

Title: Building reader autonomy

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Context

Uptown is a K-12 International Baccalaureate school in Dubai, it has a mixed student body as is to be expected in international settings and thus a great many ESL students. It has never had a designated reading program in the school. In 2019 our English department was under pressure to introduce a leveled reading product such as AR in grades 6-10 as a way to measure progress in reading and as an easy answer to new requirements within the government inspection framework. Commercial reading products are expensive and have scant independent research supporting them, so the Library took this opportunity to introduce an RfP program with a focus on measuring student attitudes to reading rather than literacy, linking our rationale to the substantial body of research that indicates that increased reading is the most sustainable pathway to increased literacy (Book Trust, 2018).

Research inspiration & Rationale

Initial planning meetings produced a great many objectives: creating a reading culture in the school, developing a shared experience of being a reader between students, mixing socializing and reading, strengthening links between home and school reading, building more reader autonomy, increasing literacy, improving writing, and providing evidence for govt inspections.

Danial Pennac's "The Rights of the Reader" (2008) gave us a sound philosophical approach and the Teachers as Readers (TaRs) research on "reading for pleasure pedagogy" (Cremin et al. 2014) provided the research backbone for program design.

One issue voiced by our team was the TaRs recommendation to rely on the large and rigorous body of research rather than evidence – however, we needed evidence to fulfil our government inspection mandates. Thus, our organizational approach followed an Evidence Based Practice (EBP) model, based on the work of Ross Todd (2014). Todd's EBP uses: academic research, and teacher knowledge, and collected evidence, in a 3 step cycle – this nicely tied together our philosophical, research, and evidence needs.

Aims

- To create a 'reading culture' at Uptown through engagement & enjoyment of books.
- To normalize reading as a leisure activity.
- To learn more about our readers and our reading community
- To draw closer together the students' school & home reading lives

Outline

As of the 1950s very few children in level four countries grow up to be illiterate adults (Rosling, 2018). However, many grow into adulthood and report that reading is 'not for them' or 'not my thing' - our current challenge is not literacy, but attitude and motivation for reading.

The Uptown reading program mixes RfP with fun activities that orient students toward the larger cultural practices around reading. We do not measure reading improvement through quantities or levels achieved, instead students collect their own milestones and memories depending on what and how they choose to read.

In collaboration with the English dept, students Gr6 – Gr9 are scheduled for a dedicated reading session in the library once every two weeks, their teachers attend with them and are active participants. This follows the RfP pedagogy that teachers “take responsibility for and plan to develop children’s RfP alongside and as complementary to reading instruction” (Open University, 2020).

The program is loosely structure around a rotating and growing selection of reading stickers that are produced by the library (often from student suggestions) - students select books, read independently, engage in reading related activities, and subsequently collect stickers that pertain to their choices. This system allows students to “control more of their own reading” and track their own progress according to their own metrics, fully empowering them to “exercise their rights as readers” (Open University, 2020).

The stickers act as a light motivator for engagement, they are non-quantitative and not tied to achievement or skill levels – rather they act as markers of the true reward, which is the fun they had through reading and the things that go with it. The stickers are not counted to measure their reading progress, but of course students may choose to do that too if that’s how they like to read.

Active discussion is a key component of the program because building a ‘reading culture’ is one of our key aims, and this can only be achieved through sharing and conversation. RfP Pedagogy findings are clear we must “make time and space for children to explore texts in greater depth, share favourites and talk spontaneously about their reading” (Open University, 2020).

Instigating conversation with a teacher or librarian is the only gateway to stickers, so all students are involved at some level - conversations usually start with basic plot points, then favorite characters, who is the book for, why’d the author do this or that, and ultimately what is the story ‘about’ (hint: it’s not the plot). Conversations tend to have a black-hole affect on passersby and often explode into noisy group debates or celebrations. At the end students are often surprised to be told that they have unwittingly been doing ‘literary analysis.’

Sticker samples – season 1:



Impact

Pre and post surveys provided a great deal of fresh data about our students' reading lives, and there were a great many surprises in the first year. The data is analysed to assess our effect on the students' reading attitudes and habits. It is also used to rationalize short-term decision making such as changes in purchasing and displays, and in long-term decision making such as creating new activities or making changes to the survey itself. All decisions must be based on supporting evidence. Once per year the data is written into a report for school leadership, staff, & parents, and students are presented the highlights as a reading celebration. A copy of our first report can be found here:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=12kssA20ljAl20vrC7WrHD0iuVrpCg131>

Major impacts worth summarizing include:

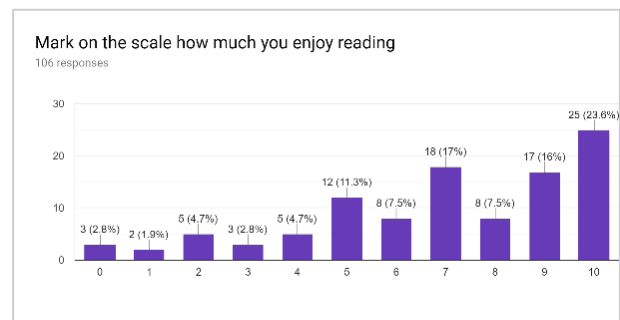
% Growth in books taken home over 6 months	
Fiction	80%
Graphics	43%
Non-fiction	147%
ALL BOOKS	84%

Circulation statistics are up

The number of books in students' hands at Uptown leaped in the first year. This increase represents books that have been voluntarily self-selected by students, so may be extrapolated to represent a substantial increase in readership.

