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READING IS FUN: A SCHOOL READING MOTIVATION PROJECT

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In a world filled with television, video games and computerized toys, little time remains for children to read. The time spent on reading in schools is some children's only contact with books and those experiences are often confined to assigned material related to school work. At the elementary level, much time is spent teaching children how to read, but few opportunities are provided them to practice reading and discover the benefits of such an activity.

Elementary children need exposure to good books. They need to be aware that reading is more than the ability to decode written symbols and the completion of seemingly endless workbook pages. Furthermore, they need to be exposed to the reasons for reading: to dream, to laugh, to enjoy the familiar and wander into the unknown.

As Smith and Johnson (1976) state "we believe that only a small percentage of children cannot be taught to value reading if they are taught with that objective in mind" (p. 225). Without a conscious effort, nothing will occur, however.

Charlotte Huck (1974) states if we teach a child to read, yet don't develop a taste for reading, our teaching has been in vain. The major purpose for teaching reading is to help children become readers who turn to books for enjoyment and information. If schools don't do this "...we shall have produced a nation of illiterate literates—those who know how to read, but do not read."

Realizing that elementary teachers are in a good position to arrange experiences in valuing reading, and that students must be exposed to reading to develop a value for reading, this project was developed.

PROBLEM

How then, might we, as teachers, parents, and administrators, begin to develop those attitudes and habits conducive to a lifetime of reading for enjoyment and learning? And how might we stimulate more independent reading on the part of the children? The answers to those questions are important in view of the following:

a. Most children spend less than 30 minutes per day in reading activities other than those assigned by teachers.

b. Students reading at or above grade level have, at their disposal, a greater variety of reading material at home.

c. A greater percentage of children reading on or above level read to someone every day.

d. The majority of children depended on the school library for their leisure reading books. Students reading below level brought a larger percentage of books home from the school library.

e. The majority of parents are willing to spend some time to improve their children's reading levels or abilities.
(Carden, et al,1983)

To address these concerns, elementary teachers and university personnel combined efforts to develop a motivation system that could be implemented within a classroom or school building.

The teachers involved in this project were from an elementary school characterized by large populations of minority students, low socioeconomic levels, and little parental involvement. The teachers were enrolled in a university course that focused upon reading instruction and motivating children to read. Development and implementation of the project lasted for one semester and was used to attain specific goals.

Presented below is an overview of the components and the functions occurring within each of the four components, the university, the school, the community and the students.

READING MOTIVATION SYSTEM: COMPONENTS & FUNCTIONS

UNIVERSITY

1. Project Goals
2. Planning
3. Technical Support
4. Dissemination

SCHOOL

1. Principal Support
2. Faculty Communication

COMMUNITY

1. Pamphlet
2. Parent Meeting

STUDENTS

1. Book Club
2. Storytellers
3. Newspaper

Several goals were established for this project by the University. First, the project was to increase the amount of time devoted to pleasure reading. Second, all students, in a classroom, were to be involved in the project, regardless of their reading level. Third, parents and/or the community were to be involved. Finally, teachers were encouraged to collaborate on their projects.

The results of this effort provided a unique university/school /community/student based project that was both enjoyable and worthwhile.

UNIVERSITY COMPONENT

Texas Christian University as one of the participants in a Teacher Corps project presented a graduate practicum to teachers of minority students. The emphasis of the practicum was upon reading, motivation and the community. One the practicum goals were established, three students collaborated to develop Reading is Fun: A School Reading Motivation Project. University personnel served as resources to the participants by providing technical assistance, resources, and agreed to help the participants develop and disseminate results of the project.

Results of a survey and the goal of stimulating greater interest in reading, thus provided the framework for the development of the following components.

SCHOOL COMPONENT

The three students informed faculty of the project through a written communication. The faculty and the principal provided much support for the project, even though they were not directly involved with many of the activities. In the future the students agreed it would be advisable to hold a meeting with faculty, to explain the rationale and research for such a project, and try to enlist more teachers in the project, thus creating a more cohesive and unified school-wide effort.

COMMUNITY COMPONENT

This part of the project included two steps. First, there was the preparation of a pamphlet for parents entitled "Parents in Reading: How You Can Help Your Child." A Spanish version was also prepared as the area has a high concentration of other ethnic groups. Second, there was the organization of a parent-teacher meeting to present and explain the contents of the pamphlet.

The pamphlet was presented at an evening meeting that was attended by about 150 parents and teachers and included an English and Spanish explanation of the purpose for the pamphlet and an exploration of the suggestions. Applications for children's library cards were also distributed. Following the meeting, the Parent Teacher Organization displayed books in English and Spanish.

STUDENT COMPONENT

For students, a school newspaper was published during the reading motivation project. The newspaper had a built-in purpose for reading since most students are interested in reading about themselves and each other. The newspaper became an opportunity to integrate the language arts program with actual, purposeful experiences in reading.

A book club was also organized to provide enjoyable experience with literature, to provide opportunities for students to get to know a variety of good books and to offer activities through which students might respond to literature by verbal and physical self-expression.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the year, faculty and principal gave much support to the project. Students wanted to join the book club and work on the school newspaper. Parents also inquired about how their children might participate in the reading activities. Though no formal evaluation instrument was used to determine the success of the project, positive and supportive responses have indicated an increase in reading activity among these elementary students. The enthusiastic response of the children called attention to the fact that it was necessary to win the child to reading at an early age and to involve parents in the reading activities. Many children discovered the fun and adventures in reading, as a result of this school/community project.

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