

***Wednesday Night Book Club:
Examining the Effects of Parent Participation in an After-School Book Club***

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Abstract

The role of parent participation has been underscored in education research and teachers are actively encouraged to make connections with parents. This study examines the implications of active parent participation in an extracurricular book club for pre-teen Korean male ELL students enrolled at an international school in the middle east. Parents attended a weekly book club and participated in book club discussions along with their child. Through findings recorded in observation records, surveys and interviews the motivational impact of parent participation was affirmed supporting the positive results of parent participation. The broader finding in the study is the need for the teacher to understand and prepare for the collaborative relationship opportunity that results when parents are active participants.

Keywords: Korean, pre-teen males, English Language Learners, ELL, parent participation, book clubs, motivation

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Introduction

I am a member of a book club and enjoy not only the intellectual experience of sharing and discussing the ideas drawn from the reading, but the social aspect of talking with others around a shared experience. One way students grow their skills is through participation in book clubs. At International School Egypt (ISE), students start participating in book clubs in upper-elementary school. Book club groups are 5-6 students of similar reading levels, reading the same book, selected by genre to fulfill the curriculum requirements. Although book clubs are normal practice within ISE's language arts curriculum, an ELL specific book club, like the Wednesday Night Book Club (WNBC), is not a norm due to the instructional inclusion model ISE follows. Additionally, ELL students are usually not placed in a class with another student, with whom they share a language, particularly if the students are Korean.

The opportunity for an ELL book club came to fruition due to one parent's interest in providing the book club experience for her child. I had considered offering a book club for ELL students and here was the perfect opportunity, validated further by parent interest. Because of the parent's energy and interest in a book club, I decided this was a great opportunity to investigate the impact of direct parent participation in supporting student success. As part of WNBC participation, I asked that a parent directly participate with their child to support the students' discussion skills. My idea was that, as members non-graded book club, parents and children could have conversations about books in Korean or English. With this idea in mind, the research questions for the project became: What happens when parents are active participants in a book club with their child? How are the parent's and child's expectations the same and how do they differ? How is the child's motivation impacted by the parent's participation?

Context

The WNBC was an independent, after-school, parent and child book club whose membership included 4 South Korean boys, grades 5 and 6, and their parents. Additional members included my son and myself. The club met from March 16 to June 1st, Wednesday evenings, from 6-7 p.m. on campus.

Participants

The student membership of the book club was mostly predetermined by the group of parents before the club was organized. Once I learned which students had already been identified to be part of the group, I offered the names of other Korean students for the group, as well as posing the possibility of including my son in the group. I suggested Korean students based upon my prior knowledge of their reading skills and their demonstrated positive attitude towards English. The final membership of the group included four Korean students, two fifth graders and two sixth graders, and one American, a sixth grader. Four mothers, including myself, were also part of the group. Nearly all the Korean students were at WIDA level 5 Bridging, "Knows and uses social English and academic language working with grade-level material" (WIDA Model, 2012). One sixth grade Korean student was at WIDA level 4 Expanding, "Knows and uses social English and some technical academic

language” (WIDA Model, 2012). None of the students in the book club were new to a non-Korean school environment.

The second group of participants were the students’ mothers. All the women had university degrees, earned in Korea or abroad. The women also represented varying degrees of English language proficiency in speaking, reading, listening and writing, specifics were not assessed. All the women also demonstrated a familiarity with a number of different English language children’s books. These impressions of the women are not documented on a demographic survey, rather they were pieced together from conversations, observations and personal correspondence, prior to and during the WNBC.

The last source of data, came from my own reflections after each book club session from the beginning of the project. The reflections evolved as time progressed. Additionally, because my son and I also participated as members of the group, I had a grounding point for my expectations of what I might expect from the students’ participation, because of the sometimes pointed feedback provided by my son.

Literature Review

Marland (2011) detailed her experiences running an extra-curricular book club in South Korea for university students. Marland’s article described the use of roles assigned to each group member as an organizational tool for learning. Following Marland’s lead I looked to Furr (2003) for the descriptions of the roles. A key difference between WNBC and Marland’s was my decision to use regular books rather than a graded reader. The parents and the students in the WNBC expected to read regular books as was the norm in the classroom.

Furr (2003) used literature circles with Japanese university students. He agreed with American teacher, Harvey Daniels’ (2002) conclusion that while adults enjoy discussing books, the response of students in the classroom was less than favourable. In an effort to change the attitudes of his students, Furr introduced literature circles including the use of defined roles. He noted visible proof of improved reading engagement when the students had specific roles to prepare prior to each meeting. According to Furr, the normally quiet students shared their ideas, used the text to support their ideas, wrote in preparation to share their ideas, and developed autonomy and joy in reading. All of these were outcomes I hoped for in the WNBC. The roles Furr described include: group discussion leader, summarizer, connector, word master, passage person, and culture collector. For the WNBC, I did not assign culture collector, deciding to take that role on myself.

