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Buddies Matter: Student Helper Preparedness in a Reading Assistance Program

Rosa Munoz
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Abstract

Addressing low literacy achievement has raised questions about the quality of student helper preparedness in a reading assistance program. The Reading Buddies Project, a non-profit organization that serves a local elementary school, by providing them with student helpers to teach kids to read, is the focus of this project. Improving the Reading Buddies program will ensure that elementary students struggling to read at grade level are receiving quality tutoring sessions that can positively impact their reading skills and abilities. After interviewing a Fishbay Reads representative, the Reading Buddies Program coordinator, and a reading intervention teacher, three action options emerged as ways to better prepare tutors to support students learning to read. Based on an analysis of the data, an action was taken to better train the student helpers, so they can more effectively teach their elementary school buddies to read.
Setting the Stage

It is fifth grade and I hear the bell ring indicating that recess is over, and it is time to go back to class. Sweat covers my back as I get in line and thoughts of what we are about to do next in class rush in and cause my anxiety to creep back up. This is my least favorite time of the day because it means opening our book to where we left off yesterday to continue to read together as a class. The teacher gives the instruction to turn to page 31 and begins to ask us if we remember what happened last in our book. A dialogue amongst the class begins to form, but all I can do is look nervously around at all the faces that will be looking at me if I get picked to read. You see, my teacher was fond of what we called popcorn reading which to me was synonym for public and utter shaming. Popcorn reading was that in which each student in the class took turns reading a page in the books by being picked by the student who just finished reading. During this time, there was no such thing as pass, skip, or ‘I’m too sick to read, can I go last instead.’ If you heard your name, it meant you had to read an entire page as everyone else followed along quietly and respectfully. Most of the time, only half of the class was able to read due to time and as I sat there, I hoped that it would be one of those days.

I turn to the correct page, crouch myself into my chair, and cross my fingers as I watch my teacher draw a popsicle stick out of the red solo cup; which would have the name of the first person that started our chain of popcorn read. He pulls a name not my own and I feel relief for a moment. I take one long breath and begin to follow along as my classmate starts us off. He picks his friend to read next, a choice I already knew he was going to make based on how this usually goes, and I feel relief again. This goes on until I hear my best friend’s name being called to read
and once again, my forehead, my back, and my hands begin to feel heavy with nervous sweat. I know what is about to happen next and the thought of reading out loud make my throat choke up. I follow along and as we get lower and lower into the page, I grow tenser and tenser. I try to hide under my book as if to say, ‘don’t look at me,’ but it fails as she finishes her part and we make eye contact. We exchange glances and I look at her as to say, ‘please don’t pick me, please don’t pick me,’ but it fails once again. I hear my name and my face grows red like a bright ripe tomato. I begin to read, and I come across a word I cannot pronounce. I try hard to say it correctly, but as I am working through it, I hear laughter in the background, and I begin to sweat even more profusely. Finally, my teacher helps me through the word, and I look up just quickly enough to see my classmates staring, smirking, and laughing. My throat closes, and I begin to stutter through the rest of the page, stopping frequently because I do not recognize most of the words and I cannot figure them out. I continue working through the page and it feels like an eternity has gone by, but I finish. I hear a classmate whisper ‘finally’ under his breath and I know he’s talking about me. Dropping my head in embarrassment to avoid eye contact, I ask to be excused to the restroom. When I finally reach the restroom, I close the stall door behind me, bury my face in my hands and let out an uncontrollable sob.

To be in fifth grade and read at third grade, borderline fourth grade reading level was shameful to say the least. This traumatizing experience led to a hatred for public speaking and overall reading. As a young elementary school kid, I truly loved and enjoyed opening a book only to discover a story I could not decipher. I tried and tried, and it was not until fourth grade that my teacher noticed my struggles and suggested I be placed in a reading intervention program. Soon enough, I was placed in a program called, Read 180, which took place every day, after school, in the computer lab. The program was online and consisted of watching videos on
how to read, then reading passages and answering questions about the passage. Other days we watched videos that read stories to us and answered some more questions. But almost every day we had student helpers from local high schools who were there completing their mandatory community service hours and who I referred to as teachers, help us through the program. When I began my journey with the Read 180 program, I felt excited to finally be given the attention I clearly needed to learn to read. I looked forward to going in every day because I wanted to be able to read books that before looked too intimidating to even attempt to read. I truly believed in this idea given all the teachers that were there to help us. Every day, there were at least three to five student helpers in the classroom with one actual teacher who sat in his desk for the hour and half we were there. However, after raising my hand, asking questions, and working with student helpers one-on-one, I realized this was not going to be the reality. The fact of the matter was that I had questions which these student helpers could not answer. During my duration in the program, student helpers failed to teach me any actual reading skills, but rather, opted to give me the answer as if that was what I needed. I was in this program for two years and despite all my efforts, I was still a struggling fifth grader barely meeting her reading level.

The agony I felt every time it was reading time grew into a rooted disdain for reading. Knowing I was unable to read quickly like many of my classmates made me feel incompetent in my abilities to read as I grew older. I shunned away from any activity that dealt with reading out loud as I associated it with humiliation from my fifth-grade experience. By the time I entered sixth grade, my struggles were made even more apparent and I was enrolled in an English Language Development (ELD) class. I lasted an entire year in this class which was meant to further develop my reading and writing skills. After one year, I was able to test out of it, but to this day I continue to struggle as a reader on a college campus. I still worry about pronouncing
words incorrectly and often opt out of saying them out loud altogether. I also continue to hold some resentment in my heart for the education that I feel failed me in teaching me to read adequately from an earlier age. Being a first-generation student and coming from Spanish only speaking parents meant that I only had the school system and the programs it offered as my only source for education. Experiences like these weighed heavily on me as I got older and have become a major reason for my wanting to become an educator. More importantly, it has become a major fuel for wanting to serve in local programs that are meant to help close the gap between reading level achievement.

