

# More than Just “Hanging Out”

## Reading Lounges Bridge the Summer Reading Gap

VICTORIA SANCHEZ

When staff at the Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) think of summer reading, we think of children selecting what they want to read, finding books that interest them and elicit feelings of excitement, friendship, or adventure. We want kids to read for fun, just for the pleasure of it and to find reading just as enticing an activity as watching TV or playing on an iPad.

Some children grow up with someone reading to them every day—helping them on the path to becoming lifelong readers. But how does the library make a child a reader if they haven't had someone reading to them since they were a baby, doesn't live in a literacy rich household, and isn't a library user? To turn children into library users, MPL initiated a project called Reading Lounges.

Unfortunately, Milwaukee ranks near the bottom when comparing literacy levels of school-age children in urban cities. Many children in our community are not library users, so we know we have to go to them.

Since 2002, MPL has had an outreach component for summer reading, beginning with delivering the materials necessary to implement a summer reading program to community-based organizations that ran children's summer camps or recreation programs. We left it up to the site staff to implement. As was expected, some did so with gusto; some didn't at all.

Then we had library representatives not only bringing everything needed to implement the program at the site, but the representatives also visited three times over the summer to work directly with the children, to read to them, and encourage them to complete the program. MPL also ran library card drives and



Sharing books that interest students helped them discover new books to love. Photos by Pat Robinson.

encouraged sites to sign up for deposit collections to use over the summer. This definitely saw success, but we wanted to do more.

We talk a lot about how to create readers, and we know that to do so, we need to immerse children in a world of stories and turn them on to the magic of reading. We wanted to create an environment that would model daily reading not only for the children, but also for the sites—to show to them that reading can be a fun, enjoyable part of a summer recreational program.

In his book *Igniting a Passion for Reading: Successful Strategies for Building Lifetime Readers*, educator Steven L. Layne says,

“. . . I'd like to consider what reading aloud has to offer in terms of its contribution to building lifetime readers. In terms of our disengaged readers, those who can read but don't, being read to is one of the most seductive (yes that *is* the word I intend to use) methods of bringing them to books. To reach these kids, we're going to have to impact the way they think about books and the way they feel about books. . . . We need to put them in a situation where being with books is pleasurable. What could be more pleasurable than a great book read aloud by a passionate reader?”<sup>1</sup>



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With this book and the above quote in mind, our staff brainstormed and resolved to intensify our summer reading program outreach. A new project took form.

## A New Model for Summer Reading Outreach

We called the project Bridging the Summer Reading Gap with Reading Lounges—the latter was a suggestion borrowed from Layne that exemplified what we wanted to create. In 2012, we applied for and received a \$29,500 Library Services Technology Act Grant (LSTA). Our proposal centered on increasing the frequency and duration of contact with the sites. We suggested a format for working with site staff to create an environment that was conducive to reading for pleasure, we shared strategies for reading aloud with students, modeled ways to share books and build excitement for reading, exposed children to a wide variety of books, provided time for students to read, connected with the library, and worked with parents to reinforce the importance of reading together at home.

## Reading Lounges

Each lounge was staffed by a certified teacher who was hired to implement the project. Approximately two hundred fifty to three hundred kindergarten through fifth-grade children at three pilot

sites spent forty-five to sixty minutes each day in the Reading Lounges four days a week for six weeks in the summer of 2012. The library representative served as a “reading lounge mentor,” helping children discover *what* they enjoyed reading while they explored their reading interests and increased reading stamina. Site staff were expected to work with our teachers so they could learn and then replicate the concept the following summer. Site staff helped set up the lounges, read with the children, and maintained an atmosphere that was conducive to reading.

Each visit to the reading lounge began with a read-aloud shared by our staff. Read-alouds were chosen based on student interest, current events (such as the Summer Olympics), or site themes. Following the read-aloud, we’d share, via booktalks, some new books that might be of interest to students.

As the project progressed, students began to share their own book recommendations. Students read independently or listened to audiobooks. One of the most popular and effective strategies used in the reading lounges was Reader’s Theater—a great way to build student confidence and fluency. A favorite in the lounges were Mo Willems’s *Elephant and Piggie* books.

Getting books into kids’ hands was essential. Our goal was to “flood” the sites with books so that after the read-aloud, kids could pick a book they wanted to read. We purchased more than two thousand books for the reading lounges. *Fancy Nancy*, *NBA books*, *Dear Dumb Diary*, *Junie B. Jones*, *Wimpy Kid*, *LEGO Ninjago*, and *Big Nate* were among the top picks for our stu-



dents. An additional 1,217 library books were brought into the lounges in response to student surveys. We never wanted to tell children what they had to read. We let them choose.

