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Real Men Read – A library led reading initiative program

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ABSTRACT


The goal of the Real Men Read initiative was to provide Pre-K-6 students, especially boys, the opportunity to meet male mentors from the William Paterson University community who have a love of reading and learning. Mentors read grade appropriate books to Pre-K-6 classes in northern New Jersey school districts. The initiative was organized by the David and Lorraine Cheng Library and partnered with the university's College of Education to identify and place mentors at nearby schools. The successful initiative brought mentors to different schools and elicited a positive response from all the elementary classes involved.

KEYWORDS

Real Men Read; library outreach; male mentors; library-school partnership; New Jersey

Introduction

The idea for starting the Real Men Read program, a David and Lorraine Cheng Library reading initiative at William Paterson University, resulted from the author's experiences as a public school educator in Pennsylvania in K-12 schools and familiarity with a similar program organized by the United Way of Wyoming Valley. For thirteen years the author worked in the Wilkes-Barre Area School District, whose student body was primarily low income and which had one of the most racially and ethnically diverse student populations in northeastern Pennsylvania. Through his teaching experiences, he observed the daily struggles that students, especially males, experienced with reading as they progressed through elementary school to high school. To address students' deficiencies in reading, the United Way of Wyoming Valley began the Real Men Read program to encourage male students and early readers in grades K-3 as they first learned to read. This program was designed to show students that men value reading and education, to help encourage young boys and all students to increase their efforts in reading, and to generate a further interest in reading and learning.

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History of the Real Men Read program

The idea for the Real Men Read program originally came out of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest school district in the United States with over 600 schools serving 361,000 children (Board of Education of the City of Chicago 2006). CPS's vision is that every student in every neighborhood will be engaged in a rigorous, well-rounded instructional program and will graduate prepared for success in college, career, and life (Chicago Public Schools – CPS Vision 2020). CPS launched the program to inspire students to improve their reading skills and introduce them to men who value education. It worked. Men from diverse career backgrounds including doctors, lawyers, politicians, and clergy volunteered to read (Ponce 2011). The success of the program could be seen in the faces of the students. Nicholson Principal Rodney Hull said, "For many of our kids, this is the first time they've had a male role model reading to them." (Ponce 2011, para. 8) Following CPS's example, New Jersey's Thomas E. Bowe Elementary School which is in Glassboro (southern New Jersey), started its own Real Men Read program in 2007. It has grown to involve mentors from nearby Rowan University (Community Bulletin 2017). Since 2006, the Real Men Read program has been adapted and implemented in school districts and individual schools across the United States.

The setting

The setting for the Real Men Read initiative was schools within the northern New Jersey region. The reason for this setting was that William Paterson University is in this geographic region. Further, the hope is that the program can expand throughout the region, the state of New Jersey, and make its way into the elementary schools and classes of nearby New York City.

In total, the state of New Jersey has 2,516 K-12 schools. Out of those 2,516 schools, 2,000 are elementary schools (New Jersey Department of Education 2019). Participants in the Real Men Read initiative were able to read to classes in ten different elementary schools, including six elementary schools in the Paterson Public Schools, the third largest school district in the state (based on 2015 data) (Largest School Districts in the United States by Enrollment 2016).

As the leader of the Real Men Read initiative, the author first sought support from the Library Dean, Assistant Director of Access Services, and the College of Education Dean and Assistant Dean for this initiative. By establishing a partnership with the College of Education, the author was able to use the Office of Professional Development & School-Community

Partnerships to connect with school districts and elementary schools throughout the northern New Jersey region. This partnership with the College of Education helped in placing all participants of the Real Men Read initiative. A majority of the participants for the initiative came directly from the diverse faculty, staff, and administration of the Cheng Library.

By starting small and reading to classes in ten different schools in the northern New Jersey region, the Real Men Read initiative has the potential to reach more elementary schools in the region and generate interest in the initiative across New Jersey. The goal for the Cheng Library is to grow this reading initiative as well as encourage and support other academic institutions interested in this reading initiative.

Goal of the Real Men initiative

The goal of the Real Men Read initiative was to provide Pre-K-6 students, especially boys, the opportunity to meet male mentors from the William Paterson University community who have a love of reading and learning. The mentors read a grade appropriate book or books to classes of students in grades Pre-K-6 in northern New Jersey school districts. As the mentors read, they engaged the students in the story and shared why they enjoyed reading and the importance of reading for their success in school and throughout their lives. The mentors also shared how students can access books from their school library and from their community public library and how students should commit to reading throughout their lives.

