

"It's Friendship, Developing Friendship": A Teacher Action Research Study on Reading Buddies

by Joan Ziolkowski

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Introduction

Early in November, 1995, I recorded our first class conversation about reading buddies. Little did I know, as my grade sixes and I gathered around the tape recorder, that this conversation would reveal, so early in my study, a surprising finding.

My journal notes document this critical moment:

I called them to our meeting place for our discussion and told them that we were about to begin a research study about reading buddies, and that they were all researchers, just like me, ready to embark on a journey of discovery. This recorded conversation would be our first method of collecting data for our study. It was really impressive to see how enthusiastic they were about the recording. Their excitement was contagious! There was lots of nervous giggling as they settled down and much ado about seating arrangements - on mats or chairs. When the discussion took place, I felt myself getting really excited. My students were saying great things.

As we discussed what the role of the older buddy should be, many students mentioned that it was to help the younger child learn to read. However, woven within their statements was a second, more subtle role: to establish a social relationship, to make a new friend. As Darren states, early in the discussion:

I don't really think it's a question of whether they can read very well or whether they can't read at all. I think it's a matter of friendship and caring.

And much later in the same discussion, Zachery enthusiastically blurted out:

It's friendship..developing friendship!

Over the course of my action research study, this spontaneous reply would prove to be prophetic. As I gathered my data, and later analyzed it, it became apparent that, although educators might assume that the purpose of reading buddies is the development of reading skills, a second factor - developing a social relationship with your buddy - is a key element in determining the success of a reading buddy program.

Description of My Teacher Action Research Study

Rationale

Reading buddies is a peer coaching system in which a class of older students, paired with a class of primary students, meet regularly to read. This system is a well established tradition in my junior school, but a brand new experience for me. Prior to my September arrival, I had taught for several years at the intermediate and secondary levels. Reading buddies, therefore, was "uncharted territory" for me, and seemed like an ideal topic for an action research study.

I had previously conducted a personal inquiry into the writing program of grade eight students. This experience made me a firm believer in a model of education in which knowledge and expertise are shared within an inquiring classroom community. I wanted to conduct my buddies action research study in the spirit Wells had observed where "teachers no longer assumed an automatic superiority of knowledge - nor attributed it to the texts and other curricular materials they used. Instead, they treated all participants as able to offer new and valuable insights with respect to the issues under consideration" (Wells, 1994: 9). It was my intention, from the start of my action research study, to share with my students not only the design of our study, but also its direction and ongoing construction of knowledge.

Although I steadfastly adhered to this philosophy, my journal notes, especially in the early stages of my study, document a great sense of confusion and uncertainty - new school, new grade, new staff, new community, new programs - and a new research study which I was responsible for directing. Karen Gallas' chapter, "On Being an Aboriginal: A Model for Teacher Research" helped me to deal with these chaotic feelings by offering this sound advice:

By recognizing that I do not understand what is happening, I acknowledge that, most probably, the chaos I perceive reflects more my state of mind than the logic of events in the classroom. Classroom events, in and of themselves, are purposeful and have an innate order. Thus the act of looking might be compared to the process of "clear seeing" or "beginner's mind" in Buddhism, in which one enters into the flow of events with an attitude of disorganization and openness, rather than organization and structure" (Gallas, 1994: 9).

Keeping an open mind, and not allowing myself to be limited to any preconceptions about reading buddies became my researcher's goal. Gallas' writing also assured me that, eventually, patterns and new understandings would emerge from the chaos, and they did!

My Questions

In mid-October, after reading "Try to Love the Questions Themselves: Finding and Framing a Research Question", (Hubbard and Power, 1993: Chapter One), I formulated my first set of guiding questions for this study in my journal. However, some questions changed as this study evolved. The following are those which I re-wrote in mid February, after reading and reflecting upon "The Artist's Toolbox: Strategies For Data Collection" (Hubbard and Power, 1993: Chapter 2).

1. What is Reading Buddies all about?

2. What will I, as teacher, see taking place during buddies time?
3. Do other types of learning, besides the development of reading skills, take place in a buddies situation?
4. What are the benefits of reading buddies to the younger child?
5. Are there benefits for the older child? If so, what are these?

