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How Book Club Affects Struggling Readers

Brock P. Stalions teaches eighth-grade language arts at Scripps Middle School in Lake Orion, Michigan. Previously a history teacher with doubts about Book Club, he is now a firm believer.

In the past decade, there has been a shift in how to teach reading. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) writings, teachers have begun to recognize and emphasize reading as a social, not a private, affair. Vygotsky believed that interacting with others is crucial in forming good readers — that what we learn as individuals begins in our interactions with others. In a related trend, if reading is a social process, it makes sense to honor multiple ways of interpreting texts. Thus, more teachers are getting away from the belief that they know the one “true” meaning of a text, which it is their job to teach to students. Now, drawing on scholars such as Rosenblatt (1976; 1991), educators are teaching that student ideas and responses are very valuable. And in recent years, Book Club (Raphael, Pardo, Highfield, & McMahon, 1997; Raphael, Kehus, & Damphousse, 2001) has become very popular in this shift in teaching reading.

Book Club is such a new way of teaching reading that there are not many studies that show the effects it has on students. Those studies that have been done tend to focus more on elementary age students (Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1998; Raphael, Wallace, Pardo, & Choo, 1996), with the middle school student being addressed only recently (Raphael et al.,

2001). But what about the typical struggling readers in middle school? How does Book Club affect them? These are the students that we as educators sometimes forget.

Forming the Research Question

Recently I attended a meeting to determine what special accommodations one of my struggling students, Sean, was to receive for the rest of the year. The question was asked of him, “What classes would you like to stay in for the rest of the year?” Sean replied, “Mr. Stalions’ language arts class because we get to talk about books and stuff like that.” Not only did this catch the attention of the school counselor and the social worker; it also got me thinking. Here was a struggling reader, who by law is entitled to special help, and who was excited about my language arts class. The next day I went to Sean’s previous two language arts teachers to see if this young man had been excited about reading in their classes. Their responses were similar: Although he seemed to be a decent student, he did not participate much in class, and he seemed rather bored. Also, as I had surmised, neither of them used Book Club in their classes. Did experiencing Book Club for half a year really affect Sean that much?

Thus more teachers are getting away from the belief that they know the one “true” meaning of a text, which it is their job to teach to students.

I started thinking about other students like Sean as well as other students who were identified as successful readers and writers. During the first half of the school year I could see that my good readers were very successful during Book Club. They wrote well in their reading logs and had interesting discussions during their small groups. But I was less certain about my average-to-struggling readers. If Sean's comments were any indication, some of those students at least enjoyed Book Club. But were they successful because of it? Did they become better readers by participating in Book Club? The question that I wanted to answer and which became the driving force behind this study was: How does Book Club affect struggling readers in middle school?

Context of the Study

School setting

This study took place in a suburban metro-Detroit middle school (grades 6-8). The school is overwhelmingly Caucasian (98 percent) with a small percentage of African-American students (1.5 percent). The majority of the students come from families in high socioeconomic levels owing to the many automotive industries within the school district. Only 5 percent of the student body was eligible for the reduced lunch program in the 2000-2001 school year.

Staff

The staff makeup for this middle school is a good blend of veteran and rookie teachers. Approximately 40 percent of the staff has been hired since 1995. As a result, a wide variety of teaching methods is used in the school.

Language arts block

Language arts classes (in all three grades) are a combined two-hour block that includes both reading and English. Teachers are free to determine how the time is divided between these two subjects. In each block, students have access to grammar books, basal readers, and several novel sets. Most of the language arts teachers use a traditional approach to teaching reading that focuses on comprehension worksheets after reading literature selections. Several teachers

use some variation of Literature Circles, but only two teachers in the building use Book Club. The two of us who do use Book Club both teach eighth grade, so each year our entering students are unfamiliar with this method of reading instruction. The Book Club format fits perfectly into the language arts block. I used Book Club approximately 75 percent of the time in my classes during the year.