**Literature Review and Synthesis**

After talking to several teachers and school aides about some of the issues they face in the classroom, I learned that there was a problem that seemed to be prevalent within the Puente Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) in Berryhill, California. Many of these teachers showed a great concern in the district's overall reading level achievement. Many of these teachers expressed how poorly students have been scoring in the recent years and how many were struggling to simply reach their expected reading grade level. Hence, I began to investigate the data that proved these concerns were valid and came across Ed Data, a website that reports a district’s metrics, demographics, and information alike. The data confirmed these assertions given it reported that nearly half of the students in PVUSD were not meeting the school’s achievement goal. These results were determined by the Smarter Balance tests and are part of The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP). The results are depicted in figure 1 below.
The results led me to explore the total achievement by grade level within the district. I found that 54.8 percent of total fourth graders did not meet the literacy standards in the 2016-2017 academic year and 49.8 of fifth graders also did not meet these standards in the same year (Education Data Partnership, n.d.). This issue is of great importance as it has gained widespread coverage throughout the state of California. To gain a better understanding of its impact, we can observe several cases as that of La Salle Avenue Elementary that is part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. In the 2016-2017 school year, 81.6 percent of students did not meet the English Language Art (ELA)/Literacy standards (Education Data Partnership, n.d.). In the case of Van Buren Elementary which is part of the Stockton Unified School District, only one student from the entire fourth grade class scored proficient (Romero, 2018, para.10). These results indicate that students throughout the state and who took the test cannot read and write at grade level. This is concerning and has become the source for a recent lawsuit against the state of California, issuing that the state has violated the student’s constitutional right to literacy (Romero, 2018, para.7). This lawsuit was brought forth on December 2017 on behalf of ten students attending three different
schools in three different school districts: Los Angeles Unified, Stockton Unified, and Inglewood Unified. The Los Angeles plaintiffs demand that the state of California, the State Board of Education, the California Department of Education, and state Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Torlakson assume responsibility for failing to properly allocate school findings towards a comprehensive literacy intervention program. They also demand that all California students should receive evidence-based literacy instruction at the elementary and secondary level. The Morrison Foerster law firm representing the plaintiffs assert that, “The California Constitution guarantees every child a basic education. [and] The California Supreme Court has repeatedly recognized that all California students possess a constitutional right to equal access to a public education system that will teach them the skills they need to succeed as productive members of modern society” (Morrison Foerster, n.d., para. 10). This lawsuit is only one example of many others who have argued that the state has failed in providing the necessary resources for creating equal access to literacy achievement in California. According to the Detroit Free Press, in 2014, the Los Angeles Unified School District settled a lawsuit filed by teacher unions agreeing to spend an additional $60 million on pay, professional development and service improvements in high-need schools (Wisely, 2016, para. 4). This data proves that literacy achievement has been an overdue problem throughout.

Why is it an Issue?

Research has found that California’s low-ranking literacy achievement has become an issue for several reasons. According to the state’s education mission statement, the purpose is to, “Create strong, effective schools that provide a wholesome learning environment through incentives that cause a high standard of student accomplishment as measured by a valid, reliable accountability system” (California State Board of Education, 2017, para. 2). However, there is a discrepancy
between the state’s expectations of student accomplishment and the resources it provides to perform at such standards. Upon research I have found that low literacy achievement has become an issue for the following factors: funds for reading intervention programs have been wrongfully allocated, there is opportunity within programs dedicated in helping students learn to read, and there seems to be a lack of proper training amongst staff (Romero, 2018, para. 13). One of the most concerning opportunities seems to be happening during after school hours. In after-school programs, this problem continues to grow as aides are given entire classes and are asked to do reading rotations in where they are not equipped to support and reinforce the proper ways to teach students to read. For my purpose, I have concentrated my efforts in helping tackle this problem by bettering the Reading Buddies Project, a reading tutoring program that helps elementary students in the PVUSD learn to read.

What has/should be done?

The Reading Buddies Project is a non-profit organization that serves a local PVUSD elementary school by providing them with student helpers that help teach kids to read. Student helpers refers to high school students who serve at elementary schools, often in after school programs to complete their community service hours required to graduate. In effort to becoming a lucrative program the project has looked at Fishbay Reads and their model which has brought them great success. This Program was founded in 1997 by the Monterey County Office of Education and various colleges (Panetta Institute, n.d., para. 5). This program works towards creating successful readers by partnering community volunteers with children in early grades to assist in on-on-one sessions for reading. This project has successfully achieved its goal to have kids read at or beyond grade level for many years through the work of community leaders in the county. More importantly, the project has shown its dedication towards this goal by providing adequate training
to its volunteers, analyzing data measuring student's progress, and by expanding its community leaders to over ten different districts throughout the county.

In Sun Moon Elementary, we hope to achieve similar outcomes by improving the Reading Buddies Project. According to Ed Data, there are 646 students currently enrolled in Sun Moon Elementary with those scoring the lowest in literacy achievement attending its afterschool program. While Sun Moon Elementary offers reading intervention programs during normal class time and in the after-school program several days out of the week, Starlight elementary has partnered with the Reading Buddies Project to further support these students. The partnership between this organization and the school allow students scoring the lowest to work one-on-one with Student Helpers known as Reading Buddies in this project. Student helpers in afterschool programs have been of great support to after school coordinators, aides, and children throughout. However, their role in the classroom has become an issue as they too, are not equipped to be working alongside students who are scoring low in literacy achievement. This project has served the Sun Moon Elementary School in Berry Hill for over two years and is currently working to continue its partnership. Hence, I find it of great importance to address what the project is currently doing and what it can improve on to create successful leaders and students within the district. Upon close examination of the project, I have found that planning, creating a program of study, recruiting, and training are ways in which we can better the project to help tackle the issue of low literacy achievement in Sun Moon Elementary.

