

Book Clubs:
Supporting Reluctant Readers at Asheville Middle School

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“I hate reading!” Ah, yes-- the all too frequently heard mantra of students at our middle school. But, why do they say that? And, what can be done about it? We have often heard teachers express frustrations with resistant readers, saying things like “She can read when she wants to!” and “He hasn’t touched a book since day one.” What can we do to help these students and teachers? This was the guiding question that led us to a Book Club project for reluctant readers at Asheville Middle School.

Our project began with conversations among teams of teachers, administrators, and a research team from Western Carolina University, including one faculty member and two graduate students. We decided to work with the most reluctant readers in the school to give them access to books they would read. Other goals were to celebrate their attempts and successes, provide a format for them to discuss their reading honestly, and constantly provide positive feedback. We made it clear from the beginning that we were not tutoring these students, but working to build their motivation, provide support and encouragement, and shift their negative perceptions of reading and of themselves as readers. We knew this would be challenging because, by middle school, many of these students had repeated negative experiences related to text and generally struggled in the classroom.

Over ninety students participated in Book Clubs. We worked with each of the 14 academic teams at AMS, which has a diverse population of over 600 students, to select six participants per team to comprise a Club. Teachers identified students who showed outward reluctance toward reading regardless of their reading level. The students varied greatly in terms of personalities, academic skills, and demographics. Although the students differed in these ways, they shared negative attitudes toward reading and experienced the classroom problems that resulted from these attitudes.

We collaborated with the teachers to select the students and meeting times for the groups. We knew the group meetings had to be a place students wanted to come. From the beginning, we asked students to help us select titles. Through a Western Carolina University grant we provided a wide range high-interest fiction and non-fiction paperbacks including sports books, historical fiction, Guinness world records books, urban fiction, and picture books. Our grant also provided funding for the graduate research assistants who acted as book club leaders. Each Club set reading goals and decided on special

incentives to earn for reaching these goals. This grant also funded these incentives, which typically involved a special lunchtime meal.

We organized times to meet during the students' non-academic periods (i.e. lunch and homeroom) for 30 minutes every other week. During the group meetings, we maintained a strict focus on what the students were reading. Students were given time to look through the books, explore them and ask questions, and then selected a book they wanted to read. (Please see the list of their favorite titles at the end of the article.)



Book Club leaders checked in with students between Club meetings to further encourage participants to read through their books. The following student profiles describe typical Book Club participants, reasons their teachers selected them for Book Clubs, and their challenges and successes within and outside of the Book Clubs.

Levon was an African American seventh grade male referred by his teachers to Book Club because he was resistant to reading. His teachers were concerned and said, "He gets frustrated (with text) easily and doesn't like to read on his own." Levon avoided reading both for content area assignments and self-selected, independent reading. He made excuses and found ways to leave the classroom when he was required to read. Levon struggled with comprehension and entered the seventh grade performing just below grade level in reading. The bigger issue, however, was Levon's lack of confidence in his own reading abilities; he was frustrated with reading too many times in the past, did not usually connect with text, and decided it was easier to avoid reading altogether.

During the first few meetings of Levon's Book Club he attempted to participate as though he had been reading but it became obvious with more detailed questioning that Levon was not, in fact, reading the books. The Book Club leader worked individually with Levon to help him select books that interested him, typically short sports books especially about football, and to read together long enough to ensure he comprehended. The leader praised Levon when he focused and read for short periods of time and built on these successes.

After three or four meetings, Levon read enough that he was able to discuss his books in the same manner as other students, though it was still evident that he was not reading nearly the same quantity. During one meeting when the group discussed whether or not they had been reading sufficiently to earn an incentive of a special lunch together, the other four students talked about the books they completed. Levon then shared that he read over 20 pages of his book and when the group leader looked a little disappointed, Levon responded, "Ms. Hedt, that is really good for me!" and, in fact, it was. Levon's confidence grew with every meeting and toward the end of the year he genuinely seemed to enjoy and take great pride in his ability to participate in the groups and discuss books in the same manner as the other students. It was a unique experience for him to feel as though he was on an equal academic level as his peers. The Book Club provided him with a space in which this was possible.