Creating a place for children to comfortably enjoy a book was important. The environment had to support the activity. The reading lounges included soft seating—a huge hit with most of the students. What could be better than getting comfy in a bean bag chair and curling up with a newly discovered book?

## Reading at Home

One of the project's goals was to encourage parents to develop the habit of reading at home and offer an environment conducive to reading. Students were able to take books home nightly and were asked to record the number of minutes they read alone or with a family member. Reading tip sheets, as well as a weekly newsletter, were sent home, designed to give parents ideas for reading with their children. We also held open houses toward the end of the project as a time for students to show their parents the reading lounge and to share what they were doing and reading.

## Making the Library Connection

Each site group took a field trip to the Central Library. Working with library staff, we developed four activities or stations that

students and site staff would circulate through in small groups to become familiar with the library. At one station they learned how to use the library catalog, locate materials, and check out materials. At another station they enjoyed a read-aloud and booktalk. The third station gave them time to explore the children's room and browse the collection. At the fourth station, they participated in an activity described below that we developed and piloted for these field trips.

## Book Looks

Building on the students' emerging book knowledge and comfort in discussing and promoting books, we designed an activity called Book Speed Dating (useful title when working with teens) or Book Looks (for younger children). The idea was to expose students to a variety of books, give them time to explore them, determine one book they might be interested in reading, and share that book with another student—turning over the booktalk and promotion to the students themselves.

Prior to the visits, library staff selected approximately two hundred age-appropriate books from a variety of genres. The books were set out on tables, grouped by genre, and students had five minutes to look through the books and choose one that they might be interested in reading based on the cover, the summary, knowledge of the author, subject, and their personal interests.



Daily read alouds were one of the favorite parts of the lounges.

The students were then divided into groups of ten or twelve and lined up in two rows facing each other. Each student had one minute to “booktalk” their chosen book to the person across from them. After a minute, the students switched and the other student shared their selection. After each student shared their book, the students rotated and repeated the process with a new partner. This exchange was repeated until each student shared and heard about all of the books in the grouping. The activity ended with the students deciding if, in fact, they wanted to read their chosen book or if perhaps they heard about a book that interested them more.

Our greatest success was the increase in reading stamina and the amount of reading the children accomplished. They read *a lot*. Students reported reading more than thirty seven hundred books total during the project. Research suggests that by reading just four to five books during the summer children will avoid summer reading loss. We feel confident that students who participated in this project started the school year positioned for success.

## Beyond the Pilot

Summer reading outreach is a year-round effort for MPL. The success of the summer program relies heavily on our ability to maintain year-round connections and relationships with our



partner sites. MPL's Out of School Learning Coordinator works to maintain/foster relationships with the more than eighty sites we partner with each summer.

In the past, this has taken the form of indirect services, such as parent/teacher newsletters, library card drives, literature drops, and deposit collections. MPL continues to offer these services, but as an outgrowth of the Reading Lounges. We are working with sites on a six- to eight-week rotation of a modified model called After School Reading Clubs. The Outreach Coordinator visits after-school sites once a week and works with site staff to create a comfortable place to read. She also spends an hour at the site reading with children and provides time for students to read on their own. She brings books based on student interest inventories administered at the first visit. Site staff is expected to be present during the After School Reading Club so they can see the various ways we introduce books and the reading, with the goal of them continuing the club once we are done.

School-age groups who visit the library now participate in Book Looks or Speed Book Dating as a regular part of class visits.

During the 2013 Summer Reading Outreach, we wanted to continue having Reading Lounges at select sites; however, we did not have the funding. So we modified our approach and visited some sites weekly instead of three times over the



Nothing beats sharing a new book with a friend.

course of the program. Weekly visits more closely align with the goals of the Reading Lounges and allow us to see smaller groups of students with activities that are more tailored to their needs.

In 2014, we plan to visit all sites weekly; this past year, we reached nearly six thousand school-age kids through summer reading outreach.

The Reading Lounges were an important step in solidifying our role as literacy leaders in the community. They helped position the library as a resource and partner in assisting students with access to books that enabled them to discover themselves as readers. We

believe we made substantial progress during this pilot project, and students clearly benefitted. The library explored new ways to work with students through outreach and in-house programs. The partner sites benefitted from the project through the resources we supplied and the modeling we provided. ☺

## References

1. Steven L. Layne, *Igniting a Passion for Reading: Successful Strategies for Building Lifetime Readers*. (Portland: Maine: Stenhouse, 2009), 188.