Brief Description of Book Club

Book Club consists of five essential parts: (1) opening community share, (2) reading, (3) writing in reading logs, (4) discussion groups, and (5) closing community share. (For a more comprehensive description of Book Club, see Raphael & McMahon, 1994).

Opening community share is usually a 10- to 15-minute mini-lesson on a topic that is related to that day's reading. For example, if the reading for the day includes a unique style of writing, then the opening community share might be a mini-lesson on author's craft. If the reading deals with the setting of the story, then the teacher might present a mini-lesson on setting, and so forth. The opening community share is also a good time to conduct mini-lessons on spelling, vocabulary, or grammar as it relates to the text.

The next step is the actual reading of the day's text for approximately 20-30 minutes. I have used reading aloud, reading silently, and reading in groups this year in my class. Also, the text does not necessarily have to be written text. I have used the Book Club format for songs and clips from movies.

After reading, students write in their reading logs for 10 to 15 minutes. They are given a list of topics from which to choose. These might include some basic ideas such as "My favorite part of the book" or "My feelings" as well as more complex topics such as "Me and the book" and "Intertextuality." The students' writing gives them a starting point for the next step, the discussion group.

The discussion group is where the beauty lies in this process. In small groups of three to five, the students discuss for approximately 15 min-

utes the text that was read that day. Students can use the same topics as in the reading logs, or the teacher can give the class a broad topic to focus on.

Finally, class concludes with a 5- to 10-minute closing community share. During this time the topic addressed in the opening community share may be

revisited or there could be a large group discussion on a specific topic.

In my opinion there are two keys to making a Book Club successful. First, as Pardo (1997) suggested, the text must be discussible. By discussible, I mean that important issues must be raised, controversies must be presented, and challenges must be issued that are familiar or relevant to middle school students. Students will not have much to write about or discuss if the text is not interesting to them and discussible. Novels that I used successfully in my class this year were *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), which is about a utopian society and all the problems the citizens faced there, and *The Lottery Rose* (Hunt, 1976), which is about an abused child. Examples of songs that have been used are "The Gambler"

(Bowling & Wheeler, 1979) recorded by Kenny Rogers, which deals with rape and revenge, and "Gangsta's Paradise" (Ivey, Sanders, & Rasheed, 1995) recorded by Coolio, which is about the plight of inner-city African Americans. All of these texts were interesting and, most importantly, discussible.

The second key to making Book Club successful is insuring that students know *how* to discuss what they read or listen to. It took approximately two months of class fishbowl (modeling for the entire class with a few students) before my students reached the point where they knew what was expected of them in their small discussion groups.

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Participants

By the time I embarked on this study, I had a pretty good idea of who the struggling readers were, but I wanted some proof that these students were, in fact, struggling. I determined this by looking at each student's past scores on the standardized reading tests that were administered: the California Achievement Test in fourth grade, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) in fourth grade, and the MEAP again in seventh grade. I decided that if students scored below "satisfactory" on **all** of these tests, I would consider them struggling readers for this study. Of the 26 students in my class, five students fell into this category.

These five students — Nate, Sean, Amanda, Natalie, and Darcy — reflected typical students at this school. (All student names are pseudonyms.) All were white, came from fairly high socioeconomic families, and spoke English as their native language. But each one of them had trouble reading.

Data Collection

What data could be used to effectively monitor whether these five students' reading improved by using Book Club? Comparing standardized test scores before the school year and after was not an option because eighth graders do not take a standardized reading test at the end of the year.

I decided to use three data sources, all focusing on a different outcome and purpose of reading — a survey on reading attitudes, a comparison of the students' reading logs, and a record of their participation in discussion groups.

Survey of students' attitudes

At the beginning of the year, I administered my own informal reading survey so that I would have a basic idea of the students' attitudes toward reading and their interests.

The following questions were asked:

1. Do you enjoy reading? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Do you enjoy language arts class? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. What kind of books do you enjoy reading?
4. What would you **like** to do this year in class?
5. What would you **not like** to do this year in class?

