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Right: The high school students came up with creative and fun ways to engage the elementary school students they worked with and bonded with them in the process.

Reading for Real: Our Year with Reading Buddies

By Patricia Ross

When my high school students at the Phoenix Day School for the Deaf buddied up with elementary school students to improve their reading skills, amazing things happened. As they read to them, my students, part of our 2012-2013 Integrated Language Arts and Social Studies program, increased their reading scores and forged relationships with younger students that may endure for a lifetime.

Here are some observations:

- As our high school class walked across the football field toward the third grade classroom, a young face peeked out. It was Paul*. When he saw us, his eyes widened and a smile filled his face. Turning to his classmates, he shouted, “They are here!” Then he dashed out of the classroom and sprinted 25 yards to meet us. He lunged at Edgar and wrapped his arms around his waist in a big hug. After a moment, he loosened his grip just enough to look up at Edgar and grin.
- As we worked on plans for the Christmas party for the kindergarten class, Elizabeth’s eyes lit up. “I have an idea,” she signed. She stepped in front of the class and flicked the lights off and on to get everyone’s attention. “Why don’t we each bring \$5 to school and go to the store to buy our buddies a gift for the Christmas party?” she asked. Elizabeth polled everyone, and they agreed. I said that they needed to write the permission slips and do everything to plan the trip. A week later we were on the public bus headed to the Dollar Store. Once inside, Jerome looked all over for something related to Spiderman because he knew his buddy, Joshtav, loves Spiderman. Elizabeth, reading a fairy tale about a princess and her guardian fairies, found a ballerina skirt and fairy wings for her buddy, Valentina.
- Jayvon planned to read aloud a biography of Justice Sandra Day O’Connor to our third grade reading buddies. He asked to go to the theater costume room and got a wig and judge’s robe. He printed out pictures of Justice O’Connor, signed “Sandra Day O’Conner” across the photo, and made copies. After he read the book to the

Photos courtesy of Patricia Ross



third graders, he gave them the autographed pictures. The third graders excitedly put the pictures in their boxes to take home.

Prior to entering the program, the high school students consistently tested at reading levels between the first and second grade on a variety of tests and “far below the standard” in the testing required by Arizona. These scores, however, did not match the students we saw in the halls every day; the scores were not indicative of their ability.

These students were exceptionally bright. They were leaders in our school community, active in sports, clubs, and activities. They were competent users of American Sign Language (ASL) both socially and academically. They were being held back because of their limited English reading and writing skills.

We believed in the students, and we knew the traditional approach wasn't working. Something needed to

be done. We decided to set up a pilot class. The class was a hands-on, activity-based block that played on the strengths of students. It required a large time commitment, extending



through three 50-minute periods. Students would work on reading, writing, and social studies.

It was an exciting year with lots of learning, but most successful was the Reading Buddies Program. We developed the program in our efforts to find a way to provide students with material to read with teacher assistance that wouldn't be an insult to their intelligence. It was an issue we struggled with. Our solution? Have the students read to elementary school students.

My morning class was matched up with kindergarteners and my afternoon class with third graders. Their assignment: Every few weeks, they would read picture books to their reading buddies. This task required my students to pick a book, learn the vocabulary, interpret the book into ASL, rehearse reading the book interpreted in ASL, and come up with activities and questions related to the book for their young buddies.



The results were incredible! The high school students took their mission seriously, reading actively with a clear sense of purpose. They improved their vocabulary, reading comprehension, and interpreting skills. At the same time, elementary students were read to on a one-to-one basis, were exposed to older peers who modeled accurate and meaningful English and ASL, and interacted with high school students who we watched become their heroes.

As the year progressed, we became increasingly involved with the younger students. My students selected books that matched the interests of their buddies and came up with educational activities to go along with the books. For example, when Zack, a freshman, read a book about otters to his buddy, Joey, he searched for video clips of otters playing to show Joey after he read the book. My students read books, learned new vocabulary, practiced their interpretation skills, wrote letters and notes, and planned parties and trips.

The connection the students had with each other extended beyond reading class. They would high five each other in the cafeteria and library, and at athletic competitions, pep rallies, and other school events.

In the Beginning

The first time my students went to read aloud to their buddies, we were all nervous, especially me! Would my students do a good job? Could they capture and hold the attention of the elementary school students? Would they be able to adapt their communication style if their buddies didn't understand? Would they enjoy this experience? The answer to all my questions and concerns was a resounding: Yes!