Gambrell (2011) investigated engagement and identified seven influencing facets: relevancy, wide access, time for sustained reading, opportunity to choose, social interaction about the text, success with challenging texts, and appropriate incentives. Within the context of the book club, I found a link to each of Gambrell’s dimensions. Wide access to a wide variety of materials was combined with the opportunity to choose when the book selections were made. For WNBC members, social interaction and success with challenging text opportunities happened in person during the Wednesday night meeting and digitally via the padlets. As the weeks progressed, I

noted issues with relevancy, not only to the reading, but to the reasons for reading, particularly as the text difficulty increased.

Ivey (2014) offered further examination of motivation demonstrated as engagement. She posited that when students could not identify relevancy for themselves and develop autonomy, engagement would also likely not be developed affecting motivation. Although the specific context of Ivey's work was Reader's Workshop, a reading instruction approach, I thought the findings relevant because of the focus on encouraging choice and autonomy to encourage motivation while reading. The students had a voice in choosing what they read, I provided the organizational structures to support relevancy and autonomy through opportunities to make authentic choices.

Malloy et al's (2013) Motivation to Read Profile (MRP-R) for students in grades 2-6 served as the motivation measurement tool used for the project. While the survey was meant to gather attitude changes over the course of a year, the scope of this project was quite short. The survey thus served as a starting point and provided a glimpse into initial attitudes.

Ireton (2008) also underlined the impact of the home, and the role of the parents in education. She wrote a brief article for early childhood professionals encouraging the use of parent's observations to inform decisions for a child's development. The article explored the tenant that parents are experts on their children and included a list of questions. Ireton's questions were modified to focus on reading activities to create the parent survey administered in the final weeks of the project.

Research Interventions

The design of this project included a number of different interventions, some of which changed over the time span of the WNBC.

From the first week of the WBNC, I implemented the use of digital media in the form of an electronic on-line bulletin board, or padlet (padlet.com). Bromley, et al (2014) encouraged the use of technology and multimedia approaches for literacy circles to support reading and expand student learning beyond the text by including visuals to support the text, as well as providing opportunities for shared discussion and project collaboration. Because the club only met one time a week, I created a total of four padlets for the WNBC. The first padlet contained book trailers from youtube.com to introduce the books up for selection. The other three padlets included discussion summaries, questions to consider, vocabulary reminders, and assigned roles. Two book padlets also included audio versions of the book as a scaffold for students and parents.

The padlets also included descriptions of the roles meant to be rotated among the club membership. Role assignment started with the first book, *The One and Only Ivan* (Ivan). I assigned the roles Furr (2003) described: group discussion leader, summarizer, connector, word master, passage person, and culture collector. I decided to adopt the use of roles for the WNBC because they mirrored roles the students were already familiar with from the language arts curriculum. The roles, rotated among the

WNBC student members for the three weeks we discussed *Ivan*. After *Ivan*, I made adjustments to the role assignments. I assigned two students the role of connector, in the hope of supporting the development of relevancy from text to reader, and therefore support engagement and motivation as suggested by Gambrell's (2011) research.

Another intervention included on each padlet was the creation of a vocabulary list from words generated at each meeting. The word master selected 4-5 words, shared the sentence, and the page number, where the word was found. With that information, the group discussed the word and tried to determine a definition using various strategies. According to Beck et al (2015) the usual strategies for vocabulary comprehension are not always effective because fiction texts are rarely written to be instructional. Strategies like reading the word in context or substituting known words for the unknown word, even using a dictionary can be ineffective if the student's vocabulary is limited, a common challenge faced by ELL students. In response, I supplemented the discussion by using the words in sentences or discussing nuanced meanings, approaches recommended by Beck et al. Prior weeks' vocabulary was reviewed orally at each book club meeting and reinforced on the padlets. Finally, I used ten vocabulary words discussed throughout the meetings to create a quizlet which the students played multiple times at the last session.

In a move away from padlet, I varied the way students chose which book to read; however regardless of the way the choice was presented, the students were offered a bound choice (Gambrell, 2011) of pre-selected books. Where Marland (2011) met student needs by using a graded reader, or adapted text, I provided students with a list of books appropriate to the group's overall reading. Marland applied Krashen's (2011) comprehensible input hypothesis to guide the choice of texts based upon students' diagnosed reading level. The application of Krashen's hypothesis made sense and also followed instructional practice I was familiar with. Furr (2003), whom Marland referenced, used short stories in his reading club. I considered this option and presented it as a possibility to the parents. In the end, full regular texts were what the students were offered.