Setting For My Study

My junior school is located in a large Southern Ontario city. The school has 500 students, and offers programs from JK to grade six. My grade six class has 25 students whose reading ability ranges from low average to superior.

Our first buddy class, Marg Ridley's, is a grade two, with 22 students of many different levels of reading ability. It was Marg's request, when we first met in June 1995, that our classes become reading buddies, that introduced me to the school's buddy system. We began our program with her class in mid-October, 1995.

Our second buddy class is a split grade two-three class. Their teacher, Lily Winston, was without a buddy class, so my students, already excited about our research study, decided that they would like to be buddies for her class as well as Mrs. Ridley's. We began these buddy sessions in late November, 1995.

Buddies Organization

We meet with our reading buddy classes during the last period of the school day, once in a six day cycle. We meet with Mrs. Ridley's grade two class on Day Two, and with Mrs. Winston's grade two/three class on Day Four. For both classes, I met with the teacher ahead of time, and we attempted to pair our students according to needs, ability level, and personality. For example, an emerging grade two reader might be paired with a patient, and mature grade six student. Active children with some attentional difficulties, whether grade six or grade two, would be paired with a calmer, more focussed student.

The students were assigned to group A or group B, depending on where names fell on class lists. During buddies time, group A would go to one teacher and group B to the other. The groups would be in the reverse location when we next met.

Data Gathering

The following methods were used to gather my data:

1. Transcripts of audiotape conversations

Four conversations between myself and my grade six class, dating from early November, 1995 to late January, 1996, and one conversation with my two buddy teachers and myself, which took place in mid February, 1996, were transcribed. The transcripts were then indexed and analyzed, using guidelines from *The Art of Classroom Inquiry* (Hubbard and Power 1993: 65-79, 8696).

2. Journal notes

The majority of my journal entries were written as I observed the students during buddies time. I recorded:

- general and specific observations of student interactions
- what I saw, heard and felt during reading buddies time
- personal notes and reflections on my research
- comments made by students or buddy teachers.
- ideas / suggestions for the course of my research

Using Corsaro's field-note coding system, as explained in Hubbard and Power, (1993: 20-21), I coded my notes as "field," "methodological," "theoretical," or "personal." I organized my journal notes under each of these headings, looking for consistent patterns to evolve during the analysis. I then compared my transcript analysis to my coded journal notes, to discover if there were matching patterns in both sources of data which would provide answers to my questions.

What Is Reading Buddies All About?

In *Action Research: Exploring the Tensions of Teaching*, Judith Newman states that "action research is as much about uncovering our assumptions as it is about seeing new connections" (1998). One major assumption I held at the start of my inquiry was that reading buddies had to be about the development of reading skills. It was hardly surprising, in light of this, that my early evidence predictably uncovered my assumption. However, justifying this assumption with clear evidence became a major challenge. The difficulty lay in identifying just what reading skills are. Educators tend to refer to reading skills collectively, rather than individually, yet, in my analysis it was necessary to identify specific skills if I was to make consistent sense of my data. Individual students have individual reading needs, and the identification of these was often hidden within unstructured conversations, and complicated by other evidence emerging alongside the evidence for my assumption.

Our first recorded conversation, after close analysis, however, did begin to reveal that indeed, reading buddies is about developing reading skills. As we discussed the importance of reading buddies, and the student's role as the older partner, my grade sixes noted that reading buddies **provides both the opportunity and the audience for readers, along with "on the spot" assistance with reading skills.**

Opportunity, Audience, Assistance With Reading Skills

My grade six students readily recognized a real need in reading development to provide the opportunity for the reader to have an audience. Just as my grade eight students had taught me, during my writing inquiry, just how surprisingly sophisticated young learners can be, my grade six students reinforced this learning with perceptive comments on the practicality of having a ready audience within the school itself, noting, as Richard stated that, "In my opinion, I think schools have reading buddies because the teacher can't hear everybody read!" Other students

remarked on the fact that the older students are an enjoyable audience. As Mark noted, "I think every children like reading to a friend."

Educators might assume that it is just the younger child who gets the audience and opportunity but, in fact, **these benefits are interchangeable**. In a reading buddies program, the older student also gets to read out loud. Greg noted this: "I think it's important because it helps...us get lots of practice in reading."

