

Sponsorship reading between students. A strategy to promote inclusion in school

El apadrinamiento lector entre estudiantes. Una estrategia favorecedora de la inclusión en la escuela

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Abstract

Reader sponsorship consists of matching senior students with lower-level students to share reading moments. The overall aim of the research presented was to design, implement and evaluate a Reader Sponsorship Project in a Primary and Secondary Education School in Murcia (southeast Spain) with the purpose of undertaking an inclusive practice of innovation and encouragement for reading. In the manuscript, a descriptive design is used to explain how the implementation and development of the experience was carried out, as well as its evaluation through the application of a series of questionnaires elaborated ad hoc. The findings show that the project generated opportunities for interaction among students, favoring not only their reading habits but also their socio-affective relationships. The conclusions point to reader sponsorship as an ideal strategy for creating links between participants, and improving inclusion and coexistence in school.

Resumen

El apadrinamiento lector consiste en emparejar a estudiantes de cursos superiores con estudiantes de cursos inferiores para compartir momentos de lectura. El objetivo general de la investigación que se presenta fue diseñar, implementar y evaluar un Proyecto de Apadrinamiento Lector (PAL) en un Centro de Educación Infantil y Primaria de la ciudad de Murcia con el propósito de acometer una práctica inclusiva de innovación y animación a la lectura. Para ello, se expone en el texto cómo fue la puesta en marcha y el desarrollo del PAL, así como su evaluación mediante la aplicación de una serie de cuestionarios elaborados *ad hoc*. Los hallazgos constatan que el PAL generó oportunidades de interacción en el alumnado, favoreciendo no solo sus hábitos lectores sino también sus relaciones socioafectivas. Las conclusiones apuntan al apadrinamiento lector como una estrategia idónea para la creación de vínculos entre los participantes y para la mejora de la inclusión y la convivencia en la escuela

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Introduction

Reading is an educational activity that promotes the search of knowledge and coming into contact with different pedagogical scenarios (Jiménez, Fierro & García, 2016). The relevance of reading lies in the important role it plays in the individual's school performance, as well as in its personal development (Serna, Rodríguez & Etxaniz, 2017). From this point of view, reading is a basic intellectual process and a major building block of learning; therefore, its promotion is a priority of the main study plans and courses of the different educational levels (Trimiño & Zayas, 2016). In this sense, Álvarez & Pascual (2013) refer to the need for school reading policies and for seeing reading plans as instruments that may promote methodological change and educational improvement. Therefore, Rodríguez (2013) advocates for the reading plan as a framework to design a school project that integrates both emotional and reading skills. According to Cruz (2014, p. 38), the reading plan is:

“a series of strategies used by the teaching staff in order for students to become competent readers who assimilate the knowledge, who do some research on it and who consequently enable them to transfer and convey what they have learnt”.

In this regard, thought should be given to the concept of reading promotion, which encompasses a series of activities, strategies and techniques aiming at fostering, boosting and stimulating an approach to books, by enhancing reading habits and promoting the playful side of reading in order to move from being able to read to being willing to read (Jiménez, 2012).

Conceptual approach

The practice called “reader sponsors”, also known as “reader sponsorship” consists on matching students in their final years of study and those in their early years of Primary Education (PE) or on combining students from both educational stages (including Childhood Education -CE-), so that the sponsors take on

the role of readers while their sponsored fellows act as listeners, although such functions may occasionally reverse in practice. On his part, Nemirovsky (1998) defines this remarkable sponsorship as a strategy that relies on a tutoring relationship to foster the learning of written language. To sum up, it is an innovative strategy that is linked to the CE and the PE curriculum at all levels, it has a transversal nature and advocates for the marching of children in their last years of primary education (sponsors from year 4 to year 6, children aged between 9 and 12) and children from lower grades (sponsored children from CE aged 4 to children aged between 4 and 6 from year 1) to share reading moments. Nevertheless, it is also possible to match students from year 1, 2 and 3 of PE (aged between 6 and 9) and students from year 4, 5 and 6 (aged between 10 and 12). This makes the couples read together in times and spaces devoted to such end, with the consequent benefits these practices generates in both peers during the learning process (Flecha & Molina, 2015). This way, the older students teach and convey the value of reading to the little ones by acting as readers for their reading mates and strengthening emotional bonds.

In short, using this kind of sponsorship in education refers to an innovative project with different purposes regarding readers and listeners. Data concerning this is shown in table 1.

