

You and Me and a Book Makes Three: Students Write Collaborative Novel Reviews With Adult Reading Buddies

BY BERNADETTE LAMBERT

Reading, writing, and thinking: these are the three critical components that drive every lesson in my sixth-grade classroom. I have learned, however, that my greatest success in engaging students with these activities occurs when I involve them in meaningful, nonthreatening, memorable moments of learning. Over time, I have developed one particular activity that consistently engages my students in literacy activities — and engages their parents as well: the “Adult Reading Buddy” project.

When I consider my own reading and writing habits, I understand that the more I do of both, the better I become at each. I believe that the same relationship holds true for my students. As the 1996 NCTE/IRA Standards for English Language Arts Report states, “Learners’ repertoires of words, images, and concepts grow as they read, listen, and view” (p. 6). However, most students look skeptical when I describe my experience as a reader and writer. After all, I am a teacher, and they expect me to read and write a great deal. No matter how many times we have tried to practice “Drop Everything And Read,” an activity that relies simply on silence, a book for pleasure reading and a “Be a D.E.A.R., Do Not Disturb” sign posted outside the classroom door, many of my students were not really reading. In fact, their restless expressions and relentless sighs indicated to me that they found little pleasure in this experience and had taken little ownership of the books that were staring at them each week. Reading was simply an assignment, not an

opportunity to think or to write reflectively about their reading.

I refused to believe it was the type of books I made available to my students. My classroom and school media center are filled with wonderful stories that should appeal to students’ diverse reading interests and comprehension levels. Yet my students rarely read on their own for pleasure. I wanted to encourage them to make their own diverse choices. Ironically, it was the success of a whole-class novel study that prompted me to create an interactive reading and writing project which, as it evolved over two years, eventually allowed me to honor the diversity of my classroom through integrated reading and writing. We were about to read *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, a novel that many teachers in my school system will not touch as a sixth-grade class study because they fear it is too risky. Its subject matter — euthanasia and sexual awareness — are often taboo in the middle school classroom. To find out how parents felt about their children reading the book, I sent home permission slips and invitations to read the book and offer feedback.

Of course, many parents simply signed the form, but at least a dozen parents took the time to read the book and respond to me. While none of them objected to the class reading, many offered suggestions and proposed questions that the students could answer in response to the book. One parent thought the book would be better in seventh grade instead of sixth, as she

believed sixth graders might be offended or disturbed by the act of euthanasia, or “releasing,” as it is referred to in this futuristic novel. She suggested that students consider what had prompted the society in the book to develop such strict rules and how long it would take to “change a society’s perception.” Another parent wrote that he thought the book did “an excellent job of adapting 1984 to a youth level.” He even commended me on my choice of reading material. I read the parents’ letters to the students. We now had a three-way dialogue for the book — parent-student-teacher — which resulted in the best classroom discussion about a novel that I have ever experienced.

I was curious as to what might happen if more parents were engaged in the discussion. My sixth-grade public school students come from varied backgrounds. Ethnically, culturally, and economically, my community is one of the most diverse in the state of Georgia, and this diversity is reflected in my classroom. Parent involvement is often limited to a small group of stay-at-home mothers. Our work with *The Giver* suggested a way to generate more parent participation. I designed a simple plan that would allow parents to spend meaningful learning time with their children.

I called the project, “Read With Me Book Reviews.” I explained that the objective was for a student and parent (or significant other adult) to read the same novel and write independent reviews, and, based on

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their reading, to make recommendations for the class library. I decided not to go with the traditional book report for the same reasons Nancie Atwell explains:

No one writes book reports except students in school; no one reads them except teachers. But the book review, a genre that exists in the real world, invites students to discover their passion — and their prejudices — as readers and to teach others what they find in a book so engagingly that others will want to look for it, too.
(1998, p. 470)

Choosing a Book

I began by asking students to select a novel, generating excitement from the students when I explained that this time they could choose any title they desired. However, as many students benefit from guidance as well as freedom, I decided to provide some suggestions.

In order to formulate a list of suggested readings, I first surveyed parents and students about their own reading habits and choices. What were the topics, I wanted to know, that parents did or did not want their children to read about? The results of the survey indicated that most parents wanted their children to read about character-building values and multiculturalism, but did not want them to read about ghosts, sex, or death. The students indicated somewhat opposite views in their responses: they wanted to read mysteries, ghost stories, and adventures. I used the results to compile a bibliography that included 30 titles. Over

two-thirds of the students selected a book from the list. However, others chose a book with a parent. One mother wanted to read *Whatever Happened to Janie?*, the sequel to *The Face on the Milk Carton*. When she visited the class to share with her daughter she said, "If I had to read a book, I wanted to read the sequel to a book I have read years ago with my older daughter."