Many of my students' comments focus on the real need for an audience. Vivien feels that this "helps the little kids learn how to read out loud." And Nick states, "the younger kids need to learn to read to other people." Reading out loud to others is perceived by my class as being very important in the process of learning to read. This audience, furthermore, provides on the spot assistance with reading skills. As Sarah says, "I think that it is important because it helps build their vocabulary", and Colin points out that "there's someone there to correct them if the words aren't right."

Providing assistance with reading skills occurs naturally and spontaneously within the context of reading buddies, whether it's explaining what a new word means, telling the younger child how to pronounce it, or helping by sounding out the word. As Joshua says, "Well, when my buddy's stuck on a word, um, I tell him to sound it out, and when he sounds it out, he can get it close, and so I have to correct him on that."

At the same time as this conversation was supporting my assumption about reading skills development, my journal notes record an important personal discovery. My students seemed to slip effortlessly into their role of assistance with reading skills whereas I, on the other hand, was continually surprised by what I was seeing - the emergent stages of reading skills:

I hear "little voices" slowly pronouncing the words from their selected books. All the partners are hard at work. Even my "problem child" is listening to his buddy read. I think he is enjoying the story ... John is showing his book to his buddy before reading it. They're looking at the front and back covers. I listen to John's buddy read his little book. He uses his finger to point to each word. He often searches the picture to use as a cue for a word. He's unsure of "rabbit" and "gate" However Steven's buddy read a short biography of Jordan, a basketball star. What a range of ability in this grade 2 class! ...Gordon tells me quite concernedly that his buddy wasn't really interested in letters or their sounds and that he didn't read very well. Gordon seemed upset by his buddy's lack of motivation.

These early jottings in my journal document a critical moment in my understanding. I realized through making these observations just how far removed I had been, in my teaching career, from the education of early readers. The slow, deliberate pronunciation, rather monotone voice, the finger pointing, not pausing at a period as the words are decoded - are all characteristics of emergent readers. This experience made me realize how little I knew about early literacy programs. My reading buddies research was uncovering my assumptions but, more importantly, it was also making me see new connections (Newman, 1995:6) and ask more questions.

In fact, some of my grade sixes were also moving towards critical understandings by questioning the importance of reading buddies if the younger buddy already knew how to read well. Both Daniel and Erin had buddies who read fluently for their age, and both students wondered about the necessity of an audience for fluent readers although Darren, when asked how he felt about the fact that his buddy already knew how to read well, admitted that it, "makes me feel good that my buddy knows how to read".

Not all members of the class, however, have good readers. This is where the ability to adapt to a variety of reading levels becomes an important quality for the older buddy. The necessary assistance with reading skills for the emergent readers, along with an innate creativity to engage the fluent readers becomes essential to the role of the older buddy. Vivien, Peter and Sarah express how the opportunity and audience reading buddies provides is important, however, regardless of the reading level of the younger buddy:

Vivien: Um, I think it's important...because some of them, they don't know how to read at all and it's really really important to help them.

Peter: I think it is important even if you have a buddy who can read really well. Um, everyone is not perfect and we still have to learn some time.

Sarah: Well, my buddy's a good reader but he's still struggling on some easy words.

It is interesting that **parents** play a role as an audience as well. My students seem to have a limit to the amount of responsibility they are ready to assume for their buddies. Maria noted that the grade sixes can be an audience "if the parents don't have time", but Carrie felt that "the parents should take some time off to help their children read. We can't do...do everything. We can't teach them how to read." Nick also felt that "we can't be there all the time to help them." Audience, as seen from my students' point of view, comes with responsibilities, which they feel must be shared by the home as well as school.

What really surprised me was, that three months after this conversation was held, Lily Winston, the grade two/three teacher, without having read the transcript, verbalized the same view of audience as my students had expressed. When asked how much importance she attached to the development of reading skills in the buddies program, Lily stated:

That's the primary purpose of reading buddies for the younger children, to give them someone that they can read with, because that's what they need to do every day, is read. It doesn't always happen at home, and even if it does you can't read too much...this is another chance to read, and read with someone who can help them out when they're stuck on a word It also helps them with their reading skills which is the main purpose for the younger ones. It also shows them that not everybody reads perfectly - that the older students may make a mistake or don't know a word, so it shows them that, "Hey! You're always learning!", so even though we tell them this, this is the proof.