The negative cycle that Levon had experienced is not unusual for middle school students: they do not connect with text, read less and less frequently, their comprehension skills stagnate, and reading becomes an increasingly frustrating task. These students are often below grade level in comprehension skills and are not self-motivated to read. They do not connect with text and reading becomes a negative experience for them, especially in the classroom when surrounded by other students who comprehend and engage well with text. It is especially important that we intervene with the adolescents caught in this spiral as quickly as possible to celebrate small successes. Building on those small successes can eventually begin to shift the negative perception of reading and the negative perception of self. Levon did not complete books at the same rate as the other students in the group but was celebrated equally for the significance of his successes.

Britney was a white seventh grade female selected by her teachers because she had stalled out on reading; she was not finding books she liked to read, and was not invested in reading. Her teachers were concerned but could not put their finger on a specific problem. They recognized and articulated that Britney "needs an extra push" with reading. Britney preferred not to read and was not concerned that her reading skills were slipping (but still at grade level). She did, however, try to pretend as though she liked reading because many of her peers were motivated readers. Initially, Britney was hesitant to come to Book Club mainly because she thought it was accompanied by a negative image. After several meetings, enough enthusiasm developed around the group that

other students perceived Book Club as a positive experience and Britney's resistance to attending subsided.

It was difficult to convince Britney to select books to read. She was skeptical about most of the books, reading the back covers and immediately determining she would not like the book. When Britney did eventually select a book suggested to her, she would want to abandon the book after only a few pages. The book group leader required Britney to read at least 20 pages before abandoning the books. We went through four or five books of several varieties with Britney and a great deal of frustration. Would she ever find a book that she liked enough to read? Should we try to force her to complete a book?

Finally, almost two months into Book Club meetings, Britney became very enthused about the first [Series of Unfortunate Events](#) books, by Lemony Snicket. She loved the book and the group leader made a point of praising her, giving her time to talk about the book, and really celebrating her engagement with the book. The leader encouraged Britney to continue reading the book even if she got to a difficult point. Britney completed the first *Series of Unfortunate Events* book within the two weeks between meetings and quickly began reading the second. She came to group meetings excited about her reading and eager to share what was happening in the books. Normally the book club leader would not allow a student to read multiple books in the same series as we believe it is important for students to read a variety of text. However, because it took so long for Britney to find a book with which she engaged, and because the level of those specific books is slightly challenging for Britney (particularly in terms of vocabulary), the group leader simply praised her for reading and encouraged her to continue, ensuring access to the next book. By the end of the school year, Britney had read multiple books by Lemony Snicket and was seeking out the Book Club leader between meetings to share her progress.

Britney needed someone to work with her in a smaller setting to explore more books and discuss her frustrations with not finding the right text. She needed to find one book that she really liked to read and did not want to put down. Once that happened and she had a place to share her excitement and talk about those books, her reading momentum built quickly.

Tiana was an African-American eighth grade female. She was selected by her teachers as a reluctant reader because she lacked motivation to read, or complete assignments of any sort, in class. She was originally resistant to participation in her Book Club group because the other participants were not from her social circle. Though Tiana was initially resistant, she attended every lunchtime meeting from the beginning of the semester. Tiana expressed that her past disinterest in reading was due to a lack of connection between her life and the lives of people she read about in novels. In the Book Club Tiana was exposed to books from the [Bluford Series](#), published by Townsend Press, which feature urban, African-American youth as main characters. She immediately

connected with this series and slowly opened up to the other Club members as they talked together over their lunch period about the books.

As the semester progressed, Tiana's ownership of her reading practice developed. One day in a Club discussion about making spaces for reading, she revealed that she reserved a special shelf in her bedroom for her Book Club books. Her opinions about the characters and plotlines she read about also grew richer as the weeks marched on. She would energetically argue with the Book Club members about which scenes were best, which characters were shadiest, and which book of the series was worth reading over and over again. After a while Tiana widened her reading scope by choosing Book Club books that were recommended to her by other Club members even though they were not from the Bluford Series. Several of these books did not hold her interest, but she was surprised when the others did. The connection she made with the Bluford books made her more comfortable in her reading practice and allowed her to further explore other options. In addition, Tiana's Book Club experience exposed her to a group of students and adults who expressed a genuine desire to hear what she had to say about books she read. She took this environment on with a sense of empowerment and pride and within it thrived as a reader.