On the other hand, Margallo (2012) believes that this type of roles (readers-listeners) promote the adoption of active attitudes towards the texts that address the students to put in place strategies of reading and attentive listening.

According to Romero (2014), these are some of the features that make this project an interesting activity with a view to introducing it in education centres: 1) its simplicity, because undertaking this project does not require the centre to allocate any additional resources because all centres have children's literature materials; 2) its impact on oral language; 3) it works on linguistic skills; 4) it helps the with-

Table 1. *Objectives of the Reader Sponsorship Project (Galindo, 2012; Romero, 2014)*

READERS	LISTENERS
Developing reading skills and working on public-speaking	Developing active listening: learning to listen by playing an active role while listening
Promoting expressive reading practices through appropriate vocalisation, intonation, pace, phonetic registers and inflections of voice	Enhancing attention and comprehension of oral and written texts
Identifying the structural elements of a tale	Promoting observation and discrimination of graphic symbols
Appreciating the physical elements of a book	Finding differences between different books and making their preferences known
Promoting motivation in reading by adapting to the listener's level	Being interested in the story, identifying characters and situations
Being aware of how the school library is organised	Familiarising with the library use and its resources
Undertaking an active search of reading materials	Promoting respect towards books
Registering book loans and taking good care of them	Being able to adapt to people of different ages
Enhancing interpersonal relationships, seeing younger students as peers at school	Acquiring pleasure in reading

drawn ones to socialise; 5) it proposes individual and group activities; and 6) it uses literature as a resource and methodology.

Background

In Spain, reader sponsorship is related to a reading promotion project implemented by Luis Romero (teacher of CE at “Padre José Casal Carrillo” school, in the town of San Fernando, Cádiz) and Ana Galindo (teacher of PE of “Virgen de la Cabeza” school, in the town of Motril, Granada) in 2010. The initial project progressively spread throughout Andalusia and caught the attention of many centres and finally swept to other places in Spain. Nevertheless, other pioneering initiatives in this thematic line were already in place for almost a decade, such as the experience documented by Torrents & Sogas (2001).

As far as virtual technologies are concerned, Monar (2012) analyses in a case study the usefulness of applying digital platforms to promote reading in the classroom. In this sense, some authors have contributed to develop a variant of this strategy called “digital sponsorships”, whereby PE students are involved in tutoring CE students through assignments that require the use of information and communication tech-

nologies (Fernández & Calvo, 2013; Fernández & Correa, 2008). This modality covers processes that are inherent to tutoring, socialisation and the creation of network working environments that are more stimulating for the students.

Linking reader sponsorship and inclusive education

Reader sponsorship is derived from a collaborative work strategy that promotes grouping students in order to improve their learning through workshops or sessions organised in the different years or stages. This experience contributes to developing interpersonal and intergenerational relationships by involving children of different ages in a common endeavour. Consequently, the support among students promoted through this strategy is an ideal formula to improve inclusion at school, to remove barriers in terms of socialisation and to open up borders in terms of school coexistence.

In a sense, as far as inclusive education is concerned, reader sponsorship is linked to peer tutoring, a collaborative learning strategy that consists on dividing students having an asymmetrical relationship into couples (where actors provide or receive tutoring depending on their level of competence on a specific subject) and a

common objective that is known and shared, which is achieved by implementing a framework that is planned externally (Duran & Vidal, 2004). Tutoring among peers allows for multiple mentoring combinations: couples having the same or a different level of education, couples who play a fixed, rotary or reciprocal role, and couples whose members are of different ages.

Consequently, during the process of tutoring among peers, the principle *ocendo discimus* (we learn as we teach) is reproduced because students act as a mediating element between their peer's mental activity and the information he/she has to assimilate (Azorín, 2014; Garriga & Oller, 2012). In this sense, the process of help and support among students generates learning opportunities. From this point of view, both students benefit from the activity performed and learn in the sphere of reader sponsorship. The sponsored student benefits from the permanent, tailored assistance provided by his/her tutor to encourage him/her to read. The sponsor simultaneously performs activities to prepare and perform assignments, which makes him/her acquire greater command of the content. The students thus develop different competences, both of an academic and a relational nature, as well as communicative and inclusive.

Objective

The research problem faced in this paper focuses on the following issue: does the reader sponsorship strategy promote the development of more inclusive practices at school? In view of this, its objective is designing, implementing and evaluating a reader sponsorship project aimed at promoting reading and enhancing inclusion in a School of Childhood and Primary Education (SCPE).