Library outreach

“In today’s higher education setting, libraries are expected to increase their involvement, not only in the teaching, learning, and research happening on campus, but also in the implementation of collaborations and the establishment of partnerships for a stronger presence within the institution, and beyond” (Salamon 2016, 1). Library outreach can take many forms in the region that a university library serves. The Cheng Library embraced the Real Men Read reading initiative as the Library Dean, nine librarians, and one library staff member volunteered to participate in the program’s first year. In addition, the Academic Provost, one College of Education Professor, several university students, and a few high school students from the Paterson Public Schools participated in the program. This initiative enabled the Cheng Library to partner internally with the College of Education and to connect with many school districts, Head Start pre-schools and educators in the northern New Jersey region. The outreach

and impact of the reading initiative was positive and as a result the Cheng Library plans on growing its Real Men Read program in future years.

Literature review

Reading aloud

The focus of the Real Men Read program was to raise awareness about the importance of reading and to engage students in a read aloud activity. “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (Kreber 2018, para. 4). Reading aloud has some beneficial effects. Reading aloud to children exposes them to stories they might miss on their own. Also, it provides a powerful boost to boys’ perceptions of reading (Sullivan 2009). The less boys read over time the more difficult it is for them to enter the world of reading later.

According to Stephen Krashen’s research, hearing stories read aloud has much the same language attainment effect as reading itself (Krashen 2004). The reality is that reading aloud is not a significant part of most children’s lives. A British study found that only fifty-three percent of parents of children up to four years old read daily to their children. For parents of children nine to twelve, that number drops to twenty-one percent (Sullivan 2009). If parents are not reading to their children, then reading aloud to children should be part of the school day. Teachers feel pressured to teach strictly to the curriculum, and many claim they do not have classroom time to read aloud to their students (Sullivan 2009). In *Connecting Boys with Books 2*, Sullivan (2009) suggests the need to read to boys during non-classroom, non-curriculum times such as before school, during lunch, or after school. The more boys are read to, the greater the impact and the more interest they will have in learning.

Why male readers/mentors?

In America today, families look different than they have in the past. Children are often growing up without the structure and support of a two-parent household. This has led to a strain on parenting and less time being spent on a child’s academic needs and more time spent serving children’s basic needs. Overall, about one in five children (21 percent) are living with a single mother, up from 12 percent in 1968. A total of 15 million children are being raised in a single mother environment. That trend has been accompanied by a drop in the share of children living with two married parents, down from 85 percent in 1968 to 65 percent. Some 3 percent of children are instead living with grandparents, other family members, or

living in foster care according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data (Livingston 2018).

In American schools today, the Pre-K-12 student population that needs the greatest support are Black and Latino males (Noguera 2012). The goal of the Real Men Read initiative was to address male students, especially those that were considered to be the greatest “at-risk.” On all the indicators of academic achievement, educational attainment, and school success, Black and Latino males are noticeably distinguished from other segments of the American population by their consistent clustering at the bottom (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2010). With few exceptions, these patterns exist in urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the United States. Nationally, Black and Latino males are more likely than any other group to be suspended and expelled from school (Edley and Ruiz-de-Velasco 2010). In most American cities, dropout rates for Black and Latino males are well above 50%, and they are less likely to enroll or graduate from college than any other group (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2010).

In New Jersey, there are a total of 1,400,069 students in K-12 education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD) 2019). Of that number, 409,096 are Hispanic and 215,879 are African-American equaling 45 percent of the New Jersey K-12 student population. To encourage and increase the level of academic achievement, educational attainment, and school success for Black and Latino males, schools and communities need to come up with innovative ways to support these students and encourage their success throughout their formative education years. It is the author’s perspective that the Real Men Read reading initiative is one innovative way to address the need for male readers and mentors in America’s Pre-K-12 schools to help all male students, especially Black and Latino males.

In American schools today, 75 percent of the teacher workforce is female while the Pre-K-12 student population is nearly evenly split by gender (Hansen and Quintero 2018). The ratio of teacher gender may be contributing to the growing gap that favors females in college graduation rates. By 2010, women received 57 percent of all bachelor’s degrees and comprised 57 percent of all college students in the United States (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). This statistic alone can lead one to conclude that male students need more academic support during their Pre-K-12 years, more academic support while in college, and more positive influences and role models in their lives. The difference in gender representation is nearly as large as the gap in race and ethnicity. The gap in race and ethnicity (roughly 80 percent of the teaching workforce are white teachers for a student body that is roughly 50 percent white) and lack of diversity in the

teaching force is another factor in education today (Hansen and Quintero 2018). There is a real need for community mentors and positive male role models in the lives of male students across America. The lack of diversity in the teaching force may also be a factor in why the dropout rate is so high and college enrollment low in Black and Hispanic student populations.