Lily's words validate Newman's point that, as professionals, we operate "on a set of beliefs that are largely tacit. We operate generally from an intuitive sense of things without actively

articulating what our assumptions might be (1995: 6)." Up to the time of this conversation, this buddy teacher had not articulated her assumptions, yet when the forum was provided, it confirmed my intuition that the development of reading skills was of primary importance to her in the reading buddies situation.

The process of discovering that, indeed, reading buddies is about the development of reading skills, also confirmed my personal belief that in a community of learners, knowledge and expertise must be shared. The spontaneous nature of reading buddies, and the way in which tutoring needs arise within the situation were demanding mature decisions on the part of my grade six students about the reading needs of their buddies, all without any training other than their own experience in learning to read. My lack of experience in teaching reading to primary students made me feel as if both my students and myself were truly "equal" in this research study, trying to make sense of uncharted territory as we explored the nature of opportunity and audience and assistance with reading skills that the buddy program provides.

It's Friendship, Developing Friendship!

That reading buddies is also about friendship was the surprise discovery that emerged from the very first transcript analysis, and would be supported by all the data to follow. The nature of this friendship, however, was determined by two somewhat different points of view: that of the buddy teachers, and that of the students.

Different Points of View: Buddy Teachers

Although Marg and Lily recognized the importance of this friendship, they seemed to attach strings to it - strings which extend from an educational conflict between what they feel the role of buddies should be: developing friendship, or developing reading skills. The transcript of the teachers' conversation, on February 19, 1996, reveals that, without seeming to be aware of it, both teachers make contradictory statements about the role of reading buddies.

Marg Ridley began the conversation by stating:

Well, I think the purpose of reading buddies really is, mostly, I think the nicest thing is that the grade twos are getting to know the grade sixes whom they would probably never get to know because the grade sixes don't have the time of day for the younger ones, so I really like that relationship...It's allowing my children to branch out socially..and to..rather than look at the grade six kids and..go, "Wow!", you know, they're getting a chance to meet them, and talk to them, and work with them.

Lily Winston agrees as she interrupts to say:

And not be frightened of them, which is often the case with little ones..the [older] buddies usually learn to be a little more caring and understanding of the younger ones.. It's more of a taking care of a younger sibling situation and they're more sensitive to the needs of the younger kids, hopefully out on the playground, too. It sets up a better communication between the two.

Marg then remarks:

I think it's not just reading buddies. It's the overall school life. It gives them an opportunity to know one another, and to have a relationship.. with them that they might not otherwise.

The contradictions begin, however, when I then ask both teachers how much importance they attach to the development of reading skills when they consider the role of reading buddies. Lily states that the development of reading skills is "the primary purpose of reading buddies for the younger student." Marg talks about specific skills, such as fluency, expression and keeping the interest of your listener.

As part of our ongoing research into the buddy program, our class had decided, after our second recorded conversation, to design a planned activity for their buddies. It usually involved reading a story, and then doing an art based activity on an idea which stemmed from the story. They loved this idea and planned enthusiastically for their meetings. In December, my journal notes record how some buddies even made puppet and dramatic presentations to my class. However, these student plans led to a real tension about the role of reading buddies. Lily remarked that:

When the activities started, I felt it was too soon, that they needed more reading time..and that the children did look at it as an opportunity to play

Marg then notes:

I think our main objective with reading buddies is reading, and the activities, or the art activity that follows is just a supplementary thing.

However, later in the conversation, she recalls her early education in a one room school house:

Reading buddies in a way brings me back to the way I was schooled, where the older kids helped the younger kids quite a bit of the time. One of the learnings is understanding the different stages that people are at, and nurturing that and making them more aware. It makes you more compassionate... accepting. I think reading buddies for the older child should do that and does do that.