Finally, as the last intervention, I requested that a parent attend the WNBC as an active participant in book club discussions along with the children. I included parents on the email with the updated padlets every week, drew the parents into discussion as naturally as possible by directing questions to them, soliciting comments, etc., and experimented with seating arrangements to better include parents in the discussion.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three stages over the course of the research project. Stage One collection included documentation of the project from the first book club meeting on March 16 to the final meeting on June 1. Stage Two data collection started on April 20, coinciding with the start of the second book, *The Graveyard Book*, and continued through June 1. Stage Three, the final stage, commenced on May 4 and ended on June 1.

Stage One: March 16 to June 1st

Personal reflections

As a researcher I used two different avenues to record the project's evolution and as well as reflect on the overall process. One avenue was a research journal (sample page, Appendix B) and the other a digital learning community online, my 777 research cohort. The writing in the research journal initially started as an attempt at having both a "just the facts" written record of each meeting, followed by a section to record surprising developments (eg: a student lost a discussion journal!), questions (eg: How can I make this process _____?), and personal feelings (eg: Wow, that was a super discussion tonight, we shared stories about _____). Over time, I also started to draw diagrams of the meeting space to enrich the collection of data by documenting the evenings' sitting arrangements. The journal became the central record from which I drew evidence because of the variety of information it contained. The journal also included primary information about the creation of the book-club and contained the only record of notes from conversations with the organizing parent for the book club. Finally, it provided a place to capture impressions of and thoughts about each the book club meeting. I usually wrote the same evening immediately after the book club.

The online discussion board provided a structured, incremental look at the overall process through responses to questions posted each week, receiving and giving feedback. The posts offered an initial opportunity to analyze my own thoughts about the process.

Student journals

From the beginning of the WNBC, the students independently created notebooks for their roles, then arranged to rotate them. (sample pages, Appendix C) The students shared their notebooks with me on request. I collected samples of these notebooks as artifacts to show the level of preparation the student engaged in as an example of their motivation.

Stage Two: April 20 to June 1st

Observation records

About midway through the project, I rediscovered book club observation forms created by the ISE fifth grade team for recording student actions during book club, including vocabulary usage as well as interactions between participants. I adapted the observation forms for this project by adding an additional observations row. (Appendix D) I initially thought to use the form during the book club. I had thought my role would be more of a facilitator entailing more observation and subtle direct intervention to support group discussion. I was much more involved in the discussion than I anticipated I would be, as a result I used the observation form as a starting point to the journaling process after each meeting. The observation form forced my reflections about the evening to be more focused on the types of behaviors typical in a

book club and assisted me in making more detailed reflections about each meeting.

Stage Three May 4th to June 1st:

Student Reading Surveys

The Reading Survey was created and emailed to the five WNBC students using Google forms. (Student Survey Questions, Appendix E) The survey contained questions taken from Malloy et al's (2013) Motivation to Read Profile (MRP-R) and was meant to be the primary data collection tool to gather information the student's attitudes towards reading and activities around reading including questions about self perceptions of reading abilities and the ability to discuss books with others. I thought the information in this survey would be useful as a baseline measure of individual motivation which could be used as a predictor of success or challenge with book club activities. One student responded almost immediately. The following week, I resent the survey to the others who had not completed the survey. Four of the five students completed the survey, however the responses of one student were not saved on the form and I was not able to retrieve his data. In the end three students responses were recorded. One of the sixth graders did not respond to email or in-person requests to complete the survey.

Individual Student Interviews

Questions for the students were prepared ahead of time and served to supplement the data collected through the electronic student motivation questionnaire. (student interview questions, Appendix F) Individual student interviews were conducted between May 22 and June 1st. The list of questions was a general reflection of their book club experience as well as a collection of suggestions for general improvement. I met with students either during a break from instruction on campus or around a book club meeting. The interview protocol I followed was: I asked the student, they responded, their responses were recorded. I repeated questions as needed.

Parent's Survey

The questionnaire included questions to gather information about the parents' feelings about the book club, their feelings about their child's participation, and questions about the types of interactions they engaged in with their child around the books. (Parent Survey Questions, Appendix G) The number of questions on the survey was limited because I asked for short answers rather than providing answer choices. The form was sent to parents via the most up to date email address I knew. Three parents completed the survey.