Because fewer men are in the teaching profession, others may be less inclined to view it as a desirable option. “It will be less and less in their head that this is an occupation for males,” said Richard M. Ingersoll, a professor of education and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania who has analyzed education department data on the demographics of teaching (Rich 2014, para. 11). Perhaps the central reason teaching remains a predominantly female profession is because teachers’ pay has been stagnant since 1970 in inflation-adjusted terms. As of 2014, the median pay for an elementary teacher was \$40,000 (Rich 2014). Despite the low pay, teaching is the largest occupation in the United States today. The teaching force has ballooned in size over time. The Census Bureau indicates that Pre-K-12 teachers form the largest occupational group in the nation, and it is growing even larger (Ingersoll, Merrill, and Stuckey 2014). With so many career opportunities in the education field, more needs to be done to recruit male teachers, especially male minority teachers, all of whom will have the opportunity to teach, inspire, mentor, and build a better future for their Pre-K-12 students, especially their male students.

Male mentoring program for Black and Latino males

Educators, scholars, and community leaders need to continue to look for ways to mentor and support Black and Latino men throughout their K-12 education years to help them achieve academic and personal success. Male mentorship has the potential to positively impact the lives of the most at-risk K-12 student populations—that of Black and Hispanic males. A study by Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) highlights the experiences and struggles of Black and Latino male students between the ages of 16 and 20 that were either “overaged” or “under credited” in terms of their high school studies (980). The focus of the study was to shift the discussion from one focused on their failures to one that focused on their capabilities for social and academic success. Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) believe that “spaces such as mentoring programs that foster culturally relevant care (CRC) can equip Black and Latino males with the community and resources necessary to attain their academic, social, emotional, and political goals” (995).

Based on the author's own experiences working in an urban school district in Pennsylvania as a public school educator, many urban high schools create a school environment made up of daily routines, structured classroom/school rules, and strict student discipline. No time or resources are committed to mentoring students or building a sense of mutual trust between the teacher and student. Instead, teachers focus on teaching the school district curriculum to their students and fail to address the many other needs of their at-risk student populations. The study by Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) mentions the necessity of holding high expectations for Black and Latino male students as well as providing additional times and spaces for them to work toward meeting their own goals. The additional times and spaces could be in the form of school based or community-based mentoring programs and identifying males of color that could serve as positive role models for the greatest at-risk Black and Latino male high school student populations.

Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) recognize the potential and importance of using culture as a means for learning and transformation for at-risk Black and Latino male student populations. The researchers shared some of the individual experiences of at-risk Black and Latino males as well as that of the mentors. The findings from the student and mentor transcripts "indicated several ways in which a culturally relevant caring atmosphere contributed to how the mentor and participants' viewed themselves, each other, their educational experiences, and hopes for their lives and communities" (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson 2016, 989). In conclusion, the research has indicated the positive outcomes of male mentorship for at-risk Black and Latino male teenage student populations as well as the real need for schools and communities to implement their own male mentorship programs for the greatest at-risk student populations.

Do we need more male primary teachers? A look at a United Kingdom (UK) case study

In recent years, primary teaching educational preparation programs across the United Kingdom (UK) have been under pressure from the central government, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), and the media to recruit more male students to their courses with the end goal of increasing the proportion of males in the primary teaching workforce (de Salis et al. 2019). British researchers de Salis et al. (2019) cited the reason for this is that the number of male teachers/role models in primary schools has been the solution to boys' underachievement, especially in reading and writing. The researchers sought to

determine the beliefs of the future primary school workforce as to whether more male teachers/role models were needed in the primary workforce.

“The main aims of the study as outlined by the researchers were to discover whether teacher trainees felt that pupils needed positive role models, what they considered to be the importance of gender in such role models, and what qualities were more generally required in teachers” (de Salis et al. 2019, 2) More broadly, at the national level in the UK, a debate is needed about what kind of workforce is needed in primary schools and what qualities and attitudes are required in the teaching workforce (de Salis et al. 2019).

