

Book Buddies: Kid Tested, Teacher Approved!

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Abstract:

Can students and teachers find a way to enhance an already successful Book Buddy Program? Will adding a writing component do the trick? This inquiry delves into how children in kindergarten and fourth grade can expand relationships and a sense of community to gain a more meaningful and educational experience. We encourage you to read and find out how writing influenced our Book Buddy Program.

A. Background Information

Description of Teaching Context

Teachers across the country brainstorm ways to get their students enthusiastic about learning. They try to think of the most exciting lessons to ensure that the students are engaged in their education. One way that teachers have helped students of multiple grade levels become excited about reading is to form Book Buddy Programs. These programs have brought together two groups of children of differing ages to read together, each benefiting the other in some way. In the State College Area School District's Language Arts Continuum, it is stated that "A more proficient reader may be paired with a less proficient reader, to serve as a consultant and perhaps even to help the less proficient reader develop more effective writing strategies" (2003). The older groups of students serve as tutors, mentors, and role models, while the younger groups help boost the self esteem and skills of the older students. Classes that are Book Buddies meet once a week to share books and read to one another. Each student is paired with one or two other students from another grade level so that relationships are fostered between grades and so that the buddies can help one another in different ways.

As teachers, we look for ways to make learning meaningful for our students. We did not have to look far because enthusiastic learners were making meaningful connections and having beneficial experiences right before our eyes. This was happening in a Book Buddy Program shared by our students at Corl Street Elementary School with a full day kindergarten class and a fourth grade class. This is a neighborhood school, which really strengthens the sense of community within the building. The Book Buddy

Program is one approach that the teachers and administrators use to promote that sense of community in a very powerful way.

What Led Us to this Particular Inquiry Project and Wonderings

As we sat and observed our students during this program, we discussed how much our individual classes benefited from Book Buddies and how we hope that next year we will both teach in schools that have similar programs. We noticed that both grade levels were benefiting from the experience and looked forward to Book Buddies each week. We wondered if the children's enthusiasm for Book Buddies could be carried over into other areas of learning besides a concentration on reading. We thought that the benefits of the program would persist and thrive if our Book Buddies participated in other activities together. We were confident that the program is already very successful and we wanted to find a way to enhance it even further.

Earlier in the year, our students spent a short period of time sending Valentine's Day notes and drawings to one another. They seemed to really enjoy this added writing component. This seemed to deepen the bonds between each set of buddies. While kindergarten students rarely attempted to write independently prior to the correspondence between the classes, they were suddenly immersed in communicating through writing. This observation led us to wondering what continuing to have writing as a part of the program would do for the kindergartners and the fourth graders. Kamberelis supports our wondering by writing that "Gradually through exploration and experimentation, coupled with writing and reading experiences at home and at school, children elaborate and refine their old forms of writing, and new forms emerge" (Lu, 2000). We also wondered what

would result in having students write a story together. We kept these wonderings in mind as we explored options for an inquiry project.

What Others Think/Know About this Topic

According to questionnaires, veteran teachers in our school feel very strongly about the benefits that Book Buddies provide for their students (Appendix A). Many teachers feel that Book Buddies develops fluent reading, builds confidence and self esteem, and creates bonds among children. It models reading for younger students and even helps weak students feel good about reading. The program makes students feel important and needed, and creates a situation for children to help each other. We were surprised to learn that none of the teachers who answered our questionnaire had ever tried a corresponding journal or had their students try writing a book together, two types of writing we were thinking of having our students try for our inquiry project.

Parents are also convinced of the educational value with which Book Buddies provides their children (Appendix B). Many parents express that they believe the program promotes reading and say that it is an important part of their child's academic and social school life. One parent shared with us that, "This program has helped enhance my son's confidence in reading aloud as well as when reading to his siblings."

The students enjoy the opportunity to read with their Book Buddies and look forward to their time together each week (Appendix C). Students refer to their Book Buddies as someone special to them, someone that makes them laugh, and they even call one another friends. Based on student responses, Book Buddies is clearly a treasured experience by both age groups. Many of the students expressed an interest in writing to

and with their Book Buddies, which allowed us to think more about focusing on this aspect for our inquiry.

Wonderings/Questions

Our wondering is rooted in the question, “How can we enhance Book Buddies at this point in the year, if at all?” From this question we want to know: What will happen when we add writing to Book Buddy time? How can we continue to keep kids interested in the reading aspect of Book Buddies at this point in the year? What will the plans we are implementing do to their relationships? What will these changes do to the self esteem of both age groups? What will happen to the already good sense of community that exists?

