

The Star Method: Will They Do It?

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Then it occurred to me: Maybe the only authority on 'good books' for kids is a kid. Should we (educators) stand aside and let children recommend books to each other?"

(Adriance 2010).

A number of studies have confirmed the impact of peer culture when it comes to recommending books for pleasure reading (Rinehart, Gerlach, Wisell, and Walker, 1998; Hopper, 2003; Howard, 2008; Mansor, Ransul, Rauf and Koh 2013; Jones, 2015; Scholastic, 2017). In fact, some of the following studies include empirical data:

- Jones (2015), states that 60 per cent of 76 middle-school English readers in Singapore identified friends as the main source of book recommendations.
- According to Howard (2008), 40 per cent of “avid” and “occasional” readers were “social readers”, who relied a great deal on friends for reading recommendations.
- As per the Scholastic survey of 2017 (Scholastic, 2017), over 1000 young readers in the United States between the ages 6 to 17 were asked to answer the following question: “From which of the following do you get the best ideas about books to read from?” Options included parents, siblings, librarians, book fairs, stores and websites, and friends. The option “Friends” was a popular choice among all ages, and at just under 20 per cent, it was also the most frequently chosen option in the age group of 12-14 years.

However, in a questionnaire given by Hopper (2005), to 11 to 14 year olds in the UK, only 4

per cent (17 out of 437) mentioned word of mouth by peers, when asked what made them choose the book they were reading at the time. Nevertheless, as indicated above, young readers respect the recommendations made by their peers.

A possible objection to encouraging peer input for book selection is the concern that children will only recommend low quality reading material to each other, such as comic books and series books. However, research on first language acquirers strongly suggests that these objections are unwarranted. Krashen and Ujiie (2005) assert that: (1) Light reading promotes literacy in general, (2) Light reading leads to heavier reading, i.e. it serves as a conduit for heavier reading and (3) Young readers have little interest in books that adults think of as “quality” literature.

Even if peer recommended reading were problematic, critics will be relieved to learn that as readers make progress, their interest in reading expands, and they gradually choose more and more challenging reading matter (LaBrant, 1958; Schoonover, 1938; Krashen, Lee and Lao, 2017).

High school librarian Laduska Adriance (2010), proposed a unique way of encouraging peer recommendation—the “Star Method”. Students were asked to draw a star or place a star-shaped sticker on the inside corner of the library books they liked. The idea was that with time, popular books would accumulate stars. Adriance further

recommended that a special display of “starred” books be created in a place that was easily visible to the students entering the library. She reported great interest in this display among her students. This increased the visibility of popular books—not books recommended by Goodreads, or prize-winning books, or books recommended by teachers or librarians, but books that fellow students had enjoyed.

Given the challenge and the importance of supporting the diverse preferences of middle school readers, we wanted to explore a way to highlight the importance of an informal culture of peer recommendation. This is the first of several reports.

In this paper we will focus on the initial reactions of 5th and 6th grade students to the Star Method. We will also report their reaction to the book displays of the starred books, and lastly the impact of this method on their literacy development.

We intend to report our results step by step, as we feel that this method has tremendous potential, is easily implementable and is zero cost.

Method

We implemented the Star Method in a South Korean elementary school in Seoul, for students of English as a foreign language who had had several years of exposure to English in school. The librarian introduced students in grades 5 and 6 to this concept during English library time across two sessions held one week apart to familiarize students with the process.

- In the first session, the Star Method was explained to students.
 - Students were given fifteen minutes to explore the library and locate a book they had read and enjoyed and would recommend to other students. The librarian specifically suggested that

students seek out old books they had enjoyed in previous years at school.

- They were given a sticker and asked to place it on the inside front cover of the book. It was made clear to the students that “starring” a book was optional, and that all placement of stars was anonymous.
- In the second session (a week later), students were reminded of the guidelines of the Star Method.
 - The librarian showed the students where they could find the stickers. The stickers had been placed in plastic containers next to the book return box and inside the library in areas that receive the most student traffic, where students often sit and read.
 - Students were reminded that they should only “star” books they really enjoyed reading, books they had finished, and would recommend to peers.

Two faculty observers unobtrusively watched the students do the activity and noted their reactions.

Results

Over two weeks, a total of six classes in grades 5 and 6 (78 fifth graders and 62 sixth graders) were introduced to the Star Method. In the first session, every student was given one star to ensure that each student was given at least one opportunity to “star” a book they loved; more stars were also made available to them. We emphasized once again to the students that it was not compulsory to “star” a book. A total of 202 stars were given out to the students over two weeks. From our observations, we know that many of the stickers ended up in the books. In fact, across all fifth and sixth grade classes, we only confirmed one unused star after classes

ended. According to our observations, nearly every student put at least one star into a book.

During the two weeks, we noticed signs of immediate engagement with the Star Method. In the first fifteen minutes of the first session itself, when students were instructed to think about the titles they had enjoyed and would recommend to a friend, one sixth grader approached our librarian to ask for more stickers.

They gravitated toward these books, and commented about the number of stars within the book. One group of fifth graders dived into the Pokémon comics, surprised by how most of the issues had accumulated 8-10 stars within just two or three days of the introduction of the star method. In fact, this appeared to be the case throughout the week across the entire comic book section, with many comics getting ten or more stickers.

We also noticed a recurring habit for students to search for favorite books in groups of two or three. They would hunt these books in groups, put stickers in them and then pass them to their peers. This was a powerful indicator that stickers support and perhaps even promote social reading.

Students also sought out specific titles to place their stars. One fifth grader went looking for a friend of hers who was reading a book she had recommended. She promptly placed a star on the inside cover of the book. Another sixth grader approached the librarian to ask about *A View from Saturday*. She was disappointed when she was informed that it had been checked out, as she was unable to “star” the book. Towards the end of the library class, a couple of excited sixth graders asked the librarian for more stickers, hoping to mark a few more titles they had enjoyed.

Throughout the two weeks, across both fifth and sixth grades, there were always a number of students who required some clarification on the process. At one point, we saw two or three students in each class pick up interesting books, put stars on the inside cover, and then proceed to read the books. This suggests that at least a few students may have placed stars in books they thought would be interesting without reading them; they had not quite understood the directions. Fortunately, the librarian and teacher were readily available to clarify that they should stick the stickers only in books that they had read and enjoyed. However, very few students (less than 10 per cent of students in each class) needed this clarification.

In the second week, students came to the library with various questions and concerns. One fifth grader asked whether he could stick the stickers into books for which he had seen the movie adaptation. This prompted a productive student-led discussion on the which types of books were appropriate to put stickers in. Students came to their own conclusions: it was important to have read a book fully before “starring” it.

As in the previous week, students began their free reading time by scouring the library for starred books and books they wished to read. We heard a number of discussions around the huge number of stars already placed in books. Another fifth grader noted excitedly that there were fifteen stickers in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and then promptly sat down to read the book.

Our next step will be, as suggested by Adriance, to set up a book display in the middle of the library to highlight the books that have received a large number of stars and observe how the students react to them. We intend to follow this with another suggestion from Adriance, that of keeping track of how many “starred” books are taken out of the library.

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