To better understand these possible solutions, I offer to look at this issue through the following theoretical perspective. The Expert and Novice Teacher perspective is useful for the purpose of this project as it implies that expert and novice learners work together toward a shared goal (Colton, 1993, para. 1). A novice learner is one who learns from teaching but does not possess
PREPARING OUR READING BUDDIES

a high level of knowledge as an expert in the subject does. An example of such novice teacher can be a student helper in the classroom or a student working towards their credential working alongside a teacher educator, the expert. This perspective offers a conceptual framework to guide the development of expert teachers toward reflection and decision making to better support novices (Colton, 1993, para 3). This perspective explores different ways in which this relationship can be accurately developed to help cultivate successful student helpers. This perspective helps to identify the level of understanding of the student helper, how they translate their knowledge in teaching, and how teachers can reflect on this to come up with better ways to teach. More importantly this perspective allows us to analyze programs that fit this teaching model to apply it in different settings such as in the Reading Buddies Project.

Conclusion

Looking at the problem of literacy achievement statewide and at the local level in California, we can see that there is an urgent need for literacy intervention. In the following sections, I seek to explore ways in which the Reading Buddies Project has worked towards becoming a more successful reading tutor program by creating a program of study, developing a more comprehensive recruiting process, and through effective training of all student helpers. The intended goal behind this research is to help develop the Reading Buddies project in Berryhill by exploring and applying the novice learner and teacher decision making perspective into the work. The hope is that this work will help yield for better results within the program for the students of today and tomorrow.

Method
PREPARING OUR READING BUDDIES

For this capstone project, the researcher has investigated the underlying factors that contribute to the success of reading intervention programs in the elementary level to apply in the Reading Buddies Project. The researcher has used the widespread concern over low literacy achievement results apparent throughout our education system as the foundation for this project.

Context

Young Solutions is a volunteer program that is committed to connecting youth with different volunteer opportunities throughout Santa Cruz County. Youth Serve has created a project that is dedicated to partnering youth with students in grades k-12 in local elementary schools to help develop their reading skills. All students benefiting from this partnership are part of the Puente Valley Unified School District (PVUSD), which has more than 40 school sites in Santa Cruz County. According to the California Department of Education, the Puente Valley Unified School District has served more than 20,000 students in the 2016-2017 academic year\(^1\) with nearly 43% of those being English Learners. Seemingly, of that 43 percent, nearly 8,379 are Spanish Language Learners with a smaller percent being Mixteco (CDE, 2018). In the 2016-2017 academic year alone, 44.2% of the district’s total student population did not meet the standard 1 level of English Language Arts and Literacy results; and of the 43% percent English Learners, 72.1% did not meet the standard 1 level of the same category (CDE, 2018). Based on this data, there is opportunity for Literacy achievement across the board.

The project is known as the Reading Buddies Project which reaches out to local high school students and partners them with younger students struggling to meet the literacy standards of California. The Reading Buddies Project has been serving Soon Moon Elementary located in

\(^1\) Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.
Berryhill California, a city surrounded by endless strawberry fields making it the official home of the strawberries. Berryhill is a city focused on agriculture as apple, raspberry, blackberry, and lettuce fields center its economy. The city is located on the central coast of California and holds a population of nearly fifty-two thousand with Hispanics being the majority. Soon Moon Elementary is surrounded by home and apartment complexes, with a slough dividing nearing neighborhoods from the school site. Soon Moon is located at the bottom of a hill, only feet away from Dolores Huerta Middle School and is at the corner of the Crystal Tech Institute of Berryhill. The school’s worn down, rose-color walls are protected with a gate at the entrance and fencing along its perimeter. As you walk in through the gates, you are welcomed into the school’s quad where students go to sit and read alongside one of the many benches positioned throughout the school. According to Ed Data, Soon Moon enrolled nearly 665 students in the 2016-2017 academic year. Of these 665 students, 54.6 percent did not meet the standards for literacy achievement and 26.1 percent nearly met the standards. This data reports a dire need for additional reading intervention and overall support which is the premise for this capstone project.

Participants and Participant Selection

The researcher invited one member of the Reading Buddies Project, one Soon Moon Elementary reading intervention teacher, and one representative for the Fishbay Reads Project to participate in this study. This group of prospective participants was invited to participate because of their relevant experience, expertise, and knowledge of what is needed to teach students to read is valuable to the purpose of this research. Their roles and responsibilities provided useful insight into the opportunities of student helpers preparedness in in teaching students to read.

Sophia Garcia. A Hispanic female and coordinator for the Reading Buddies Project. She holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology and is currently working to pursue a master's in
Education. She is dedicated to creating opportunities for growth for the youth of Berryhill, California.

Jessica Longe. A white female and representative for Fishbay Reads. She has been serving the program for over two years.

Allison Martinez. A Hispanic female and reading intervention teacher in Soon Moon Elementary. She has worked at this school site for over one year. She holds a bachelor's degree in Human Communications.

Researcher

As the researcher for this issue, this concern is personally meaningful to me because I worked as a student helper for two years in the after-school program at a local Elementary School. I learned about some of the issues most of us, student helpers, faced when working in class settings. Examples included not knowing how to manage tough situations with parents, behavioral conflicts with students, or supporting them properly with school work. I realized that I was never properly trained in dealing with any of these arising issues. Although my experience as a student helper was unforgettable, I still ponder about the ways in which I could have been more successful, had I been given the proper training to do most of the duties I was asked to do.