B. Inquiry Plan

What We Did to Carry Out the Inquiry in Our Classrooms

We eventually were able to determine that the main focus of our inquiry would be combining reading and writing during Book Buddy time. According to Lamme, “The concepts of authorship and illustration are vital to an interactive view of reading and writing” (1992). In order to meet this objective, we decided to have each set of buddies write and illustrate a book together (Appendix D). This was accomplished by having students decide on a topic and write a story together over the course of three weeks. Once the rough draft was complete, the stories were typed and a copy of the book was printed for each individual. Buddies then spent time together to illustrate their own copy of the story they had written. While creating a story together was meeting our goal of incorporating a writing component, we still valued the friendly kinds of notes that students corresponded through earlier in the year. Therefore, we decided our second

major writing focus would be to have students continue corresponding through weekly Book Buddy Journals (Appendix E).

As a third focus, we prepared our students for an Author's Tea which would be an opportunity for students to showcase their work for their families. The idea was that students would invite family members to attend a gathering in which they and their buddy would share the book they have worked so hard on, while enjoying milk and cookies. This event was encouraged by reading specialist, Lynne Sanders. From her experience, she was able to share with us the benefits of an Author's Tea. Through this type of gathering, students are able to practice their choral reading skills and feel ownership for their work. Lynne also suggested that we have students practice for the Author's Tea by holding an Author's Chair. This was an occasion in which each group of buddies was able to rehearse for the Author's Tea by reading and sharing their book in front of their peers. Research shows that as children experience being an author, they gain an appreciation for other authors, in this case their peers (Lamme, 1992). Strengthening community was an underlying focal point throughout our project, and the Author's Tea presented a way to expand the sense of school community to a larger scale, reaching out to families.

With these three focuses in mind, we immediately decided that we would complete as much of our inquiry as possible while the two groups of students were together. We usually only have Book Buddies once each week for thirty minutes. We knew that with the short amount of time given to complete the project, we would not be able to simply use regularly scheduled Book Buddy time for the new writing aspect. We considered saving time by having the students begin writing their book together instead

of reading to one another for a few weeks. However, since reading is such a wonderful experience for the children, we did not want to take that time away from them.

Therefore, we chose to add an additional thirty minutes for two weeks, plus extend our usual meeting time by ten minutes.

This extra scheduled time was designated as the book writing time. Prior to having the students get together and write a book, we both spoke to our classes about this activity. Ms. Bowman spoke with her kindergartners to get them excited about writing a book with their buddies, and both Ms. Bowman and Miss Barto spoke with the fourth grade students. They were informed of what their role would be in writing a book, and we explained why they needed to assist Ms. Bowman's children with certain parts. We also helped students brainstorm a list of topics they could write about. Together, we put on a small skit demonstrating how they should behave and how they should act while writing a book with their buddy. Both groups received instruction in the form of mini lessons on various topics including parts of a story, behavior, and illustrations.

All the Ways We Collected Data

Prior to actually implementing anything in our classrooms, we decided on all the ways we would collect data. In order to see if we could enhance the already successful Book Buddy Program, we needed to find out what students, parents, and in-service teachers with Book Buddy experience thought of the existing program (Appendices A, B, and C). Questionnaires and surveys seemed like the best way to gather responses from all of these people. After deciding that our focus would be on incorporating a writing component, we chose to also collect data through student journals and books (Appendices

D and E). Finally, in as a way to capture our observations, we used digital pictures as another source of data (Appendix F).

We began collecting data by writing a questionnaire for both the kindergarten and fourth grade students (Appendix C). The fourth graders answered the questionnaire independently as a morning activity. Prior to completing the form, they were encouraged to be completely honest in their responses and they were told that there were no wrong answers. The kindergarten children completed the form verbally during station time. Ms. Bowman read them each question and recorded their responses. They were also asked to share honest thoughts about the program.

Next, we decided to direct our attention on obtaining feedback from parents. We originally brainstormed multiple open-ended questions for them to answer. We quickly realized that with parents being so busy, we should try to keep their questionnaire as short as possible. We decided to see if there were any questions that would be especially insightful and could be answered in survey-type questions. This way parents could quickly use a checkmark to indicate which option best defines their thoughts to a particular question. This would allow parents to complete the form faster and require less writing on their part. It was finally determined that the form should consist of two survey-type questions, one open-ended question, and an additional space for parents to write any extra comments concerning the program (Appendix B).

