Readers Are Survivors: A Middle School Student/Parent/Teacher Book Discussion Group

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MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS AND KIDS TALKING TOGETHER ABOUT . . . BOOKS?

"You're kidding!" you exclaim.

More than 100 13-year-olds and their parents reading four books together over the course of a few months? And coming back to school in the evening to talk about them?

"You're exaggerating. Impossible," you say. "Can't be done."

We'll be the first to admit that when we first started our Readers Are Survivors program, we had no idea what to expect. Could we convince our parents and students to read with us? Would we end up with a few honors students and their parents and none of our struggling readers?

We knew what we wanted; we just needed our plan for bringing parents and students together to read and talk about books to be irresistible. We knew not to waste our time with more "reading incentive" programs where the external rewards for reading (coupons, stickers, principals doing bizarre things for the number of books read) replace the true rewards that come from engaged reading. We knew we wanted to make inroads into creating a reading culture at our school where our kids see the value of purposeful reading and enjoy its social aspects. While encouraging our students to become lifelong readers, we also saw the value of providing our families with a way to actually communicate about something other than homework, chores, and curfews.

We had a little convincing to do: persuading parents to give up their time to read and talk with others about books, and—an even harder sell—convincing students that showing up at school in the evening with their parents to talk about books was important and, in fact, cool.

What follows is a description of what has evolved over the past three years. This year there are 102 students (out of 121 on the team) who are participating. We think parent/child/teacher book discussion groups can work in many schools. Put aside those nagging skeptical thoughts, as we did, and see how "if you build it right, they will come."

How It Works

Our Survivors book group meets five times during the year between October and April. The first evening meeting is a kick-off; parents, teachers and students come to hear about the program and learn about the four book choices for the month. Picture the media center decked out to resemble a tropical island. The atmosphere is lively, the music is loud, and the book talks are interactive with

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck
The Hot Zone by Richard Preston
Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli
Touching Spirit Bear by Ben Mikaelsen
Whirligig by Paul Fleischman
Into Thin Air by Jon Krakauer
Rules of the Road by Joan Bauer
Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card
Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World by Jennifer Armstrong
Tunes for Bears to Dance To by Robert Cormier
The Last Years of Merlin by T.A. Barron
Downsiders by Neal Shusterman
The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman
Warriors Don't Cry by Melba P. Beals
Among the Hidden by Margaret Peterson Haddix
Petey by Ben Mikaelsen

Figure 1. Some popular eighth-grade survivor books
skits, video, and contests. The refreshments melt the hearts of any doubting eighth-grade boys. Each parent/child team selects one of the four book choices. (See Figure 1 for a list of books we’ve used successfully.) They then have one month to locate the book, read it, discuss it at home, and come prepared for a book discussion at the following meeting. At each subsequent meeting, students and their parents meet with other families who have read the same book and participate in a discussion led at first by teachers, but later by student facilitators. Then it’s back to the media center to watch lively presentations about the next month’s book selections, award door prizes and, of course, enjoy refreshments and conversation.

Why It Works

Team Support

As in most middle schools, our students are organized by academic team, in our case, the Green Dragons. The team is comprised of the counselor; science, history, English, math, and special education teachers; and, for this project, the reading resource teacher and media specialist. With the entire team reading the books and participating in the discussions, the team teachers send the message that “reading is what our team does.” Survivor becomes hard to resist.

Because we are asking our students to do something above and beyond their normal workload, Survivor students are granted “homework immunity” on the discussion nights. They also receive extra credit in English for the time spent reading and discussing the books.

Marketing

“It’s all about the marketing” is our mantra. We’ve adopted the label “Survivor” from the popular television show and adapted its motto: Outwit, Outlast, Outread. We wear Survivor t-shirts, decorate our classrooms and library to look like tropical islands, play the Survivor theme music whenever we can, and generally set the expectation that “this is what we do on our team.” Our classroom invitation begins with our teacher-produced video, “The Top Ten Reasons You Should Participate in Survivor.” Door prizes, contests (Can You Guess Our Next Books?), gummy worms, and refrigerator magnet date-reminders all add to the general feel that “this is something you don’t want to miss.”

Our most important tool for marketing to parents is the invitation we share in September at our Back-to-School night. For those parents not in attendance, we follow up with a phone and/or e-mail invitation.

Mentoring

Our goal is for every student on the team to participate. No student should be excluded because he/she doesn’t have a family member who can make the commitment. Mentors read and serve as surrogate parents for any student who wants to participate. We have community members, administrators, instructional assistants, and counselors who are serving as mentors for our students.

Administrative Support

Both the 7th- and 8th-grade principals are active mentors and supporters of the program. What administrator doesn’t love a program that gets kids reading and their parents participating in the academic lives of their children?

Book Choice

Each month our book selections include fiction and nonfiction titles. The reading level and length vary, as do the genres offered. What all the books...
share, however, is the potential for discussion. They are rich in connections to issues of interest to teenagers. Parent and child together choose the book they will read from the four books offered each time. We have begun to build a library for checkout through grant money, though some of the books still need to be purchased or located at the public libraries. It’s great fun to listen in on the conversations between parent and child as they negotiate which book to select!

**Reading Strategy Instruction**

Our school has adopted seven active reading strategies to integrate throughout the year: making connections, determining importance, questioning, visualizing, inferring, synthesizing, and repairing comprehension. These active reading strategies are taught in all of the core classes and practiced with Survivor books. In English, we teach these strategies early in the fall with short stories so students have practice with participation in a literature discussion. We’re big believers in the use of sticky notes to enhance a discussion, so we give our students lots of classroom practice with that, as well.

**Student Discussion Leaders**

When we began, we worried about leveling the playing field for book discussions that include adults and kids. Can you picture our worst nightmares?: no one talking, parents dominating the discussions, adults embarrassing their children, teachers hogging the conversation. Our best cure for this is to train student discussion leaders each month. The afternoon training includes such topics as: how to move the discussion along, how to tactfully tell an adult to include others, how to encourage everyone to participate, and how to get the group to stop discussing when the allotted time is up.

Parents are also trained in the etiquette of participating in a book discussion. On the evening of our first discussion, students presented a skit titled “Ten Things Not to Do in a Book Discussion.” Humor works well to remind parents to be equal members in the discussion.

**One Hour Time Limit**

We appreciate our parents, students, mentors, and teachers attending each of the discussions, and we value their time. Some of our students show up in their soccer uniforms, fresh from practice. Often our parents stop by on their way home from work. Many choose to stay later, to chat with neighbors and touch base with teachers, but we work hard to end the “official program” after one hour.

**Our Rewards**

Our first Survivor was held in the fall of 2000. There have been 262 students who have participated over these three school years. We know that Survivor has created an enthusiastic community of readers. It might have been the marketing that got them started, but it was the books that kept them coming back.

**References**


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