Given my own personal work experience, I know there is still opportunity for improving the quality of the training of most student helpers in their everyday tasks and functions. To this day, I continue to hear some of the similar concerns that I had while working as a student helper nearly five years ago. There are several experiences that make me reflect on this issue such as my first day as a student helper. On my first day in the after-school program, my then boss, asked me to take the fifth-grade class to the cafeteria for their lunch. Although the task could not
seem easier, things quickly turned frightening as I witnessed one of the students making inappropriate gestures and comments. I could not believe such foul language was coming out of such a young child. I was only 17 at this point and was given a rather large group of hormonal fifth graders which I had only known from seconds ago. I stood there shocked, wondering what I should say to address the problem in a not only proper, but lawful way.

Another example that showed the lack of proper training amongst student helpers took place during the reading segments of the after-school program. Along with working closely with students on homework and Physical Education, I also worked with students to help them reach their reading level given that most students were falling rather behind. The after-school Program had reading rotations and two of them were focused on reading. Here, older grade students were asked to read, write a summary, and take a quiz on the book to show they read and understood the content. With younger grades like first and second, we were asked to read one-one-one with the students in hopes that our presence alone would encourage students to read or at least try to. However, this seldom worked and rather than feeling encouraged, most often than never, kids left the program feeling sad and discouraged of reading out loud. I too would walk away feeling unsuccessful and frustrated at the fact that I did not know how to help them. This was just another instance in which I realized that no one ever gave me the proper tools to be a successful leader in a classroom setting like the after-school program. Situations like these continued to arise throughout my time working as a student helper and it was not until I noticed the pattern that I realized this was a concerning issue throughout the school.

However, knowing what I know now, I believe I possess the skills and talents necessary in helping others develop ways to tackle this issue. I have worked as an Assistant Store Manager for over three years and have held leadership positions for over five years. I think that many of
the skills I have obtained working in such positions can easily translate into the classroom and other class settings. I also believe that with the appropriate connections and partnerships I can receive the proper training in helping students tackle on the literacy issue that is so prevalent within the Puente Valley Unified School District and more specifically, in Soon Moon Elementary.

What I believe makes me different from the informants or influentials is that although I do have experience working in the classroom, this experience does date back to almost five years ago. Since then, most of my work has been in retail and so I may not be as knowledgeable on current events as I would have, had I continued working in classroom settings. This helped me yield away from any bias as I came into this project as an outsider, open to ideas, suggestions, and mindful of other potential concerns.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

The following shows the list of participants who were interviewed for this project and their perspective interview questions.

**Sophia Garcia:**

1. How long has the Reading Buddies Project been around for?
2. Has the project partnered with other elementary school in the area, or just Soon Moon?
3. What does the other site location look like, is it similar or different to the Soon Moon one?
4. What is the highest number of youths that the project has been able to partner in one semester?
5. What do you see as a strength within the project?
6. What do you see as an opportunity within the project?

7. What do you see as an opportunity within the student helpers (youth) preparedness to teach in a class setting?

8. What are you concerned about when it comes to training student helpers to teach students to read?

9. What is currently being done to improve the quality of the training received to teach in the Reading Buddies Project? - by whom - and do you think this is helping, not doing enough, or indifferent? Why?

10. What do you think should be done about student helper preparedness to teach students to learn to read?

11. What do you think are the obstacles, drawbacks, and disadvantages to changing how we train and prepare our student helpers to teach young students to read?

12. Is there anything else that you would like to say about classroom aids and student helpers in the classroom or class setting, their concerns, and/or the improvement of their training to better serve students in reading?

Jessica Longe:

1. What do you see is a problem causing our students literacy achievement results?

2. I’m assuming that from the needed support of this problem came Fishbay Reads, is that correct?

3. At its beginning stages, what were some of the obstacles the program faced in terms of support and achieving the desired results?

4. How have these obstacles subsided throughout the years?
5. Your volunteers, they are an integral part of this program. How does the program recruit such a large number of students and what has it done to maintain this success?

6. After being involved with this program for some time, what do you see as a problem with student volunteer and their preparedness for teaching in a class setting? (If any, now? or in the beginning stages of the program?)

7. What are some of the steps the program has taken to improve the quality of the training received to teach in the classroom? - by whom - and do you think this is helping, not doing enough, or indifferent? Why?

8. What do you think should be done about student helper preparedness to teach students to learn to read?

9. What do you think are the obstacles, drawbacks, and disadvantages to changing how we train and prepare our class helpers to teach young students to read?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to say about classroom aids and student helpers in the classroom or class setting, their concerns, and/or the improvement of their training to better serve students in reading?

**Allison Martinez:**

1. Before going any further, would you mind telling me a little about yourself? What do you do? What does a day in the life in your profession look like? How long have you done it for?

2. As a reading intervention teacher, what are some obstacles you personally face in your profession?

3. What do you see is a problem causing our students literacy achievement results?
4. After doing this for some time, have you seen any recurring patterns as far as the student’s ability to read and their overall literacy skills?

5. What do you see as a potential solution to combating these patterns outside of the classroom?

6. There are emerging programs dedicated in addressing these concerns. For example, the Reading Buddies Project, here in Starlight, are you familiar with it?

7. As a reading intervention teacher, do you see any possible opportunity with such program?

8. What do you think can be done to improve the quality of the program for more successful results?

9. What do you think should be done about our school’s literacy achievement results overall?

10. What do you think are the obstacles, drawbacks, and disadvantages to these possible solutions?

11. What is currently being done to improve these results? - by whom - and do you think this is helping, not doing enough, or indifferent? Why?

12. Is there anything else that you would like to say about literacy achievement and/or programs to help solve this issue and/or to better serve students in reading?