Conclusions

The primary finding of the project highlights the opportunity for parents to engage in discussion of unique topics with their children. Other notable findings included: the rise of conflicts between parent and child around expectations; children change in order to accommodate and fulfill the parent expectations, sometimes adhering to the spirit of the expectations and sometimes to the letter of the expectations; parent's

active participation supported the development of all children by recognizing positive trends in the group as well as negative trends in the group; and finally, parent's active participation supported the overall organization of the group, from recruitment to attendance to positive attitude consistency. Of the themes I identified, the promise of deep discussions in the book club best exemplified the high point of the project, was the most motivational and empowering piece, reached despite the challenges different individuals faced.

In a review of parent survey responses, discussing ideas was a common answer to a question asking about hopes for their children as outcomes of book club participation (Parent Survey, May 2016). Students' responses mirrored the parents' responses. In individual interviews, Hae-il shared he enjoyed, "discussing...debating" and Sung-Yong agreed stating, "sharing different ideas" as the best part of book club (Student interviews, May 2016). The common mindset expressed in the answers was exemplified by the participation of parents and children in conversations on topics such as "satisfaction with life" (Ivan padlet) to "fulfilling promises" (Ivan padlet) within the first few weeks of book club. The specificity of the topics was directly related to the content of the books. Without attending the book club, the topic would probably not have been discussed. A uniquely poignant conversation, which was perhaps the most personal to each of the kids, was when their moms shared the origin of their child's name. Some of the children knew the origin of their name, while for others the story was new. In the professional online learning community, I recorded this reflection:

...at one point, the discussion turned to highlight how the character had one name "Mud," and the naming process. The kids each expressed their ideas about how they were named and then, because most of the kid's mother's were present, they naturally became part of the conversation as they shared how each child was named...for each child the naming story was different. (Blackboard post, March 31)

The opportunity for the children to hear the story of their naming created an atmosphere in the discussion that was charged with a sense of pride and various emotions as the parents spoke. The meeting ended on a particularly happy note.

At other meetings, the parent/child interactions with the content of books elicited other responses around a topic based upon the book content. The interactions between Nobody Owens and Scarlett, his only human friend, introduced the topic of absolute honesty and some students shared instances of telling the truth, but not being believed. Some students shared their circumstances with brave frankness others remained silent (Journal, April 20). When we read *Tuck Everlasting*, a student's question about Winnie's decision to pour the vial of magic water on a toad, rather than drink it and gain eternal life, divided the students in the class into two opinion camps. I asked the parents to remain neutral, explaining they would judge the arguments. Each camp presented their positions to the parent panel, provided rebuttals and answered questions (Journal, May 25). All of these types of interactions are examples of uncommon parent/child interactions that occurred in the unique context of a topic in book club.

Parent support of children's conversation was not accomplished with ease by all parents. A trend in the responses on the parent survey illustrates the attempts to support their child at two different levels. One level was direct conversation after reading the book: "I try to motivate him in order to complete reading while read book together and talk about contents each other." This response was a little surprising to me because of use of the word "motivate." As I reflected on this response, I found myself relating the parent's plight to my own, with my son, who was also a participant in the WNBC. I too would ask him about the reading and if he hadn't finished would encourage him to finish so we could talk about it before book club, particularly around his role. Admittedly, about half the time, his response would be less than positive particularly if my inquiries were ill-timed and competed with demands on his time for his "real homework" (Personal Interaction, May 2016). This personal experience had a grounding effect on my understanding and expectations about motivation and reminded me of the "fun" this was supposed to be. My attempts at motivating my own child met with mixed results, illustrating the possible challenges other parent/child pairs could encounter.

The other level of support attempted was the reading of the book with limited ability to discuss it in English: "I tried to read the book and ask about the story, but my English isn't enough good to talk about it" (Parent Survey, May 2016). What surprises me about this response is that the parent did not address attempts to discuss the book in Korean. Because I do not have any further information, I can only conjecture as to why. One idea that might offer an explanation is the difficulty of translating the text from one language to another. Although there are text translators, I contend that the nuanced meanings and author's voice can be lost in a subpar translation. Another possible explanation is the possibility that the child's understanding of Korean is limited and they do not possess the transferable language skills needed to have a discussion.

The two responses mirrored individual instances when different parents had expressed their concerns unique to their individual situation and supporting their child. In response to the trend, I verbally encouraged the parents to do what they could, and put more effort into updating summaries and questions on each padlet.

The padlet was ineffective as the support I intended it to be, for the parents and the students. I posed the question of the padlet's effectiveness to myself early in the process. But I did not document its usefulness on a survey, rather I note this tendency because of informal data in the form of questions about role assignments and requests for questions to guide or support reading, as well as a simple periodic audits of who had signed into the padlet, responded to question on the padlet, or made posts. These combined trends lead, me to conclude that the padlet was not the support I had intended it to be. My conclusion was further supported by a parent's suggestion for improvement: "give and share some query and question" (Parent Survey, May 2016).

