

Reading with Junior: A Project in Family Literacy

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Reading with Junior is a program that teams up a Grade 3 male elementary school pupil with reading difficulties – or with no motivation to read – with a parent (preferably a father) and a male student in a preschool and elementary school teaching program. The pupil's role was simply to participate in the project; the university student's role was to present different types of readings to the pupil and to read with the him and his parent. The parent's role was to participate in the reading activity and to guide the university student to a better understanding of his child's interests. Teachers noted that participating pupils were less opposed to reading in class, that they developed more positive attitudes towards reading, and that, in some instances, behaviour problems were reduced. Some parents commented that relationships within the home also improved.

For several years now, the media have been calling attention to the fact that boys don't read well, or that they don't like to read. Multiple reasons are called upon to explain this phenomenon, most notably the absence of a male role model in the school environment. However, when examining the situation more closely, it is clear that boys *do* read, just not necessarily what the school environment prefers them to read. Indeed, they often prefer to read game books such as

Dungeons and Dragons, newspapers, documentaries, magazines, practical books, or even recipe books! They rarely read – and even more rarely appreciate – novels. Yet, schools place more importance on novels, based on the faulty belief that they represent “real reading”.

In 2007, we proposed a project designed to motivate male pupils with reading difficulties by taking into account their particular interests. The project was initiated in Estrie, at Notre-Dame-du-Sacré-Cœur school, in Quebec’s Commission Scolaire des Hauts-Cantons.

Setting up the project

Our idea was to team up a Grade 3 male elementary school pupil with reading difficulties – or with no motivation to read – with a parent (preferably a father) and a male student in a preschool and elementary school teaching program. The initial goal was to train three such trios.

A number of factors contributed to the development of this project. First, several researchers have turned their attention to the family-school-community relationship and have shown that parents’ involvement in the school progress of their child has an impact on building self-esteem, lowering the rate of absenteeism, and increasing appropriate school behaviours.^[1] Hoover-Dempsey specifies that the response of parents is greater when the invitation to participate in an activity comes from children.^[2] In addition, various studies on family literacy projects show that these programs enable parent and child to develop a special bond.^[3] A few researchers, who have turned their attention more specifically to fathers’ involvement in such projects, note that fathers become involved when given the opportunity, and that their reading strategies – although sometimes different from those proposed by the program – are effective.^[4]

In the *Reading with Junior* project, each member of the trio was given a well-defined role. The pupil’s role was simply to participate in the project; the university student’s role was not to *teach* reading, but to present different types of readings to the pupil, to follow him in his choices of reading, and to read with the him and his parent – to become, as it were, a “Big Brother” of reading. The parent’s role was to participate in the reading activity and to guide the university student to a better understanding of his child’s interests.

The Unfolding of the Project

This project, which has been ongoing since 2008, takes place during the winter because, by that point in the school year, teachers of both the participating elementary students and the participating university students have a chance to determine who would benefit most or be the most appropriate participant in the program.

So as not to overwork the participants, the project unfolds over four months, with six meetings for each trio. The pupil can decide to end the project at any time, but neither the university student nor the parent can make this choice. Meetings are held at the place and time chosen in advance by the trio. It is important to mention – and to impress upon all participants – that there are no expectations with regard to results. It is not possible to “fail” in this project.

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The selection process begins at the university, where professors introduce the project to male students and invite them to participate. Once the number of number of participants is determined, the professor, a specialist in family-school-community relationships, contacts the school principal, who becomes the link between the school, the families, and the university. If, at any point during

the program, any member of the trio has a problem, it is the principal who contacts the professor-coordinator to find a solution.

The task of the classroom teacher, in cooperation with the special education teacher, is to target a number of boy-pupils who have reading difficulties or who are not motivated to read, and to match the number of university students available.

At an initial organizational meeting, the professors and students meet with the school principal, the classroom teacher, and the special education teacher. The purpose of this meeting is to give the university student members of the trios an opportunity to learn about the school environment, the participating pupils (strengths, weaknesses, what they like or dislike, etc.), and the pupils' families. Following this introductory portion of the meeting, the parents and children join the university and school personnel. During this part of the meeting, professors and students question the pupils on their reading interests – and learn, invariably, that boys detest princess novels! The professors explain the project to the parents, and the trios are established.

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Meetings of Trios

Trios meet a total of four times on their own, every two or three weeks. Meetings held at closer intervals are burdensome for participants, whereas meetings scheduled farther apart can lead to disinterest. The length of these meetings varies, depending on the trio (often from one to two hours). Trio members decide among themselves what will be accomplished and also determine how long it will take.

At the request of school professionals, we added a meeting in mid-course for all participants except the children to report on where the trios are situated in the project.