Some students we worked with in the Book Clubs had the desire to read but not the access to books or a home-culture of reading to extend this desire outside of school. Such was the case with DaeQuon, an African-American seventh grade male who was labeled as a reluctant reader by his teachers. DaeQuon generally liked the act of reading but he struggled to stay interested in any text put before him and lacked support outside of the school to stick with a text and give it a chance. Originally in Book Club he read the first chapter of many books but hardly got past that point with most. His Book Club leader continuously encouraged DaeQuon to set small goals for his reading, but he often fell short of meeting these goals.

At one Club meeting halfway through the semester another boy in the group reported to the students about a sports legends book he just finished. He discussed his favorite parts and said he would recommend it to anyone who liked sports and an easy-read. DaeQuon asked to read the book next and by the following meeting he read the whole thing. The difference, he explained, was that this book was about real people and real events, not like the fictional texts he was trying to read before. We found that non-fiction was the "hook" for this young reader. Throughout the remainder of the semester DaeQuon was presented with a wide variety of non-fiction texts to delve into in the Book Club. His reading attention span improved greatly with these books. His Book Club leader helped him clear up holds he had at the library so he could start checking books out to take home. Toward the end of the semester DaeQuon was reading non-fiction texts and novels at the urging of his Book Club leader. He set the goal to read one fiction book for every non-fiction book he read.

DaeQuon would often search out his Book Club leader to give updates on his reading progress, “Ms K.! I just got one chapter left in my novel!” His self-pride was evident when he presented his favorite parts of the books to the other Book Club members. DaeQuon developed a relationship with these texts unlike he had in the past and he seemed pleased with this change.

At the end of the year, we held grade level Book Club celebrations. Local businesses donated prizes and students were allowed to enter one ticket for each book they completed from Book Club. In addition to the drawings, all of the students were presented with certificates, made ice cream sundaes, and selected books to take home for the summer from the Book Club collection. We also asked students to fill out a short form in which they identified their favorite book and something the school or teachers could do to help them want to read more. Their responses included: “Encourage me to read and tell me some good books.” “More book choices.” “More sports books.” “Help me choose better books.” “Send me home with books.” “Let me read stuff I like.” Multiple students responded with “Keep me in the Club.” Their enthusiasm was obvious and encouraged us to think of ways to keep the Clubs going in future semesters without the grant funding.



At the Bookclub celebration

There are several distinct lessons we learned from conducting this Book Club Project. The first was the importance of book choice. We made it a priority to know which books these students most desired to read and stocked the Club inventory with multiple copies of these titles. Another concept that became clear in all book clubs was the power of a student-to-student book recommendation. The simple fact that another student liked a book was sometimes enough to engage a reluctant reader. In a survey at the end of the year, students listed their favorite titles (see the list at the end of the article).

Such recommendations were a result of the group dynamics experienced by each Club. The members of each Club shared their reading successes and challenges with each other. From this sharing came the development of group reading goals and the selection of group rewards for meeting these goals. The relationships that resulted from this group experience were an important factor in what motivated students to read.

We also learned that not all students resist reading for the same reasons. The spectrum of interrelated reasons for this resistance spreads wide from issues of book access and ability level, to levels of confidence and text choices. Understanding the various reasons that students resist reading provided us with insights about adolescents and literacy, as illustrated in the cases of Lavon, Brittney, Tiana, and DaeQuon. These insights fuel the ongoing dialogue between the Literacy Coach, classroom teachers, and WCU partners. Another important outcome of this project was a deeper understanding of the effect of positive adult attention, and the role of persistence in affecting change in a student's reading practice.

As Book Club leaders, we focused on the small achievements of the reluctant readers in our groups. For some students, this type of positive interaction was very limited with other adults in their lives and it served to counteract past negative experiences the students had in the classroom. These relationships expressed themselves in a variety of ways. Some students would come by the Literacy Coach's office between Book Club meetings to not only discuss their Club books but to also talk about reading assignments from their classes. This example represents an important transfer of focus; reading interest was shifted from being just a Book Club phenomenon to being a part of the daily classroom experience. These students seemed to thrive on having a positive adult to engage in conversation about their reading.

We also found that persistence was a key element to the success of the Book Club project. Many of the students did not fully "buy in" to the process until half way through the semester. As Book Club leaders, we found it frustrating to have students attend the meetings and pretend like they read their books since the previous meeting. We remained positive with these students and provided them with opportunities during the meetings to read and earn praise. The development of reading interest, though slow, was significant. Increased interest in reading, resulting from our persistence and positive attitudes, also produced stronger, more positive self-images for our students, which is always a challenge when working with Middle School students.