Different Points of View: The Students

Whereas the teachers' conversation is filled with contradictions about the real purpose of reading buddies, the students' conversations reveal little, if any, educational conflict. They do not question the validity of developing relationships, as opposed to developing reading skills. They easily merge both roles, demonstrating a friendship which extends beyond the classroom, which demands a real sensitivity to needs, provides assistance where needed, and works to solve problems as they arise.

Friendship Beyond the Classroom

During our second conversation, my grade sixes fondly recalled the many activities they did with their older buddies when they were in the primary grades. They went skating, had Thanksgiving lunches, played in the snow, were protected in the schoolyard from the bullies, and went on excursions with them. The pairing of junior and primary classes within a school opens up many opportunities for bonds of friendship to form outside of reading. Within my junior school this year, for example, buddy groupings were successfully used to produce a school newspaper. Older buddies were assigned to write up a report on the younger buddies' class activities. These were then published in the newspaper so that all classes were equally represented.

My students mentioned, as well, that buddies groupings are not always for reading. Both Laurel and Zachary recalled going on excursions with older buddies. Zachary still fondly remembers how his buddy "bought me a little blue jay". Sheryl recalls participating in penpal buddies with a class of grade eights they never met. Nick had even been in a class buddied with senior citizens. "We did things with them and we went to the park."

What impressed me the most in this conversation was the pleasure that these memories elicited in my grade sixes. Their earlier buddy experiences had obviously been happy ones - and not specifically because of reading, but because of the opportunities for friendship outside the classroom.

Friendship is Sensitivity / Assistance / Problem Solving

My journal notes and data analysis of my transcripts illustrate a consistent sensitivity on the part of the older student to the needs of the primary student. This was one of the most touching revelations in my research study. Throughout the study, I was continually surprised by my grade sixes' facility in adjusting to individual needs, whether it were providing an opportunity to read, being a responsible audience, or assisting with specific reading skills. It was the friendship they offered which actually fuelled the assumed purpose of reading buddies, the development of reading skills.

One example of this is my journal note describing the time when Marg couldn't wait to tell me:

how touched she was by the wonderful sensitivity Mark was showing during buddies time. He was working with his own buddy, Bobby, who requires some assistance, plus a new student who is very needy. Marg watched Mark coaching the new student with great patience and then was delighted to see Bobby join in to help. "Three heads together". It was a heartwarming scene, according to Marg, who told this story with great enthusiasm.

This role modelling and patience demanded by the buddies situation is best expressed in an excerpt from my fourth conversation with my class, recorded in late January. The same child, Mark, begins the conversation by describing a problem he is having with his buddy in Mrs. Winston's class.

Mark is worried about a skill - reading out loud - which had been identified as being very important by the grade sixes in their first conversation. He knows she is too shy to be told to "speak up", as Nick suggested. The class accepts this, and then decides she needs to be made "unshy". Still, they look for reasons for shyness, and recognize that they appear frightening because they are so big. (The buddy teachers will later comment upon the very same point - that the primary students are fearful of the older students.) My class then works out some strategies to assist Mark with the problem. These include shared reading, making a deal, and trying to make her feel at ease through the use of praise, and conversation.

Mark: Um, well my buddy, she like she talks softly and it's hard for me to hear what she's saying. I can't hear what she's saying.

Teacher: Is there someone who can offer a solution to Mark? Maybe you have the same problem with your buddy?

Nick: My buddy has the same problem. Tell her to speak up.

Teacher: Have you tried that Mark?

Mark: Yeah, but it's hard for her.

Teacher: It's difficult for her? (Mark nods). What else could we do to encourage her?

Daniel: Maybe she's a little shy, um, maybe Mark could try to make her "unshy" as in, um..

Teacher: How could he do that?

Meagan: Well, you can't really make her "unshy", you could sort of say when she starts to go quiet, you could sort of say, speak up a bit more, and she'll get used to it and speak up loud.

Brandon: Well, maybe she's afraid of you because you're so big. (laughter) Because the little kids think the big people are mean, so if you show them that you're not mean, they might just perk up and talk.

Teacher: I think that's an excellent point. Now how can Mark begin to establish a relationship with his buddy, 'cause there is the possibility that his buddy might be frightened of Mark. You don't think of yourself in that way, but you are much bigger.

Laurel: YOU could speak up more.

