

A BOOK CLUB FOR GROUP LEADERS ONLY?

By Sara Hill



As an educational specialist for a large school-based afterschool program, I provide regular monthly professional development for group leaders. Last month I ran a professional development workshop on “Before, During, and After” (BDA) reading strategies. As one of the reflective activities, I asked participants to think about an experience with reading that they had had as a child, young adult, or adult. It could be in school or out of school, a positive or negative experience. When they had identified an experience, I asked them to analyze what in that experience made it positive or negative, and we collectively grouped the elements that support or negate reading, and strategized how to apply the positive elements as they work with children and youth. One of the participants was unable to come up with a positive experience, and stated that no one in her life had ever engaged her with reading or a book. I felt that someone or something in her life had really let her down – we hear similar examples of children and youth who have been let down by social and educational institutions – and yet we expect group leaders, often failed by these institutions themselves, to somehow compensate for them. This was the impetus for me to form the Angry Owl Book club for group leaders.

Group leaders, as is true across many Out-of-School Time programs, are often young and either in college or have just graduated high school. For many it’s their first job, and they do not necessarily come with any

training or expertise providing educational or enrichment activities for



The Angry Owl Book Club

youth. Given the funding impetus to provide more academics, they, and their supervisors, are under a great deal of pressure to

create lesson plans that are aligned with academic standards or program mandates. Yet, can we expect group leaders to get kids excited by books when many of them have either had bad experiences academically or with books and reading? Can we expect them to share their enthusiasm with books if they've never been able to be enthused by a book? Indeed, what I had been seeing in many of my observations of the English Language Arts sessions at program sites confirmed this – they were making the reading sessions with students into a chore, even a punishment, rather than something enjoyable and life-affirming.

The Angry Owl Reading Club is a three-session professional development program, meeting over the course of three weeks. Staff volunteer to participate, and they get paid for their time at their regular hourly rate. In my advertising, I mentioned that those who “hated to read” were warmly welcomed. The agency bought, for each of the participants, copies of the Award-winning book *Brown Girl Dreaming*

by Jacqueline Woodson, which served as the anchor for all of the activities. One of the first activities was to look at an image, drawn by a group leader, about their experience with reading (see figure to the left), and we discussed what we thought reading meant to this person. Then,



participants reflected on their own uses and purposes for reading, and what kind of reader they thought they

were and are. I

then reviewed the BDA structure, and modeled strategies as we read the book *Brown Girl Dreaming*. At every session we read a few chapters of the book, and I modeled different BDA activities, so that participants could get a sense of the wide range of creative activities that they could do with their students. In addition, each participant selected and read their own book in addition to the group book, and presented on the book as a “book talk” to the rest of the group. In this way, particularly for older youth who want to choose their own books, participants could get a sense of how to manage a group whose members are not all reading the same text. For the final session, participants came up with their own lesson using the BDA strategy, as well as ways to integrate technology (many of them worked with older youth, for whom technology is key). They tried it out with their students, and presented on its implementation to the group, receiving feedback and suggestions. One of the activities of

the club was for participants to interview a student of their own who struggled with reading or didn't enjoy reading to find out how that student viewed him/herself as a reader, what topics interested them, and what they or the program could do to enhance the reading environment and experience. This attention to and focus on the READER; their needs, wants, and interests, was central in understanding how group leaders could engage their students, and themselves, in the reading process. Indeed, as one of the participants stated after talking about the book she had chosen for her individual reading book, *Star Girl* by Jerry Spinelli, was that the book spoke to her as someone who always felt different – but by reading the book she felt more connected. Indeed, isn't that what reading, and book clubs, should be all about?

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