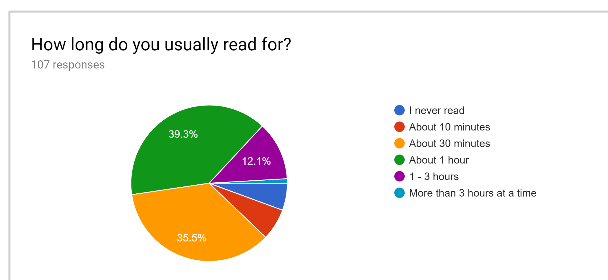
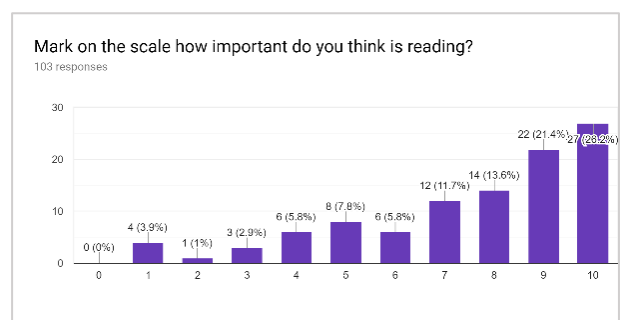
Many of our students are keen readers

47% of Gr6 students report that they enjoy reading a great deal. This is a good starting point for our project. However, it drops to 32% by Gr8, a trend noticed in teens worldwide, which we intend to challenge as the program develops.



Students know that reading is an important life skill

63% of all our students recognize that reading is important now and for their futures. Students report that they read to relax and escape from life pressures, but also to improve vocabulary and learn new skills.

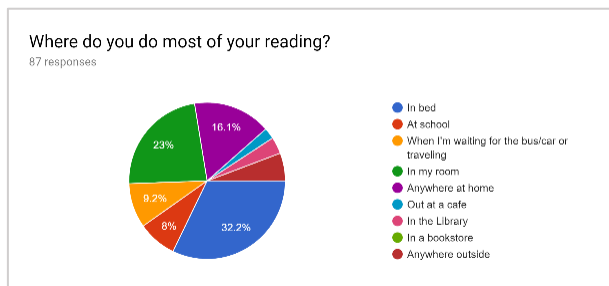


Our students are reading more than ever

In the first 6 months of our program students have reported that they are now reading for longer periods of time. We have recorded a 10% increase of students that read for an hour or more at a time.

Home life is most important

A huge majority of students report that they do most of their reading at home. The Uptown reading program focuses on students choosing books to enjoy at home and then strengthening those school-to-home links.



Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

Our program has been running for one year now and has proven itself to our English teaching staff. RfP is no longer a theoretical nicety for them, but an essential reality in their school week. Students badger them to do more reading and several teachers have spontaneously started to engage with teen literature. This is the beginnings of the 'reading culture' that is number 1 on our list of aims.

Some of our more human impact stories will best exemplify how our progress is slow yet satisfying.

We discovered a quiet group of Non-fiction reading boys who were not being recognized, because they themselves did not recognize their habits as reading. They read bits and pieces information on sport, cars, gaming, and of course the Guinness Book. Immediately, we produced some new non-fiction stickers to help these students identify as readers. More subtle changes over time led to the gradual re-alignment of several English teachers to the appreciation that 'all reading is equal.' Many of these boys remain nose deep in world records, which is fine, but some have transitioned to more diverse reading through conversations with their teachers, who are now better prepared to engage with them as readers.

We discovered a fixed group of reluctant-reader girls who were able to fake reading very effectively. There are various cultural reasons for their lack of interest and too much to dig in to here - however, we did discover that they enjoyed sitting together and sharing coffee table books about their nation's history and founding fathers. This on-the-spot data informed a snap purchasing decision and these girls now come in to contact with more books than ever before. Within our EBP model this is known as using 'evidence in practice.'

Our experiences over the last year have shown that it is relatively easy to motivate students to read as long as it is on their terms. It is possibly more important, but less obvious, that students need more adult involvement for their reading to become a sustainable habit – they need modelling, conversation, engagement, links to home life, and shared time together. This has been amply born out in the TaRs research and is core to the further development of the Uptown reading program.

Sticker samples – season 2:



Bibliography

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