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MLA Citation for this article:

O'Donnell-Allen, Cindy, and Bud Hunt. "Reading Adolescents: Book Clubs for YA Readers." *English Journal* 90.3 (January 2001): 82–89.

Reading Adolescents: Book Clubs for YA Readers

CINDY O'DONNELL-ALLEN AND BUD HUNT

What happens when college students enrolled in an adolescent literature class meet young readers encountering young adult (YA) literature in a Book Club setting for the first time? What are the logistics of establishing reciprocal, inquiry-based partnerships between university classrooms and junior high and elementary schools? What important realizations, compelling questions, and significant difficulties arise in the process? In short, what happens when theory, practice, and real kids meet? ■ These were but a few of the big questions we had as we embarked on a new project with students enrolled in

Adolescents' Literature, a course at Colorado State University (CSU). In this article, we describe the ongoing Book Club project and the accompanying challenges and benefits it has posed for preservice teachers, partner teachers, and their students. Because the project was intentionally designed to help participants assume an inquiry perspective, it has prompted all of us to recast the title of student teacher in positive ways, to consider the influence of gender on reading preferences, and to question familiar conceptions of YA literature. Even though our story focuses on the learning that occurred in a preservice classroom, we see obvious possibilities for constructing similar learning contexts for practicing teachers as well.

Establishing a Partnership of Learners

The idea for establishing a reading partnership with area elementary and junior high schools came about as a result of our prior experiences in Adolescents' Literature. The semester before the partnership, Cindy was the professor and Bud an undergraduate preservice teacher enrolled in the course as a requirement for his English education program. We found during the course that students were often con-

cerned with the ways adolescents might respond to the texts we were reading but that we had no real way to access adolescents' ideas. Among other things, we wondered whether the poems in *I Feel a Little Jumpy around You* had the potential to make poetry more accessible and enjoyable to young readers; whether they would find the complex issues and incidents introduced in the short space of *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* to be realistic or contrived; and whether books such as *Rule of the Bone*, written in an extreme, contemporary adolescent voice, would have a place in the classroom or even in the body of YA literature.

Because we had no ready access to the audience for which YA texts are written, our considerations of such questions were always couched in hypothetical terms. In the process of struggling with these complex issues, we came to realize that we were relying all too often on our hazy memories of adolescence and our own (mostly positive) reading experiences to construct a "virtual adolescent reader." This idealized reader was self-motivated, savvy, and sold on the prospect of reading a wide range of texts. Having taught English for eleven years, Cindy was quite sure that such a reader was the exception rather than the norm. Consequently, all of us were frequently left with the uncomfortable

feeling that, if we'd managed to resolve the above issues, it was only for ourselves. Who knew what "real kids" would think? And if we didn't know that, how valuable or valid were the conclusions we were reaching within the convenient space of our fifty-minute class period on a university campus?

A Possible Fix

The following semester Bud agreed to be a teaching assistant for the same course so that he could gain classroom experience before he began his student teaching. In planning for the course, Cindy proposed Book Clubs as a potential means for addressing these questions. While we were still formulating our ideas for the project, she contacted teachers at two local public schools—Barker Elementary and Washington Junior High—to see if they might be agreeable to having college students invade their classrooms. Several teachers enthusiastically responded, and a partnership that all parties thought might fill our respective needs began.

Both schools reflected the ethnicity and socioeconomic status of their surrounding neighborhoods. Barker was a school of mostly white students with approximately 13 percent minority enrollment (Latino, 8 percent; African American, 2 percent; Native American, 2 percent; Asian, 1 percent) and about 25 percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Washington was considerably more diverse for a Colorado Front Range community (Latino, 28 percent; Asian, 2 percent; Native American, 2 percent; African American, 1 percent), with close to 40 percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch.

At Barker, we worked with several teachers, grades 1–6, who conceived of Book Club as a pull-out program for students already reading chapter books independently. At Washington, we worked with Steve, a seventh grade English teacher, who preferred that we keep this experiment small-scale the first time around and conduct multiple Book Clubs in a single class. Groups met weekly in half-hour to one-hour sessions that occurred during the school day in various locations at each site. While we saw Book Clubs as a prospect for college students to ground their understanding of YA literature in actual experiences with young readers, the teachers saw them as personalized enrichment opportunities for their students, as well as support for their curricular needs.