I administered a similar survey at the end of the year to see if there were specific things that we did in the classroom that students liked or disliked. It asked the following questions:

1. Do you enjoy reading? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. What kind of books do you enjoy reading?
3. What did you **enjoy** this year in language arts class?
4. What did you **not enjoy** this year in language arts class?

It should be noted that the students were assured that their answers on these forms would not be graded. In fact, the end-of-the-year survey was given after final grades were recorded.

I have used these surveys every year that I have taught as a type of student assessment of me as a teacher in hopes of keeping certain lessons, revising others, and even eliminating lessons that were not effective. For the purposes of this study, however, I also was able to compare the results of the surveys to see if students' attitudes toward reading had changed after using Book Club for the year.

Reading logs

It is important to note that students' reading logs were treated as a personal response to the texts we had read (or listened to or watched). The students were informed that the logs would not be graded for grammar, spelling, or punctuation. They were graded only on the requirement of writing about the text. Students were either

given certain topics to write about or were permitted to choose topics themselves. And they were always allowed to write about anything they wanted to regarding the text we had read. Those were the only instructions given throughout the entire year regarding the reading logs. These instructions were repeated before each reading log entry.

Discussion groups

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I monitored students' comprehension in the discussion groups. Although the reading logs could show improvement in comprehension, the small group discussions were where the magic occurred, where rich discussions about the text took place. Throughout the year I kept a record of the discussions by using the Book Club observation sheet shown in Figure 1 (facing page).

Using these sheets, I was able to compare the students' discussions at the beginning of the year with those at the end to see if using Book Club throughout the year had improved their discussions (were deeper), thus showing progress in how they comprehended text. In addition, I frequently audiotaped different groups' discussions. Again, these allowed comparisons to determine change in the depth of students' comprehension.

The first small group discussions were not the first discussions each student experienced. All of the students had the opportunity to discuss in fishbowls in front of their peers, and all had the opportunity to observe and critique their peers after observing a fishbowl. Following two months of fishbowl activities, I collected formal data from their first small group discussions.

Each discussion group is comprised of three to five students of varying reading levels, maturity, and social skills because forming groups in this manner has been found to be the most effective (Raphael et al., 2001). As a result, the five struggling readers were not in the same discussion group together throughout most of the year. They were each placed with independent-level readers and average readers.

Students were either given certain topics to write about or were permitted to choose topics themselves.

Data Analysis

Survey of students' attitudes

On the initial survey, 18 of the 21 "satisfactory" and "proficient" readers (as determined from the same standardized test scores that were used to determine the five "struggling" readers) reported that they enjoyed reading. Four of the five struggling readers, however, wrote that they did not enjoy reading, with only Darcy writing that she did.

Furthermore, three of the five struggling readers claimed that they did not like language arts class. Two of them said, "It is boring." The other two wrote that language arts class was "OK" (Amanda) and "so-so" (Natalie). In re-

sponse to the question, "What would you not like to do this year in class?" Sean and Darcy both answered "grammar," Nate replied "worksheets," and Amanda said "read."

At the end of the year, three of the five struggling readers responded "yes" to the question "Do you enjoy reading?" Four of the five readers wrote that they enjoyed Book Club, with Darcy replying, "Book Club was great. I loved talking about books all the time." Nate wrote, "Mr. Stalions didn't get mad at us when we talked about our own lives." This observation by Nate is significant, because it is this point — the freedom that students had to relate the text to their own lives — that is a crucial aspect of Book Club.

Figure 1

BOOKCLUB OBSERVATION SHEET				
Group Number _____				
<u>STUDENT NAME</u>	<u>SHARES LOG</u>	<u>SHARES IDEAS</u>	<u>LISTENS</u>	<u>OFF-TASK</u>
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<u>Comments</u>				

Reading logs

I felt that the best writing comparison was between the first reading log entry of the year and the last. For the first Book Club, we focused on the song "Gangsta's Paradise" by Coolio. This was a very discussible song because it had a very distinct dialect, it talked about an alternative lifestyle, and it had a survival theme.

