

Cross-Age Tutoring in the Literacy Club

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Carolyn Urzúa

Some words are clues. You have to look at the picture and then sound the first letter out and you could read the word. You could find clues very easy. You can find clues in the picture or in the sentence.

Having been in teacher education for many years, I have heard many comments like the one above from novice teachers learning about literacy. But this quote is not from an adult. It is from a sixth grader who is participating in a cross-age tutoring program with first graders. She is sharing her thoughts about the tutoring experience with her classroom teacher. After the program was established five years ago from the work done by Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola (1991), a collaborative relationship began to emerge among the teachers -- Barbara Cook, Mary Stirton, and me -- at Cleveland Elementary School, Stockton City Unified School District (CA). We named the project the Literacy Club, borrowed from the work of Frank Smith (1988), and the children named themselves the Rapid Readers and the Little Readers. Even we three could not have foreseen the wonderful effects of the project.

The design of the project is not unique; after all, cross-age tutoring programs have been used by good teachers for a long time. Research shows great gains for both tutees and tutors, even when the children being tutored and the tutors are from special education backgrounds (see Topping, 1987, for a review). What is wonderful about the project is that nearly all of the children involved speak English as their second language -- not just the Little Readers but the Rapid Readers. In fact, many of the Rapid Readers, whose primary languages include Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese, have been learning English for only a year or two. Through the years, it has become surprisingly evident that the tutoring program should not be a frill to be included only if time is available, but the core of empowering student-centered learning around which much of the curriculum is organized.

The Literacy Club at Work

Children are paired as much as possible with students who share their primary language. The Rapid Readers assume the responsibility of reading to the Little Readers. They talk about books, identify good books to read, and discuss how little children learn to write. The Rapid Readers are encouraged to translate any of the books into the Little Readers' native languages and to talk about the books in the native language because, the goal is to help the Little Readers to become literate. After a half-hour of tutoring, the Rapid Readers return to their class and begin documenting their experiences and making notes for their next lesson plans. As the year progresses, they also write letters to the first-grade teacher in which they evaluate the progress of their Little Readers. The Rapid Readers also share their perceptions with their classmates, help to solve problems, and celebrate victories. Next, they write lesson plans for the following session. (A more complete description of The Literacy Club can be seen in Cook & Urzúa, 1993).

Foundation of the Club

Although the model can be adapted to the differences among teachers and students who have organized literacy clubs in their schools, the following points have guided the club's development at Cleveland Elementary School:

- Every child in the classroom must be involved in the Literacy Club. It is the central core of the language arts program, whether there are a few or many students from diverse backgrounds.
- The life skills of students from many ethnic communities frequently include care-giving and cooperation skills that may or may not be recognized or utilized in school communities. The Literacy Club values and uses those life skills.
- The primary language of students from many ethnic backgrounds, although not often spoken by school personnel, can nevertheless be supported by not simply allowing but encouraging its use at school. Such use of the primary language is especially important when the school lacks bilingual staff and materials in other languages.
- Language development, both oral and written, is best acquired through interaction with more linguistically proficient users (Krashen, 1982).
- Students must engage in active learning experiences. Active learning is particularly important for early adolescent students, who must see the usefulness of their behaviors.
- Students must engage in authentic experiences. They must read for real purposes and write texts that will be read by real audiences. Likewise, they must engage in situations that help them learn to become self-sufficient, trusted, empowered human beings

Goals of the Literacy Club

We established the following goals for the Literacy Club and shared them during a workshop for the Rapid Readers.

Expectations for Rapid Readers (Mary Stirton):

1. Help Little Readers to be confident when they are reading and writing.
2. Be a friend and give support when Little Readers are trying new things.
3. Help Little Readers to tell their own stories.
4. Help Little Readers make guesses about how to write words.

Expectations for Rapid Readers (Barbara Cook):

1. Gain confidence in yourself.
2. Be aware of the knowledge you have so you can share it with others.
3. Be a good observer.
4. Be able to record what you have seen.
5. Be aware of your Little Readers' needs and be able to adapt to those needs.
6. Plan and carry out your plans.
7. Keep learning about the literacy process so that you will become a better reader and writer.

Some Observations

All of the students gain a great deal through this experience. But the older students seem to develop in areas that could come only through the empowerment they feel in being the teacher. Although the results of formal self-esteem measures are inconclusive, interviews with the students reveal impressive levels of confidence, risk-taking behavior, initiation, and language and literacy development.

Carlyn Syvanen (1993), who studied the Literacy Club for a year, reports on interviews she conducted with the Rapid Readers concerning what they had learned. One student replied that *"...one of the things is that when we hear our Little Readers read we felt like we taught them something. We are learning to become better teachers every day."* In addition to mentioning academic work, the Rapid Readers also told Syvanen that they were proud of other aspects of their teaching, as shown by these comments:

- *My best day in the Literacy Club was when (my Little Reader) first came. We had a lot of fun together. The reason I say that is because we shared our thoughts and feelings with each other.*
- *The best day I had in the Literacy Club is one day my Little Reader had this problem about not having friends. I told her that just be yourself and be nice to other people. Be friendly and have friends. She said thank you for the advice. And during the next Literacy Club, she told me that she made a friend.*

In addition to the obvious empowerment that occurred with the Rapid Readers, their literacy also often changed dramatically. On the basis of preliminary analyses of a year's worth of field notes kept by five children, two of whom were Hmong and three of whom were Cambodian, I have made the following observations:

- Even with only a beginning grasp of English and with perhaps a limited view of the tutoring task, the tutor's written language moves from a concern with controlling the tutoring situation to an interest in observing the tutee.
- As the tutors begin to acquire teaching behavior and as this acquisition influences the tutor's self-esteem, there is a concomitant change in written language moving to more sophisticated use of causal structures.
- As more and more success is acquired in the teaching act, a theory of literacy develops. (Urzúa, 1991)

Successful Aspects of the Literacy Club

The following is a summary of some of the successes noted by teachers and researchers:

1. The Rapid Readers learn to read predictable texts to their Little Readers -- texts that are a means by which beginning learners of English can gain access to print for themselves, even if they are twelve years old. To ask twelve-year-olds to read a predictable textbook for themselves would be insulting. But to ask them to learn to read a predictable text to prepare for their own students is good teaching and provides an authentic purpose for their reading.
2. The teacher maintains a professional relationship with the Rapid Readers, constantly encouraging them to think of ways of helping their Little Readers. She trusts them, and they respond to that trust by being responsible.
3. The writing that the Rapid Readers do is a reflection of personal reconstruction of knowledge that they gain. The interaction of cognition and language is clear to both the teacher and the learner.

Many additional outcomes are still being studied. Our hope is that children will stay in school longer because of their confidence and that some of the Rapid Readers will be encouraged to become teachers. We also believe that the use of the students' native language in classroom activities will help students develop positive attitudes about bilingualism. The activities should also help students strengthen their literacy skills in their native languages -- languages that traditionally have been left out of literacy programs. We are showing that, even without a bilingual teacher, it is possible to demonstrate support for bilingualism.

Many programs for children acquiring a second language are designed to fix something that is deficient or broken. But if we believe in the efficacy of the human spirit, we will recognize the variety of abilities all students bring with them to school. The Literacy Club is one place in which children can use all that they have and are to bring about development for both older and younger children.

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