The Book Club Project

The Book Club program is based on a project begun in 1989 by educational researchers Taffy Raphael and Susan McMahon and a team of classroom teachers. As Raphael and McMahon explain in *The Book Club Connection: Literacy Learning and Classroom Talk*, Book Clubs are

the context in which small groups of three to five students meet to discuss a common reading, including specific chapters from longer trade books, folk tales and picture books, articles and short stories. They share their personal responses, help one another clarify potentially confusing aspects of their reading, create interpretations and critiques of their texts, discuss authors' intents, and so forth. (xii)

The standard Book Club, as Raphael and McMahon describe it, is comprised entirely of young readers who lead the literature discussion.

Our Book Clubs included four to five school-age readers and a CSU student who had chosen Book Club facilitation from a list of possible course projects. The CSU student acted as both full participant in the discussion and also as a more expert reader by introducing response tools and facilitating the group's interaction. Because the concept was so new to the young readers, the CSU students initially took a more directive role in leading the weekly discussions and helping students negotiate such important decisions as text selection, reading schedule, and response activities. As the semester progressed, however, young readers became much more comfortable in suggesting texts, initiating conversation, asking questions, altering reading schedules, and responding to texts in ways that were tailored to their specific needs and preferences as readers.

Introducing Preservice Teachers to Teacher Research

In *Adolescents' Literature*, the Book Club project seemed to provide a potential intersection of content (in this case, YA literature), pedagogy (educational theories and practices for teaching literature), and context (the living, breathing ideas that emerge from the inevitable joys, challenges, and frustrations inherent in contact with students). We felt that Book Clubs had the potential to be what teacher-researcher Scott Christian refers to as an "area

where theory meets practice,” where we learn to “reconcile our beliefs with what we are actually doing in the classroom” (18).

In Cindy’s mind, the primary benefit of using Book Clubs was the opportunity to introduce pre-service teachers to a teacher research mindset and methodology they could immediately apply in the Book Club setting. After their Book Club sessions, CSU facilitators were responsible for recording information in their fieldnotes journals, data collection tools that consisted of both observational and reflective entries. Although Cindy hoped these journals would be an ongoing means for assessing students’ Book Club experiences, they also served as rudimentary data sets from which to draw larger questions for analysis. Periodically, students brought their fieldnotes journals to class to share in what she called “inquiry groups.” Modeled after a successful teacher research group Cindy had been a part of, inquiry groups not only allowed facilitators to collaboratively analyze their classroom experiences, but also to discuss their responses to *The Book Club Connection*, a text they were required to read in conjunction with this project.

Midway through the course, Cindy asked the students to comb the data in their fieldnotes journals in order to find a pressing question that they would like to continue investigating for the remainder of the semester. Students then discussed potential questions during an inquiry group session and submitted them to Cindy for feedback and fine tuning. She had originally conceived of the culminating project for Book Club facilitators as a written case study they would hand in at the end of the course much like any other term paper, but after reviewing the questions, she decided that the results of the inquiries merited sharing with a much larger audience. Cindy asked the class if they would consider sharing their results in a poster session (think science fair, complete with tri-panel displays) in lieu of the originally planned final, a Reader’s Theater. The class consented, and our community partners from Barker and Washington were invited, along with several other English classes, university faculty, and staff members from the campus Office of Service Learning and Volunteer Programs.

Raising Compelling Questions

As we wrote this article, we jokingly considered including a disclaimer in our introduction that went

something like this: *This is not a study. This is really not a study. If this had been an actual study, you would have read transcripts from Book Club discussions, excerpts from fieldnotes journals, and interviews with participating classroom teachers. You also would have been informed of our findings and their implications for teaching.*

Although we cannot offer definitive answers to the questions we posed at the beginning of this article, we do feel confident in reporting that everyone involved in the Book Club project benefited from the inquiry perspective provided by its structure. In the following sections we share narratives from various Book Club settings in order to contextualize a collection of informed hunches and yet another list of second-draft questions we plan to investigate as our Book Club partnerships continue.

“What Does It Mean to Be a Student Teacher?”

Historically, the double bind presented by the notion of the “student teacher” has been more than a linguistic one. As many of us who have survived the experience would attest, interns often occupy that nether region where they are at once student and teacher and, at the same time, fully neither. Such a double bind is most painfully apparent in the ways their students respond to them as quasi-authority figures, deserving respect and a modicum of testing in equal parts. A further complication is presented by the options cooperating teachers have for viewing them as colleagues, subordinates, or something in between. But perhaps the most difficult identity shift occurs when student teachers consider how they should view themselves. The traditional notion of “teacher as expert” implies that the teacher has all the answers and is no longer a learner (and hence no longer a student). A student teacher, then, is a contradiction. If the teacher role is privileged, is a student teacher still entitled to be a learner in the classroom? On the other hand, how can a mere student fill the role of an “expert”? Little wonder that student teaching is sometimes viewed as a hurdle to be cleared rather than an opportunity to be embraced.

