

Read4Respect Service-Learning Project: Motivating and Engaging Students in Reading

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Abstract

This paper discusses an after-school service-learning project implemented over the course of the school year in a low SES elementary school. This project offered a sustained, coordinated effort to motivate and engage 57 struggling readers in a skills-based literacy tutoring program. A paired two-sample t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant increase in scores from the reading attitude pre-survey to the post-survey for the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters. Increases in attitude scores were found for 13 of the 20 survey questions with three of the increases found to be significant.

Keywords: service-learning, struggling readers, bullying prevention, motivation

Introduction

Eduardo Guzman is a second grade student who attends Williams Elementary School (all names are pseudonyms). Williams Elementary is a public school located in the central Midwest of the United States. It serves approximately 135 students in grades PK-5, where 95% of the student population are identified as economically disadvantaged, and 59% are minority (most are Hispanic). In addition, like Eduardo, many of the students who attend Williams Elementary experience a cycle of movement, instability, and school absenteeism, which causes a ripple effect in their educational life, often placing them at-risk for academic failure.

At the beginning of the school year, Eduardo was reading at a primer level on the Basic Reading Inventory and frequently refused to participate in literacy-related activities. Eduardo's teacher described him as a bright student who was "unmotivated" to learn to read. Despite challenges, Eduardo made extraordinary academic progress over the course of the school year—he moved from a primer level to a second grade level. In addition, his demeanor changed: He began smiling and laughing more often, and became an active participant in literacy activities. Part of the reason for Eduardo's growth is elusive—possibly that combination of resiliency, strength, and the inherent drive to learn. But another reason for his success may be simple—he became motivated and engaged in reading.

Background and Research-Informed Principles

Children who enjoy reading do it more often and become skilled at it (Allington et al., 2010). Frequent reading contributes to growth in sight word recognition, ability to decode unfamiliar words, reading fluency, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and general knowledge (Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). Given the availability of sufficient print resources are available, how often a child reads is explained by two factors. The first is success in acquiring reading skills. The second factor is motivation to read (Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; National Research Council, 2012; Pressley, 2002; Snow et al., 1998; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

Unfortunately, poor readers—the children most likely to benefit from frequent practice—are often unmotivated to read (Lepola, Vauras, & Maki, 2000; National Research Council, 2012; Turner & Paris, 2010). Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) found that motivation significantly predicted the amount of reading practice; furthermore, these and other results led Guthrie et al. (2001) to conclude that motivation is the "preeminent predictor" (p. 250) of frequent reading and reading achievement.

Equally important, studies show that children from low-income families do not read because they have much more restricted access to books at home and in their communities (Neuman & Celano, 2012). However, a recent study by Allington et al. (2010) demonstrated that providing children from low-income families with books spurred reading gains comparable to those experienced by children from middle-income families. There have been several similar studies demonstrating the positive effects of distributing books to children from low-income families (Kim, 2007; Kim & Guryan, 2010; White & Kim, 2008; Wilkins et al., 2012).

Our Service-Learning Project

Three conceptual and research-related principles guided the development of our project design. The first was related to the type of program offered to these children. Because of their nomadic lifestyle and language barriers, they may not have had ample opportunity to become skillful readers, and therefore would benefit from a skills-based literacy tutoring program. The second perspective involved the children themselves and the dynamics of their school situations. Poverty, social isolation, rejection, school indifference, and peer victimization are common threads throughout the literature concerning children in these situations. The final area of consideration was related to evidence that suggests that children from low-income families have limited access to books, and this may significantly contribute to their low reading achievement.

With this in mind, we chose to implement the Read4Respect Program developed by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). This program engages children in lessons that promote empathy, respect, and appreciation of differences through bibliotherapy. Because the framework of this program is based on the use of children's literature, it integrated well with the Department of Teacher Education's Corrections of Reading Disabilities Internship.

Funding for this service-learning project came from an \$18,000 grant from the Kansas Health Foundation. This project had two components. First, grant resources were used to purchase engaging, award-winning children's literature that focused on bullying prevention, understanding and appreciating differences, and teaching children to show empathy and respect. This literature was used during tutoring sessions as undergraduate elementary education students implemented research-based reading intervention strategies to assist the children to improve their reading skills.

