

# Oh . . . and we do reading too . . .

By Laurie Babicki and Sally Luke

*“Have you ever heard about vowels asks Elan?” “A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y” says Noah. “Do you remember what happens when you see an E at the end of a word?” “Have you heard about silent E?” “Yeah,” Noah said, “it makes it say it’s own name” - fifth grader Elan is helping kindergartener Noah work through “hop” to “hope”.*

Both boys, crowned with mops of golden hair, crouch in the corner of the library to read together. Their quiet, respectful interactions are always unassuming and gentle. These gems of learning are related daily in our Reading Buddies Program where kindergartener’s work with fifth graders.

As a ten year old, Elan, along with his nine classmates, routinely read with three kindergarten buddies each week. Reading improvement is a fringe benefit to the programs described. While kindergarten children are being given opportunities to practice their emerging literary skills older elementary children are learning how to share their love of reading in ways they had not thought about before.

## **Everyone shines as a Reading Buddy**

The real story is one about people of all ages experiencing cooperation, mutual respect, having fun together and sharing yourself with others. When **Reading Buddies** meet, reading and learning to read are the activity, yet, the real value appears to be in enhancing the self esteem of the younger children (I can read, I know someone in the elementary program) and in the amplified self-worth of the older children.

As a fifth grader, Curran was usually reserved having a graceful stature and peaceful presence clad in neat jeans, hi-top sneakers and tee shirt. Long strands of jet black hair often draped his brow. It was a little surprising then what he wrote in his journal describing his experience of reading with his younger buddies. He wrote *“I am amazed by their skills and it is a wonder of how they keep trying and never give up. This makes my heart shine . . .”* His reflection revealed a new sense of inner strength and caring. This magnitude of emotion and enthusiasm were not typical of Curran. It supports the idea that in working with others you can add to your own life in countless ways.

This feeling of doing important work was echoed by eleven year old Victoria. Close to five feet tall, framed with long flowing hair reaching beyond her waist and armed with an infectious smile, Victoria would quietly and energetically greet her younger buddies devoting herself to the moments they spent with each other. She quickly adapted to the personality of her buddy. As she met with Kaitlyn who was often shy and reticent, Victoria was calm, gentle and soothing.

In contrast, when she read with Morgan, Victoria was more of a bouncy animated coach persuading Morgan to be less reluctant about reading and constantly encouraging her. In her end of year written reflection of her experience Victoria wrote, *“I have learned that when a child gets rewarded with a “good job,” of “really close,” they feel like they’re getting the hang of it. I love it when I help to make someone happy . . . I think I would like to pursue teaching when I’m older.”*

Reading with a buddy starts sometime in October. As the weeks progress the children not only develop routines and share stories about themselves they also develop heartwarming friendships. Prior to the winter holiday break there was a brief party of popcorn and hot chocolate. With great pride, the elementary children had created and given their younger buddies acrostic book marks (of the kindergarten child’s name) and a holiday card. The delighted younger children left the celebration skipping down the hallway back to their classrooms waving their bookmarks in the air as badges of honor.

The Reading Buddy program is rooted in the Montessori tradition. As with all Montessori activities, modeling behavior and interactions is an important factor for success both socially and academically. This tradition is carried forth with our Reading Buddies where teachers model for the older children and the elementary children model for the kindergarteners.

It all begins with a Primary teacher giving a lesson to the elementary Reading Buddies on how to read with a child: “Teachers need to understand and demonstrate the qualities of good reading and help students grow toward these qualities” (Calkins, 2001, p. 11). The Primary teacher often asks the older children to “think way back when you were in Primary learning to read.” Having the elementary children reflect on their own experiences helps them to remember to be kind when they are with the younger children.

Then there is a review of how to be patient, to allow time to pass before saying anything (as the younger child works on a sound), being sure to give only a little help (da –ah – da) rather than “dad,” and discussing the fact that good readers look at the pictures before they begin reading. The importance of placing an index card or finger under the words as they are read is discussed. As the younger children become stronger readers the older children are advised to ask them about the stories they read and have the younger children make predictions about what they are reading.

The lesson from the Primary teacher is always full of enthusiasm and energy. The elementary children get very excited about their new role and responsibilities.

The Primary children meet the older children in the elementary library of the school where the older child will either have the younger child read the book they brought with them or (if the child is not able to read yet) the older child will read a book discussing all the things good readers do. As the older child reads the book they are pointing to the words being read and the younger child is hearing the words pronounced correctly.

Fifth grader Emily has often reflected on the improvements her buddies have made and describes how important reading to her buddies is “Zachary speeds through his book so that he can find one for me to read.” Modeling behavior is a key component to the success of those involved and essential to the way things are accomplished in a Montessori classroom.

Once the younger children have returned to their environment, the older students document their Reading Buddy session in a reflective journal. They record the day, time spent, books read, areas where there were successes and difficulties and what they would like to do the next time they meet with their Buddy.