The inquiry perspective provided through the Book Club project offered a unique opportunity for all participants to reconsider “student teacher” as a positive, rather than a pejorative, term. Consider, as a case in point, the role of the Book Club facilita-

tor. A Book Club facilitator is a student teacher, but not in the conventional sense. While participating in a Book Club, the student fills the role of teacher-as-learner. Because of their introduction to teacher research (via the fieldnotes journal, inquiry groups, and semester projects), students were given a perfect opportunity to “teach with a questioning mind” (O’Donnell-Allen 13). This inquiry focus was supported by the contexts available to them as a part of the university course.

Through the inquiry groups in particular, students were able to share successful ideas, offer potential solutions to ongoing difficulties, and sometimes just vent their frustrations. Because he was also facilitating a sixth grade Book Club, Bud frequently sat in on the inquiry group sessions with other CSU students who were working with sixth graders. He noticed that the inquiry group’s time was often spent discussing how to motivate reading, especially because the Book Club did not return any type of grade to the kids. In the course of their conversations, CSU students discovered that, even by the sixth grade, letter grades have become one of the few social currencies to which kids respond. Consequently, many of their kids were finding it challenging to maintain a reading schedule for which they were receiving no classroom compensation in the form of “points.”

As they tackled this problem together, CSU students remembered that Barker Book Club participants were originally chosen by their teachers because they had proven to be proficient readers. In comparing notes, they began to notice that their Book Club kids were also more likely to be swamped by extracurricular activities that made finding time to read a sometimes impossible task. As one activity on a list of many (soccer practice, dance lessons, advanced math homework, etc.), Book Club was often pushed to the bottom because it offered no tangible “reward.” CSU students reasoned that the problem of motivation was surely tied to a problem of scheduling priorities. They thus focused on what was obviously a challenge common to the Barker Book Clubs and began to generate possible solutions together.

While they found no magic remedies, Book Club facilitators realized that they weren’t alone and began exchanging ideas that would acknowledge the problems of the sixth graders’ busy schedules but would still accommodate the needs of Book Club. When Bud realized that his sixth graders were able to keep up with their outside reading but

that it wasn’t realistic for him to expect his kids to complete written responses at home, he introduced, with their permission, a free writing time at the start of each Book Club. He found this allowed the kids to meet their extracurricular obligations and also ensured that Book Club discussions would be focused on their responses and not just Bud’s incessant prompting. Because free writing proved a successful tool for easing the motivation problem in his group, Bud offered it up to the inquiry group as one more option for the members to try with their young readers, just as he constantly borrowed and adapted ideas from other members to use in his particular context.

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The problem of motivation was just one of the many challenges raised in inquiry groups. Because CSU students were able to share such problems in this supportive setting, they were also able to identify them as patterns that were not exclusively limited to their respective Book Club groups. What once could have been conceived of as teaching “failures” were reconsidered as cultural “patterns,” and CSU students were able to deal with them more productively.

In the traditional student teacher roles described at the beginning of this section, preservice teachers who encounter classroom problems often blame themselves as they realize that they fall short of meeting the expectations associated with the teacher-as-expert. However, preservice teachers who see themselves as teacher researchers are equipped with a mindset that allows them to constructively deal with classroom problems as challenges rather than as insidious character flaws.

Like inquiry groups, Book Clubs were also designed to be supportive learning contexts where participants would view themselves as both teachers and learners. By providing insight into their reading preferences and processes, young readers taught Book Club facilitators what they knew as well as what they wanted to know about engaging with literature. By providing advice and ample background information on their students, partner teachers taught Book Club facilitators how to support these students' needs. By introducing Book Clubs at Barker and Washington, CSU students taught partner teachers and their kids about alternative contexts for discussing books in schools.

In order to become more skilled readers, writers, and thinkers, individuals at every level of the partnership had to also see themselves as students, open to learning from and with one another. The Book Club experience allowed its participants to recast the title of student teacher in positive ways, since they were both learners and experts at the same time.

"What If We Put 'Boy Books' in Pink Covers?"

In working with the young readers in our Book Clubs, we began to see some of the expectations that they had about reading—expectations influenced not only by their classroom teachers, but also by cultural notions of gender and identity. For example, Sally and Claire, two CSU students, conducted their Book Club at Barker Elementary School with a group composed of an equal number of boys and girls. When they asked their group to choose from a series of books that had been suggested by their cooperating teacher, the boys picked a book with a sea monster on a blue cover, and the girls chose a book with a girl in a frilly dress on a pink cover. When Sally and Claire suggested that everyone read both books, both groups objected to carrying around books with covers they feared might subject them to peer ridicule.