We enter this new school year reflecting on the successes of last year's Book Clubs. We will have to be more creative in how we run future Book Clubs without grant funding. Fortunately, we retained 80% of our original books because we asked students to return the books upon completion. One school-based counselor facilitated a successful Book Club during last year's project. In

the future we hope to have more school staff volunteer to run Clubs and may need to request some district funding to keep a diverse book supply reflective of our students' interests. Another possibility would be for us to limit the number of Book Clubs.

We are excited to experiment with the format this year, and are invested in pushing the capacity of what Book Clubs can achieve. Our ideas include creating mixed-team groups, allowing last year's most motivated participants to take on leadership roles in the Clubs, and integrating the Clubs with highly-motivated readers. Other options include same gender groups or Clubs that read a shared text. It is evident that this project was a highly valuable endeavor. The proof is in the students' own words. One seventh grade girl identified the Book Club as the most helpful part of her school experience last year. When asked why she said, "Because I think before I wasn't as confident as I am now." A seventh grade boy added, "The Book Clubs helped me like reading more because before I hated it, and the Club helped me find books that I like."

Specific procedures and recommendations

AMS Book Clubs—Talking Points

- Let's go around the table and share your name and what your thoughts about reading are.
- Is there anything that you do enjoy or are at least willing to read?
- Have you always disliked reading or can you remember a time that you did like to read? When did that change?

**The purpose of this book club is for you to be able to select books that you might like to read and discuss those books with the other members of the group. We will meet every other week to talk about our progress with the books we are reading. Make sure you bring your book with you to the meetings. When you have completed a book, you will fill out a short form and turn it in with your book. You can then select another book to read.

**If all the members of the group are making good progress with reading some books, we are planning to celebrate that progress. We would like to see every member of the group complete at least a couple of books before we have a celebration. How would you like to celebrate your reading progress? (Breakfast, lunch, ice cream party, etc.)

(**Have students select a book—you may want to read the back of a few books aloud to get their interest.)

- Let's go around the table and tell the group about the book you're reading.

- How far have you gotten into the book? Is it interesting? Is it difficult? What helps you get through the difficult parts?

(**If discussion stalls, you can also have students read a short excerpt from their books to discuss.)

Book Club READING REFLECTIONS

Compiled by M. Hedt, AMS Literacy Coach

6th Grade FAVORITE BOOK THIS YEAR:

THE GUN
 GOOSEBUMPS
 A MATTER OF TRUST
 LOST AND FOUND
 BURN
 LABRON JAMES
 ERAGON
 RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT
 JACKIE AND ME
 NO MORE DEAD DOGS
 SECRETS IN THE SHADOWS
 EVEREST
 FREAK THE MIGHTY
 LOST AND FOUND
 A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS
 WHO AM I WITHOUT HIM
 OUTSIDERS
 THE FALLEN
 SPEAK
 MOLLIE'S YEARS
 GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS
 Sports books

7th Grade FAVORITE BOOK THIS YEAR:

NANCY DREW
 SHATTERED
 Walter Dean Myer's books
 SLAM DUNK
 MONSTER
 THE GUN
 RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT
 HOOP
 WRESTLING ALMANAC
 FOOTBALL ALMANAC

BLOOD IS THICKER
SUMMER OF SECRETS
RIPLEY'S WEIRD, WEIRD WORLD
A MATTER OF TRUST
DAWN BEFORE DARKNESS
WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM
FLIPPED
SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS
SECRETS IN THE SHADOW

8th Grade

FAVORITE BOOK THIS YEAR:

RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT
LOSER
NFL
MONSTER
THE GUN
FALLEN
CORALINE
LOST AND FOUND
A MATTER OF TRUST
SHATTERED
LOSER
COLOR ME DARK
THE FIRST PART LAST
HEARTLAND
BLOOD IS THICKER
NFL LEGENDS
FALLEN ANGELS





About the authors - Melissa Hedt earned her degree in Middle Grades Education from UNC Chapel Hill and National Board certification in Early Adolescent English Language Arts. She has taught middle school Language Arts and Social Studies and currently serves as the Literacy Coach for middle grades in Asheville City Schools. Jessy Kronenberg is currently working toward her Masters of Arts in Teaching degree, focusing on Middle Grades Science, at Western Carolina University. She has been a research assistant for WCU at Asheville Middle School since January, 2007. Jessy will complete her internship at AMS in the spring of 2008.