Our final type of questionnaire was designed for “experts” in the area of running a Book Buddy Program (Appendix A). We created a questionnaire for experienced in-service teachers to complete. Both of our mentors completed a form based on the Book Buddy Program they have used for 11 years now. We were curious to find out if other

teachers in the building ran their program the same way as ours and if they had ever tried incorporating writing or other activities. Knowing how busy teachers are, we made this questionnaire optional by placing it in the teachers' lounge with a note explaining what we were doing and a treat as a thank you for taking the time to complete the form.

We originally considered tape recording students during Book Buddy time. We also thought about observing them through anecdotal notes, but as the inquiry took off we realized these two types of data collection would not help us to analyze our more clearly defined wonderings. We determined that the many other forms of data collection we were planning to use would be sufficient.

How We Analyzed the Data

We analyzed data through our observations and digital pictures (Appendix F). This form of data was very telling of how the students used the Book Buddy time. We were able to see which students were on task and engaged, and which groups struggled to stay focused. These pictures and observations revealed that a strong sense of community already existed among these two classes of students. From pictures, we saw students cuddle, sit on one another's laps, and laugh and smile while looking at books together. As we photographed students in the process of writing their books together, it was amazing to see a few fourth grade students encourage kindergartners to write a few words at a time of the rough draft. These digital pictures seemed to provide an endless amount of information regarding community and how children utilized the Book Buddy time together.

We used the students' corresponding journals as a source of data to see what topics they chose to communicate about (Appendix E). They often referred to Book

Buddies in a positive way and wrote or drew pictures relating to these enjoyable times. Both age groups wrote words of encouragement to their buddies and complimented each other often. They wrote notes regarding future reading time together, and some students used the journal as a way to get to know each other better through questions. We were also able to tell from the corresponding journals that students were excited for the Author's Tea where they could share the books they wrote together and meet one another's families.

We looked at responses in student, parent, and teacher, questionnaires and surveys (Appendices A, B, and C). We tried to see if there were common trends among each of these individual groups as well as all groups combined. If we received the same answers multiple times, we paid close attention to analyzing why we thought so many responded in a similar way. We also tried to see if there were any answers that differed from all others, but found this to be quite rare and insignificant.

C. What We Learned or Now Know

Claims of What We Think We Now Know and Evidence to Support These Claims

We believe and feel confident claiming that adding a writing component strengthened friendships and relationships among our students. From our observations and discussions with the students, we found that they loved spending the extra time together each week, regardless of what the activity was that they were working on. An interesting observation we made was that our students found one another on the playground during one of the two weeks that they had spent extra time together. Both the kindergartners and the fourth graders were excited to report back to their teachers and interns that they had spent their free time playing with one another. The kindergartners

always seemed especially excited to see their buddies, but we really had a feel for just how much this time together was meaning to them when they recently began chanting “Book Buddies” right before they knew they were getting together.

Going into this project we were doubtful about whether it would be successful or not because of the age groups in our Book Buddy Program. We knew the kindergartners would need a lot of guidance and assistance in the writing process, and we were not completely confident that all of the fourth grade children could guide them through the process. As the inquiry project took off, we were repeatedly amazed at how well the students were working together. At one point we took this as an indicator that if a Book Buddy Program consisting of a fourth grade and a kindergarten class could work, any two grade levels could make it work. The more we thought about this claim, however, we actually found ourselves having a new wondering. The program was extremely successful for these grade levels, but would it in fact work for all others?

Something we tried to focus on as we planned our inquiry was to keep the writing aspect academic. We tried to include mini lessons at both grade levels and we tried to meet the writing standards at points. We have learned and can claim that this particular group of fourth grade children were successful in making the writing process quite academic on their own, taking it further than any mini lesson we had ever done with them. We observed and photographed multiple fourth grade students assisting and encouraging kindergartners to write a few words of the rough draft story. They often showed them how to write a word, told them the spelling, or even let them try it themselves. It was amazing to watch these few groups and see that the fourth grade students knew not to expect too much from the younger children, but the kindergarten

students who tried this clearly felt very good about themselves. Other groups discussed how to write a story and helped kindergarten children to stay on task. We found that the fourth graders included mini lessons of their own and met a few writing standards without our guidance.

Although much of our planning consisted of arranged mini lessons, we also were amazed to see how many mini lessons naturally arose during our discussion and work time with students. We had both planned specific topics we knew we would need to go over with the students before they could begin working together. As they worked and as questions arose, we naturally answered these questions and taught skills that both groups of students needed in order to be successful. For example, we were not sure if the kindergartners would be able to sequence a story into a beginning, middle, and end, and so a mini lesson arose. However, according to Applebee and Martens, most students have grasped the underlying features of storytelling well enough to carry this understanding over into their story writing (Lu, 2000). This research supports what we observed and is evident in the stories students have written (Appendix D). From this research and our observations, we can now comfortably claim that fourth graders and kindergartners can competently collaborate to write a sequential story.