Teacher: Who?, Mark?

Laurel: Yeah, and that would be an example for his buddy.

Darren: Um, I have another suggestion Mark can use to get his buddy to read louder. Like, my buddy, he had his favourite book (that I have) in his mind, so every time I go over, and I'll say,

like, okay, if you read a few pages of this, I'll read you one page of this, so then you can say to her, if you can read this real loudly, then I'll read you this.

Teacher: Do you think that would work, Mark? (Mark says "Yes")

Nick: Another thing is that Mark could try to be funny so she won't be afraid of him anymore. He could be, you know, not so serious.

Teacher: How could you do that in a reading buddy situation, like how could he reassure his buddy that he's a nice guy, and he's just there to help her?

Nick: Maybe he could do some activities with her, like so then they could help each other out

Brandon: Well, I have another suggestion. Maybe she doesn't know if she's reading the right words, and she doesn't want to read out loud because then she'll embarrass herself, so maybe Mark should encourage her..like "Very good reading!" and then she might start feeling better about herself and then she'll perk up again.

As I studied this transcript and my students' very sophisticated use of problem solving to assist Mark with his buddy, I was genuinely amazed at their acceptance of the younger buddy and their persistence in finding solutions to make her feel more comfortable. It was yet one more demonstration of the wonderful sensitivity to the younger buddies which had dominated this research study. In fact, as a result of this conversation, we decided that the grade sixes would have to spend one or two minutes at the start of each buddy session talking to their buddy in order to make them feel more at ease. I modelled some possible "conversation starters" to generate some ideas, and then noted some of these buddy conversations in my journal:

Darren brought his buddy over to see the list of students selected for individual roles in the school [play]. Jared's older brother was one of these lucky students... Peter and Kyle are having quite a discussion on the planets. Peter LOVES this topic. He talks like an expert.

Throughout this buddy session my journal records a very "friendly" atmosphere in my classroom. One key entry states:

Am I just imagining it or have the younger students a better selection of books? All seem very engaged this p.m.

The teachers had also been engaging in problem solving, so I don't think it was imagination on my part. We had our teachers' conversation just before this particular buddy session, and one of our main topics had been the selection of books, which often seemed unsuitable for the younger students. Marg had really made an effort to send her students with more appropriate books and it showed in the reading, the conversation, and the happy faces in my classroom that day. It was an excellent example of the positive changes action research can bring about.

Discovering the importance of the "human factor" - the development of social relationships within the reading buddies situation - is a key finding in my action research study. From my

experience, I feel the establishment of this friendship is the essential ingredient for a successful buddy relationship. It is a friendship which easily extends beyond the classroom reading activities. It is a friendship demonstrated in a wonderful sensitivity to the needs of the younger student, continual on-the-spot assistance with reading skills, and persistent use of problem solving to make the buddy program work for all concerned.

Action Research: Connections Between Theory and Practice

In *Changing Schools From Within*, Gordon Wells presents a model of action research which begins with systematic **observations**, which the researcher **interprets**. This leads to a **planned change** upon which the researcher **acts**, and then, through observing the effects of this change, recommences the cycle. At the core of these four components is the practitioner's **personal theory**. The model also must be extended to include the "importance of reading about other work, both theoretical and practical, that bears on the topic of the inquiry, and of writing about it, both for self and for others" (Wells, 1993: 26-27).

As I conducted my action research study, there was initially a largely unplanned, but surprisingly similar flow through each of the steps in this model. As I made my observations, interpreted my findings, planned changes with students and teachers, and then observed the effects of these, I was gradually forming a personal theory - that reading buddies was more about social relationships than about reading skills.

When I turned to the literature, however, to find "other work" which could inform my research, I was frustrated by my inability to find similar studies to my own. In most cases, buddy situations, whether for reading, writing, study skills, or math skills, had one major feature in common. Their goal was to rescue children at risk of failure in the targeted skill. Since the majority of my buddies were certainly not at risk, it became an interesting challenge to see how "other work" could inform my own research, even if our settings were different.

