

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
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RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



# TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

## Building Literacy Skills Through Reading Buddies

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- 4) encourage organizations as well as individuals to determine and act in areas of research and inquiry; and
- 5) encourage experimentation with innovative ideas and methodologies related to teaching and learning.

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A special thank you goes to our school-based administration as well as our school division, Saskatchewan Rivers School Division #119, for their support and interest in our project.

We also appreciate the permission that we were able to obtain to use materials from Nelson Thomson Learning for our learning resources.

# Our School Community

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Vincent Massey Community School is located in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and is part of Saskatchewan Rivers School Division #119. It is a Pre-K to Grade 8 community school with approximately 331 students. The students bring to the school diverse backgrounds with respect to ethnicity and culture.

Over the past year we were fortunate to work in a brand new building that provided an optimal environment for learning. Our school is constructed in a way that groups each area of the school into Division Neighborhoods. This construction is wonderful for group collaboration and out-of-class experiences.

Our school is also technologically advanced. We have a wireless system that is the basis for computer operations throughout the whole school. We have three SMART boards in our school as well as a Laptop Computer cart with thirty wireless laptops.

With the support of our colleagues and our students' parents, we undertook this research with the collective feeling that "Together we are better."

# How We Got Started

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One of the researchers taught in a grade seven-eight class and the other in a kindergarten class. We had for several years matched our students as care partners, providing time for them to come together and develop their relationships. However, in the past, this meeting time had been devoted to craft projects and games that focused on playful student interaction. There were several points in the year where our meeting times became inactive. Due to the busyness of our classrooms and the inconsistency in our meeting times, we became frustrated. We felt that no real learning was taking place and it was just a time for “fun.” We could see that without a goal or main focus for reading buddy time, it was very easy to dismiss the meeting times. Realizing that the relationship between buddies was important and provided the potential for learning, we needed a better system that would provide reading buddy time in a way that was advantageous to both groups of students.

# Our Goals

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Our research focused on two major goals:

- To increase literacy in the younger students through a consistent, planned program that incorporated the use of technology, and
- To work collaboratively together as colleagues by teaching in each other's classrooms. This team teaching enabled both of us to get to know each set of students on a personal level that only made the relationship-building easier between all of us. We gained an appreciation for one another's teaching assignments. We also learned that although we were on opposite sides of the teaching spectrum of elementary school grades, our differences did not hamper the creation of meaningful interactions with each other and our students.

In the search of ways to better our reading buddy program, we found a great resource that addressed our goals and exemplified what we wanted to achieve. *The Kindergarten Teacher's Resource Book* (Nelson Thomson Learning, 2000) not only gave us a vast body of ideas on which to build our new buddy system, it helped us to realize that our ultimate goals could be achieved.

We decided that focusing on one main objective, which would be teaching the older age students to assume a tutor-like relationship with the kindergarten students, was the best approach for our situation. "Working with a partner or buddy promotes more positive attitudes and higher achievement. He who teaches, learns." (Leland and Fitzpatrick, 1994, p. 294)

Our modeling of working together showed that partnerships between two unlikely groups of people can be beneficial for all involved. Our team teaching approach gave the older students an opportunity to see that relationships can be built in unlikely situations. When they "helped" the kindergarten students, they realized that they were actually learning right along with their kindergarten partners. We felt that we were successful in creating a reading buddy program that met the needs of all students.

# Our Research

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Having established care partners over the last three years, we thought it would be great to now have the opportunity to create out of these established partnerships a set of effective reading buddy partnerships. Having realized that having student buddies in the classroom did not necessarily make for a better literacy support, we needed to have in mind an actual program that would achieve our goals. We came up with the program that we have called Building Literacy Skills through Reading Buddies. This program used the older students as mentors to the younger students. Not only did this strategy improve the younger students' literacy skills and help the kindergarten teacher to develop their reading and writing skills, it provided the older students with many beneficial skills as well. We quickly realized that this was a "win-win" situation.