Methodology

Our research adopts a descriptive design that sets forth an innovation project aimed at promoting reading that aspires to be seen as a

model of good practice to enhance inclusion at school.

Context

This paper outlines the experience implemented during the academic year 2015/2016 at "Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente" SCPE in the city of Murcia, which incorporated a Reader Sponsorship Project (hereinafter, RSP) within the framework of its Reading Plan. This school is located in an average-low socio-economic environment, with high immigrant population, and has one line, three CE units (with students aged between 3 and 5) and six PE units (with students aged between 6 and 12). The school management is leading an inclusive school project and advocates for the development of innovations that result in improvements for all the school's students, notably those with special educational needs.

More specifically, the local educational legislation in the Autonomous Community of Murcia -where this work was performed- sets forth that educational centres must create a reading plan to improve reading literacy and promote reading among the students. This initiative relies on the Order of the Regional Department of Education, Culture and Universities, dated 20th November 2014, regulating how PE is organised and assessed in the Autonomous Community of Murcia. More specifically, article eight thereof refers to reading plans and concludes that some time must be spare every week to promote reading habits. Therefore, the teaching staff of all educational centres must decide which fields are to be promoted each day of the week and must spare -at least- 30 minutes of class hours to work on comprehension reading.

Participants

Table 2 shows the pairings scheduled in the four years of PE (1, 2, 5 and 6) that participated in this experience ($n = 97$):

Table 2. *Groups-class participating in the project*

QUARTER	SPONSORS	No.	SPONSORED STUDENTS	No.
Second	Year 6 of Primary Education	25	Year 2 of Primary Education	24
Third	Year 5 of Primary Education	23	Year 1 of Primary Education	25
Total	Readers	48	Listeners	49

The teaching staff who coordinated the proposal was made up of the tutors of these four groups ($n = 4$). Likewise, the school management, led by the headmaster, the academic advisor and the head of the students' office ($n = 3$) also performed coordination activities to spare the times and spaces available.

Data collection and assessment instruments

With regard to this work, a series of instruments to collect data were put in place, such as the minutes of the meetings held, in whose agenda the developments of the project regarding its design and implementation, the agreements adopted and the remarks made were written down. Additionally, a report with proposals to improve the following school year was drafted as an instrument to collect data; such proposals were agreed upon by the school management, the teaching staff and the research team. In order to assess the experience, three questionnaires were drafted: the first one was addressed to those students who acted as readers, made up of 20 items and 4 options ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"; the second one was addressed to those students who acted as listeners, made up of 16 items and 3 options to assess the level of agreement of the aspects dealt with; and the third one was addressed to the teaching staff in order to self-assess the RSP, made up of 38 items and whose structure has four options to answer the items. These instruments were validated using an inter-judge procedure. To that end, five university teachers, experts in the implementation of innovation projects at schools, collaborated in this procedure by analysing the initial questionnaires. The contributions made by these assessors were

taken into account when drafting the final instruments. All the instruments used can be consulted and downloaded on the website hosting the documentation related to the project (<https://cmariaazorin1.wixsite.com/apadrinamientolector/contact>).

Procedure

The RSP turned out to be a pilot programme implemented in the school during the third term of the academic year 2014/2015. This innovation project was a result at the initiative of the teaching staff, which started to prepare *motu proprio* a series of sponsorship sessions held between students of different years of PE. Given the good reception of the project, it was agreed to maintain the initiative started in the Reading Plan in future years. As stated above, the proposal outlined in this paper corresponds to the follow-up performed during the academic year 2015/2016. More specifically, the teaching staff who had been working on a regular basis on the regular tutoring measure also wanted to incorporate some innovations by introducing intergenerational support through sponsorship in their programmes and using reading as a link to that end. The table below contains the different stages of the project implemented in the SCPE (table 3).

The planning, implementation and assessment of the RSP was performed with the collaboration of a university researcher who participated in the preparation of resources, materials and instruments used for this project, who also collaborated counselling the teaching staff in the stages scheduled and in the follow-up and monitoring of the reading meetings. In this case, a website using the Wix technology was created, in order to collect all the documents prepared to implement the project. According to Cañizares (2013, p. 69), "Wix is a very useful tool in the field of education, because it enables to group all kinds of resources in different formats on the same website". On his part, Azorín (2015) highlights the use of Wix as a tool that makes grouping of online curriculum contents easier.

