

Dads Read, Boys Win: The effects of male mentors on reading motivation

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Abstract

Battle of the Books (BOB) is a reading competition program established at our school five years ago. By the third year of eligibility, some fifth grade boys were losing interest and commitment to their teams. Exploring ways to build fifth grade boys' enthusiasm for BOB, we decided to try a father/son reading competition, DADS READ. A group of fifth grade boys volunteered to enhance their BOB participation by reading and competing along with their fathers (grandfathers, stepfathers, or other male role models). For three months, the pairs read from a pre-selected list of three books. To help the adults in talking to the boys, we gave them background information about the author, discussion questions, and related activities for each book. Excitement filled the library the morning of the contest. Fathers, decked out in custom DADS READ t-shirts, and their sons gave each other last-minute reminders about details of the books. Randomly assigned teams of three and four father/son pairs consulted with one another, agreed on answers, and enjoyed displaying their knowledge. In terms of our research, student focus groups surprised us by saying that, contrary to what we had observed in previous years, these fifth graders had been looking forward to their third year of BOB and especially the leadership opportunities they perceived as being the province of the oldest team members. Taking part in DADS READ made them more excited about BOB, and the apathy we anticipated based on previous years' experience never materialized. Given the available data, we are not sure if this group of boys was more motivated than in other years or if the introduction of the DADS READ program helped forestall any negative feelings. Although not a specific focus of our research, we hoped that the DADS READ program might foster recognition of the importance of lifelong reading in a man's life. Post-participation survey answers from both

fathers and sons demonstrated a high level of approval for the program and a desire to see it continue.

Introduction

Our research question is, “How would adding a father/son component enhance fifth grade boys’ enthusiasm for the Battle of the Books (BOB) program?” Battle of the Books is a voluntary reading competition program open to third, fourth, and fifth grade students. The program was started five years ago to build enthusiasm for reading and to interest boys in reading books they may not choose on their own. Incorporating a tournament structure, group meetings, and peer support, BOB has been well-received and highly successful. Participation across the grades has remained strong; however, we noticed a number of boys whose interest lagged by fifth grade. Some fifth grade boys who joined teams did not actively contribute by reading books from the list, coming to meetings regularly, or engaging in discussions with their teammates.

Considering that most of our BOB coaches are female teachers, and because of the high percentage of female faculty members, we wondered if the concept of male role models as readers would be the key to engaging the fifth grade boys. Would adding a father/son component to the experience bring back the boys’ enthusiasm?

Literature Review

Current thinking accepts the notion that boys and girls learn differently (Gurian 2001). In *Why Johnny won't read*, Sullivan (2004) writes, “If we want to transform boys into lifelong readers, we need to discover what makes them tick.” Brozo, along with Booth and Scieszka, support bringing the outside world into a boy’s reading experience, which may be the “key to reducing achievement disparities between them (boys) and their female peers” (Brozo 2006, p.71). Other research, from the 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, suggests that boys approaching middle school lag behind girls in literacy (McFann 2004). They can become self-conscious and fall prey to the belief that reading is “...noncompetitive, passive, and effeminate” (Sullivan 2003, p. 57). Reading is simply not cool.

By recognizing what Scieszka (2010 online) refers to as “the male way of learning, which tends to be action-oriented and competitive,” McFann (2004) believes that library programs can support and enhance boys’ enthusiasm for, and success in, reading. Recognizing the male way of learning would involve, as Brozo (2002) suggests, connecting boys to their interests and thus enriching their experience of school-based literacy. It would also mean recognizing the importance of male role models in making reading acceptable to boys of this age. Sullivan (2003 p.145) supports this strategy with his belief that boys need greater opportunities to see men interacting through reading as they do through sports and other types of active competition. He considers competitions based around reading as one positive way to garner boys’ engagement and enthusiasm for reading. Sullivan (ibid, p.xii) says, “It is vital that men model good reading habits and dispel the myths of manhood that discourage boys from becoming lifelong readers.” Male role models are important in a boy’s life, and according to Gurian (2001), having male mentoring opportunities within an educational context results in better academic results and a greater sense of humaneness for boys. He points out that male role models are particularly important from fifth grade onward. In support of Gurian’s urging for male role models in a boy’s life, Sullivan addresses reading specifically, saying,

We must convince boys that reading is a social activity, and that begins with convincing them that men...read. We need to challenge the men in our communities to be open about their reading, to read in public, and to share their reading with boys (2009, p.31).

