Reading for Enjoyment: Empowering All Students to Succeed through Whole-School Reading Programs and Cultures

1. Perspective and theoretical framework

The present study addresses how education praxis, research, and theory, can contribute to more justice, by developing, implementing, and evaluating a whole-school literacy program that enhances students’ reading engagement. According to the OCD report Reading for Change: “Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change” (Kirsch et al, 2002, p. 3). This conclusion is based on the finding that “being more enthusiastic about reading and being a frequent reader was more of an advantage on its own than having well-educated parents in good jobs” (Kirsch et al, 2002, p. 3). Guthrie, Schafer and Huang (2001) also found that the engaged reader can academically overcome obstacles of low parental education and income, as well as preferences and abilities associated with gender.

An impressive body of research calls for equal and concurrent focus on both skill and will. The Eurydice Teaching Reading in Europe report emphasizes that “those who enjoy reading usually read more frequently, thus further improving their reading skills and getting even greater pleasure from reading” (2011, p. 130). Krashen’s metaresearch emphatically stresses the importance of reading engagement, and reading for pleasure in particular: “Those who do not develop the pleasure reading habit simply don’t have a chance—they will have a very difficult time reading and writing at a level high enough to deal with the demands of today’s world” (2004: x). The present study presents research results from a school that did take reading enjoyment and engagement into serious account and acted accordingly.

2. Objectives

The case study presented here was conducted by the international education research center CARDET for the purposes of the European project Lifelong Readers. LiRe aspires to bring positive changes in the field of reading promotion, through a coordinated effort and collaboration at the European level. It provides school librarians, teachers, and administrators with a whole-school framework for encouraging children of ages 6-12 to develop lifelong reading habits. The LiRe Framework was implemented at schools in all participating EU countries. The presented case study was developed during one such implementation at a primary school in Nicosia, Cyprus.
The general aim was to improve all children’s reading habits and attitudes, through reading for enjoyment and the development of reading communities and a whole-school reading culture. It addressed the needs and abilities of diverse groups of students, including disadvantaged students, boys (who statistically have a bad relationship with reading), and multilingual students.

The study aimed to collect and analyze detailed qualitative and some quantitative data that illustrate the successes and challenges of designing, implementing and evaluating a whole-school reading promotion program. A case-study approach was followed, guided by seven evaluation questions. Our present analysis focuses on two of these questions: (1) What elements of the implemented reading promotion plan had the most positive effects? (2) How were the students benefited by the implementation of the reading promotion plan?

3. Methods

An initial reading habits evaluation indicated that children attending this school could be categorized into three equally numbered groups, with low, medium, and high level of reading attitudes and habits respectively. Interestingly, the questionnaires indicated that parents were also divided into three similar groups, in terms of their valuing of and involvement in reading-related activities. Figure 1 presents the student population’s split into three distinct thirds in relation to the number of books children read during the previous summer vacations (no books or 1-2 books; 3-4 books; 5-6 books or more).

Figure 1

4th, 5th and 6th Graders: “Last summer I read...”
Additionally, the school had not implemented any whole-school reading promotion programs prior to its involvement in this project. Prior to the program implementation, the school staff self-evaluated their school’s practices (e.g. visibility of reading or peer-to-peer recommendation) indicating that they were at an “initial” or “developed stage;” none were at an “enhanced stage.” The program was designed and implemented in the stages described below:

**Figure 2**

Coordinating Team & Revamped School Library
Whole-staff Participation & Professional Development
Needs Assessment
Program Co-Design
Program Implementation

Continuous and Final Evaluation and Reflection

The program’s objectives were to improve the following areas:

- Whole-staff engagement
- Visibility of reading
- Peer-to-peer recommendation
- Utilizing ICT
- Reading events
- School library accessibility and display
- School library stock
- Classroom libraries
- Pupil involvement
- Involving organizations and adults from the community
• Reaching boys
• Pupils and families from diverse cultures and backgrounds
• Communication with families
• Family events and activities

Addressing these areas, several actions and activities were incorporated in the plan. These took place throughout the second half of the school year. The plan included diverse action points, from everyday practices like Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), interactive reading activities and dedicated displays, to one-time events like author visits, workshops for parents and book exhibitions.

Data was collected throughout the implementation of the program, using the data sources described in the next section. For data analysis we followed the inductive and deductive stages of qualitative data analysis (Stake, 2011). Data were collected, transcribed and organized. We then calculated descriptive statistics for the quantitative data. After multiple readings of the data, assertions (statements that indicated some form of generalization) were generated. We then looked for evidence that both supported and disconfirmed the assertions generated. Based on careful data analysis and weighing of all the evidence, only the assertions that were supported by enough evidence were adopted. Generalizability begins within the case at hand. In this study, we attempted to find instances that illustrate recurring themes in the setting. The reader should compare the findings of this study with their contexts and others that they are familiar with, in order to see if the results of this study generalize to their cases.