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited via phone which led to face-to-face meetings. Participants were interviewed in their respective work spaces. Sophia was interviewed at the office of her organization in Berryhill, California. Allison was interviewed in a classroom at Soon Moon Elementary and Jessica was interviewed at the office for Fishbay Reads. All interviews were
done individually and upon appointment. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour each, and upon participant consent, Sophia’s interview was audio-recorded. A consent form was provided and signed by both parties for the purpose of audio recording. A semi-structured interview format was used for all interviews to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee.

Results

For this Capstone Project, a Fishbay Reads Representative, an intervention teacher, and the Reading Buddies Project Coordinator were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve the quality of student helpers’ preparedness in teaching elementary students to read. This is important because low literacy achievement has proven to be a serious issue throughout California’s public schools. Given the resources that the Reading Buddies Project brings forth, it is important to take the necessary actions to ensure the project becomes successful in its goal of teaching students to read. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Time Required; Cost of Attainability; and Community Outreach (see Table 2). Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1. Proposed Action Options
Table 2. *Evaluation of the Action Options*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Time Required</th>
<th>Cost of Attainability</th>
<th>Community Outreach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan and Create a Program of Study</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit for a more successful Reading Buddy to Student ratio</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train the Reading Buddies</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Evaluation of the Action Options**

As noted in Table 1, three actions emerged after interviewing a reading intervention teacher, a Fishbay Reads Representative, and the Reading Buddies Coordinator to enhance volunteer and student helper preparedness to teach young students to read. These options are:

13. Planning and creating a program of study

14. Recruit for a more successful reading buddy to student ratio

15. Train the reading buddies
All three options will be evaluated based on time required, cost of attainability, and community outreach. The time required to make each action option happen is important as it allows one to set realistic and measurable goals within the time frame in which the Reading Buddies Project operates. The cost of attainability for each action option is important given that all three options will require stakeholders’ input and some funding for any needed expenses. Community outreach refers to the efforts required by the two project leaders to outsource community partnerships, needed resources or information to make each action option possible.

Planning/ Creating a Program of Study

A clear program of study, important by design, seemed to be lacking within the Reading Buddies Project. Sophia, the Reading Buddies Coordinator, expressed her concerns saying, “something that we do not have, is a curriculum to go by. We partner our youth with the students, and they read, but we don’t yet have a way or scale to measure their growth.” (personal communication, November 6, 2018). Given that this is Sophia’s first year working with Young Solutions and the Reading Buddies Project, she has little to no previous knowledge of the program and how it was run before her. Hence, there is very little statistical data on the methods and successes of the program. On several occasions this concern was made apparent as student helpers arrived at the site and did not know what to do upon arrival. Although some training was given prior to beginning their work, the lack of an actual program of study led to most student helpers guessing what to do with their student. Taking the time to create a set of lessons and activities for the project would address this issue. Creating a well-structured program benefits all parties involved such as the reading buddies, the project supervisor, the tutees (students), and even the teachers of the students being tutored. However, doing so would require great efforts
from everyone involved. Understanding that all leaders involved have their own respective jobs and duties finding the time to gather, coordinate, and plan proves to be difficult.

Nonetheless, detailed planning and organizing is key to creating a well-structured and successful reading tutor program. According to Derrick (2015), “a well-planned and carefully organized tutoring program can lead to remarkable gains for tutors, tutees, and teachers” (pg. 1). More so, in an effort to create such success, there must be a clear, concise, and effective program of study in place. A program of study refers to a set of goals, activities, and resources that resemble lesson plans to further support reading. Given that this action plan requires resources such as school utensils, the cost of attainability would be moderate. That is, because in recent years, the project has served no more than twenty students per semester; the supplies needed would not require an excessive amount of funds. The idea behind creating a program of study for the Reading Buddies Project is that the lessons and activities can remain a constant part of the program and can be done for years to come. They can also be done by anyone who decides to become involved with the project and can become a resource option for teachers working with student helpers and students learning to read. Planning a program of study requires the input of all leaders including the teachers, Reading Buddies Coordinator and Supervisor, and reading intervention teachers. Hence, the level of community outreach necessary to create a successfully coordinated program would be high. However, in this way, all leaders involved in teaching students to read can optimize the Reading Buddies Program by providing insightful ideas and suggestions based on their work experience to assist the students.

The lack of a clear and structured plan was made apparent within the project as the location of where the tutoring would take place changed quite frequently. At times, students were placed in the cafeteria, other times they were placed in a classroom or in the library. According
Researchers generally agree on the factors that generate the most consistent positive achievement for tutees: (1) Close coordination with the classroom or reading teacher; (2) Intensive and ongoing training for tutors; (3) Well-structured tutoring sessions in which the content and delivery of instruction is carefully scripted; (4) Careful monitoring and reinforcement of progress; (5) Frequent and regular tutoring sessions, with each session between 10 and 60 minutes daily; and (6) Specially designed interventions for the 17-20% of children with severe reading difficulties. (pg. 6-9)

Based on this research, a program of study possessing these qualities has proven to benefit student literacy achievement. Identifying the needs of the tutees and the tutors, establishing where the tutoring will take place, and having a plan to address these needs are all essential components in creating a thought-out reading assistance program. Structured tutoring sessions and careful monitoring of these services can help produce productive routines and enhance volunteer preparedness which would impact the effectiveness of instruction by leading to consistency throughout.