Moreover, the children displayed and expanded their understanding of a story's lesson through social-emotional learning activities. For example, one book that we used was *My Secret Bully* by Trudy Ludwig, a story about emotional bullying that can occur among friends. After reading the story, children identified bullying behaviors, discussed how the characters felt while they were being bullied, and why people bully. After learning new skills to deal with bullying, the children role-played in a social grouping game with one-on-one mentoring from an undergraduate student from the Department of Teacher Education. What's more, the elementary students kept their books at the end of the tutoring sessions.

Additionally, in October the students at Williams Elementary attended a young reader's conference held at the university. The keynote speaker, Trudy Ludwig, is the author of many of the books that were used during the afterschool tutoring sessions. The topic of her presentation was bullying prevention. Too, the day before the conference the author visited the children at Williams Elementary providing small-group and one-on-one interaction with the children.

Lastly, at the end of the semester, undergraduate students from the Institute of Applied Technology (IAT) assisted the elementary students with their technical reading skills via the application of following directions and assembling bookshelves engineered and developed within the IAT (see Figure 1). These bookshelves housed their new books at home, further engaging and motivating the children's recreational reading.

Findings of Research

The reading attitude pre-survey was administered early each semester to measure student attitudes toward recreational and academic reading, and the post-survey was administered late each semester to the same students. The pre-survey and post-survey scores for each student were collected. The mean scores and standard deviations for all students combined were composed in a table (see Table 1).

A paired two-sample t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant increase in scores from the reading attitude pre-survey to the post-survey for the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters. Fifty-seven students, 25 from the fall 2014 semester and 32 from the spring 2015 semester completed the pre-survey and the post-survey. Increases in attitude scores were found for 13 of the 20 survey questions with three of the increases found to be significant. There was a significant increase for Recreational Reading question 4 (How do you feel about getting a book for a present?) from the pre-survey (mean = 2.58, st. dev. = 1.21) to the post-survey (mean = 3.07, st. dev. = 1.05) at the 5% level of significance (p-value = .004, n = 57). There was a significant increase for Recreational Reading question 6 (How do you feel about starting a new book?) from the pre-survey (mean = 3.05, st. dev. = 0.93) to the post-survey (mean = 3.42, st. dev. = 0.89) at the 5% level of significance (p-value = .028, n = 57). There was a significant increase for Academic Reading question 5 (How do you feel about learning from a book?) from the pre-survey (mean = 3.05, st. dev. = 1.05) to the post-survey (mean = 3.36, st. dev. = 0.94) at the 5% level of significance (p-value = .049, n = 56). These results indicate that students felt better about receiving a book as a present, starting a new book, and learning from a book at the end of the study as compared to when the study began.

Future Implications

As expected, an increase between the pre-test and post-test scores for reading attitude was found for the entire sample of students on 13 of the 20 survey questions. Furthermore, a significant increase was found on three recreational and academic reading attitude survey prompts. Students responded positively toward receiving a book as a present, starting a new book, and learning from a book. Therefore, researchers concluded that Read4Respect positively impacted students' reading attitudes does enhance several different aspects that make up reading attitudes.

The study found that reading attitudes increased with the implementation of Read4Respect. An implication of this study is to collect data on students' reading achievement pre-test and post-test scores by administering a basic reading inventory. Information gained would be pertinent to reading comprehension and oral reading fluency.

A second implication of the study is to collect data on elementary education teacher candidates' reflection surveys during the Read4Respect program. Teacher candidates will report on the demographics of the students tutored.

Information gained will be based on gender, number of students per teacher candidate, grade level, and language of students. Reflection prompts including observations of students' reading comprehension, fluency, and attitude along with teacher candidates' confidence level and ability will be collected. Candidates' reflections are vital to a program being effective.

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Step 1. Locate side A and B, Stand Side A and B upright with wide base down and notches facing up. Bring the back sides of A and B together, creating a 90 deg. angle so that the backs form a vertex.

Step 2. Locate shelf C. With the curve of shelf C facing forward, slide shelf over the side of A and B. Continue sliding Shelf C down until the slots in shelf snap firmly into the notches on side A and B.

Step 3. Locate shelf D. Repeat Step 2 until shelf D snaps firmly into the notches on side A and B towards the top.

Figure 1: Directions for Installing Bookshelf

Table 1: Reading Attitude pre- and post-survey

Question	N	Pre-Survey Mean	Post-Survey Mean	Pre-Survey Standard Deviation	Post-Survey Standard Deviation	P-Value
Recreational Reading 4	57	2.58	3.07	1.21	1.05	.004
Recreational Reading 6	57	3.05	3.42	0.93	0.89	.028
Academic Reading 5	56	3.05	3.36	1.05	0.94	.049