This study ultimately proved that teacher gender wasn’t the main predictor of academic success for boys in their primary grades of schooling in the UK. Having more male teachers/mentors will not necessarily lead to higher scores for boys in the areas of reading and writing as suggested by the UK central government, Ofsted and the media. Although the results of this study did not point to the need for more male teachers in the UK teacher workforce, it does bring to light the need for mentoring of young boys in the UK. Male mentoring and male mentoring programs could possibly help to support boys’ academic efforts in the primary grades in the UK. More research and studies will have to be done in the areas of male mentoring, and male mentoring programs in the UK and countries around the world. This study also reinforces the need for additional research on male teachers. One specific question that research studies could address is whether more male teachers are needed in the United States educational system today, particularly at the preschool/primary grade levels (Pre-K-5) and if there would be any impact on student achievement.

Collaboration

The Real Men Read initiative at William Paterson University was an innovative way to connect young boys in many urban schools in northern New Jersey. The importance of reading was emphasized through the in-class readings completed by an academic provost, academic library dean, nine librarians, one library staff member, one education professor, several university students and even a few high school students from the Paterson Public Schools. Through an internal partnership with the College of Education’s Office of Professional Development & School-Community Partnerships, the Cheng Library was able to obtain school placements through the Professional Development School (PDS) Network. The PDS Network is a partnership between the College of Education and 60+ participating schools in northern New Jersey that focuses on the sharing of research, resources, and innovative practices to enhance the educational

practices of educators (Office of Professional Development & School Community Partnerships 2020; William Paterson University, College of Education 2020).

The PDS Network connected the initial Real Men Read participants with ten schools in the PDS network. Nancy Norris-Bauer, Director of the Office of Professional Development & School-Community Partnerships, was supportive of the reading initiative when the idea was first pitched in October 2019. The Real Men Read initiative is a prime example of an inter-campus partnership between an academic library and the College of Education that extended into a university-regional partnership connecting William Paterson University with several elementary schools/school districts in the northern New Jersey region. With the university adopting key performance indicators, this collaboration with the College of Education helped the Cheng Library exceed a stated objective of doing outreach to ten area schools.

The kickoff for the Real Men Read initiative was during Read Across America week, March 2–6, 2020. Since this was the first year of this program, the focus of recruitment efforts was on the faculty and staff of the Cheng Library and the College of Education. The goal in future years will be to expand recruitment efforts university wide and to involve others from the local communities in northern New Jersey such as firefighters, police officers, businessmen, lawyers, politicians, and others.

Reflections of ‘Real Men Read’ participants

As the saying goes, leaders should lead by example. As the leader of the Real Men Read initiative, the author read to three second grade classes at Paterson School #9 in the Paterson Public Schools, met with all second-grade teachers and all of the school administrators to talk about the Real Men Read initiative, and had an overall positive experience. The following week the author read to several Head Start preschool classes at the Center for Family Resources in Ringwood, Pompton Lakes, and Wayne. These students really enjoyed the interactive experience of being read to. At Pompton Lakes, the author read a book in English and a library coworker read the same book in Spanish, thus creating a unique reading experience for the students, several of whom were ESL students. Judy Herman, Director at the Center for Family Resources – Pompton Lakes, expressed that this was a wonderful and much needed program as very few dads or males volunteer to read books to the classes of preschool students.

In addition to the author’s own efforts to recruit individuals to be a part of this program, David Fuentes, a professor of elementary and early childhood education at William Paterson University, was able to recruit three

male high school students, who wanted to be future teachers, from the S.E.T. Academy at the J.F.K. Educational Complex in Paterson, New Jersey to read to elementary students at Paterson School #28. Paterson Public Schools Superintendent Eileen Shafer lauded the program by saying that “seeing older male students read aloud before a class can make a strong impression on younger boys, especially those who may not have a male role model at home. We are fortunate to have young men aspiring to be teachers willing to read to younger students today, and to have a strong partnership with William Paterson University to help facilitate opportunities to promote literacy in our young people” (Jennings 2020). Nancy Castro, the principal of Paterson School #28, embraced the Real Men Read initiative, had Real Men Read t-shirts printed, and had every male in the school including the custodians reading to classes the day after Professor Fuentes and his high school students visited.

William Paterson University Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Joshua Powers, also took part in the Real Men Read initiative, visiting three classrooms at Paterson School #29. “The children were outstanding and a joy to engage,” Powers said. “The book I read, *What Do You Do with a Problem?*, enabled powerful conversation at key moments,” he continued. “This reminds me why schools and their support network are so important” (Daniels 2020). Schools truly do provide a safe environment for students to learn and achieve success throughout the Pre-K-12 formative years.

Library Dean Edward Owusu-Ansah read to a class of 2nd grade students as part of the Real Men Read initiative at Dr. Hani Awadallah School in the Paterson Public Schools and talked with two classes of junior high school students about careers in academia. He found the experience to be both “influential and rewarding” for the students that he interacted with and mentored.