Table 3. Short explanation of the RSP stages

PREPARATORY STAGE	This first preparatory stage included the following aspects: a meeting held between the tutors of the years that participated in the experience to agree on the schedules, frequency of the reading meetings, the duration thereof, the places selected for the activity to take place, the pairings (observing the principle of heterogeneity), the functions associated to the teachers, the possible reading materials, some projects of interest, activity planning, search for materials, drafting of the sponsorship agreement as a commitment of the students and the way the experience should be jointly presented.
INITIAL STAGE	During the initial stage of the project, the students were paired, which corresponds to the 1st session. This is when the students meet one another and they are paired. Combined with this, the register of couples is completed (sponsors, sponsored students), the implications of the sponsorship agreement are explained, the couples sign the agreement and a recreational activity is performed (for example: a photocall of the couples to create closer ties, which promoted the creation of an image bank of the experience). In turn, the students are provided with outlines and guidance to perform active listening and be able to develop expressive reading.
DEVELOPMENT STAGE	This may be the case where all the students are reading the same book (when there are enough copies available) or where each couple selects a book to work on depending on their preferences. This second session was used to deliver their cards to those students who participated in the RSP. Book loans were performed in the library and recorded in a record sheet. In this regard, one of the books selected during the reading meetings was "The mysterious island", by Jules Verne. The reading materials can be kept in the <i>sponsorship spot</i> in the classroom when being used. Once this is done, the reading meetings start. As far as the spaces are concerned, our recommendation is that they are diverse and large so that they do not hinder reading by the couples. Once the activity is completed, other types of activities of reflection, text comprehension, drawing, pictures, etc. can be proposed. Attention and motivation during these meetings will be maintained by including complementary activities that are interesting for the students (for example: exchange of papers: hand-made books, crafts, self-portraits of the couples, bookmarks), visits by the parents, theatre and puppet plays -drama-, contests, reading tournaments and riddles.
ASSESSMENT STAGE	The last stage of the project included a session to assess the experience, a tutor's meeting to complete the RSP in the academic year and to make proposals for improvements (for example: extending the programme to reader families). The entire process was assessed at this final moments on the basis of the preparatory stage carried out by the teaching staff, the commitment undertaken by the students, the activities performed by the couples, the guidance worked on, the progress made in terms of reading and the improvement of inclusion.

Under the domain name <https://cmar-iaazori1.wixsite.com/apadrinamientolector> (figure 1) a virtual space was created to store the documents related to the RSP including the following information: pictures of the experiences (displayed on the website's homepage), the planning sheet of the project (made up of the following sections: 1) needs spotted, 2) objectives of the project (general and specific), 3) actions, 4) persons-in-charge, 5) timing, 6) resources and 7) instruments -of data collection and assessment-, and all the materials required to implement the project.

As far as the spaces are concerned, the sessions were held in the school library, in the sponsors' classroom, in the classroom of the sponsored students, in the playground and in other places agreed upon in case of rainy and cold days, such as the lobby. After the planning stage of the RSP, its incorporation to the institutional documentation of the school (Reading Plan) and the implementation of sponsorship

sessions, a self-assessment questionnaire was administered to the school management and the teaching staff involved and another one to the students to collect and assess all the data.

Data analysis

To analyse the data of a quantitative nature obtained from the questionnaires, version 22 of the SPSS statistical package was used, which enabled to extract basic descriptive statistics, including the averages and the percentages referred to under the "outcomes" heading.

Outcomes

The data extracted from the questionnaires drafted to collect data show how those students and teachers who participated in the RSP see this experience. In accordance with the data, it emerges that the project was successfully designed, implemented and assessed.



Figure 1. Screenshot of the website's homepage

As far as the students' opinion is concerned, the questionnaire addressed at the sponsored students was completed by students from year 1 and 2 of PE (aged between 6 and 8), who acted as listeners ($n = 49$). The support given by the students to this proposal is reflected in the outcomes because 100% of the listeners pointed out that they were asked about their favourite reading materials (item 4), that they visited their sponsor's classroom (item 5), that the meetings were held in different spaces of their school (item 6), that they behaved well during the reading sessions (item 7) and that they took great care of the books lent from the library (item 10). Additionally, most of them (90% of the students) answered that they enjoyed participating in the RSP (item 1) and 80% said they had a relationship with his/her sponsor outside the reading sessions scheduled (item 16), which shows the connections between students that arouse as a result of this experience. Nevertheless, a small percentage (10%)

said they did not get along with his/her reading mate and that he/she did not enjoy being with him/her.