Darcy.

Following is Darcy's reading log entry after we listened to "Gangsta's Paradise":

"Vocabulary" "Gangsta's Paradise"

Title Explantation

The tite of this song "Gangsta's Paradise" is about Gangsta's which what they are saying is this gang is their paradise. They have everything they need and want. This song is basicly trying to tell people what his life is like. The person is telling us how it is to be in a gang. Which he explains it in a good way. He tells you how and why him and his "homies" to the things they do. He is wondering if there is anything left in his life. He is thinking if this is a good idea.

Darcy focused on summarizing and retelling, as indicated in her title and in the content. However, there was little interpretation. This reflected what scholars refer to as "literal" comprehension, in effect, answering the implicit question, "What was this song about?" with a list of facts or words from the story. There was little evidence that she drew on personal experiences, raised questions, or made connections to other texts that she had read. There was no focus on themes.

The final log entry addressed the last two chapters of the book *The Giver*. These chapters, again, were very discussible because there were many different ways of interpreting the ending of the book. Here is Darcy's reading log entry for chapters 22 and 23:

"The Giver"

Chapters 22-23

I really liked this book because it was

different. I didn't understand the ending. Maybe the Giver saw him suffering and maybe he helped him. or maybe he was in heaven, because I would say that maybe Jonas and the baby died of being in the cold and they both died of starvation. Then he went to heaven. I was maybe thinking that the Giver is god. Because he has done so much for people and he helped all those people so they wouldn't have all those bad memories. Because if it wasn't for the giver, then maybe the people wouldn't be so happy like they are today!

Darcy dug deep into the ending of the story. It is interesting that she wrote, "I didn't understand the ending." On the contrary, Darcy probably understood it just as well as an adult. In fact, she came up with an interpretation of the ending that I had not even previously considered. Whether she knew it or not, Darcy had comprehended this ending better than many adults.

Nate.

Nate showed similar progress in his two reading log entries. First, his entry for "Gangsta's Paradise":

Vocabulary or wonderful words

title expnation

Gangastas Paridise 9-7-00

He used some pretty crazy words In their like "G" and "hood" and those words are like something a ganaster would say. He acts like he only has a little time before he could die. I think he said that because he could get shot or someone could kill him. I think that I would be horrible to be in a gang like that because it would be bad and their always running from cops or something. I think that the title of the song tells that it is everything he like it is perfect for a gangster because it is what a gangster likes to do and I is like the best thing for a gangster.

Nate did a better job than Darcy at comprehending the message of this song because he

focused more on the meaning of the lyrics. He even put himself in the shoes of a gang member. But, again, he did not dig very deep in trying to reach the underlying message of the song.

The following is Nate's final entry for *The Giver*:

Interpration of ending

The Giver (ch. 22&23) 6-13-01

I though the book was pretty good I wouldn't want to live in the utopain community because everything you do has to be perfect if you do something wrong you get three warnings and your out. Where would you go after you were kicked out you would have nothing left and you would be all alone you would have to live in the real world. I though the last chapter was pretty good because it seemed like alot of different things could of happend to him. I think that he was dieing when he was sleding because that was a perfect world going to a town were nothing was all the same and people cared about you. The people waiting for him was heaven but I don't think Jonas new what it was. I could relate this book to Z for Zaicharh because at the end they were both setting out of a strange world and searching for a new better place to live.

Nate brought up some interesting points. First, he put himself in Jonas' shoes, much like he did with the gang member from "Gangsta's Paradise." This time, however, he made an insightful comment: "Where would you go after you were kicked out? You'd be all alone. You would have to live in the real world." Nate also had a very thoughtful interpretation of the ending and even compared this text to another novel we had read earlier in the year. All of these things were examples of what good readers do when reading books.

