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Report from the Field

Finding the Missing Piece: Book Clubs Supporting Adult Literacy

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Introduction

READ Out Loud is a student-driven, multi-level, adult book club formed to supplement systematic literacy instruction for ABE students in the metro-Richmond, Virginia area. Supported by trained literacy tutors, students explore vocabulary, text structure, literacy terms, and extend concepts from each book.

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For over forty years, READ RVA (formerly The READ Center) has been providing literacy instruction to adults in our Virginia community. Adult Basic Education (ABE) encompasses reading levels from beginning (K) through 8th grade equivalency. This large span is addressed by adult education providers that offer robust and varied programming. Locally, at READ RVA, we understand our role because our students dictate that role: our students want to read their prescriptions, get a driver's license, help their child or grandchild with their homework, read their religious text in church, and understand their mail independently. Eighty-two percent of enrolled students at READ RVA are native English speakers looking to improve their functional reading skills for personal improvement. Fifty-four percent are retired and/or are not interested in joining the workforce. Fifty-six percent of students already have a high school credential. And most importantly, Sixty-nine percent read below a 3rd grade equivalency. Everyone needs and deserves a literate life and the programming we provide supports that right.

Structured Literacy

As ABE service providers, we regularly analyze our programming. We challenge ourselves to consider if we could be improving, growing, and modifying instruction to better serve our student population. Literacy programming at READ RVA follows a structured literacy approach and includes phonemic awareness, phonics, the study of word elements, the study of the rules that govern English, high frequency word instruction, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Effective instruction must be systematic – planned, in a logically progressive sequence, with clearly designed objectives, and utilizing appropriate assessment tools (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

Our program utilizes a curriculum system shown to be effective for adults with or without dyslexia. Our team utilizes NRS (National Reporting System for Adult Education) approved adult curriculum assessments following test manual guidelines for administration and testing schedules. We recruit and employ highly trained, credentialed, professional teachers, and we leverage support from over 170 trained literacy tutors. We accommodate, adapt, and welcome our students in a non-judgmental, stigma-free, caring environment. Students enroll in leveled classes with low student-to-tutor and teacher ratios. Each programmatic decision is considered carefully to maintain high standards of instruction and quality in programming.

By following our approach, we see successes through standardized testing as well as anecdotally with reports of increases in confidence, self-reliance, and comfort in interactions with medical and school professionals. We celebrate when students share their stories of

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successfully navigating an airport, participating in their religious meeting, and understanding notes from their children's teachers. These are BIG wins, and they keep our community motivated and dedicated to the rigor of our programming.

Adding the Joy to Structured Literacy

BUT...what about the joy of reading? Don't we want our students to experience the feeling of curling up on a couch with a cup of tea and a good novel? The interaction of telling your partner about the most thrilling chapter? The desire to skip out on evening plans so you can flip to the next page and learn what the leading character will get up to next? Is hoping for the JOY of reading just fluff? Should we, as ABE providers, continue to maintain an almost exclusive focus on the realities and goals of functional literacy? Over 60% of prospective volunteer literacy tutors cite their love of reading as a primary motivator for volunteering with READ RVA. To them, reading is a key component of their lives, and they want to bring that feeling to individuals in their communities. During training, we explain all the reasons why a structured literacy approach is required and that it is the best solution to improve our students' lives. If a student finds happiness in reading, that would just be icing on the cake, right?

In September 2024, a READ RVA student, *IC*, and her digital skills tutor began discussing book clubs and *IC* revealed her secret desire to join a book club. She had been approached by a friend to join a community book club and separately by her pastor to join a bible study book group. She declined both invitations. Her refusal to join stemmed from a lack of confidence in her reading ability. Her tutor, Sharon, was motivated to help *IC* take the leap and join a book club. Sharon recounts that, "Our students show such a determination and a true burning desire to read. I get strength from our students' strength, and I just have to get involved." After much discussion, and buoyed by her tutor's encouragement, *IC* approached the READ RVA program team with a request: help her make a book club where all people are welcome and feel comfortable participating. When our students talk, it is imperative that members of the literacy community listen.

A Club Reimagined

In 1996, book clubs experienced a meteoric rise in popularity when talk show host Oprah Winfrey announced the creation of her book club. She sparked interest in collective reading for a generation of adults looking to share experiences surrounding text. Books by emerging authors, classics revisited, or sometimes hefty-in-theme tomes have gained wildfire-like intensity as much of the nation rushed out to purchase or borrow Oprah's latest pick. However, for adults that experience low literacy, Oprah's book club, and any other book club, are elusive and exclusive groups.

Biblioguidance book clubs have been utilized in K-12 educational settings for many years. Used as a strategy to interject content without overtly stating the material, educators leverage texts to generate desired outcomes. With a group of 10th grade students, researchers documented that book clubs provided psychosocial benefits to participants. Participants gained insight into other perspectives and experienced catharsis citing increased feelings of hope, validation, and reduced loneliness (Banas et al, 2024). Engaging with text creates an interesting dynamic between reader and the text. According to the transactional reader response theory, readers, the author, and the text take part in a transaction (Banas et al, 2024). The readers' personal experiences influence their interpretation of the text, and the text influences the readers. However, low level readers may not be able to connect with the story or evoke the same emotional response. To mitigate this disparity, educators can guide and lead readers to achieve the same outcome through prompting Banas, et al, 2024). With these benefits in mind, READ Out Loud participants work through text together, take breaks to discuss content, and leverage tutor support to ensure appreciation of the material. Book club participant *TW* explains that, "I relate to the experiences of the characters in the book by putting myself in their shoes."