[In the kindergarten classroom] ... expectations of what children will need to know by the end of kindergarten have changed dramatically in recent years. Today, in addition to socialization, the traditional emphasis in kindergarten, crucial skills of learning to read and write are the focus of the curriculum. It is now expected that children will learn about critical concepts of print and how our alphabetic system works, and will have had many opportunities to use oral and written language to express meaning and share experiences with others. Many children entering kindergarten, however, will have very different levels of knowledge about written language. Instruction will need to be adapted for those differences. (Morrow, Strickland and Woo, 1998, p. X)

Nothing can replace the time that children spend with their parents in the early years. Not all children will enter kindergarten coming from a home rich in literacy experiences. Students coming from a literacy-poor environment are at a disadvantage simply due to less experience with and exposure to language.

Although few kindergartens can imitate the intimate, one-to-one connections that parents and children enjoy in the home, teachers must find ways to adapt these stimulating, home-like conditions to classrooms where there is one adult to twenty or more children, who are often from very diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the teacher must provide ways to help those children who do not have the home advantages to catch up with their peers. (Rog, 2001, p. 28)

Many teachers find it difficult to give their students the one-to-one time that they require for proper literacy development. However, there are a variety of strategies that teachers can use to achieve literacy goals. They include the use of paraprofessionals in the classroom and the use of parent or community volunteers and older students. Our focus became the use of the partnership between the kindergarten students and the grade seven-eight class.

# Implementation of the Program

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We tried to group the students based on individual needs. Some of the groupings worked well, but we also had to make changes as students moved or relationships did not work as well as we had hoped. We also had to take several special needs students into account in creating the partnerships. We soon realized that just putting two students together to work on an assigned task was not enough; we needed to take the time to mentor the older students in their role as older partners. We felt this mentoring was essential for the success of the partnerships.

We based our training for the older students on the resource already mentioned, *The Kindergarten Teacher's Resource Book*. We set aside some of our research grant money to provide the time in which we could train the older students. Over the course of two days we pulled out small groups of students to carry out the training.

However, before we started the training sessions, we sat down together and decided on some key strategies that we felt the older students needed to learn. Some of the strategies included: how to keep their younger partners on task, how to respond to their needs and how to share feelings with one another.

As well, we needed the older students to have an understanding of what literacy was. With this understanding, they needed to be able to promote phonological awareness through activities such as rhyming, letter sounds and manipulation of oral language. It was also essential that the older students be able to demonstrate and promote familiarity with print. We modeled for the older students how to track when reading, how to use your voice to make a story more interesting, how to draw attention to picture cues to help younger students figure out words, and how to help the kindergarten student respond to the story. Examples of the resources we used with the older students are provided in the Appendices.

In addition to helping the older students learn how to carry out their role as teachers of the younger students, we needed to focus on the technological part of our objectives. Through the use of the SMART board, the grade seven-eight students were given the opportunity to find on-line literacy resources related to our reading buddy program. This search enabled the older students to take a greater degree of accountability for the way in which they taught their buddies certain skills that had been laid out by the teachers. The whole search process increased the enjoyment of both groups of students. As well, the older students who struggled academically were given the opportunity to increase their confidence level as the mentors for the younger students.

Using technology also helped us to address the needs of some students who required different approaches to become proficient in early literacy skills. As a bonus, the kindergarten students were exposed to the computer, and by the end of the year we found that their computer skills had increased. This skill development was wonderful to see because we had not set out to achieve this.

Once the training phase of the project was complete, we designed our buddy program to meet once a week for a forty minute class period. During this time, we focused on language activities that included: games, shared reading activities, word play, computer skills, shared writing activities and oral language development. More specifically, the literacy development activities were based on collections of emergent readers that students would use together, following specific mini-lessons that they had been given. Emergent readers were “little books” created for take-home reading programs, such as *Ray’s Readers* by Zaner-Bloser and *First Collections* by Ginn.