As the weeks go by the journals are packed with ideas, concerns and enthusiasm. In October, McKenna wrote that kindergartener Hannah “...reads slow but steady. Some words need to be pronounced clearly.” In February, fifth grader McKenna revealed “She (Hannah) is very eager to read! She read almost all the books in the box!” In an April Journal Entry McKenna recorded her observations: “she is a great reader! She only falters over hard words.” In the Journal section that describes Things I would like to do next time, McKenna wrote “read harder books.” When asked about her experience with Hannah, McKenna said “I love reading with Hannah because she just loves to read so much. In the beginning of the year she was quiet and a little shy but now we get right to work and she can’t read enough. She’s amazing.”

Before the Spring Parent Teacher conferences the elementary children’s reflective journals are shared with the kindergarten teachers. Debbie, a Primary teacher, related to the Elementary teachers: “. . . your Reading Buddies are incredibly astute individuals. When I reviewed their continuing assessments of our children I could not believe how on target they are! Also, they seem to have the same enthusiastic response to the little (and big) successes that our children have made through the year that their other teachers do. Thank you again!”

Both the fifth grade children and the kindergarteners get a boost in self esteem because each enjoys a new found success. The older children have contributed to and witnessed the improved skills of the younger children. The kindergarteners, receiving the encouraging words of their buddies, see themselves as readers! Few things in life match overcoming that hurdle. In an April Journal Entry eleven year old Brian wrote of his younger buddy Brandon, “...he actually listens when I read and pays a lot of attention . . . about three weeks ago he believed he would never be able to read but now he is...I’m fond of Brandon.”

For the older children developing a sense of responsibility and giving back to our school community has also enhanced their feelings about themselves. When they see their buddies in the hallway or playground and get a big hug from the younger buddies the older children appear to walk a little taller for the rest of the day.

The older children like sharing what they know with the younger children. They appear to be empowered when they feel listened to. Fifth grader Elan wrote of kindergartener Stephen “he actually listens

to my tips, he actually listens to me when I read.” Elan says of kindergartener Lachlan, “I think he likes me, he leans on me a lot when we read together.” Forging a relationship with a younger/older child is a wonderful benefit of this program.

In revealing and promoting these passions, the older children have the opportunity to gain insight into their own strengths while enhancing the experiences of their teachers and the younger children. Renowned Montessorian Aline Wolfe wrote: “*The children who surround us in the classroom are the adults of the future . . . these are the years to nourish the habit of caring.*” (Wolfe, 1996, p. 106).

Because of their exposure to Reading Buddies, as fifth graders, Sloan and Samantha are now engaged in a Girl Scout community outreach program where they read with children at the local YMCA. Providing children with avenues to make contributions of themselves has a tendency to spill over to other activities.

The basis for these programs stems from the research and respected conclusions of many. A hundred years ago Maria Montessori described observation, revised implementation and modeling behavior as the key to working with children. She also established (through extensive research) the value of the three period lesson. “This is, Show me, What is?” are important approaches for early learners and their young teachers; skills the older buddies were taught to use with the younger children. Calkins beautifully summarized the current research in this way:

The instruction that will help learners most is grounded in observations that acknowledge what they are already doing... Bruner (1978), Halliday (1975), Vygotsky (1978) Clay (1985) Each of these researchers uses a different metaphor to suggest that teachers provide temporary support to enable a child to work in ways that are a step beyond what the child could do independently (Calkins, 2001, p. 11).

Through the Reading Buddies program, the relationship of the buddies, the routine of the activity, and, the atmosphere of doing important things all contribute to a positive experience. Although the focus is reading the real story is that investing yourself in others reaps huge dividends to the investor . . . **Oh . . . and we do reading too . . .**

### References

- Calkins, L. (2001). *The Art of Teaching Reading*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.  
Wolf, A. (1996). *Nurturing the Spirit*. Hollidaysburg, PA: Parent Child Press.

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### Sidebar:

#### Reading Throughout A Community

There are many “reading” traditions at Princeton Montessori. **Parents Read Aloud to their children** from Toddler to Adulthood. Parents are encouraged to share their understanding of what’s been read and have something interesting to discuss with their child (18 months . . . to adult). As a result, the child’s vocabulary, pronunciation and sense of the world improve dramatically.

As the children grow up, **Reading Buddies** pair Kindergarten children with fifth graders; **Reading Partners** couple first and second graders with eighth graders and **BookEnds** facilitates fourth and fifth grade children reading the same book with their parents over the course of a month and then discussing it (much like a book club).

Peppered throughout our community are additional opportunities for children to share their reading with others. In our lower elementary program, first and second grade children earn the privilege to read to the

younger Primary children and Primary children work on opportunities to read to Toddler's. The benefits to all are impressive.

**BookEnds** – hosted by Elementary teachers, it is a monthly reading club offered to fourth and fifth grade children and their parents. The club is designed to promote the importance of reading together as a family, to stimulate creative thought and lively discussions of ideas. The books selected are not part of the curriculum during the school year.

Karen, mother of two who attended with each of her children over the years, described BookEnds as a cozy time with her kids where “we just curl up together and enjoy being with one another sharing something special. I just love that time.” As a fifth grader Hannah, said what she liked about BookEnds was “that you get to get together with your friends, share good food and reflect about fun books.” Dindy, Will's mom mentioned, “I'm always a little surprised and impressed with what the children say when they get together to discuss the books. I've enjoyed reading these books with Will and talking with the other parents.”

A roar of laughter emerged from the group when the praise for **BookEnds** was “It's a good thing.”