**Recruiting for a more successful Reading Buddy to Student ratio.**

Since her involvement with the project, Sophia has found that the biggest opportunity lies in recruiting youth/volunteers whose schedules can accommodate the times and dates of the program. Since Reading Buddies only happens during the After-School Program hours and the project only lasts one hour, twice a week, it has become difficult to recruit volunteers. However, it needs to be noted that Sophia has concentrated her efforts on recruiting community youth.
primarily and has not purposely widened her search for other volunteers; although the program
does take in anyone willing to volunteer as a reading buddy. Sophia’s focus is based on the research
on the benefits of promoting at risk youth to take on leadership roles. According to a study done
by The Partners for Valued Youth who partnered at risk youth with low achieving elementary
students, “tutors had lower dropout and absentee rates and higher self-concept scores than a
randomly selected control group. Tutees also experienced improved reading scores, lower absentee
rates, and fewer disciplinary referrals (1990). Given this research, the efforts of the program to
recruit youth has been vast but has failed in providing enough Reading Buddies to create a
consistent one-to-one partner ratio. On several occasions, when a reading buddy was unable to
attend and due to the limited number of student helpers participating, another reading buddy was
forced to read with two students. This affects the success of the program and the tutors as they are
unable to focus their attention to one student consistently.

A consistent tutor to student ratio is key when dealing with teaching students to read.
According to Peterson, O’ Connor, and Strawhun (2014), “One-on-one tutoring with adequate
resources is arguably the most effective form of instruction” (pg.5). Student helpers are able to
tailor the lessons to the student’s individual needs by providing the student with enough time,
opportunities, and resources to make instruction more effective. This one-to-one ratio is important
and is what has made the Fishbay Reads program gain success. According to a representative of
the program, their efforts are concentrated on recruiting community volunteers and partnering
them with a low performing student who they work with for an entire school semester for 20-30
minutes per week based on scheduled dates and times. These one-to-one sessions allow for more
individualized attention towards each student and a higher student engagement rate (personal
communication, November 5, 2018). One-to-one sessions recognize that students learn at different
rates and are more likely to benefit from specialized instruction. These sessions also help evolve an organic relationship between the student helper and the tutee which sets a more comfortable learning environment. This was observed during several reading buddies sessions as students became attached to their reading buddy, often asking and requesting to read with their assigned reading buddy when that student helper was unable to attend.

Hence, the action option proposes widening the recruiting process to a larger demographic audience. Opening the recruiting process to all local high schools and community organizations can positively impact the one-to-one ratio and benefit the students being tutored. This would also result in higher student helper participation as it would target all high school students versus only at-risk youth. Broadening the recruiting process would require a moderate level of community outreach given partnerships between the project and some local high schools have already been established. The action would simply require more advertising for the program throughout the community at almost no cost. The time needed to recruit an adequate number of volunteers is moderate as it would only require basic advertising strategies. This would include creating an informational pamphlet of the program, distributing it throughout the community, and outsourcing for adequate tutors. It is important to note that the time to achieve this action option is moderate also due to the fact that it would require the project leaders to create a list of tutor qualifications. If the project broadens its recruiting process, it must also filter the applicants based on certain criteria to ensure suitable participants. While volunteers do not need to be high achieving students, they must possess basic material knowledge and effective communication and interpersonal skills. Material knowledge consists of being able to read at a high school level. The goal is that this action option can help increase the number of capable volunteers for a more successful reading buddy to
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student ratio. Consequently, this can help the program serve an even bigger number of students in need of reading assistance.

**Training Across the Board**

Training is an important factor in developing successful reading buddies and an overall tutoring program. Given the positive results of peer tutoring or peer-assisted learning, it has proven to be an invaluable resource. Proper training allows for a consistent understanding of the work that needs to be done for everyone. Training student helpers on how to behave in the presence of younger students is the first step into creating a successful learning environment. According to Albert Bandura, “... most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (Bandura, 1977, p. 22). This is important given that younger children tend to replicate the behavior they see in seemingly older students. On several instances, this was made apparent within the Reading Buddies project as student helpers would stray away from reading and opted to make jokes, distract one another, and act unprofessionally. After questioning this behavior, Sophia asserted that, “we always have the basic training for reading, but the training excludes behavioral management. There has been no actual cover on this topic before” (personal communication, November 6, 2018). Research states that unlike adult-child instruction, there is a smaller age gap between the student helper and the tutee that allows there to be a less passive relationship between the two; yielding to more open discussions and a more natural interaction (Kalkowski, 1992). However, these interactions must be carefully monitored as they can also lead to ineffective use of time.

In addition to training on behavior management, training on the actual subject and on how to teach is also crucial. At the beginning of each semester, student helpers are given an hour and
half to a two-hour long orientation on how to teach students to read from two volunteering teachers of the Puente Valley Unified School District. Both teachers have remained the project’s trainers for the past two years and their training excludes behavioral management. Based on personal observations from the most recent semester, the training discussed basic reading strategies, the strategies were then modeled, and the complete session lasted 45 minutes.

As discussed in the literature review section of this paper, this project was explored through an expert and novice perspective in several ways. In this case, the program supervisor acted as the expert and the reading buddies acted as novice learners. The reading buddies then used the knowledge they learned to tutor the younger students in addition to the training they received at the beginning of the project. Throughout each session, the supervisor would attempt to oversee the learning and offer strategies to better assist. According to Wood (2002), attaining these skills are an integral part of successful training. Speaking on his own research project, Woods (2002) states, “One reasonably self-evident problem is that having knowledge of the task is not enough to guarantee effective tutoring. There were children. Who knew perfectly well how to do the task but seemed incapable of helping the other child in a contingent fashion” (pg.7). This alludes to the point that a single day training is hardly rigorous enough to fully teach student helpers the skills needed to be an effective tutor. Training should be intensive, ongoing, and strategic in order to become successful. Ms. Martinez, an intervention teacher at Ohlone Elementary reinforced this belief by adding that, “Sometimes student helpers try to help, and they read with the kids, but they’re not actually teaching them any skills so that they can do it themselves” (personal communication, November 7, 2018). Training across the board would address this issue. It would allow student helpers to learn, understand, and be able to relate the material to their student in a way that is proven to be effective. Given her professional experience, Ms. Martinez notes that
receiving hands on training allows student helpers to become more interested and engaged with the material (personal communication, November 7, 2018).