The students' responses raised questions in Sally's and Claire's minds about how even book choices are gendered constructions in the minds of publishers who design book covers, as well as those of the teachers who select them and the students who read them. After noting this incident in their fieldnotes journals and retelling the narrative in excited tones in a hallway conversation moments

after our class, they decided to focus on the role book selection played in students' investment in Book Club participation. In the poster session final, where they presented their tentative findings, Sally and Claire noted the following on the handout they provided:

When presented with limited, gendered choices, the group could not agree on a book to read as a group. The book choices given to us by the teacher were . . . very easy and gender-specific. They had books about mermaids and princesses or books about war and adventure. The girls did not want to read the "boy books" and the boys did not want to read the "girl books"—in fact, both groups threatened to quit if they had to read the other gender's books. In the end, we read one girl and one boy book. [Students] were verbal in their complaints to the teacher, but in the actual book group, they seemed supportive of the books.

These findings prompted Sally and Claire to list among their future questions for investigation, "What role does gendered literature play in Book Club?" In a phone conversation with the cooperating teacher, Cindy learned that she also had begun to consider the influence of gender on students' selection of texts in light of Sally and Claire's question.

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Questions of gendered reading preferences were not confined to the elementary Book Clubs. Erica, the facilitator of an all-boy, seventh grade group, became interested in boys' motivation for reading. She found that the only books that held the boys' interest were those in which violence was central to the plot. This prompted her to ask if violence should have a central place in YA literature, particularly in those books aimed at adolescent males. Erica was conflicted by her findings. While she was encouraged by the increased reading motivation that resulted from reading violent texts, she worried

that these texts might have an undue influence on the boys' views of YA literature and, possibly, the world in general. What was more important—that the boys were finally reading, or that they might limit their reading repertoire to only violent texts? In the long run, would these books expand or limit their reading horizons?

As we debriefed these incidents for ourselves in the process of writing this article, Bud was compelled to ask, “What would happen if we put boy books in pink covers?” While we don't know the answers to this and many other questions about how kids see themselves in relation to the books adults make available to them, we believe that Book Clubs might help us find these answers.

“But When Do We Get to Read Edgar Allan Poe?”

While some CSU students were concerned with the relationship between gender and reading preferences, others focused on what Cindy had defined as one of the central tasks for the university course, that is, the formulation and refinement of working definitions of YA literature. We were pleased to note that, as the semester progressed, so did the CSU students' ideas about what YA literature was and also what it wasn't. These definitions were influenced not only by the texts students were reading in the university course, but also by their interaction with young readers through the Book Club project. One might think that, as leaders of the course, we would have had firm definitions of the field. However, because both of us were facilitating Book Clubs of our own, we, too, discovered that our definitions were more “working” than we thought.

So that our Book Clubs could begin reading as soon as possible, we selected the first book. Bud began with *Holes*, a book by Louis Sachar involving Stanley, an innocent boy who was wrongfully sentenced to “do time” in a juvenile detention center in the middle of nowhere. Bud selected this text because of its likelihood for engaging his sixth grade, all-boy group. In Cindy's case, Washington partner teacher Steve suggested that all the seventh grade Book Clubs begin with *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, a survival story of a young boy and a West Indian sailor who are shipwrecked on an island during World War II. We wanted students to have greater input in selecting the subsequent books we would read during the semester, so we began our respec-

tive Book Clubs with informal reading surveys in order to gauge our students' reading interests.

Because of their age groups and the titles typically found on the book order circulars their teachers regularly distributed, we fully expected students' suggestions to be dominated by familiar YA titles. Instead, Bud's group suggested that their Book Club read everything from Michael Crichton to Stephen King. These young men were already reading these “adult” authors at home and felt it only appropriate that they incorporate them into their school reading. Ironically, these same young adults who later requested to read *Lord of the Flies* were the same boys discussing Pokémon cards and characters during Book Club downtime.