4. Data sources

➢ At the beginning and end of the program, teachers completed the Reading Promotion Evaluation questionnaire where they had to rate their school’s reading promotion practices in various fields, such as whole-staff involvement, library access, communication with families and reading promotion events.

➢ Before and after the implementation of the program, students completed a Reading Habits Evaluation questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed after reviewing several other tools that have been used in relevant research projects (Link 1984; McKenna & Kear 1990; Mullis et al 2001; Malafantis 2005; and Clark et al 2008). It was addressed to students aged between 9 and 12; younger students completed a more simplified tool. It was used at the beginning of the program to investigate
the students’ relationship with reading, diagnose needs, and set objectives. At the end of the program, two classes were randomly chosen to complete the questionnaire once more; their pre- and post- results were compared and changes in habits and attitudes were identified.

- Researchers conducted observations on ten different days, during which reading for enjoyment activities were being implemented.
- Near the end of the school year, eight separate interviews were conducted. The first interviewee was a vice-principal and represented the school administration in the coordinating team, while the second was a first grade teacher who was particularly active in the program and had prior experience in reading promotion. Six more teachers, one from each grade, were interviewed.
- A focus group discussion with five other school staff collectively reflected on the implementation of the program.

5. Results

Teachers agreed on three specific elements of the program that worked particularly well:

1. Increased library use

Both the researchers and several school staff considered the renovated school library as central in the effort to promote reading and create a reading culture. This was proved to be true, as most teachers frequently took their students to the central library to read or check out books.

2. The whole-school, whole-day event

Commenting on the whole-day event, a first-grade teacher asserted that “Our book day was the zenith, as children liked it very much, and I even heard comments by variegated aged kids saying that this was the best school day of the year and that they were very impressed.” In the interviews and focus group discussion, teachers marked this whole-day event as important because:

- It included a wide variety of activities: book games, author visits, theatre play, visual arts, Greek and English literature, musical narration, performances, etc.;
- Children interacted with diverse people from the community: teachers, university students, actors, authors, etc.
- Children were actively involved and engaged;
• Parents were excited about the event and asked to be more intensely involved.

Observation notes during that day verify students’ engagement and active involvement.

3. Free Voluntary Reading (FVR)

All teachers reported positive effects in relation to FVR. A first-grade teacher reported that “When we had them read for 10-15 minutes every morning, they liked it so much that they would take out their books and read even during recess time; it was as if they were addicted to it. I believe that they enjoyed the 10-minute FVR a lot.” Observation notes verify the positive effects on students’ reading habits. A second-grade teacher stated: “And they did it [FVR] during recess as well. They would bring 3-4 books from home and share and read with their friends during recess; this was quite nice to watch and it showed that kids liked it”.

The above observation is even more important in its description of book-sharing as a social phenomenon; as part of a developing reading community and culture. A fifth-grade teacher observed that students would carry their books around with them wherever they would go. And a third-grade teacher said that many students would read their book during recess, or have it with them and read whenever they had free time. As an example, she mentioned that when the class teacher was absent and students were sent into other classrooms, they would take their book with them and read.

The students’ improved attitudes towards reading and books are also supported by a comparison between pre- and post- Reading Habits Evaluations. Figures 3 and 4 present a comparison between pre- and post-results in relation to four important, attitude-related questions. Comparing pre- and post-evaluation results, one observes an increase in the positive (green) end of the spectrum (“Quite a lot” and “Very much”). This change may not be spectacular—or of the same degree in all responses—but it is still an indicator of progress in children’s attitudes towards reading.
A further comparative look at these fourth- and fifth-graders’ responses to reading habits questions shows that their home reading habits improved. This shift was not dramatic, but it was significant if we take into account that reading habits and reading communities need long periods to evolve.

6. Scientific significance of the study

This first implementation of a whole-school reading promotion plan in Cyprus, has managed to plant the seed of a reading culture. In spite of time-pressure, teachers expressed passionate opinions about the need to continue to promote reading. There are at least two important dimensions in this expressed need: (1) Teachers acknowledged that creating and sustaining a reading culture cannot be achieved in a one-off approach, but
needs to be continually explored and developed throughout the years; (2) Teachers acknowledged that reading promotion is important and worthwhile, thus it should be part of the school’s efforts year after year. The revamped central school library proved pivotal in the formation of the school’s reading culture. Three elements of the reading promotion plan worked particularly well: (i) Increased library use; (ii) The whole-school, whole-day event that was devoted exclusively to reading; and (iii) Free Voluntary Reading (FVR). This whole-school reading for enjoyment program had tangible and important benefits for students’ reading habits and attitudes, empowering in this manner diverse students to become lifelong readers and achieve academically.

Bibliography


