

Reading Buddies: Linking older and younger readers

by Sally Crawford

■ "But I'll miss the Grammys!" wailed the dismayed six year old as his dad came early to collect the youngster from the YMCA's after-school program. No, he was not lamenting a lost opportunity to view the famous music awards presentation. Leaving before the end of the afternoon meant he would not be able to sit and read with one of the visiting seniors.

Frontier College, with financial support from the federal New Horizons for Seniors initiative, coordinates a weekly "Reading Buddies" Program at the Fredericton YMCA. The project is officially called Frontier College "Reading Buddies," but it has been affectionately dubbed "The Groovy Grammys."

Ostensibly, the program's aim was to connect older and younger readers around the joy of books. It would nurture the children's developing literacy skills and also provide an opportunity for the seniors to continue to contribute their wisdom and experience to their community. It attracted several of Frontier College's community partners—the New Brunswick government's department of social development, the Fredericton YMCA and the public library.

Every week each senior reads with two or three children. Most of the dozen or so women volunteers live in seniors' apartment buildings around the city. The 30 children, aged 5 to 7, attend the Y's after-school program.

Frontier College coordinates the program and provides materials, transportation, training and ongoing support to the volunteers. The YMCA supplies the space and contributes backup supervision of the children. Books are borrowed from the local public library. Local seniors' groups circulated flyers and emails containing information about volunteering for the program. The department of social development helped to arrange introductory meetings with small groups of interested seniors.



Local volunteer Gladys sharing a favourite book.

A small investment of time, energy and resources is paying huge dividends in the quality of community life.

The importance and benefits of reading with young children have been well documented. But the serendipitous part of this program has been the observations and questions that have arisen concerning the effects on the seniors. An untapped wealth of experience and enthusiasm emerged from this often marginalized demographic who "don't work." (Ha!)

Why did only older women volunteer? What are their strengths? Their challenges? Their expectations? What are the barriers to their participation? Should an upper and lower age limit be established? What are any special considerations for programming with this group? What are their literacy level comfort zones? More questions than answers. Good research in practice?!

Although the program is still a work in progress, it is deemed a great success—not just for the children but for the volunteers. It is apparent that it has become a vital part of the lives of the women. At the orientation, when quizzed about reasons for becoming a volunteer, the overwhelming response was to "get out and meet others" and "to be with

children.” The focus was certainly literacy but the overriding emphasis was on the social benefits. Many of the women live alone in apartment complexes and have no means of getting about except via public transportation. This can become quite isolating, especially during the winter. (The fact that transportation was provided is a crucial piece in the success of the program.) Many, too, do not have the chance to visit with children and grandchildren as much as they would like. They now are able to come out weekly to enjoy children and each other in a program where the success is credited totally to them.

The women are very adaptable and always ready to “go with the flow.” Asked if they had any concerns about the program, most replied that there were none that couldn’t be “dealt with” or “ironed out.” They were all confident about their ability to interact with the children and were sure that any logistical problems could be solved. This has certainly been the case. Regular check-ins for

feedback and the appropriate adjustments keep things running smoothly.

In any given week, usually one third of the volunteers is unable to attend due to more pressing commitments. As well, the unexpected occurs and “life happens.” It seemed practical to have a continuous uptake and training of volunteers and to enrol more volunteers than would appear necessary.

These seniors are conscientious people, engaged with family and community life. It is understandable that a last-minute arrangement to babysit the grandchildren takes precedence over attending the program. Also, they were hesitant to sign on for too many hours or for an indefinite length of time. A couple of hours weekly for ten to 12 weeks seemed an agreeable time commitment. Many, too, have physical concerns that can limit their participation. But despite “I don’t hear so good” or “I can’t get up and down on those mats—I’d rather have a chair” or “I’ll have to miss a week on

Conversations with senior Reading Buddies

When I heard about a new literacy program involving seniors as Reading Buddies for children at the YMCA, I was intrigued about the possibility of carrying out research in practice around seniors and community literacy. And the idea of teaming up as co-researchers with my friend and colleague Sally Crawford, who coordinates this program, was irresistible.