On the other hand, the questionnaire drafted to obtain feedback from the students who acted as readers was completed by 48 students from year 5 and 6 of PE (aged between 10 and 12). One of the most significant aspects is that 85% admitted that they enjoyed participating in this project (item 1), 90% said that they get along with his/her sponsored student (item 10) and 75% said that he/she made a commitment to his/her sponsored student outside the reading sessions (item 20). Similarly, 40% stated that they had not spare time in class to prepare the reading sessions for his/her sponsored student and 20% admitted that they did not exchange literary gifts during the reading sessions.

As far as the assessment of the teaching staff is concerned, the questionnaire designed to self-assess the RSP was completed by the tutors of the four class groups that participated in the project and by the school management ($n = 7$), including the academic advisor who is "in charge of the library". The answer to most items was 4- strongly agree, except for item 23 regarding the level of abstraction that readers must use with listeners to explain things to them. Some difficulties were encountered during the process, such as the low score of item 25 ($M = 2.80$) regarding the duration of the reading sessions, which shows that the sessions could have been longer. Regarding item 32, it was pointed out that the families did not actively participate in the plan proposed. On the other hand, the teaching staff realised that the climate of coexistence had improved at the school. In this sense, it resulted in greater interaction and better communication between the students and a good atmosphere, which

was verified by the teachers at the playground during recess, in the corridors and at the school entrance. All the foregoing resulted in an increase in support among the students, which in turn promoted and improved inclusion.

Discussion and conclusions

Many educational and professional centres in Spain participate in reader sponsorship experiences (Calero, 2011; Dopazo, 2015; Fernández & Calvo, 2013; Fernández & Correa, 2008; López, 2016; Piquer, 2016), as well as in peer-to-peer tutoring programmes to improve reading skills (Ripoll, Bravo, Irurzun, Pérez & Zuazu, 2016; Flores & Duran, 2016). Nevertheless, there is no specialised literature in this field that provides teachers with theoretical references, guidelines for action or resources on how to implement RSPs at school. In most cases, innovations are not disseminated in events or publications of a scientific nature, hindering the existence of a thorough theoretical and empirical framework regarding this issue. Nevertheless, we expect that the work outlined in this paper will be useful to export this enriching strategy to other schools and educational realities.

As far as teaching work is concerned, thorough planning by teachers is highlighted because, according to Wells (2001), learning depends on the teacher's ability to create situations where students learn from one another through cooperation. Some studies on the students' reading habits, such as that conducted by Muñoz & Hernández (2011), make clear that reading is still an outstanding issue and that there is a need for initiating lines of action that enable to improve educational practice in this sense.

When asked "does this reader sponsorship strategy promote the implementation of more inclusive practices at school?" and upon planning, implementing and assessing the RSP, the answer is affirmative. In this regard, the theoretical foundations presented in this article refer to the advantages of the reader sponsor-

ship programme in terms of inclusion and coexistence at school; some of these advantages are: the socialisation generated by this practice, the individual and group work it provides and the development of critical awareness acquired through this strategy (Romero, 2014). More specifically, through the practical application of the RSP, a feeling of protection and assistance emerges in the older students, as well as a feeling of responsible care towards their sponsored students which is somehow touching. As a matter of fact, it is noteworthy that, in the case of students who occasionally show disruptive behaviour, this type of activities change this behaviour and they are more receptive to the assignment proposed (Armas, 2007). It all makes them gush over their sponsored children in the scheduled sessions when they read a story or a poem or just draw a picture. With regard to the foregoing, as far as inclusion is concerned, there are connections between couples, which fosters that their relationship goes beyond reading. This can be noticed in the school's atmosphere, as when the students meet in the playground, they warmly greet one another and feel happy to meet their couples, generating some kind of complicity that occasionally exists outside school.

Therefore, the outcomes encourage the school management and the teaching staff to keep working on this basis. The feasibility of this project and its future extension to all groups-class in coming years is without question a plausible reality. The proposal presented herein has had a positive impact in the classrooms because it is an innovative initiative, where reading and literature expertise of the students is used to transfer it to younger students. To sum up, Soler (2003) states that the potential of intergenerational relationships is rarely leveraged in SCPEs. Therefore, we must highlight the importance of opening up borders and removing barriers within the education community (Azorín, 2016), by implementing strategies such as reader sponsorship to build bridges that enable us to improve inclusion

and coexistence at school, as well as promoting pleasure in reading.

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