Mike McQueen’s blog (2010 online) addresses the power of fathers modeling good reading habits, which affirms Sullivan’s research that men must be seen reading and must encourage their sons to read to further the notion that reading is linked intrinsically to learning for life. Sullivan notes that a father reading to his son is “reading from the male perspective. Men need to be guides to learning and teach boys that reading is the map” (2009, p. 78).

The message is clear. Boys need positive male role models mentoring them in reading; boys also need to satisfy their need for action and competition. Research shows that competition is one of the primary means of motivating boys to read. Boys thrive on challenges, and competition can be the stimulant they need to really care about reading (Gurian 2005). Guthrie (2001 online) adds that “children who like to share books with peers and participate responsibly in a community of learners are likely to be intrinsically motivated readers”. It would seem, then, that combining group reading experiences with short competitions may be one positive strategy in which to enthuse and engage boys more deeply in reading experiences.

With an appreciation for the challenges facing fifth grade boys as they head into middle school and recognizing the importance of competition and male role models in engaging boys with reading, we decided to explore how a father/son reading competition, embedded in our library program BOB, would address the issue of fifth grade boys’ waning engagement.

Context

St. Christopher’s School, in Richmond, Virginia, USA, is an Episcopal college preparatory pre-K-12th grade day school for boys. The school’s mission to educate the “whole boy,” mind, body, and spirit, is accomplished through a rigorous academic program and a supportive community experience. The two Lower School teacher librarians performed the research. Our study group consisted of 28 fifth grade boys in the BOB program whose fathers or other male role models agreed to read books along with their sons. The boys’ reading and parent interaction took place primarily outside of school. The boys and their fathers engaged in a special contest in January during school hours prior to the boys’ full team competition in March.

Research Approach

As defined by Mills, action research is a “systematic inquiry conducted...in the teaching/learning environment” with goals of “gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment ... and improving student

outcomes and lives of those involved” (Mills 2011, p. 5). Since in our project we were addressing motivation in boys’ interest in free voluntary reading, we thought the action research process had the flexibility to help us identify specific steps we could take to affect change within our established program. Gathering evidence became an intrinsic and enjoyable part of doing the DADS READ activities. The action research method and the program implementation itself meshed well together.

Participants

The focus of this study is a group of twenty-eight 10-year-old boys who were all previous participants in the school’s BOB program. As fifth graders, they were enrolled in their last year of lower school and were eager to experience new challenges befitting their age group. When we introduced the DADS READ competition, they enthusiastically volunteered to read with their fathers or another male mentor in addition to competing with their regular BOB team over a five-month period. The pairs read three books selected from the larger BOB list of 20 titles starting in November. To help the adults in talking to the boys, we provided them with background information about the authors, discussion questions, and related activities for each book. In January, assigned to random teams that included the fathers and sons working together, the participants competed to demonstrate their knowledge of the books they had shared.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

To provide qualitative and quantitative data, the boys took pre- and post-participation online surveys. The male mentors filled out evaluations online after the competition. Photographs and video footage were taken at the competition. Four focus group video interviews with a total of 17 boys provided additional qualitative data and valuable insights.

To analyze the data, we used both manual and automated methods. The survey website compiled statistics to represent responses in numerical terms. We studied the survey open-ended questions and video interviews and looked for themes that expressed the boys’ opinions about BOB before and after the experience of working with male mentors. Boys’ emotional responses about participating in a competitive program with their fathers and

grandfathers were placed in one category. Although the focus was to observe any change in enthusiasm or success for boys in reading through adding male mentors in a competitive environment, we also felt gathering the male mentors' reactions to sharing the time with their sons and grandsons was important. We felt that their comments might also reveal something about the boys' attitudes.

Discussion of the Findings

Twenty-four of the 28 boys stated that participating in DADS READ made them more excited about taking part in BOB. Wow! When we saw those responses from the boys' post-participation surveys, we were jubilant. Our goal of increasing fifth grade enthusiasm for BOB was being realized, and our new DADS READ program was a big success. As is often the case, however, there was somewhat more to the story than could be expressed numerically.

In our focus groups, many boys said they had approached their third year of BOB with excitement. Each BOB team elects a captain and a co-captain. They answer questions on behalf of their teammates and motivate others to keep reading. While not necessarily the domain of fifth graders exclusively, these coveted positions are often assumed by the oldest boys. Several boys expressed their belief that fifth graders were more likely to be team captains and co-captains. Participant KN said that a fifth grader could *"be like a leader for the team."* Participant GW agreed *"this year I felt like it was my time to really read the books and help out the team."* Participant MF said, *"I felt that I wanted to try harder this year."* While we were surprised that few boys admitted they were bored with BOB by the third year, we were not sure whether the boys who signed up for DADS READ were more enthusiastic about BOB in general, or if the introduction of DADS READ helped combat potential ennui.