The five favorite choices from my list were *Fat Chance* by Leslea Newman, *Going Through the Gate* by Janet Anderson, *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen, *Scorpions* by Walter Dean Meyers, and *The Thief* by Megan Turner. The favorite choice not on my list, but soon to be added, was *Holes*, the 1999 Newbery winner by Louis Sachar. Five boys read and praised the book.

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Finding a Partner

In addition to selecting a book, students needed an adult partner to share in their reading. This partner could be anyone over the age of 18. The majority of students

selected a parent, but several asked an older sibling, grandparent, cousin, or neighbor to be a reading buddy. Imagine the joy of a parent and child searching the book store or library for a book to read together! Most students reported that this experience was the most powerful and memorable part of the assignment. Knowing that a few students would not find someone to commit to reading an entire novel and responding to it, I asked several teachers and administrators to volunteer to be reading buddies as well.

Once students selected their buddies and each pair selected their novels (a process that took one week), I asked each parent and student to sign a commitment form. All but five of my 85 students returned the form signed; these five were given teachers as reading buddies. Unfortunately, three parents still did not complete the task as they had promised to do in signing the commitment letter. Despite their parents' failure to complete the assignment, the three children each read and published the student portion of the project as required.

Many memorable student-adult combinations emerged. One boy read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* with his mother, who had read the entire series as a child. He began his presentation for the class by saying, "This assignment was fun for me because it gave me a chance to read with my mom!" He added that he is planning to read the entire series over the summer break — like his mom did when she was a kid.

Another interesting reading duo was a father and daughter who selected *Fat Chance*, a book about eating disorders and

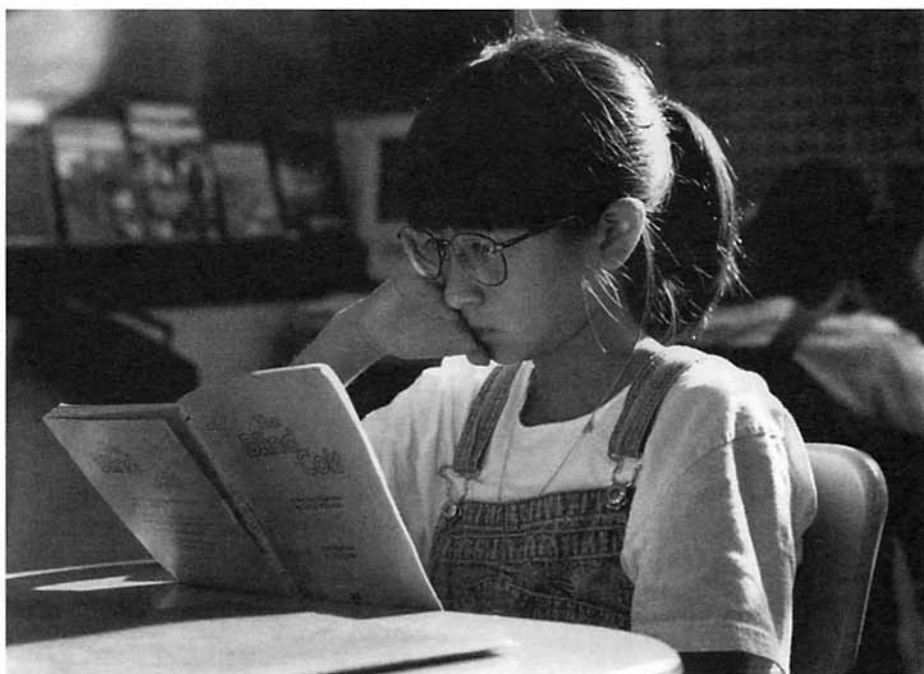
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adolescence. The father wrote in his review, “I must admit the prospect of reading a book about a teenage girl with an eating disorder left me with more than a little trepidation. However, in less than ten pages my fears were gone and I was hooked.” After reading the book, he and his daughter searched the web for information about eating disorders. She was proud to share their findings with her peers.

Sharing the Reviews

Indeed, all students had to share their reading experience with the class. The process began with a written book review which focused on one of four elements of the book: plot, characters, setting, or theme. If students wrote about the plot, they were taught to go beyond summary, indicating, for instance whether the plot was predictable, surprising, or disappointing and supporting their opinions with facts and details from the text. Some students analyzed how characters developed and changed in the course of the book, or they related setting and theme to either the plot or the character development.

Our class discussions of *The Giver* gave students a model for analyzing their own book choices. As we discussed the changes that the protagonist of the book undergoes in the course of the novel, students were able to recognize similar changes in the characters in their own books. The class conversations about the utopian setting and the book’s strong messages gave the students several examples of how to approach the review while focusing on setting or theme.



Although the reading buddy had also committed to writing a review, some had trouble completing this assignment. Students were surprised to discover that they were not the only ones who have trouble finishing schoolwork. Several reported their parents’ frustrations at having to carry out a writing assignment. As one student put it, “My mom says she doesn’t do homework anymore.”