We also constructed a number of literacy boxes in accordance with the book, *Literacy Bags* (Howell and Webb, 2002). This book consisted of literacy activities that included pictures books, alphabet objects or props, journal activities and alphabet games. The older students not only used the literacy boxes to interact with their buddy, but they were also an integral part of creating and developing the kits.

# Why Use a Reading Buddy Program?

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It has been observed that the academic demands in kindergarten seem to be increasing over the past years. Yet often students are entering school without the literacy background they need to be successfully made ready for grade one. On the other hand, upper-year students tend to lack the confidence they require to be better readers and writers themselves. With the reading buddy program, learning occurs for both older and younger students. Often teachers assume that a buddy program only benefits the younger students, but in reality, both partners are learning.

Simply preparing to be a peer helper has been proposed to enhance cognitive processing in the helper - by increasing attention to and motivation for the task, and necessitating review of existing knowledge and skills. Consequently, existing knowledge is transformed by reorganization, involving new associations and a new integration. The act of helping itself involves further cognitive challenge, particularly with respect to simplification, clarification and exemplification. (Topping and Ehly, 1998, p. 13)

Aside from the academic focus, the partnership accentuates the development of social skills between the two students. At times, we felt that the students were more responsive to the reinforcement and feedback provided by their buddies than they were to that provided by the teacher.

Having a reading buddy program utilizes the skills of the older students to take on the role of classroom educational associates and parent volunteers. Having students play this role not only benefits the younger students, but it greatly affects the older students' learning as well.

... However, in order to be effective, this support requires initial work and follow-up. Research shows that volunteer programs make an important contribution to students' literacy learning if they are carefully organized and provide high quality training. The same holds true when using buddies and paraprofessionals in the classroom ... Most importantly, the experience needs to be a positive one for all concerned. Classroom practices must build a positive attitude toward literacy and help young students to see themselves as "readers" and "writers." For those involved there is nothing more rewarding than witnessing the emerging literacy that changes daily in the kindergarten class." (Trehearne, 2000, p. 515)

Finally, both older and younger students enjoy the learning partnership involved in an effective ready buddy program. In our research, we gathered positive feedback from both sets of students regarding their experiences with this project. Some of their comments are provided below:

## **YOUNGER STUDENTS:**

"My buddy and I have fun together.

"I like reading with my buddy."

“Reading poems are fun.”

“My buddy makes me feel good.”

“I like it when my buddy comes into the classroom.”

### **OLDER STUDENTS:**

“I am having fun learning with them.”

“They are the best to work with.”

“We should do this more often!”

“It is neat to see them learn their letters and sounds.”

“It is cool to “teach” them!”

Initial planning of an effective reading buddy program may take time and effort on the part of the teachers, but it is well worth it in the end. When students had awareness of the goals of the program, each meeting time ran more smoothly. This change was due to the organization and planning that went into setting up our year together as Reading Buddies.

# Recommendations

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We feel that it is important for all teachers who are involved reading buddy partnerships to take the time to plan at the beginning of the year. This planning is essential for the success of the program. Moreover, if teachers are freed up to work directly with the older students in a mentor-type relationship before they enter into the reading buddy program, both sets of students will benefit.

# Conclusion

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The research that we reviewed on reading buddies and peer tutoring was not new. There were numerous articles and books entries on the topic, e.g., Morrice and Simmons, 1991; Bialostok, 1992; Girard and Willing, 1996; Johnston, Invernizzi and Juel, 1998; and Ditzel, 2000.

In our review of the literature, we found that every program of this kind had been developed to suit the needs of the particular school or group. Taking into account the needs of our situation and our students we developed the program that we thought was best: Building Literacy Skills Through Reading Buddies.

Possible advantages of this program for the kindergarten students included:

- Safe and happy relationships,
- One-on-one time to practice new skills,
- Improvement in the students' attitudes and interests in their reading, writing and listening skills,
- Enjoyable experiences and greater happiness.