Analyses of the other three struggling readers' reading logs produced similar results. None of their entries from "Gangsta's Paradise" was profound in any way. But at the end of the year, Sean compared the end of *The Giver* to his own

life. Natalie brought up two possible interpretations of the ending, and Amanda went into great detail on how the Community would handle having all of Jonas' memories.

Small group discussions

The first Book Club in which small groups were used was for the novel *Z for Zachariah* (O'Brien, 1975). In this science fiction story, a young woman believes she is the only survivor of a nuclear war. In looking back at the notes I kept on each Book Club observation sheet, I found that the struggling readers participated frequently but with minimal depth to their discussion. For instance, Amanda, during the discussion of chapters 6 and 7, repeated five times that she "really liked these chapters" but never explained why. Nate, during discussions of chapters 9 and 10, talked for two minutes on how "This book is too long." In one discussion, Natalie emphatically cried out, "Yeah! I agree!" six times when others in her group made an interesting point, yet said nothing else the entire discussion. And Darcy started one discussion off by claiming, "This girl is stupid." When asked why she thought that by one of her peers, she replied, "I don't know; she just is."

Throughout the year these five struggling readers made similar comments in their discussion groups with some improvement when they realized their grade was being lowered because of their lack of depth. But there was never deep connection with the text. I was frustrated, although I recognized that at least I was aware of this problem due to my close observation of these students within their discussion groups.

Near the end of the year I did something that a Book Club teacher had tried several years ago. Laura Pardo (1997) placed her lowest achieving students in the same group for two reasons. First, she felt that they would not be able to "hide" behind more able readers and writers. Second, she could monitor them more easily in a single group. Although this is not recommended for most struggling readers, I decided to give it a try owing to my concerns that the five struggling students were not improving as much as I had hoped. They were together on their own for *The Giver*.

After creating this group of struggling readers, I decided to audiotape every one of their discussions. The following is a portion of the discussion on chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Darcy: I think this author, she's, you don't find very many authors that can write like this. Well, every author has a good imagination but, like, this is a different kind of imagination. You know what I mean?

Nate: It's pretty amazing how some people can dream this up themselves.

Sean: Yeah.

Amanda: It's kind of a different point of view that most authors don't write this way.

Nate: Well, well, I wouldn't want to live there because it's too, it'd be, like, too hard. You have to be perfect. If you do something bad then they'll kick you out, so, I probably ...

Darcy: I'd probably be really scared because in this world you'd have to tell everything. You have to pour your feelings out to everyone and, and, I know it's not a good thing to keep your feelings bottled up inside of you because sometimes something bad could happen but it's like us, like it's really embarrassing if like you go up to your mom and say 'Hey mom, like, I met this guy and I want to give him a bath.'

(Laughter)

Darcy: It's kinda hard.

Natalie: In a way it's good but there's just some things you don't tell everybody.

Darcy: I know.

Natalie: There you have to tell them because they most likely know if you're keeping something from them and you'll get in trouble.

Amanda: What's the whole point of

a girl havin' a diary or somethin'? Because then she'll be writin' all her feelings down and that's supposed to be a girl's private possession.

Nate: Yeah. Yeah.

Amanda: She'd have to share and tell, like, what boy she likes and what if

...

(mumbles)

Sean: Yeah, that's why I think in the next chapter he might get into a fight with his parents, like, he's going to do something and not want to tell them and I think they're going to kick him out.

In this short, two-minute conversation, the five struggling readers discussed the author's craft (with quite an interesting perception), applied the reading to their own lives, and predicted what would happen in the next chapter. Furthermore, every one of them participated, which showed some deep comprehension of these chapters.

Here is another excerpt, this one from the discussion of chapters 18 and 19:

Natalie: Jonas, having these bad memories, reminds me of Columbine.

Darcy: Yeah.

Natalie: Because I wrote a whole entire thing on Columbine here and it reminds me about that because I think Jonas is going to go nuts.

Amanda: Like with that not telling their kids to play with guns, like them using their hands like guns and all that.