We now know and can claim that the self esteem of both age groups was able to increase even more than the Book Buddy Program accommodated before. Fourth grade students felt special taking on a “teacher-like” or tutor role when helping the kindergarten children to write. The kindergarten students already felt proud that they could read to a fourth grader, but adding writing helped them to feel an even bigger sense of

accomplishment. Having completed the finished product of an entire book at the age of 5 or 6 seemed like a wonderful thing to these youngsters.

We were amazed to find that both the fourth graders and kindergartners could use the journals to compliment and encourage their buddies. Without being told, they wrote in a very positive way. This was a good indicator to us that they really do enjoy the program and that they are most likely carrying these compliments over into their reading time.

D. Conclusions and Future Directions

Implications for Future Practice as a Teacher

From the start of this project, we held in high esteem the value of the Book Buddy Program. We both hope that a Book Buddy Program is in place in the schools where we teach in the future. The benefits for all students and for the school community are immense. After implementing this project, we feel that adding writing did enhance the Book Buddy Program in terms of learning outcomes, school community, and self esteem for all students. We agree that implementing our findings in the future will be beneficial and have a positive impact on our future school community and students.

This project will impact our teaching practice for years to come because we will introduce others to our experience of adding writing to a Book Buddy Program. We look forward to bringing our findings to other schools and inviting them to try adding a writing component. We feel that by adding writing, we will also be supporting multiple academic standards, while keeping the social aspect of the program strong.

In the future, we both hope to fine tune the writing component of Book Buddies. We have learned a great deal from this trial run, and there are some aspects that we will

try differently next time. In the years to come, we will be better able to organize mini lessons and adapt the writing component to stretch across a longer time period.

Another implication on our future teaching is that when reflecting on what we do in our classrooms, it is beneficial to enhance practices that are already successful as well as those that are in need of change. Based on our experience, extensions and enhancements to practices that are already successful can clearly benefit student learning outcomes and are avenues we will explore.

New Wonderings Developed

We are pleased with the outcomes of our project, but we are still left with many wonderings. We have thought about how our kindergarten and 4th grade experience would have been different if the grades were closer together. On one hand, we feel that if kindergarteners and fourth grade students can work side by side and benefit from writing together, then any grade levels can work together and also have meaningful experiences. However, we wonder if the benefits would be different, and if the process of implementing these changes would need to be adjusted depending on the grade levels involved. Our kindergartners and fourth graders each gained self esteem as a result of this project. We wonder how the self esteem of individuals at different age levels would be influenced by adding writing to their Book Buddy Program. We also wonder if one grade level would take on as much of a leadership role over the other if the grade levels were closer together than they are in our situation.

Another wondering we have is what would happen if we had a longer timeline and a different plan for implementing the writing components. For example, what would happen if we extended the timeline in which the two classes wrote in the corresponding

journals? Would the stories they wrote together be better in terms of organizing materials and management if we bound the books before we did the illustrations? We did not bind the books for our students before they illustrated them, and it did seem to cause a little confusion at times. We also asked ourselves, “How could we organize the process and timeline of making the illustrations so that the students would have enough time to finish their books together and be able to do their best work?”

We wondered how we might have influenced the students’ feelings of ownership over the books. Due to our school computer lab arriving late, the fourth graders’ typing skills were not as developed as planned for this time of year. They were not able to finish typing their stories and we had to complete what they could not finish. How would the feeling of ownership over the books change, if the fourth graders were able to finish typing the books themselves? Another question we have concerning ownership of the story is, “How would narrowing down the topics from which they could write influence their creativity?” We wonder about doing a mini lesson on altering stories that are already written and published. The focus of this lesson would be to challenge the students to rewrite this already existing story, but in a different way. We are curious if that would help the kindergarteners understand the parts of a story and give them more support in creating a book. We also wonder what this approach would do to the students’ enthusiasm about writing a book.

These new wonderings will influence our teaching in the future because they are questions that we will investigate in our practices. Each year, we will learn and grow professionally as we fine tune our practices to best match our students’ needs and our values. We will always protect the bonds and relationships that the Book Buddy Program

already provided and we will always be careful not to stifle the enthusiasm and excitement of Book Buddies by adding work. Whatever enhancements we make will need to be valued and worthwhile to the students because the bonds and community that arise out of students sharing books together is our number one priority. However, as we have learned this year, adding writing can be a worthwhile, enjoyable, and academically stimulating activity that has the potential to make those bonds and relationships even stronger.