

COLLABORATION, CHOICE AND A LOVE OF READING

By Amy Buerlein, Second Grade Teacher

How do second grade collaborative literacy groups foster and enhance student engagement and interest in authentic independent reading?

AREA OF STUDY

Second grade boys enter the school year at varying levels in their reading development. Some boys learned to read with ease and have an innate confidence and desire to read independently. Others are more timid and prefer support, usually selecting familiar books and authors. Then there are boys who are still struggling to read; they typically are not engaged in reading either because the interest level is higher than their reading level or their books choices are just too difficult.

I wanted to give the boys time to read books of their choosing, while also fostering a love of reading and an openness to selecting books that offered new challenges and genres. I personally only read books that are recommended to me and rarely go rogue. What if I tried this recommendation method with my boys? I was curious to see if their excitement about favorite books could engage readers who may not have tried those titles otherwise.



WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

In order for independent reading to be successful, children need choice, relationships, time, and accountability. Silent reading alone, without intentionality and collaboration, does not breed success.

Boys need choice in their reading. “They need to be able to connect their readings to personal interests and passions” (Bronzo 2006). Studies have shown that providing choice of what to read is about twice as effective at developing literacy skills as teacher-selected reading (Lindsay, 2010).

When I looked at what research said specifically about boys and literacy, I found that boys need to develop meaningful relationships with teachers. “This relationship can often help make the connection between their personal experiences and their literacy development.” (Bronzo 2006). It was important during our Book Talks that the boys felt their voices were heard, and that I was able to provide meaningful books for them. Gathering lists after each Book Talk was imperative to building our literacy relationship.

The third important component of successful independent reading is time. Students need ample time to read. In *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller explains “No single literacy activity has a more positive effect on students’ comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, spelling, writing ability and overall academic achievement than free voluntary reading.” Building reliable time into our schedule was another important key to successful independent reading.

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Finally, research says there needs to be some form of accountability in terms of sharing and collaborating with the broader community. “When students have time to talk about the books they are reading, their comprehension, motivation, and language development increase” (Allington and Gabriel, 2012). “This discussion creates a community of readers in which students become encouraged to read and share with their peers” (Hudson and Williams, 2015).

METHOD

In my classroom we have structured guided reading time where I choose the boys’ reading group books based on instructional need. I also choose shared readings, literacy choice magazines, and articles from resources such as *Scholastic*, *PebbleGo* and *Time For Kids*. These teacher-selected materials, while needed to advance the boys in their reading development, do not foster and nurture a love of reading. My hope was that by adding intentionality to DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time through collaborative Book Talks, I could improve reading abilities, while offering choice and nurturing interest and authenticity in reading.

I began my action by asking the boys to fill out a reading survey for me. In the initial survey the boys’ overwhelming response was that they preferred to choose their own books. They were moderately excited about reading at home and at school and rarely shared books with their peers.

My next step involved finding books that my boys enjoy and making sure I had them in the classroom. I started thinking about books that were popular with my boys in the past and spent some of my Scholastic points filling my classroom library with new, exciting titles. To add to this collection, I also had our fabulous librarians deliver an enticing selection of picture books. At my request, they included Easy Readers, ensuring that even my lowest readers could feel confident with their reading at the beginning of the year.



I then taught and mentored the boys in how to collaborate during their Book Talks. I assigned roles for our Book Talks and set clear expectations. Each Book Talk group had a facilitator to make sure everyone's voice was heard, a recorder to capture everyone's thoughts and answers, and a reporter to share findings with the larger group. I decided to change up the groups each week so that the boys had the chance to meet with everyone in the classroom.

Once we had gone through this routine together for a few weeks, the boys were on their own. They met every week or so and talked about different topics and completed a journal entry that I saved in their Book Talk folders. After each Book Talk, I asked the boys what books they would like to add to our class library. Most of the time I was able to fulfill their requests in our school library, or with my Scholastic points. We kept a revolving crate of these books in our classroom so the boys could regularly choose new selections.

After enjoying several of these Book Talks, we invited other friends to join us. We met with our Middle School buddies who shared and read their favorite picture books with my boys and vice versa. We also did the same with our St. Catherine's buddies and again with our Second Grade peers. We then went global and shared our book recommendations with schools in Australia and Japan. We even shared poetry with our very own Upper School faculty member and Poet Laureate of Virginia, Ron Smith. Our collaborative Book Talk circles had truly expanded.

FINDINGS

After adjusting to our routine, most boys now rank DEAR time as a favorite activity in our classroom. They are engaged and eagerly anticipate those few minutes dedicated to delving into a book. One boy recently asked "Can I wait to see the nurse for my poison ivy cream so that I can have my DEAR time since it is my favorite time of the day."

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that the incorporation of collaborative literacy reading groups led to truly engaged independent readers in my classroom.

When it is time to share a book, the excitement is undeniable. You will often see the boys making waiting lists for certain popular titles, offering favorites up to share with friends and genuinely talking about books. There is a general enthusiasm for books that was not present in my previous classes. After every Book Talk, I've had to head to the library to check out requested new books of interest. My boys are thoughtful and enthusiastic about getting their new library books and often talk to each other about their choices.

When I asked the boys whether they thought that our Book Talks were helpful, the overwhelming answer was "YES!" One of my favorite quotes from the boys was "Book Talks are helpful because they introduced me to new books and gave me a chance to share books that I am reading". I have been extremely pleased to discover that the incorporation of collaborative literacy reading groups led to truly engaged independent readers in my classroom.

PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

I would like to expand the global aspect of my study. We experienced a disappointing setback when one of our international partner schools did not exchange their favorite book titles with us. Our other global connection school was an American school in Japan, not quite providing a diverse exchange. I'm hoping to make solid connections with boys' schools internationally. As my boys learn about books that are popular with other children around the world, I can incorporate new, exciting international titles into our classroom library.

I found the Book Talks to be a huge benefit to my boys and plan to continue these through the school year and beyond. We have so many wonderful resources here at St. Christopher's to support these connections. One of our favorite talks was with St. Christopher's Writer-in-Residence Ron Smith. My boys loved reading his poetry, and they were thrilled when he came to our classroom to discuss his poems in person. This excitement inspired them to write their own poems independently and with ease. I believe this collaborative sharing could enhance other areas of study such as writing, BUILD (Boys Using Innovation to Learn and Design) projects, etc. These young boys certainly seem willing and ready!

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