One study, *Book Buddies: Creating Enthusiasm for Literacy Learning* (Bromley, Winters, and Schlimmer, 1994) did have interesting links to my own. Eight and nine year old children, who were at risk of reading failure, were paired with teachers taking a graduate course in reading. Although the buddies did not meet face to face, they corresponded regularly, over a ten week period, through dialogue journals. Students wrote about their reading, and were trained, in the process, to use webbing as a device to help them expand their reading response writing.

One unexpected finding was that most entries in the journals were social in content. "Children were apt to write about their current interests and activities, and graduate students followed their lead." Some buddies even met outside of school and continued exchanging books, gifts, cards, tapes and letters (p.396-397). The graduate students felt that, in subsequent buddy projects, it would be important to give the pairs a chance to meet and establish relationships first, before literature strategies were introduced (p. 398).

Other findings were that, as a result of the adult modelling and collaboration, very positive changes were observed in the literacy skills of the children at risk. The graduate students also learned the "importance of audience, purpose and the opportunity to be creative in a

nonthreatening environment as critical to children's enthusiasm about reading and writing (p. 398)."

Although the reasons for pairing the buddies, and the manner in which they communicated through dialogue journals, differed from the face to face meetings between my student buddies, the results of Bromley et al's study point to the vital role played by social relationships in a buddy situation. It was the establishment of a successful social relationship which became the foundation for literacy learning in this project. In my study, the formation of friendships between our buddies provided the positive motivation all students needed to focus on literacy skills. My older students' modelling and collaboration as buddies were also essential to the teaching of reading skills. The grade sixes, just like the graduate students, realized the importance of audience, purpose, and opportunity - further proof of the surprising sophistication of young learners.

A second paper which links well with my findings is *Big Buddy Is Watching You Succeed* (Towell, 1996). Towell describes a program developed to "assist at-risk students by providing an older student in the school to be their big buddy" (p.24). The older student's role is to monitor the at risk student's homework and organizational skills as well as to facilitate daily communication between home and school. The foundation for success in this program is the friendship which must be formed between the big buddy and the younger student. Towell notes that "matching these students is critical" (p.25). The friendship pays off on the schoolyard, and in providing stability in the life of an at risk child. For the older buddy, they "learn what it means to be a caregiver" (p.25).

This program, although developed for a very different purpose than that of our reading buddies program, nonetheless clearly points out the vital importance of establishing social relationships, real friendships, to the success of the educational goal.

Another interesting study, which made me reflect upon the methodology I was using in my action research, is a practicum entitled *Reading for Pleasure: A Strategy to Improve Elementary Students' Attitudes and Participation in Recreational Reading* (Duran, 1994). Thirty grade two students who were considered at risk, and identified as "non leisure time" readers, were targeted in this study. One strategy used was to pair them with grade four and five reading buddies whose role was to "work in a cooperative effort to model positive reading habits and read aloud to the target group. Guidelines to be followed by the reading buddies were established so that positive attitudes toward reading would be maintained" (p. 40).

Duran's list of guidelines linked very well to my study, especially the first four:

1. Read to your buddy and model positive attitudes for reading.
2. Help your buddy find a book that meets their interest or addresses problems and feelings that they may have.
3. Encourage your buddy to read to you and others.
4. Help your buddy to read and just tell him words he doesn't know. (Duran,1994: Appendix E, 79)

Once again the important role of the older buddy in being an audience, and providing purpose and opportunity, along with modelling and collaboration is highlighted. Reading skills, specifically reading out loud and assisting with unknown words, are also mentioned. The importance of finding the "right" book is a guideline. In my study, selection of appropriate books was a recurring theme in both student and teacher conversations. It was exciting to see that many of the discoveries that were emerging from my investigations were framed as guidelines in Duran's practicum.

In fact, I was tempted, in January, to distribute his guidelines to my grade six students. However, after reflecting on the philosophy I had been following - that my students and I were sharing the construction of knowledge within our action research - I realized that my students were in the process of discovering the insights in the guidelines, all on their own, and were not likely to benefit from a "top-down" imposition of rules for their buddy situations. I was proud of our learning together, and the formulation of our own guidelines, on my students' terms.