Cindy's reading survey revealed that her Book Club boys were spanning the gap between adolescence and adulthood as well. They informed her that, on their own time, they were reading Christopher Pike, R. L. Stine's Goosebump series, and even Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In determining what they would read together, the availability of books was an issue. Cindy's next step after the reading survey was to scour the Washington Junior High book room to select a range of YA texts she felt reflected the preferences of the boys in her Book Club. When she offered short book talks on these at the next Book Club session, the boys listened politely and then asked, “But when can we read Edgar Allan Poe?” From Poe, they proceeded to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and chose never to return to the familiar field of YA titles again. Even though Cindy had included what she considered to be boundary-pushing books (e.g., *Caucasia*, *Rule of the Bone*, *What Girls Learn*) in the university course on Adolescents' Literature, those boundaries were complicated in unpredictable ways by her work with actual adolescents as opposed to the “virtual adolescent” she kept in her mind during course planning.

Even librarians and bookstore owners seem confused about where to shelve books like *Maus* and *The House on Mango Street*. Most current definitions of YA literature, be they explicit (e.g., Beach and Marshall; Lukens and Cline) or implied (e.g., Kaywell; Moore; Stringer) resemble the one offered by Chris Crowe, editor of *English Journal's* “Young Adult Literature” column, who defines it as “all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults” (121). Crowe clarifies that many adolescents read outside of these boundaries but insists that “YAL restricts itself to literature *intended* for teenagers” (emphasis in original).

Based on our experiences with the young readers in our Book Clubs, we worry that such definitions do not reflect the range of what adolescents actually read or would like to read.

In our final poster session, one CSU student summed up many of these concerns. In the introduction to her personal canon of must-read YA literature for grades 7–12, Carissa stated:

To begin the task of compiling my personal canon I considered my definition of young adult literature. To begin defining it I would first have to clarify what it isn't. It isn't one type of literature, one genre. It isn't a book after or before a particular date. It is not what adolescents are limited to reading in class. Simply, it is what young adults read, what they like, what they are going through, what they want to know more about, what they are confused about, what they relate to, what they want to relate to, who they are, and even who they want to be. Books are a way for people to escape who they are and become someone else, and books are also mirrors in which they can see a clearer view of themselves.

Because current definitions of YA literature were initially so powerful in shaping our expectations of what our Book Club participants were reading on their own and would want to read together, we find ourselves wondering, along with Carissa, if these definitions might prove too limiting to young readers' horizons. The same definitions that guide book placements on library, bookstore, and school bookroom shelves also have the potential to bracket young readers' choices. Is it possible to construct a more inclusive definition that more accurately reflects the actual reading practices of adolescents? Or would that definition be so broad that it would cease to be useful to anyone? In the coming year, we are committed to pursuing these difficult questions in light of our new Book Club experiences.

Contemplating Collaborative Inquiry

Michael Cole claims that the ultimate test of any context's success lies in its ability to sustain itself. If this were the sole criterion by which we judged the Book Club experience, it would rank as an unqualified success. While everyone involved has suggestions for improvement, all of the classroom teachers have requested that we not only continue but expand the program. Teachers from both Barker Elementary and Washington Junior High have initiated

meetings with us to provide feedback from their experiences this semester and explore how we can improve upon our partnership next year. Among those suggestions are increased contact with cooperating teachers and their classrooms periodically throughout the semester, including occasional inquiry group meetings, which will be expanded to include the classroom teachers so that all parties can take advantage of the combined expertise of classroom teachers, university students, and teacher educators.

Even at this early juncture, the Book Club project has reminded us of what can happen when students, teachers, and teacher educators document the process of learning, listen closely to one another, and act mindfully on the lessons we are learning together. While we deliberately configured our Book Club project to include multiple inquiry communities (i.e., Book Club groups, inquiry groups, regular meetings with partner teachers), we feel that the inquiry perspective we found to be so powerful in provoking compelling questions need not be limited to university-school partnerships. For instance, teachers who are affiliated through a literacy organization (e.g., a local Writing Project), within a district, an individual school site, or even an English department can support one another's inquiry by setting up teacher research groups similar to the inquiry groups in our Adolescents' Literature classroom. As Cindy has discovered firsthand through her sustained participation in a teacher research group, such groups have potential to be much more than an idea exchange. They also provide the chance to collaboratively deconstruct problematic situations encountered in everyday practice in order to better understand them and so improve learning in the classroom.

As Pamela Grossman has noted, "For the theoretical to be compelling for prospective teachers . . . it must be linked to the practical realities of classroom teaching" (144). The Book Club project has served as a bridge between the historically competitive groups of those who generate theory (university researchers) and those who implement it in their practice (classroom teachers). By reconfiguring these relationships so that everyone is simultaneously a teacher and a learner, Book Club has inspired instances of collaborative learning in the best sense as a process that is at once messy, surprising, and capable of provoking more complex questions than easy answers.

Note

With the exception of Colorado State University (CSU), all references to Book Club participants and settings are pseudonyms.

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