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## Parent perspectives on inclusive bookclubs

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## Parent perspectives on inclusive bookclubs

### Abstract

An inclusive book club was created to examine the effectiveness of incorporating literacy enhancing techniques and art to aid comprehension. This study focused on the parent perspective of their child participating in the book club and how it affected their child's life at home. Two parents were interviewed after their child participated in a 3-month book club. The significance of this study is to show educators and families the benefits of having their children participate in inclusive environments. The study also explored how inclusive book clubs can benefit students with different comprehension levels and how families viewed the outcome of participating in a book club. Results indicated that both families saw an increase in confidence when reading books and the ability to choose new types of genres to read. Additional results and clinical implementations are discussed.

PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE BOOK CLUBS

A Research Report

Submitted

In partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Amy Bucciferro

University of Northern Iowa

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## **Abstract**

An inclusive book club was created to examine the effectiveness of incorporating literacy enhancing techniques and art to aid comprehension. This study focused on the parent perspective of their child participating in the book club and how it affected their child's life at home. Two parents were interviewed after their child participated in a 3-month book club. The significance of this study is to show educators and families the benefits of having their children participate in inclusive environments. The study also explored how inclusive book clubs can benefit students with different comprehension levels and how families viewed the outcome of participating in a book club. Results indicated that both families saw an increase in confidence when reading books and the ability to choose new types of genres to read. Additional results and clinical implementations are discussed.

### **Introduction**

Previous research has been conducted to see if inclusive book clubs are an effective way to teach children literacy skills and improve social skills as reported by parents (Goatly, 1997, Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Book clubs, defined as a group of people who meet regularly to discuss books they are reading (Irons-Georges & Berman, 2009) are commonly found in every community and are typically made up of general education students or adults.

Every student, with or without a disability, has the right to be a part of a group with his or her peers. There are not many book clubs that include children with disabilities and even fewer that are inclusive. Inclusion refers to the concept that students with disabilities, regardless of the nature and extent of their disability, should be educated with age-appropriate peers in regular classrooms (with needed supplementary aids and services) in the neighborhood school (Gartner & Lipsky, 2002) or extracurricular activities.

For students with disabilities, a book club environment could facilitate therapeutic strategies similar to group therapy. For example, group therapy provides a community of commonality and solidarity where all members have an equal voice and responses are valued (Lasry, 2010). Gazeas (2012) states that by including typically developing peers in a group with non-typically developing peers, a safe, supportive, and naturalistic environment for relationships can be created. In addition to building relationships, book clubs can help children learn how to have focused conversations around themes, learn about different perspectives, and communicate their perspectives appropriately (Raphael & McMahon, 1994).

## Literature Review

### Inclusion Law

Inclusion law was first established in 1975 when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed (Causton, 2015). This act has since been renamed IDEA- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA supports free, appropriate public education to all students in the least restrictive environment and the ability for parents to have a say in their child's education. For most students, the least restrictive environment is in a classroom or group with age appropriate peers and learning materials. Materials and assignments might be modified and there could be extra adult help in the classroom, but the students are still participating in each activity.

The IDEA act states the following about what inclusion is and how inclusion should be used in the schools:

That to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (S. Res. 101-476, 1990)

The IDEA act states what should be done in a school setting, but does not include any information about community activities and how they should be run. In the community, the American's with Disability Act (ADA) should be followed to make sure everyone is included. ADA was passed by congress in 1990 and is the nation's first law that addresses the needs of

people with disabilities, prohibiting discrimination in employment, public services, public accommodations, and telecommunications. This law creates an open invitation for all people to participate in community activities and events, including book clubs.

### **Benefits to Inclusion**

Benefits of inclusion differs between students. Fruth (2015) discussed his findings that students with disabilities performed better in inclusive environments than in the segregated environment such as a self-contained classroom. Fruth also said, it is important for these peer interactions to occur because it allows the students to learn more about working together and sometimes it is easier to understand a peer's explanation of a topic than it is to understand an adult's perspective. Finke (2009) said the students often work together in groups. She wrote, "Kid thinking and speaking at times can be clearer to the kids than when said by an adult. Other peers can help the child understand what they are learning about." When a child is given the role to help others learn, their self-confidence grows. The confidence that students gain while learning in an inclusive environment promotes the growth of social skills that can then be transferred to activities outside the school setting (Kluth, 2003).

Inclusive educational settings are required by the law and have many character building and learning benefits. Students with disabilities, peers, and educators gain valuable experience from being educated in inclusive classrooms. Students learn to be leaders and peers can learn from each other. Being a part of an inclusive group builds understanding of people that are different than you and can help people learn to accept others.

### **The Family's Role**

The family's role is important in a child's life. A family is a group of people that spends the most time with a child throughout their life. They learn all about how the child thinks, acts, and the reasoning behind those actions, but most of all, the family is important for the success of a child in school. According to Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull (1995) students with disabilities rely on the support of their families to help them make decisions through school and to help them transition to the working world.

A contributing factor to the success of inclusive education is communication between the professionals and the families of the students. Kluth (2003) discussed how important it is to learn everything you can from the families of the students you are teaching, because they know their children best and are able to give advice on how to approach situations with their children. As Kluth (2003) stated, “[the family] can provide more rich and detailed information about a student than any professional we can ask or any report we can read” (p. 58). The information provided by families gives professionals a glimpse of how families have made it through difficult situations and how professionals can guide their practice to duplicate the behavior management the child has already learned. Families may be able to tell professionals what motivates their child and how to achieve the best results if you want their attention. Knowing what motivates a child can drastically improve the results of a treatment session or meeting you are involved in and the results of the meeting do not just affect professionals, but the kids themselves.