Gaining reading comprehension skills is a key component of the book club design. The National Institute for Literacy explains that "Reading is a combination of many sub-skills combined to achieve the common goal of comprehension. Teaching reading sub-skills in an authentic setting ensures that there is never a moment when comprehension is not a factor." Reading together

during book club provides a simultaneously authentic and supported setting (*Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers*, n.d.). Additionally, more advanced readers benefit from partner work which encourages summarizing understanding of a text with a peer (Talwar, 2024). Student and book club member LB confirms this notion. "I like talking to someone else about the book. I like explaining what is happening in the book. I never did that before."

Multi-Level Design

Together, the READ RVA team and *IC* designed a multi-level student book club group. The most important element to *IC* was that every student must be invited, regardless of their reading level. At READ RVA, our literacy classes are leveled and follow a structured curriculum. However, in book club, we are not following that same approach. We allow time and grace for students to work through text or simply pass their turn if they prefer to listen. READ RVA tutor, Sharon explains, "This is a no judgement zone. Mistakes are okay. We demonstrate community and mutual respect." By opening the group to all reading levels, we extend and grow our students' exposure to one another and build connections across classes. Each student learns that they are part of a larger group, and they support individuals where they are in their personal literacy journeys.

With *IC* as our student leader, we selected a short, high interest book, and set ground rules for the execution of the inaugural session. To allow time for active participation from each student, we established an ideal group size of not more than 10 students. We recruited student members and promised that attendees would be familiar (classmates and trusted tutors) and by challenging the participants to help us determine if this experimental project was worth pursuing. This book club would be neither exclusive nor elusive – all levels of readers would be welcomed and supported. Today, participants meet weekly to read, consider, discuss, engage, and grow together as readers and book lovers.

The Process

Seated around a large table, the book club participants are armed with their books, pencils, paper, and strategically placed tutors. As a group, book club members agreed that the goal of book club is to enjoy text as a community. To succeed at that goal, the group brainstormed a few basic ground rules before the book's spines were even cracked.

- A leader is identified by the READ RVA team. The leader can be a staff member, a tutor, or an advanced student. The leader should be comfortable with the role and able to moderate conversation to keep on pace.
- Participants do not read the book in advance, as most book clubs require.
- The members don't receive the book in advance; they read, tackle difficult words and concepts together, enjoy surprises, make predictions, and enjoy the text together as a community.
- Members may read aloud or simply state 'pass' when it is their turn to read. There is no pressure to take a turn. Readers at the very beginning levels may ask a tutor to assist by echo reading together.
- Students and tutors respect each other's attempts at pronunciation and don't jump in to correct unless support is requested by the reader.
- Tutors and students take breaks from reading aloud to discuss higher level questions involving plot, characters, key details, and making predictions.

Since its inception in 2024, the READ Out Loud book club has met for five eight-week hour-long sessions. Pacing must remain fluid due to the multi-level literacy design. Sometimes, a novel can be read and discussed in a shorter time span and when that occurs, we are prepared and ready with the next book. The club meets from 11am-12pm during READ RVA's 'specialty programming' block on Fridays. This block was chosen for the convenience factor; students that were already participating on Fridays were willing to try out the club.

Initially, the books were selected in collaboration between the student leader and the READ RVA team. Now, the student leader and participants consider several choices and make the book selections. Generally, we choose popular high interest adult books between a 2nd and 4th grade level equivalency from publishers like Gemma Open Door, Orca Soundings, Rapid Reads, and Grass Roots Press.

The Benefits of the Missing Piece

The laughter and conversation that seeps from the room is evidence that multiple levels of readers can and do enjoy immersion into high interest text together. "It's more fun reading with others. I learn new words that I've never seen before. I learn how to pronounce them better," student *VW* explains. *TW* shares that "leaving home to go to book club is like going to another home. I like the energy the other students bring." Book club member *VW* agrees. "When I see some other students catching on, it really makes me happy. I am so proud of them," she explains. From a programmatic perspective, the book club provides extra instructional opportunities and hours. When asked why book club participants elect to join book club in addition to participating in literacy class, the answer isn't solely for fun. *TW* reports that, "Class can be really hard. We have to follow a plan for each class. At book club, we get to practice what we learned in class. We get to take time to think about the stories more." Creating the right environment to read and enjoy text together just may provide the piece missing from traditional programming.

Outcomes and Next Steps

For participants of the READ Out Loud book club, we anticipate a potential increase in family engagement with schools, an increased awareness of our programming as participants share their experiences with family and friends, and a continuation of trust building within our community. Anecdotally, we see these trends emerging. Book club member *TW* reports that he joins group discussions at work easier now, "by walking in with confidence." Student *IC* explains that participating in the book club, "has made me more comfortable in recognizing and pronouncing words."

By changing the narrative of what a book club looks and feels like, all adults can reap the benefits of participating. We are striving to create a literacy-rich space in our little community. Our next step is to expand book club participation into the greater community by sharing this opportunity at alternate locations and with a wider range of adult participants. Since participants won't be known to READ RVA until they join the group, we will be prepared with several book options of varying reading levels to meet the needs of the off-site groups. The success and popularity of the READ Out Loud book club is also informing the way we approach family literacy engagement. We can harness the benefits and strengths emerging from this experience to grow our program in ways we haven't previously considered.

Recently, founding student leader *IC* reflected on her experiences with the READ Out Loud book club. She shared that her confidence has been boosted by leading the group, reading aloud, and discussing text with peers. "I am growing. If I keep growing, I may decide to join a community book club." We can't wait to hear all about it.

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