Librarian and Co-Coordinator of User Education, Tony Joachim, shared his experience reading for Read Across America: Real Men Read and emphasized that “it was a great experience, from start to finish.” Joachim read at the Clifton Early Learner Academy, a pre-school housed in a building that was originally planned as a high school. He described his experience as follows: “Everyone was seated and ready, with a stuffed animal that they were excited to show me.” This Real Men Read participant read *Lola at the Library*, and the students were excited to talk about their own visits to the library and the books they knew. Because they were so excited, the participant was happy to read another book that he had brought titled, *I Went Walking*. The students seemed to be more familiar with this one but were just as excited to guess what the animals on the next page might be.

The participant found the experience to be both rewarding professionally and personally.

Given the experiences of just a few participants, the Real Men Read reading initiative in its first year at William Paterson University was a success. There is room to grow the program and involve others from William Paterson University and the northern New Jersey region.

Assessment and future directions

Assessment of the Real Men Read initiative in its first year was informal. Based on individual teacher and principal feedback at the ten schools, the initiative proved to be successful. In future years, the author plans to have a more formal way of assessing participants' feedback using a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire will assist the author in making improvements in the initiative in the years ahead. Overall, Real Men Read served as an example of an inter-campus partnership addressing the need for male mentorship and reading support at the elementary school level. It provided a way for the William Paterson University community to engage in service to the schools in the northern New Jersey region.

Future plans for this program include the expansion of the Real Men Read initiative at more schools in the PDS network as well as moving the Real Men Read initiative online to have participants read to classes of students while being livestreamed through Google Meets or Zoom. In addition, to increase the awareness of this worthwhile program as well as the number of participants in the Real Men Read initiative, it is important to connect with public librarians and school librarians in the northern New Jersey region. It is the author's goal to share his research, early success with this initiative, and expand his recruitment efforts by collaborating with public librarians and school librarians in northern New Jersey on this worthwhile program in the years ahead.

How to build a Real Men Read reading initiative

While different libraries, school districts, and community organizations may encounter different challenges or opportunities in attempting to partner with other groups internally or externally for largescale planning and implementation, there are several basic steps to take when building a Real Men Read reading initiative.

- Bring your idea to the leaders first. As a faculty member, librarian, educator, or concerned member of the community, always bring your idea for starting a new, innovative program to the leader(s) of your

organization or community first. In presenting the need for a Real Men Read initiative, show the leaders of your school district, school, library, community, or organization that studies demonstrate the involvement of a father or positive male role model in the lives of children directly promotes a child's physical well-being; competency for relating with others; greater ability to take initiative; and evidence of self-control (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006).

- Look to establish or use established partnerships. If you would like to start your own Real Men Read reading initiative in your region or local community, you can look to partner with a local academic library, public library, nonprofit organization such as the United Way, sponsoring businesses, and neighboring school districts. By partnering with other organizations, the program will have a greater impact on a region, school district, school, or the community at large.
- Call for male mentors/participants. Seek out and ask for male volunteers from academia, the local police department, the local fire department, municipal government, state government, and community businesses by contacting them in-person, through phone, email, a letter, even connecting with organizations through social media. The more people involved in your Real Men Read reading initiative the greater the impact will be.

Implications

The Real Men Read initiative has the potential to help to mentor America's children and encourage their interest in reading and learning. It can bring a male presence in the lives of children and positively influence their lives. Male mentorship has the potential to have an impact on students' academic achievement, emotional well-being, and the student discipline within a school.

The Real Men Read initiative can encourage students to be lifelong readers. The undeniable fact is that more readers, critical thinkers, and problem solvers in American society today are needed to meet the needs of 21st century life. Journalist Monica Kreber said the fact she found most daunting in American society today was that "studies show that kids will watch more television by the age of five than the amount of time they will spend with their dads until 18" (Kreber 2018, para. 8). Too often, she said, "we create school-time readers instead of lifetime readers. So, by the 12th grade, only 19 percent of students read for pleasure" (Kreber 2018, para. 9). Educators, parents, and communities need to encourage students Pre-K-12 to want to read and embrace reading for life, not just for school. If the percentage of students who read for pleasure by the 12th grade would increase, then we would have a more educated society in America. More students would want to explore higher education, more students would be

inquisitive learners, and more students when they become parents later in life would read to their children and grandchildren. In conclusion, implementing new reading initiatives such as the Real Men Read reading initiative and increasing the level of male mentoring in our schools improves male students academic success while in school, and will increase their chances for a lifetime of success.

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