Possible advantages for the older age students included:

- Safe and happy relationships,
- Improved confidence in reading,
- Improved self-esteem,
- More knowledge about Picture Books,
- Strengthened ability to read aloud,
- Increased cognitive awareness,
- Opportunities to make connections from past learning.

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# Appendix I: Letter to Parents

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## LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents and Guardians:

This year the Kindergarten morning class and the Grade 7/8 class will be working on a project. Mrs. Tiessen (Kindergarten) and Mrs. Dust (Grade 7/8) received a grant to do some research. This project is based on building literacy skills through reading buddies. Your child is NOT being researched. We will simply be working together once a week on reading and writing strategies. We will be researching the reading buddy system and not individual students.

We will be incorporating the SMART board into this project. The SMART board is a tool that we are very lucky to have in our school. The SMART board helps the teacher by using computers and technology to teach. The older students will be using the board to help teach the students different reading and writing strategies. We will be teaching the older students different strategies to use when working with the younger students.

Please join us for an information meeting about our project. The meeting will be about 45 minutes long and we will demonstrate the SMART board and show you some of the many literacy strategies that we will be using with our child. This meeting is for Kindergarten and Grade 7/8 students. The meeting will be held on Thursday, September 22 at 6:30 p.m. Please enter the school using the front entrance.

We are looking forward to seeing you at the meeting. Thank you for being a part of your child's education.

Sincerely,

Jasmin Tiessen

Dawn Dust

# Appendix II: Consent Forms

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Dear Parents and Guardians,

As you well know, your child will be involved in the Reading Buddy program this year. We need consent from you in order for your child to participate in this wonderful learning experience. This program is not new, but this year our grant will enable us to learn more about the buddy system and ways to improve the literacy component.

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand my child's teacher is involved in a research project and my child will be taking part in the Reading Buddy program.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As you well know, your child will be involved in the Reading Buddy program this year. We need consent from you in order to use your child's photograph in our project report. This report will be made available to other teachers across the province. Names will not be used.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give permission for my child to have his or her picture used in the project.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give permission for my child to have his or her picture used in the project.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix III: Steps in a Kindergarten Reading Buddy Program

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## SHARE BUDDY READING GOALS

- Make literacy enjoyable.
- Increase interest in reading and writing.
- Improve understanding of print awareness:
  - concept of book
  - directionality of reading
  - book title
  - use of pictures – pictures related to print
  - author, illustrator
  - concept of word, letter
  - beginning writing and copying and creating text (using invented spelling)
- Improve listening skills and communications skills.
- Improve confidence in self as a reader and writer

## SHARE “LEARNING TO READ” WORKSHOP

Share the “Learning to Read” workshop with older buddies. (See Blackline Master 28: A Workshop for Parents of Emerging Readers: Learning to Read – Promoting Your Child’s Reading Growth, Chapter 6, on pages 455-81.)

## ROLE-PLAY READING

The teacher role-plays reading to kindergarten students. Other older buddies observe and come up with ideas as to how to keep the kindergarten students attentive:

- How to use voice effectively
- How to encourage younger buddies to respond to the book
- How to share holding the book together.

## SELECT BOOKS TO SHARE

A selection of picture books (fiction and nonfiction) and pattern books are gathered, and each older buddy selects one and practices sharing it with a peer. Partners then provide feedback to one another.

(See Blackline Master 28/21: A Workshop for Parents of Emerging Readers: How to Read Aloud – reading to Your Child, Chapter 6, on page 475.)

## MEET YOUR BUDDY

Both younger and older buddies are introduced to each other via notes written by them. This gives older buddies the opportunity to learn about the importance and acceptance of invented spelling. Younger buddies get a chance to “write” something about themselves that they want to share with their older buddies.

## BUDDY SESSION 1

The purpose of the first Buddy Reading Program session is for the buddies to get to know each other. They discuss favourite TV shows, food, pets, interests, and so on. Then each buddy pair joins another pair, and they all get to know each other through a read-aloud.