However, implementing longer and more intense training would require a lot of time and community outreach efforts to make it feasible. It would require that the project supervisor and coordinator outsource for trainers that can contribute to the project by helping create an effective and efficient training packet. Moreover, the trainers can dedicate their time to teaching the material, modeling strategies, practicing, and providing feedback consistently. To this day, the project’s trainers have remained the same, hence the cost, if the teachers or experts on the subject are volunteering trainers, would be low.

Conclusion

This section will justify the action I recommend improving volunteer and student helper preparedness to teach young students to read. This section will also address some of the concessions, limitations, and possible negative outcomes of my recommendation.

**Recommendation.** After careful examination of each action option based on the criteria, it is recommended that the project seeks proper training for student helpers and volunteers to create successful tutors and overall program. Based on the fact that the project has already established a partnership with two volunteering trainers and experts on the subject, there is not an excessive course of action required to recruit additional trainers. Given that the location for the training to occur has also been established, as it has remained the same all years, is another reason to seek this option. Although this option would require additional community outreach to
gain the input of all stakeholders, such partnerships and relations have also been built through the course of this capstone project.

**Limitations.** As a limitation to this action option, the researcher has not established a relationship with the Reading Buddies lead organizer of Young Solutions. Given that this project has only been discussed with the project coordinator, it is unknown that the lead organizer will accept this action option and decide to move forward.

**Potential negative outcomes.** Additionally, a potential negative outcome of this recommendation may be that due to the higher training expectation required, both existing trainers may decide to opt out of the project. It is assumed that both trainers would adhere to the changes, however, this is not certain.

**Concessions.** At its core, planning a clear and constructive program of study can produce highly structured lessons with explicit and effective scripts for tutors to follow when teaching students to read. Additionally, widening the recruit process can enhance the effectiveness of instruction by ensuring that there is a one-to-one reading buddy to student ratio.

**Conclusion.** Despite the limitations and potential negative outcomes, I believe that proper training remains the most fundamental part of preparing student helpers and volunteers to teach students to read. I hold that the success of the two options not recommended are dependent on proper training of each volunteer. The lack of proper training would make all the efforts of creating a well-organized program of study meaningless. It would fail to successfully reach its goal of teaching students to read. More so, the lack of proper training would also limit the success of the program even if there were a one-to-one ratio. This is due to the lack of sufficient knowledge to properly teach the subject. Although this recommendation would require great
efforts from all Reading Buddies Project leaders, it will prove to be an invaluable resource for everyone. Proper training will serve as a great option tool to educate and prepare student helpers and volunteers to teach elementary students struggling to read, more successfully.

**Action Documentation and Critical Reflection**

For this Capstone Project, my focus issue was student helper preparedness in the Reading Buddies Project, a reading assistance program, at Sun Moon Elementary. My goal was to find an organization that worked towards positively impacting the low literacy crisis in public education. In doing so, I found Fishbay Reads in the Monterey County and Youth Solutions in the Santa Cruz County which help tackle this issue through their work. A Fishbay Reads representative, the Youth Solutions coordinator, and a reading intervention teacher were interviewed to see what they thought could be done to improve the quality of student helper preparedness in teaching younger students to read. After analyzing the interview data and the research literature, three action options emerged. These options are: Plan and create a program of study for the Reading Buddies Project, recruit for a more successful reading buddy to student ratio and train the reading buddies for a better success rate. I chose to implement training the student helpers as my action option given its importance to help create a more successful tutoring program. Intensifying the training given to student helpers will better equip them to be able to teach elementary students to read. Through training, student helpers will be able to learn the expectations required to behave, effectively communicate, and instill the skills needed to be able to read to younger students. As a result of a more rigorous training, student helpers will also become more confident in their abilities to tutor younger students. Thus, causing a more engaging and interactive learning environment for all involved.

**Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection**
First, Sophia, the Reading Buddies coordinator, and I, revisited the training given to the student helpers at the beginning of the semester. The initial training included several Close Reading Strategies handouts that informed student helpers on the appropriate questions to ask during reading sessions with their assigned student (photos of the handouts can be found in Appendix A). At the will of each student helper, we added an hour to the reading sessions which took place twice a week at Sun Moon Elementary. We met with the student helpers one hour before the actual reading sessions and went over each handout (there are four total). We explained, modeled, and practiced these strategies with the idea that they would then be able to do it with their student. These handouts aim to create an interactive read aloud experience for the student and the reading buddy and to measure the student’s level of reading comprehension.

Next, Sophia and I partnered with the student’s home room teachers who offered recommendations to better assist each student (a photo of the recommendations for each student can be found in Appendix B). These allowed for more individualized tutoring sessions as they informed student helpers about the specific needs of each student. Finally, Sophia and I created several sets of reading comprehension flashcards, an idea taken from the web, to support and measure the student's level of understanding (a photo of one set of flashcards can be found in Appendix C). Each set of flashcards includes question about the literature which inquire the students to analyze the text to find the answer. We also explained to the student helpers that there were four flashcards in each set that required them to further engage by requiring that they make text-to-text, world, and self-connections as examples for the students. One flashcard also required the student helper to create a math problem from the events in the book to inspire creativity in the process. We gave one set of flashcards to each student helper which they were able to use in any way or form they thought to be better. The idea behind doing it in this way was
to spark creativity in the student helpers so that they had the freedom to modify the sessions to the student’s needs. I was personally surprised at how engaging this activity became for all involved as some student helpers chose to use the flashcards in innovative ways. Throughout this work, my personal role was to supervise the sessions and offer advice and/or praise the work being done.

Throughout this work, Sophia and I had to modify the times to train the student helpers on the close reading strategies. Initially, we wanted to review one handout per day, with the idea that we would have covered them all in the span of two weeks. However, there were days in where not all student helpers were able to attend the reading buddies sessions which affected the training schedule and the overall effectiveness of the strategies to translate in the reading sessions.

