

The Potential Gains of Peer Mentoring Among Children

by Leslie Moguil

The historical perspective of what is currently being identified as “peer mentoring” has been found to be a natural component of belonging to a large family, an extended family, a one-room schoolhouse, or a mixed aged classroom. Seizing the general tendency of children to help other children, which occurs almost spontaneously in this type of environment, can be successfully replicated within current learning institutions.

Young children acting as human resources for their peers in schools, after school programs, summer programs, community centers, and a variety of programs where children of different ages and abilities come together is beginning to take root. Adults in the form of teachers, counselors, administrators, librarians, and others have taken the initiative to create the structure and provide the support to students and adults in carrying out a variety of creative peer mentoring programs. The account that follows focuses on the development and implementation of a Buddy Reading program at the RCMA Wimauma Academy, a charter school located in rural Hillsborough County, Florida.

Three years ago the Redlands Christian Migrant Association embarked on a journey to develop and design the structure of its first two charter schools. The structure of one of those schools includes grades K-2 and grades 6-8. The target student population consists of a majority of students who are acquiring English as a non-native language. The challenge



Leslie Moguil accepted a position with Redlands Christian Migrant Association in 1987 as an education coordinator for multiple child care centers. She was responsible for the delivery of a quality educational program for migrant and rural poor children birth to five years of age and has mentored numerous RCMA employees toward setting and achieving their professional development goals. In her most recent position as special projects coordinator, Leslie provides administrative and development support to over 70 RCMA programs located in 20 rural Florida counties. She has facilitated training at local, state, and national conferences on education, and issues related to farm worker advocacy. She serves as a member of the Florida Department of Education’s Migrant Education Advisory Council, CDA Advisor, editor of the RCMA *HOY* monthly newsletter, and is a federal reviewer for Head Start.

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being addressed is how to take a group of students who have been previously identified as reading below grade level in middle school, and enable them to feel positive and successful about something they have been struggling with throughout their school careers — reading.

The split grade level structure, which is clearly out of the ordinary, was designed with the intent of utilizing the potential created by middle school children interacting with primary grade students in a partnership for learning. The goal of building self-esteem and strengthening the reading skills of both age groups through mentoring is now becoming a cornerstone of the curriculum.

The program takes shape in what RCMA Wimauma Academy students and staff members refer to as “Buddy Reading.” Every Friday middle school students are paired with elementary students in the confines of their primary classrooms to read to each other, and on occasion, to read aloud simultaneously. Second graders rush to the classroom shelf to choose the books and are often observed giving their older buddies a voice in the decision of which book to tackle first. Every nook and cranny in the classroom becomes a

place where the partners stretch out, get comfortable, and read.

Buddy Reading is a natural complement to the existing Accelerated Reading (AR) Program adopted by the school. The AR program is based on teachers and students working cooperatively in setting reading goals based on an assessment of where the children are within their individual reading continuum. The classroom and library contain books that reflect the different reading levels of the children. The program is supported by computer technology that allows children to test their comprehension upon completion of a book. The role of the teacher is to support the students in their understanding of the system in which books are labeled for their use; to provide structured time for children to read; to help students set appropriate reading goals; to motivate students to read; to track progress and celebrate the attainment of the students’ AR goals.

When the middle school reading buddies arrive in the classroom they take on a much different demeanor than is present at other times of the school day. The characteristic teenage ego, along with the strong desire to demonstrate their ability to assert themselves, seems to disappear as they come face to face with their younger reading buddy. The younger buddies approach with a smile, eager and pleased to have the attention of an older student focused solely on them. How often do students have the opportunity to have one on one support during the school day? The obvious answer is very little, but students know they can count on Buddy Reading every Friday.

From the perspective of the middle school student it may be more difficult to identify what potential this mentoring partnership plays in their educational experience. The obvious gain, as is true for all positive mentoring experiences is the development of one’s own self esteem, derived from the participation in an act of service. When older students engage in the act of making a difference, they are paving the way to improving their own social skills and developing positive values for the future.

The potential gains move well beyond the social skill boundary and into academic achievement for those students who have never read on

grade level. The embarrassment of continually stumbling over words and the frustration of being told how important reading is, only to continue to fall farther and farther behind your peers, perpetuates the formation of a wall. This wall stands in the way of successful student achievement in the learning of subject area content. The more students read and the more they feel success in their ability to read, the greater their potential to succeed in a broad range of critical content areas.

Buddy Reading provides for an environment that is positive and non-threatening for all students involved, especially those students who are reading below grade level. The program also provides a challenge for those readers who are on or above grade level by enabling them to utilize and highlight their reading strengths.

The concept of Buddy Reading has moved beyond the classroom and into the homes of the students. Students are encouraged to participate in Buddy Reading at home. During a recent circle time, a group of second grade students shared who their home reading buddies were. Older brothers, sisters, and cousins were mentioned as people whom children do read with. Beyond this level of experience, several second grade children mentioned that they read to younger siblings or cousins on a regular basis. These young children are now on the path to becoming informal mentors to yet another group of even younger children. This continues to perpetuate the feeling of success coupled with the enjoyment of reading.

In order to strengthen the Buddy Reading program and the partnership for learning that has been developed with the students, Augustin Montejo, charter school coordinator, has asked the middle and primary school students for their feedback on the reading program currently in place. Several students expressed their desire to have a consistent reading buddy in order to strengthen their knowledge about the child they are working with and increase their ability to improve the child's reading skills. Plans are in order to conduct an interest survey with students regarding their book preferences prior to the purchase of new library books. Additional efforts to involve parents and community volunteers are also under way.

Empowering children with a voice and making them part of the mission to help others within their own school community has proven to be invaluable for the staff, children, and families of the RCMA Wimauma Academy.



Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Buddy reading for me!: Implement a buddy reading program in your center. Consider good matches between age groups (like enough differences between ages to have buddies view the opportunity as a special treat) as well as between individual children.

Creating many mentoring opportunities: Explore other ways children might mentor. Consider cross age mentors, like kindergarteners introducing new toys and materials to twos, as well as same age mentors, like competent climbers teaching climbing skills to new climbers. Don't forget to consider developmental stages as well like non-napping children helping younger children calm down and go to sleep or skilled snack self-servers staffing the self-serve snack area for new self-servers.