Such responses heightened my concern that students would be unfairly penalized if parents didn’t follow through, so I adjusted the adult contribution percentage of the grade to only 10%. Further, I made it known that I would not evaluate the reading buddy’s writing for anything more than its completion.

However, I need not have worried. The reading buddies wrote strong reviews, and

I could see some effects of parents’ modeling in the students’ own work. In most cases the parent and student pieces were organized in a similar fashion and about the same length. However, some parents and children disagreed in their reviews. For instance, one boy who read Paulsen’s *Brian’s Winter* was disappointed because “it wasn’t as interesting as *Hatchet*” (another book by the same author). But the boy’s grandmother and reading buddy wrote, “I couldn’t put the book down at all once I started reading.” Her grandson believes she would have felt differently if she read *Hatchet* first.

A mother-daughter team that read Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street* agreed that they both learned a great deal from the book. The mother wrote, “I tried to reflect on the parallels between Esperanza . . . and my own half Latino daughter.” She added that

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she initially thought the “similarities began and ended within the first chapter,” but later found that by the end of the book “the similarities became so very clear.” She wrote that both her daughter and Esperanza are proud dreamers who are strong in spirit and live life with passion. Her daughter wrote that she realized “that just like Esperanza, many people today face the same problems she did and some people don’t end up so lucky by the end of their story!”

As with other assignments, some students turned the project in late, and a few brought apologetic excuses from parents who were guilty of not following through. For the most part, however, having a buddy who is also responsible for reading and writing about the same book by the same deadline helped both partners become aware of the pacing required to finish on time.

In addition to the written review, I asked students to make a visual presentation. They were to fold a sheet of 12" X 18" construction paper into three sections. In the middle section, I asked them to illustrate their original ideas for a new cover for the book; the redesigns of the book covers helped the students to express what they thought was important about the book they had read. When it was time to share, many students were more excited about explaining the new book cover than about reading the reviews.

After the reviews were written, students placed their reading buddy’s review on one side of the presentation board and their own on the other. In addition, each reader added a symbol reflecting his or her overall

feeling about the book. Some used thumbs up or thumbs down, and others used smiling faces, stars, or check marks. One very creative student used 5 baseballs instead of stars to indicate her recommendation of *Maniac Magee*, a book about baseball.

I encouraged students to make their work aesthetically appealing. They decorated their projects using colored paper, stickers, stars, and magazine pictures. In the end, my students proudly shared and displayed their final products.

I had hoped parents would visit our classroom on the day of the buddy presentation. One year I asked students to invite their parents themselves, but no parent came. However, when the following year I extended the invitation myself, including it in the commitment letter that parents signed at the onset of the project, four parents attended, and more students said they wished their parents could have come. Whether or not parents made a personal appearance, their voices were heard and respected in our classroom through their written reviews.

Only a handful of parents wrote that they did not like the book selected by their child. One mother who had earlier read and enjoyed *The Giver* expressed her dissatisfaction with another book by Lowry, *Number the Stars*. While the parent provided excellent arguments making a case against the book, her daughter wrote a review detailing the reasons why she thought it was a good book.

Some of the parents described what they had learned as a result of the readings. For

example, one mother wrote that she did not know until after reading *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston that Japanese Americans were sent to live in internment camps during the 1940s.

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The students’ responses were equally fascinating. Most were proud to share a piece of writing done by a parent, and several admitted that this project marked the first time that they had shared this level of intellectual conversation with their parents.

Overall, the project elicited countless rewards — some that go beyond what I will be able to witness. Students received powerful role models of lifelong learning. Cooperating parents had an opportunity to bond with their children. The entire class discovered the joy of reading and writing,

Yet the biggest reward was mine. I learned that I could touch the lives of not only those in my classroom, but also those in my community. I was able to share the projects during a summer conference sponsored by our National Writing Project site’s Project Outreach leadership team. Participating teachers were thrilled to take back to their classrooms an idea that would invite parents to become part of the ongoing

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literacy dialogue. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers discussed adapting this project for different age levels. High school teachers were concerned about the possible lack of parental involvement, but many vowed to try it. Back in the classroom, American Studies teacher Dave Winter of Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia experienced success not only with the parent-to-student dialogue, but with the student-to-student dialogue as well. Dave writes:

I know this happens often in the middle school classroom, but the proposition that reading is enjoyable and that students might share texts with each other is a tough sell in high school. This project provided a space where such sharing could occur with the teacher out of the conversation as he must be for such sharing to take place.

Since last summer, I have met several teachers who have borrowed and modified this project. I am always flattered when I hear about it as a success story from a teacher I have never met. My original goal was to enhance the dialogue among parents, teachers, and students. I never imagined that I would also discover my own "reading buddies," as I am now able to join some of the professional conversations among teachers who are working collaboratively to meet the needs of literacy development in our communities. What better way to model the reading, writing, and thinking that I expect from my students!

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