## SHARE A BOOK

The older buddy shares a book with a kindergarten buddy. The teacher monitors and provides feedback.

## **SHARE IDEAS – READ-ALOUDS AND SHARED READING**

Buddies share ideas for responding to read-alouds or shared reading through the following:

- retelling by the student
- discussion
- drawing a picture and/or writing something about the story
- acting out a favourite part
- Story Board or Story Map

## **SHARE IDEAS – KINDERGARTEN READING**

Older buddies share ideas for responding to kindergarten reading. They get together to debrief and

problem-solve. Role-playing difficult situations helps students to problem-solve. It's important for older buddies to:

- be encouraging
- help younger buddies to track print
- encourage younger buddies to chime in, especially when rereading text
- encourage using the following strategies to figure out unknown words:
  - use the picture
  - think about what word will make sense
  - look at the beginning of the word and get your mouth ready to make the first sound
  - try skipping the word and coming back to it
  - look for a part of the word that is known
- try echo reading
- reread favourite books (very important)

# Appendix IV: Literacy Skills in Kindergarten

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## LITERACY SKILLS IN KINDERGARTEN

Students excel as they:

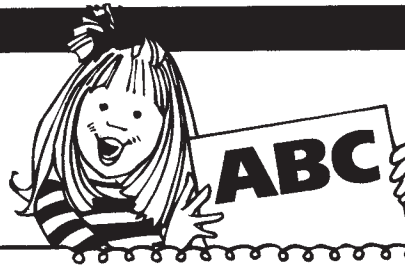
- Vocabulary, Concepts and Reasoning**
  - develop both a rich vocabulary and a deep understanding of many concepts and language structures. Developing reasoning, creative/critical thinking, and inquiry skills is crucial.
- Concept of Written Language**
  - learn that written language is a system for representing oral language
- Concepts About Print and About Books**
  - learn the concepts about print (e.g., directionality, concept of letter, word) and the concepts about books (e.g., purpose of book, book features)
- Phonological Awareness**
  - learn that speech can be segmented into small units of sound, and learn how to play with language (phonological awareness)
- Letter Names and Sounds**
  - learn to recognize letters and their corresponding sounds
- Print Letters**
  - learn how to print most letters (when provided with letter names, sounds, pictures, or keywords) and a few words (using invented spelling)
- Recognize Words**
  - recognize their own names in print and a few other familiar and high-frequency words.
- Listen With Understanding**
  - are able to listen to and understand stories and informational books. Retellings must include important information or ideas.
- See Oneself as a Reader and a Writer**
  - begin to see themselves as readers and writers.

# Appendix V: Sample Activities

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## BUDDY READING

### Framework 1



#### Reading To Kindergarten Buddy

- Review title, author.
- Discuss cover together.
- Do picture walk—make prediction(s) together.
- Read story.

#### Responding

- Kindergarten buddy retells the story; prompts may be necessary.
- Write a sentence together about the story.
- Illustrate the sentence together.
- Remember:
  - Each of these steps should occur every session.
  - You may have time to share more than one book.
  - Always make certain that your little buddy can see both the print and pictures. Sit side by side.
  - Praise! Praise! Praise!

Have fun together!



Blackline Master 21

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**Framework 2****Reading To Kindergarten Buddy**

- Review title, author.
- Discuss cover together.
- Do picture walk—make prediction(s) together.
- Read story.

**Responding**

- Kindergarten buddy retells the story; prompts may be necessary.
- Create Story Map together (see Blackline Master 9: Story Map, Chapter 3, on page 231). Older buddy scribes for kindergarten buddy. Kindergarten buddy is expected to write what he or she can (including invented spelling).
- Kindergarten student may draw pictures to go with each section of the Story Map.\*
- Review story using Story Map as a guide.
- Remember:
  - Each of these steps should occur every session except where indicated otherwise.
  - Always make certain that your little buddy can see both the print and pictures. Sit side by side.
  - Praise! Praise! Praise!

Have fun together!



\* optional

**Blackline Master 22**

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