [in my own school]." "I would love to participate in this [the book club] again if it was in a regular classroom," shared Rena.

Reflections
Through our book club experience, we found that the safe and comfortable environment of the book club supported students’ collective and collaborative learning and their confidence as readers.

Safe & Comfortable Environment
Students said that book clubs created a space where they could ask questions without being laughed at and not be concerned about sharing ideas. Concerns about teasing, feeling embarrassed, unworthy or less than other people and their ideas, no longer existed. No matter how on- or off-track their thoughts and ideas were, the group was supportive and assisted them
in making sense of their ideas. More often than not, students said that having a dialogue about their ideas assisted them in better understanding the text.

Robert found that, as a facilitator of a book club, he needed to ensure that students could engage in rich, authentic conversations without mocking or teasing them. He addressed situations where a student was teased immediately with the group, finding it useful to include the group in the conversation. This discussion also deepened students’ understandings as to why teasing happens, why it is unproductive and how teasing is different from productive conversations in where members disagree on an idea.

Collective & Collaborative Learning

The students identified how important it was to read the book together and talk about their ideas, questions, and concerns on an on-going basis. This allowed them to check-in with one another to make certain they understood the narrative and to correct any misconceptions with each other. They sometimes shared similar questions that they were able to solve as a group simply through their conversations at book clubs. Other times, they posed a question and argued over opinions, referencing the book to support their ideas.

As a facilitator, Robert found that it was important to allow and encourage students to bring in outside questions into the discussion. In our group, one member brought in the effects of 9/11 and how that would impact the book. From an outsider’s perspective, this may seem off-topic and a ‘waste of time’; however, it led to a rich discussion that impacted their understanding of the text.

Overall, the researchers believe the project and in turn, the research, was an overwhelming success and had a positive impact on those students directly and indirectly involved. Through the use of a book club in a learning community, students identified as under-performing in literacy, improved their literacy skills. Through this process, they also positively improved their self-identification and self-perception. These positive transformations were demonstrated to transfer with the students outside of the classroom and into the years shortly following the book club, suggesting that these changes are likely to be long lasting or permanent. Larger studies are necessary to investigate this possible finding. Additionally, a few outstanding questions still remain:

1 - What can teachers do to transform this knowledge to other academic subjects? For example how would this work in a mathematics course? What would it look like? How would it be implemented?
2 - What is the best format or structure teachers should use in implementing book clubs in regular classrooms? We recognize the average class size in Ontario is approximately twenty-six students. How will teachers overcome this challenge? What would a book club look like in a class that large? How will teachers access the necessary materials for this strategy? How will it be assessed?
3 - How will teachers select the text to be used? Recognizing our study, all students were reading at similar academic levels, in a regular classroom, this is often not the case. How will teachers then meet the needs of all learners? For example, in our study, all students agreed on one text. In our class, our teacher provided a list of approved texts and we were asked to select our top two choices. These solutions may not be reasonable for the regular classroom teacher.
4 - What is the role of mixed gender in participating in a book club? How would having different genders in the book club influence its results and outcomes? Although we suspect,
based on our larger class community, it would have no negative impacts, since there were no males in our study, we are unable to make this conclusion.

In conclusion, students participating in this book club showed us that we can create an environment that students can take risks, feel comfortable expressing their opinions, questions and ideas, and are able to get to know peers and develop meaningful relationships.

References


Authors’ Biographies

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