That first reading I required only that my students select a book and read it aloud. For the second reading, they were also required to plan an activity related to the book. In this, my students proved unbelievably creative. John'Ta worked with Christian to prepare his activity. The two students made parts of a hamburger, using paper to cut out the "bun," "lettuce," "tomato," and "burger." When Christian read the book to the kindergarteners, they loved putting pieces on the bun to make their paper hamburger. It looked so real.

In October, my students prepared Halloween surprises for their buddies. For the third graders, we prepared a party with Halloween books and games. We played Concentration, Pin the Tail on the Black Cat, and Math Jeopardy—each game planned and organized by my

class. My students also made Halloween cards for their buddies.

After our success in October, the students insisted we have a holiday party in December before winter break. I asked Peggy Marco-Sprague, the kindergarten teacher, if she had a craft that we could use, and she copied an activity and gave it to me. But silly me ... my students didn't need our help. They researched on the Internet and found their own craft projects that were better than ours, I must say. In fact, my students' party was much bigger and better than I would have planned or even imagined. We planned our trip to the Dollar Store, made cards, crafted a paper mâché piñata, and hosted the party. The kindergarten students rotated through centers we prepared, did two craft projects, played Pin the Nose on Rudolf, enjoyed stories related to the holidays, and had their faces painted. Everyone on campus wanted to know who did the adorable face paintings. The answer: my students, of course! They had researched the idea and practiced its implementation, and it turned out that I had quite a talented group. After the games, the crafts, the stories, and the piñata, we exchanged gifts. When Joshtav, a kindergartener, gave my student, Jerome, his favorite candy, Jerome signed, "I love you. I love you, my favorite."

This continued throughout the school year. We celebrated the Phoenix Day School for the Deaf, birthdays, holidays, reading, and writing. Natural, real-life literacy happened all the time as both the elementary school students and the high school students wrote cards, invitations, and thank you notes. Our elementary buddies looked for their high school friends in the cafeteria for high fives or just to ask a question. The number one question: "When are you coming [to read to us in our class] again?"

At the end of the year, my students planned a culminating activity to celebrate our year of reading and learning. My students voted on what to

do, researched the cost, came up with fundraising possibilities, wrote parental permission slips, filled out the transportation requests and the school's field trip request, called the restaurant for price details, and got approval for the trip. Within a month we had raised over \$600 so we could treat our elementary school buddies to lunch and games at Chuck E. Cheese's. I am not sure who enjoyed the trip more—my high school students or the elementary school students.

Megan Gardner, the third grade teacher whose students were our reading buddies, observed:

My students benefited greatly from the field trip at the end of the year. We appreciated all the planning the high school students did. Some of my students do not have a lot of great role models, and it was great for them to interact with high school students in a non-educational



setting. I know one student particularly had the time of his life as he was lifted out of his wheelchair and placed on several video games! I have never seen him smile so big! It was great to see the high school students take the time to help my students feel valued.

I saw amazing growth in my students. Their reading skills and confidence grew. Johnie, who was stiff and focused on signing English the first time he read aloud, became animated as the year progressed. His buddy, Bruce, responded in kind. Pictures of the first reading show both boys looking bored. By the end of the year, pictures show completely different expressions; huge smiles and even giggles are evident as Johnie reads to Bruce.

Kayla, who said she “hates reading” became an incredibly competent and compassionate reader. The students loved her, and her understanding of text and storytelling skills improved every time we did a read aloud. She was

thoughtful and created fun activities for the students.

Alex, who is a natural-born actor, used his skills to animate his stories. Reading aloud played on his strengths.

Last week, Gary, who has a new English teacher this year, told me that this teacher said he was very good at signing a story, and he told his teacher that it was hard but he worked and practiced all last year.

In the end, my students had young children who jumped up and down at the sight of them and improved their literacy skills. When they took the state's standardized test, all except one no longer were scored as “falling far below” the standard in reading; they were now “approaching the standard.” Just as importantly, my students had self-confidence in their ability to be role models in literacy. They had not only captured the attention of their younger classmates through reading but implemented ideas that extended the younger students' learning.

In the beginning, our expectations for our students were high; by the end of the class, even our high expectations were exceeded.

**In some instances, the names of students have been changed to protect their privacy; in other instances, however, the students wanted—and permission was granted for—Odyssey to use their real names.*