What I Have Learned From My Action Research Study

This action research study consumed countless hours of work and unmeasurable amounts of energy. It began, last fall, in a state of great uncertainty. Just as Newman describes, I didn't "know what matters, what to notice, or what to ignore. [I didn't] know what information to collect, who to interview, where to look (1995: 9)." In the beginning I had to do a lot of "messaging around", and yes, I was very uncomfortable. Several times, I considered changing my topic.

When I experienced this sense of personal chaos, it was the literature on action research which rescued me, most specifically Hubbard and Power's excellent book, *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*. Following the guidelines in their chapters on the process of action research, data gathering and analysis, helped me to see the patterns emerging in my study. I realized that my initial assumption about reading skills was being overshadowed by a new discovery. This gave me an increasing confidence in the importance of my study, and not just for my students and the effectiveness of my reading buddies program, but for myself as a professional, and what I was learning as the academic year unfolded.

What I was learning was that I had yet so much to learn about early literacy programming. For many years I had been very comfortable with my skills as a literacy teacher for adolescent learners. Now I realized that I needed to learn about the special needs of primary students in order to help my junior students to offer effective assistance with early emergent readers.

The topic of my action research - reading buddies - also proved to be deceptively simple. I thought I would be investigating "reading" but my action research data and analysis opened up so many areas of investigation that I had to "shelve" many important topics for a later paper. What I'd like to research more intensively is:

- The role of the teacher, how her perceptions, attitudes and beliefs can affect the course of an action research study.
- The influence of personal factors in the lives of students, colleagues and myself on the course of action research.

- How students take over and direct their own learning.
- The importance of engagement to student literacy learning.
- The importance of collaboration in literacy programs.
- The selection of appropriate books for reading buddies.

Not only did I learn that reading buddies is a multi-faceted topic, I also learned that my action research study was, in reality, one long exercise in problem solving. Poor personal dynamics between buddies demanded careful re-matching, as did disrupted partnerships which had been already established. I had to be told by "other" students that some pairs were not working. Luckily our class conversations provided a vehicle for informing me of what I needed to know. Seeing an alternate group each time we met made for some rather disjointed observations, so it was not surprising that this teacher was the "last to know" when pairs were dysfunctional.

Other group management problems plagued us all year. Absenteeism, or special events often caused last minute switching of buddies to be sure everyone was paired. Luckily the grade six class was larger, and we were always able to provide an older buddy, but this affected the consistency needed in building friendships. My grade sixes adjusted very well, but the younger buddies were often disappointed when the older buddy wasn't there. What to do with my "leftover" students also became a challenge. By January, rather than have a group of unassigned grade sixes, I formed "trios" of two grade sixes with one primary buddy, and crossed my fingers that it would work. Once again, my students amazed me with their adaptability, and most of the trios functioned relatively well.

The tensions caused by teacher perceptions of the role of reading buddies also called for considerable problem solving on my part. My students begged to have their planned activity, and my buddy teachers preferred to have reading only. During the teacher conversation, we decided to arrange special days when the buddies could do an activity. This has worked well with the grade two class.

We are now engaged in writing and publishing stories together. Students have constructed stories, often based on patterns in their favourite books. They are illustrating these, putting the text on computers, and will read them to each other on a special literature circle day. It has become an extension of our action research study, and once again is taking the buddy teacher, myself, and our students into uncharted ground.

Although my questions guided my action research study, they certainly have not all been fully answered. In fact, as seen in my list of what I now wish to further investigate, the list of questions is considerably longer. At this point, it seems of minor importance. My study took off in its own direction, empowered by the sharing and risk taking both my students and myself engaged in. My guiding question, "What is reading buddies all about?" has been answered. In my opinion, there is no doubt that it's all about friendship, developing friendship. The development of reading skills is of great importance, but it is the development of friendships which motivates the students and provides opportunities for the successful development of literacy skills.

This action research study has made me very proud of my grade six class. Our study has produced a community of learners where "adults and children learn simultaneously and in the

same place to think critically and analytically and to solve problems that are important to them (Barth 1990: 43)." It has made our school a place "where students discover, and adults discover, the joys, the difficulties, and the satisfactions of learning (1990: 43)." The knowledge produced by our research on reading buddies was constructed together, and the benefits of the journey of discovery will live among us, as a community of learners, long after the completion of our research.

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