Natalie: Yeah, just like Columbine.

Amanda: Yeah, like for us, pretending you're shooting a gun, well, they'd prefer we not do it because it makes kids wanta play with guns and everything but they just let kids play with guns.

Nate: Hey! Hey!

Sean: What?

Nate: You know what this is like?

Everyone: STOP THE SUN!!! (a short story from our basal reader about a Vietnam veteran).

Natalie: Yes!

Darcy: Oh my God, because that guy, he has all those bad memories from the war and everything.

Sean: Yeah, and Jonas now has them.

Amanda: Yeah.

Nate: Flashbacks!

Natalie: We are good!

Darcy: I'm smart. High fives, baby!

(Sounds of people giving each other high fives)

Once again, the students related the text to their own lives, and they made intertextual connections. They showed metacognitive awareness in Natalie's statement, "We are good!" and in Darcy's comment, "I'm smart." These students appeared to have recognized their own success at being able to make intertextual connections that came together at the level of important story ideas (e.g., the role of memories) and similarity of characters' responses ("that guy" and Jonas). Nate identified a literary device used, flashbacks. In short, the students recognized both techniques that they could use and how their use signaled their success as readers. But most important, their self-esteem skyrocketed because they made these connections without anyone else's help.

Discussion

The focus of my study revolved around three very important components of reading: attitude, writing, and comprehension. In each case, Book Club affected struggling readers positively.

First, the attitude of these struggling readers changed during the year. Only 20 percent of them claimed to like reading at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, 60 percent claimed they liked reading. Also, at the beginning of the year, 60 percent of them said they did not like language arts class. By the end of the year, 80 percent indicated that they enjoyed language arts because they got to use Book Club.

Second, the struggling readers' writing improved steadily because they had a choice in what they wrote about. Most of these students were accustomed to writing answers to a series of questions at the end of a chapter or text that they read. In many cases this restricted the students' freedom to discuss their ideas or feelings about the text. And even those teachers who did allow students to write in some type of reading log usually gave them specific topics and instructions, which also limited student freedom. However, by using Book Club reading logs with limited restrictions, these five struggling readers improved their writing.

Lastly, I never expected to see the results I did when all of these struggling readers were together in a discussion group. They had just as good, if not better, discussions than students in any of the other groups. I expected this group to have a lot of dead time when nobody knew what to say. I can always determine if a discussion is successful or not by how many people resort to reading their reading logs. I strongly suggested throughout the year that reading logs were to be used as a last resort when people ran out of things to say. I have found that when students started reading their logs, either the text was not discussible or the students were not in the mood for discussion. *The Giver* was a very discussible text; therefore, hardly any group had to resort to reading their logs. Throughout the entire novel the struggling readers' group never read their logs.

In short, the students recognized both techniques that they could use and how their use signaled their success as readers. But most important, their self-esteem skyrocketed because they made these connections without anyone else's help.

Closing Comments

The findings of this study are quite startling. Book Club may, in fact, be more effective for struggling readers than for other students. The key is to give them a chance to write and discuss freely in a comfortable atmosphere where they do not feel intimidated by more able readers. If this is done, their attitudes, in turn, improve.

Monitoring attitude is a very unscientific process. Some would even argue that informal surveys are not at all reliable because both the teacher and students have hidden agendas. But no argument is valid against the sight of these five struggling readers' excitement when they made connections between texts and related the text to their own lives.

Raphael et al. (2001) provide specific strategies for how to work with struggling readers using Book Club. These include providing reading materials at their age level and using QAR (Question-Answer-Relationships), KWL (What you know, What you want to know, What you learned), SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), as well as picture books and read alouds. These strategies definitely help struggling readers in the classroom. However, unless these strategies are taught and students are expected to use what they have learned in the context of meaningful activity, they are unlikely to make a lasting impression. By participating in Book Club, where all readers get a chance to write and discuss freely, struggling readers can improve their writing, comprehension, and their attitude toward reading.

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