When asked why they wanted to participate in DADS READ, the boys reported many motivating factors. Participant TM noted, *"I thought it was cool because my dad is a big reader, but he and I don't read much together. It was really fun just to do it with my dad and not by myself."* Participant CF commented, *"My dad barely reads, but when it came to*

BOB/DADS READ, he really wanted to read and compete.” Many boys noted that they enjoyed spending more time with their dads and talking about the books together. As Participant BW said,

Usually I do stuff with my dad like sports...but usually we don't get to write down facts and quiz each other and read books together. It was a really good way to get close to your dad.

In terms of why DADS READ made the boys more excited about BOB, Participant JF said, *“It was fun, because when your dad did it, it was a whole new thing with your friends and your dad.”* Several boys said reading their BOB books was easier because they could discuss them with their fathers. Many dads went beyond their specific three books and read other BOB books with their sons. Participant BW shared,

My father called last night and said if I had a BOB book checked out and was finished with it, he could read it. He was still interested...He said, ‘Let’s have a father-son challenge. Let’s see if we can read all the books together’.

Participant JF compared BOB to regular season football and DADS READ to *“the Pro Bowl. That’s how I think of it.”*

We began the research with the idea that male mentors would be important to our boys. The readings in our literature review supported that idea. Surprisingly to us, many of the boys still accepted their mothers as being important figures in their reading lives. One of the survey questions was, *“Who helps you decide what books to read?”* Of the 12 boys who included a parent in their pre-DADS READ answer, six said, *“Both Mom and Dad,”* five said *“Mom,”* and one said, *“Dad.”* Post-DADS READ responses included three boys who commented, *“Both mom and dad,”* five said, *“Mom,”* and two said, *“Dad.”* One focus group adamantly stated that DADS READ would not have been as much fun with mothers, but the other three focus groups said they would have enjoyed the program equally with either parent. Even though many of the boys were amenable to the idea of reading with their

mothers, all the groups agreed that they tend to spend more time with their mothers. Doing a special project with their fathers was more unique. Participant DH stated, *“You’re already bonded with your mom, but you could be not that bonded with dad. It’s also like guy-to-guy talk.”* Participant JF summed it up: *“Mom picks me up every day; she does everything for me. With DADS READ, it feels like you get to know dad better.”*

When we began this action research, we found the literature acknowledged that the role of competition was an important aspect to motivating boys to read. In the focus groups, the boys readily expressed their enthusiasm for the game element. Participant MF stated, *“Fifth graders, we just enjoy scores and competition against each other.”* The friend beside him nodded, *“We really do.”* Participant WT said, *“I think competition makes reading more exciting because you have to read and read well to know the questions,”* and Participant CF added, *“It’s good to know something about the book and being able to speak about it instead of just reading it and getting it over with.”* Would a club serve the same purpose? Heads shook *“no.”* *“That probably wouldn’t have gotten everybody as excited,”* they agreed.

The fathers also commented on the competitive element. Nineteen out of 22 respondents said a competition was more appealing than a father/son book club. One man said, *“I believe it made him [my son] more involved and put more effort towards remembering the material.”* Another noted, *“He [my son] loves to read, but the competition aspect of it sparked him to make sure that he paid more attention to details - and that I did as well.”*

As the months of the project passed, we wondered if the boys and their fathers were connecting over the books. The survey answers suggested yes. The number of boys saying that they discussed books ‘often’ with their fathers rose from five before the program to 21 after DADS READ. On the fathers’ survey, seven men reported discussing books with their sons ‘often’ before the program, but 12 did so after DADS READ. Fathers made comments such as, *“Our son was already an avid reader, so this [DADS READ] did not really affect his attitude toward reading. The advantage of this was being able to do it together.”* Another man added,

He and I have not read the same book in quite some time. I think it gave me a better understanding of the type of books he is reading, the issues presented in those books, and what he finds interesting/funny/scary/etc. That will certainly give me more insight as we continue to talk about reading and books.