Nonetheless, the work done so far to better prepare student helpers to support student reading have resulted in a more interactive and engaging learning environment. Before implementing this action option, reading sessions were unstructured, dull, and evidence that actual learning was seldom seen. Knowing what I know now, I wish I had planned for the training sessions to be at different times and possibly locations from the reading sessions. Altering the time and location to meet the student helper’savailabilities would have allowed the training to occur versus being postponed. An important next step will be to seek the direct partnership of experienced reading assistance trainers. Their experience will provide us with a better understanding of the knowledge, skills, and strategies that can further aid the Reading Buddies Project and student helper preparedness overall.
In addition to being pleasantly surprised at how engaging the training and the use of flashcards had become, I was also surprised at myself for taking on a leadership role. From doing this project, I learned that I am a leader in my community that is actively seeking a positive change. I also learned that I really enjoy working alongside high school students who are also doing something to impact their community. Although I was quite hesitant about my work and its effectiveness at the beginning of this project, I have come to realize that the work done thus far is only the start of work towards change. Through doing this project, I have learned that real impact requires the partnership and the dedication of community leaders and members to translate more effectively. Hence, my decision to continue this work even after the completion of this capstone project.

Synthesis and Integration

The required coursework, the Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes, and this Action Research Project have impacted my professional development in many ways. The required coursework for this project such as peer reviewing sections of our paper and practicing our presentation taught me that there is always room for improvement. The Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes have also provided a great aide for the completion of this work. While considering Major Learning Outcome (MLO) 1, I have noticed my personal development as a critical thinker, writer, and presenter of issues dealing with California's public education system. After taking LS 398, Social Foundations of Multicultural education, I became more aware of the Educational Foundations that have shaped our schooling experiences. An assignment from this class that stands out is one in where we were asked to interview a representative from a low-income school in the Monterey County. Conducting this interview
taught me the ways in which a school’s funds, test scores, practices, support services, and community connections contribute to the success of a multicultural education.

Another Major Learning Outcome that has impacted my development is Diversity and Multicultural Scholar. This MLO deals with the value of diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom. A course that contributed to this learning was LS 390, Culturally Relevant Literature for Children and Adolescents. After taking LS 390, I learned about the framework required for culturally responsive teaching. I learned that as educators, we must create a culturally relevant pedagogy to successfully serve and educate all students. A specific assignment that stands out to me is one in where we were asked to reflect on our own experiences with multicultural literature. I was saddened by the fact that I could not think back to a moment in where I was exposed by such literature. With this in mind, I was able to approach this Action Project with an understanding of the importance of multicultural literature as a way to engage and reach all students.

Major Learning Outcome 4, Social Justice Collaborator, is another learning outcome that impacted my development as an educator. A course that reinforces this MLO, is LS380, Teaching for Social Change. This course had a significant influence on me as it taught me about the social responsibility that we, as future educators, have on providing students with an equitable education. This course taught me about the inequalities that persist within the public education systems. It also taught me about the factors that contribute to most students of color not receiving an equitable education experience. This course fueled a passion in me to serve as an educator in my own low-income community to help combat these issues.

As I near the end of my undergraduate experience, I know and understand the responsibilities that educators take on when entering the field of teaching. Nonetheless, I am
eager to pursue this profession as it has always been my passion. As for my next steps to become the professional I envision being, I know I have to continue my education and involvement in the educational field. I will be pursuing substitute positions to enhance my own hands on experience and understanding of different grade levels, districts, and approaches to education. In time, I will be applying for the credential program to further my professional goals of becoming a well-rounded, inspiring, and multicultural educator.

References


Appendix A:

Interactive Read Aloud K-1: Literature

- Early Language: What are the words about? How do you know?
- Content: What is happening? How do you know?
- Coherence: How do you know? How can I know?
- Author's Purpose: What is the author trying to do?

Interactive Read Aloud K-1: Informational

- Early Language: What are the words about? How do you know?
- Content: What is happening? How do you know?
- Coherence: How do you know? How can I know?
- Author's Purpose: What is the author trying to do?

Close Reading for 2nd and 3rd Grades: Literature

- What is the author trying to do with this story?
- What is the author trying to do with this poem?
- What is the author trying to do with this picture?

Close Reading for 2nd-5th Grade: Informational

- What is the author trying to do with this picture?
- What is the author trying to do with this poem?
- What is the author trying to do with this story?

Appendix B:
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 3:15-3:45</th>
<th>needs help with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not reading yet, please read to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English reading comprehension, please ask questions as you read to check for understanding -- Please work only in English!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English reading comprehension, please ask questions as you read to check for understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence in Spanish reading and comprehension support, please give lots of reassurance and have re-read with fluency, also ask questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>comprehension support in both languages, ask questions throughout reading and use text to clarify meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix C:
PREPARING OUR READING BUDDIES

- Make a text-to-world connection.
- Make a text-to-self connection.
- Make a text-to-text connection.
- Is there a problem in this story? What is it?
- How do you think this story will end?
- Use the events in this story to create a math story problem.

- What is the setting of this story?
- Predict what will happen next.
- Find a noun in the book; is it a person, place or thing?
- Find an adjective (describing word) in the book. What does the adjective describe?
- Find a verb (action word) in the book.

- What is the genre of this book?
- Choose 1 sentence and read it aloud with amazing expression!
- Who is the main character of this story?
- List 3 words that describe the main character.
- In 3 sentences or less, tell what this story is about.

- Who is the author of this book?
- Who is the illustrator of this book?
- Find a word that you have not seen before. What do you think it means?
- From whose point of view is this story being told?
- Which character in this story is most like you? Why?