The final meeting involves all participants in the *Reading with Junior* project: the trios, school principal, classroom teacher, special education teacher, and two professors. It is the occasion to gather impressions from everyone on the project, changes noticed in pupils, strong points, weak points, as well as possible improvements. During this evening, the university students hand out books to the pupils, based on their personal interests, along with a certificate showing their participation in the project.

Outcomes

This innovative project involving family, school, and university has been fruitful on many levels. All participants have made positive comments about the project and wish to see it repeated every year. The parents (father, grandfather, stepfather) have all noticed a new openness to reading on the part of the child. Some younger brothers even asked to participate in reading with their fathers, turning the trio into a foursome. Some families learned that reading a magazine on hunting and fishing was as relevant as reading a novel, or that a parlour game required as much reading as a book. And several parents were surprised by their children's depth of knowledge.

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reduced. The teacher in special education even remarked that the project enabled some pupils to obtain better results more effectively than did her own interventions. The project has also had a positive impact on the family-school relationship. Some families stressed that they felt honoured that the school had thought of them for this project and wished it could be realized on a grander scale. The principal has noted a new openness with parents – commenting that it is no longer unusual to be greeted by parents when they meet on the street.

It is important to note that pupils who participated in *Reading with Junior* during the first years have maintained improvements in attitude and behaviour.

As for the university students in the preschool and elementary teaching program, *Reading with Junior* enabled them to live a unique experience that cannot be experienced during periods of internship or during the daily life of a teacher. They also discovered that pupils have their own interests in reading. For example, one boy had more of an appreciation for documentary books, while another noticed that it was more difficult for him to read a book with illustrations in colour, because the colours distracted him.

In addition, this project allowed pre-service students to get a better handle on certain family realities and understand that circumstances, rather than a lack of willingness, may explain why some parents are not more involved in their children's education (for example, a family with four children or parents who work at night).

Conclusion

This project has been repeated by other schools, with adjustments to meet the particular environment or resources at hand. For example, one school chose to conduct the project with male retired teachers, whereas another uses students at college level. Regardless of where the mentor is from, *Reading with Junior* works for a variety of reasons.

The fact that no results are expected removes an enormous burden from the shoulders of participants. Pupils are not obliged to read, as they are in school, since the objective is really to develop the motivation to read. Also, mentors do not teach, they accompany the child on his reading journey by presenting different types of books to him (newspapers, comic strips, magazines, etc.), by allowing him to reject a book, to not finish reading it, to find some books boring, and to read anywhere he feels like.

The professor-coordinator's knowledge of students or the school principal's knowledge of retired teachers makes recruiting easy, since the relationships are already present.

The autonomy of the trios in setting their own schedule and agenda contributes to the project's success.

Finally, the project owes part of its success to the recognition of each one's expertise; this project could not have taken place without the presence of all partners.

The *Reading with Junior* project is a simple project that pays significant dividends on several levels.

EN BREF - Le programme Lire avec fiston consiste à jumeler un garçon de troisième année qui éprouve des difficultés en lecture – ou qui n'aime pas lire – avec un parent (de préférence le père) et avec un étudiant masculin au baccalauréat en enseignement au préscolaire et au primaire. Le rôle de l'élève consiste tout simplement à participer au projet et celui de l'étudiant universitaire, à présenter à l'élève différents types de lectures et à lire avec l'enfant et son parent. Le parent a pour rôle de participer à l'activité de lecture et de guider l'étudiant pour qu'il saisisse mieux les intérêts de son enfant. Le personnel enseignant a observé que les élèves participants étaient moins rébarbatifs à la lecture en classe, qu'ils avaient développé des attitudes plus positives envers la lecture et

que, dans certains cas, les problèmes comportementaux avaient diminué. Certains parents ont souligné l'amélioration des relations à la maison.

[1] K. V. Hoover-Dempsey, J. Walker, H. M. Sandler, D. Whetsel, C. Green, A. Wilkins, and K. Closson, "Why do Parents Become Involved? Research Findings and Implications," *Elementary School Journal* 106, no. 2 (2005): 105-131; J. Epstein, *School, Family and Community Partnerships* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

[2] Hoover-Dempsey.

[3] J. Anderson, A. Anderson, N. Friedrich, and K. J. Eun, "Taking Stock of Family Literacy: Some Contemporary Perspectives," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 10, no. 1 (2010): 33-53; L. Baker, "The Role of Parents in Motivating Struggling Readers," *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 19 (2003): 87-106.

[4] A. Morgan, C. Nutbrown, and P. Hannon, "Fathers' Involvements in Young Children's Literacy Development: Implications for Family Literacy Programs," *British Educational Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2009): 176-185; O. N. Saraho, "A Literacy Program for Fathers: A Case Study," *Early Childhood Educational Journal* 35 (2008): 351-356.