Will DADS READ have lasting effects? We do not know for sure at this point, but three-fourths of the boys commented that participating in DADS READ made them more excited about reading. Participant JF said he and his father would “*talk about the books we read on car trips and ask each other mini questions.*” Several of the boys seemed unsure if they would continue talking to their dads about books now that DADS READ is over. Others were more confident. Participant JF said, “*Ever since DADS READ was over, we’re both asking each other what we’re reading.*” Participant BW has decided, “*I’ll tell my dad about books he might enjoy.*” A father noted that DADS READ gave him and his son “*a better opening to talk about books together.*” Another said, “*I hope we will share the books we are reading and enjoy with each other more.*”

In terms of the original research question, taking part in DADS READ enhanced fifth grade boys’ enthusiasm for BOB by adding an element of novelty to their third year of participation, offering the boys support for increasing their reading responsibilities as ‘senior’ members of their teams, and providing an opportunity for the boys to share the books and the whole BOB/DADS READ experience with their fathers. One dad commented, “*We already discuss books, but I’m now more aware of the school programs. I’ll promote more discussion...and ask more questions.*”

Conclusion

Based on the positive feedback we received from both the boys and their fathers, it is likely that DADS READ will be repeated in the future. We thought the program would be popular and it was, although possibly not for the reasons we anticipated. In the end, the finding that surprised us the most was how engaged the fathers became in the program. We were overwhelmed with their responses, both in terms of numbers signing up and their positive remarks. Soon after the competition, one father sent this kind note,

Thank you for a great experience. Everyone had a great time with the whole process. There was a buzz surrounding the whole affair throughout the school. Parents, in social situations, talked about the event and I know some dads wished they'd signed up for the ride.

Perhaps our research question should have been:

How can parents, through the support of our school library program, become more involved in the reading lives of their sons? or

How can school library initiatives, centered on enriching reading support, strengthen the father-son relationship through reading activities?

Our future research and practice will explore the previously untapped desire for fathers to engage their sons in discussing books and for our boys to share their love of reading with their parents in new ways.

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Reflection (Lucinda Whitehurst & Brenda Snead)

Not knowing much about action research as a theory, I started this process with both anticipation and apprehension. I now see how valuable action research can be for teachers in the field. Often we want to know how changing our methods can affect our results, but we do not have a long period to gather data and analyze results. The action research model is quickly implemented and flexible enough to adapt to a variety of needs.

Our project turned out to be a lot of fun. While many mothers volunteer in the library, I do not always get to meet the boys' fathers. These men were a delightful group, and their enthusiasm for reading with their sons was inspiring to me. The high level of student engagement with DADS READ and the increased enthusiasm for Battle of the Books were professionally and personally satisfying outcomes.

My personal awareness as a researcher was honed as we put together questions for the surveys and the focus group interviews. The process helped me think about what we really wanted to know about the boys and their attitudes toward reading. Collecting the data produced valuable information for our library program in general as well as specifically for DADS READ.

Our project would not have been possible without the support of our whole school community—students, parents, and teachers. Our Lower School Head, Dave Menges, and our Head of School, Charley Stillwell, encouraged us every step of the way, providing helpful advice, financial assistance, and cheerleading as needed.

I salute Linda Gibson-Langford and Di Laycock for their ability to keep the teams on task and for providing the framework within which we could work. It is amazing how they could juggle so many people, questions, and ideas all at once!

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in an action research project with IBSC guidance and am looking forward to taking advantage of the information gleaned through all the team projects.

Lucinda Whitehurst

For me, the journey of the last 13 months, beginning with the IBSC Conference in Philadelphia last summer and concluding half a world away in London, has been a rewarding professional experience on many levels. By interacting with school library colleagues from all corners of the globe, I have come to realize that the challenges we face and the hopes we have for our students are the same no matter where we live. The Library Team Action Research Reports are a testament to that fact; their themes are universal for

those of us who work in school libraries, and I look forward to learning from the group's research as much as I have my own.

I learned very quickly that action research is different from other forms of study in that you don't really know where you will end up once you begin. Our action evolved as we progressed, and it was truly about the boys. Their opinions drove our efforts. The focus groups, especially, were enlightening as they provided the boys with the rare chance to share their feelings about reading, but also much more: they talked about their relationships with their dads and with each other in their last year of lower school. We listened, and along the way we learned how to improve our future practice. If not for the action research project, we might never have asked these important questions. We might never have known what they think about reading.

The IBSC, along with supportive school administrators Charley Stillwell and Dave Menges, gave my fellow teacher librarian, Lucinda Whitehurst, and me a unique opportunity. I thank them, and I thank Lucinda, without whom I would not be at St Christopher's – a wonderful boys' school.

Finally, to Linda and Di, I extend my appreciation for all their work on the team's behalf.

Brenda Snead