Implications

At the end of reviewing the process and the findings a few truths are apparent to me: Based upon the data, students' opportunities for unique interactions with literature was impacted by the presence of the parents because of the personalized nature of the

connections. As a result of the unique interactions, the children found relevancy in reading and their persistence increased. A student who stated, “I hate reading in any language!” (Classroom conversation, Spring 2016) shared, “ I finished 4 English books, the most I have ever read. I am proud, my mother is proud.” (Student interview, May 2016) In a conversation on celebration night at the club’s final meeting, his mother beamed as she confirmed he would continue in book club because he finished more books than he ever had (June, 2016). Parent involvement affected the children positively.

The participants’ interests demonstrated in various discussions were examples of two of Gambrell’s (2011) seven rules of engagement, those of relevancy and opportunities for social engagement. Without parent involvement, the conversations would not have had the same quality of meaning for the children. The WNBC with parent participation will start again with the beginning of the new school year; as a teacher I can facilitate that discussion, and support student motivation by identifying or designing more ways for the whole group to continue finding relevancy in reading.

A related finding in the data suggested that parents attempted to be involved but met obstacles. The intervention I used was ineffective for the intent for which it was designed and only successful in specific cases. The use of the Padlets was successful when used in class as a resource, but not as an organizational tool. Its ineffectiveness was proven by the number of WNBC members who signed into each book padlet, usually only one or two, aside from myself. To be successful, the use of the padlet by members needs to fulfill a driving need, such as accessing the audio book. Bromley (2014) described a number of ways to use digital media for cooperative activities in literature circles. I initially started to use Padlet as a simple organizational tool, but I found a need to have a simple, collaborative, communication platform to share information between each meeting. The students were familiar with Padlet so I thought it would be an appropriate tool. In class, Padlets were useful as a resource point for specific needs, such as an audiobook version of the text. However, without explicit reference or need, the support was ineffective. This implies the need for planning more meaningful use of the platform within the club meeting time and training the group to use the resource. As an organizational or record keeping tool, the platform was valuable to me. Having a digital board provided me a space on which to gather resources as well as to create a visual reminder of the overall progress and development of the book discussions and roles for the students.

I considered a number of other questions as I thought through the implications of the study, many related to parents: What if I knew more about each parent participant and developed activities with their talents in mind? What if I trained the parents about the roles I attempted to use in book club? What if parents also took on a role in the discussion and partnered with their student to fulfill a role? Others related to the students: What would happen if the group was not primarily Korean but more culturally diverse? What if the group also included girls? If I reviewed the intent of each role with the students and practiced, would more challenging texts then become more accessible? Within the context and constraints of the study and given the short period of time, the simple focus on parent participation and its impact on student motivation was sufficient.

And finally, as I examined the evidence, the patterns I discussed emerged, but so did the need to address an overarching question, that of what actually happens when parents are in the classroom. Research emphasizes the importance of parent involvement and parent knowledge to support students. As a teacher, when this opportunity came, I entered into it with rose colored glasses or a romanticised view of the possibilities; based upon my own prior experiences in a book club, I even baked cookies! However, over the weeks of the club, I started to notice a change in my interactions with parents, particularly the parent spokesperson. We shared a mutual enthusiasm of reading, and as we were both starting book clubs, we shared information, resources and observations. Our relationship changed from one I was familiar with, teacher/parent, to one that I had not expected: collaborators.

I questioned myself and as I reflected on this project, I found myself also developing different relationships with each parent, though not all to the same degree. This development of a different relationship with parents was a natural outcome of sharing experiences. It seems obvious at this point, but as I entered into the project, I have to admit my mind and ideas were focused on the students, with little acknowledgement of the impact of active parent participation on my role within the book club. Although I did not fully realize it until I analyzed the data, the overarching theme that emerged, with parents as active participants alongside their children in a book club, is that a book club has the potential to become a collaborative effort between the parent group and the teacher for the benefit of students.

Parent support is powerful, and when we are in a position to include parents, we have to make the decision to move forward or not. If we decide to move forward, we must keep in mind a few points: communication is extremely important; share expectations; share concerns; and share resources. As you share, keep in mind, you continue to be in a position of power and responsibility because you are still working with students thus confidentiality applies more than ever. Keep in mind that there are underlying assumptions, motivations and expectations each stakeholder brings to the collaboration. Ultimately, the practitioner who decided to include parents must make efforts to continue to build this collaborative relationship slowly and carefully.

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