I have previously participated in a research program with the University of New Brunswick Early Childhood Centre entitled Parenting for a Literate Community. This program engaged parents of preschoolers in “critical conversations” around children’s books. I wanted to see how a similar component would work with the seniors in the Reading Buddies program. Our aims are:

- to familiarize participants with a wide variety of children’s books;
- to enhance participants’ ability and enjoyment of reading books with children;
- to encourage the participants to find their voices as literary critics; and
- to help participants reclaim their knowledge and skills and enhance their capacity to enjoy the power and pleasure of reading and literate activity.

In order to move forward, we must address some practical issues and considerations. Can we find a time slot for this

component that dovetails with the YMCA program routine as well as with the volunteers’ availability? Some participants may have physical challenges such as being hard of hearing. Will this create a barrier? How can we carry out this project in a way that respects the participants’ energy levels and limits?

Research questions

Here is what I am hoping to learn from the critical conversations:

- What connections do our senior Reading Buddies make between their amazing life experiences and the texts in the children’s books and vice versa?
- What observations and ideas do they have to share and what meaning do these conversations have for the participants?
- What can be learned from this process that will help us in the future?

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two while I'm in for treatment," all carry on faithfully as they are able. Such is the description of any volunteer endeavour.

Each week the program coordinator borrows 60-70 books from the local public library (a large plastic laundry basket on wheels is just the thing to carry them!). Having a wide assortment of books enables children and volunteers alike to have a large choice of reading materials: a mix of fiction and non-fiction; several books without written text; easy readers featuring high interest and low reading skill; old favourites; stories about TV characters; popular authors familiar to the children; magazines and comic books. The coordinator tries to include requests for particular books as well. With this variety, the reading skills and interest levels of the children as well as the volunteers can thus be accommodated with no one feeling singled out or inadequate.

The sessions are about so much more than just reading books to children! Relationships are being forged. The children are learning to be comfortable with older adults. There are lively exchanges about real life: "Well, back when I was your age..." and "How cum' your knuckles are so bumpy?" and "A lady doesn't like to be asked her age, but I'll tell you." Children are observed snuggling up to the reader during the story and there are many spontaneous hugs when the women leave. The women report that they thoroughly enjoy the sessions and look forward to the meetings each week. One offshoot of the program is an outing planned for the volunteers as a closing celebration.

There has been a deliberate attempt to keep the program focused on the encounter between the youngsters and seniors as they read together. There was discussion about including some natural extensions to literacy that reading a book can foster,

such as crafts, puppets, drama, music, etc. Time restraints and a small space limited these options, but this has turned out to be for the best. That magical spark that ignites when reading with

children can be fanned and fed without distraction. Also, several of the volunteers became concerned that they would be called upon to do something else besides reading, although others would love to see more things included in the program. Perhaps this could be addressed further in future programs, but for now the program's triumph is all about the Reader, the Listener and the Book.

The total outcome for this deceptively simple

idea of bringing energetic youngsters and seasoned seniors together around books is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a small investment of time, energy and resources that is paying huge dividends in the quality of community life.

Not only does "Reading Buddies" provide a way for seniors to contribute their time, knowledge and experience to society, it supplies the opportunity for children to enjoy reading and books in a relaxed one-on-one fashion. In today's transient and fragmented society, the enriching grandparent/grandchild relationship is often missing or not accessible to families. Bringing seniors and youngsters together around stories and literature is a great way to fill a small portion of that deficit for both groups. It is a practical way to maintain and build literacy skills for the children and also helps to provide an avenue for seniors to enhance the quality of life in their community. In reflecting upon our aging demographic, this literacy program is a straightforward, manageable way to engage seniors who want to volunteer so that their wisdom is neither lost nor discounted. Everyone benefits. ■



Deb and Mary (left to right), colleagues from Frontier College and New Brunswick Department of Social Development, support Sally in making Reading Buddies possible.

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