If families are ignored, dismissed, or otherwise prevented from participating in the education of their child, the student's program will suffer – skills and knowledge gained in the therapy sessions may not be reinforced in the home; any competencies the child demonstrates in

the home will not be practiced and perhaps even seen, in the session; and new learning inspired by the synergy of a home-school partnership will never be realized (Kluth, 2003, p. 58).

Kluth (2003) shared a story from a mother, Arlene M. Smerdon, about how her daughter was able to get involved in extracurricular activities due to the growth that occurred because of inclusive education.

Inclusion has been ongoing and authentic in the case of my daughter's education.

Credit goes to the staff in her inclusive environment, as independence has always been an important goal. To that end, many learning opportunities have been afforded to

Chelsea and peers have been drawn in to support her in those situations. One of the best outcomes has been her social growth and learning. She has not only participated in a

high school drama class but, with the encouragement of her drama teacher and

classmates, she auditioned for and performed a dramatic interpretation of Lewis

Carroll's "Jabberwocky" in the school talent showcase. I was initially worried about the

after-school rehearsals. Who would supervise? "The staff couldn't possibly be asked to stay after school on their own time, could they?" As it turns out my worries were

unnecessary, as staff and students had already taken all of these factors into

consideration and the event went off without a hitch. This positive exposure led to

many more peer contacts in the days after the event. (Kluth, 2003, p. 61)

By having classmates and teachers that are encouraging and understanding, Chelsea was able

to learn social skills and gain the confidence needed to participate in the school's drama

performances. Without the help of inclusive education, Chelsea might not have been able to gain

enough social skills to be successful in class and later on in the real world. Inclusive education

gave Chelsea the ability to learn along with their peers and the chance to succeed in the least restrictive environment.

Working with families will benefit the therapy sessions and individual students in many ways, but educators have to keep in mind that not communicating with families can be detrimental to the education of their students.

### **Book Clubs**

Book clubs are defined as small groups of people who meet together to discuss the books, stories, or poems that they all have read (Danials, 2002). Book clubs provide multiple opportunities for people to learn from other people. They also help children synthesize information, have conversations focused around important themes, represent ideas in writing, and learn about different perspectives (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Book clubs allow participants to talk about their individual findings within a text and learn about others perspectives (Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995). Raphael and McMahon (1994) said that book clubs are a good way for students to learn by observing others in the group. Students can learn appropriate social skills, find other connections to the text, or provide insight to an unknown passage. According to Finke, McNaughton, and Drager (2009), when students' work together in groups it promotes teamwork and inclusion.

The book club environment can facilitate therapeutic strategies within a group setting. Group therapies, or group meetings, can provide a community of commonality and solidarity where all members all have equal say and all response are valued. (Lasry, 2010). Gazeas (2012) states that by including typically developing and non-typically developing peers in group therapy, a safe, supportive, and naturalistic environment for relationships to be created. In

addition, book clubs can help children synthesize information, have conversations focused around important themes, represent ideas in writing, and learn about different perspectives (Raphael & McMahon, 1994).

Book clubs are a place to help children improve their reading comprehension. Successful methods for improving reading comprehension in typically developing children include connecting the story with prior knowledge, identifying the main idea, asking questions, creating mental images, making inferences, retelling the story, using repair strategies, participating in cooperative learning, taking part in multiple strategy instruction, and utilizing graphic organizers (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; National Reading Panel, 2000). A book club has the potential to be a natural cooperative learning group. By definition, cooperative learning occurs when students come together, discuss what they have read, and teach each other reading comprehension strategies. (John, 2006; Littlejohn, 2011; McLellan, 2012; National Reading Panel, 2000; O'Donnell-Allen, 2006).

### **Literature Circles**

Literature Circles are similar to book clubs, but are organized within the school curriculum. Literature Circles encourage dynamic involvement, maximum participation and social interaction, which can allow for better understanding of classroom literature (Anderson & Corbett 2008). Some preliminary studies have been done with introducing students with learning disabilities to literature circles. According to Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom (2002), with specific instruction, including each student having a job and a semester to practice, and scaffolding in place, literature circles provided the extra support students needed to increase their understanding of the text and further promote their abilities to participate in groups.

**Disabilities**

According to the law, a disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more life activities of an individual (42 U.S.C. § 12102). Life activities include, but are not limited to, learning, caring for oneself, walking, standing, hearing and communicating. Down syndrome, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Sensory Processing disorder limits different life activities for each individual.

Down syndrome is a chromosomal disease that is associated with a mild to moderate intellectual delay and low muscle tone (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2017). Down syndrome is found to co-occur with difficulties with speech and language, behavior, attention to tasks and cognitive abilities.

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurological development disorder that affects a person's ability to focus and keep attention to tasks. According to CHADD (2017), ADHD is inappropriate developmentally levels of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity.

Sensory Processing disorder (SPD) is when neurological sensory signals in the brain are not being detected or are not connecting in the way they were meant to be (STAR Institute for Sensory Processing Disorders, 2017). SPD makes it difficult to perform everyday tasks because people are not able to process information coming into their brain and react appropriately.

It is important to understand the different types of disabilities in order to best support the individuals in their learning and life activities. By learning about the characteristics of each disability, adults are able to make modification to materials or support the individual to maximize their learning.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research is to learn about the parent perspectives and how the book club affected their child's life at home. The following research questions guided this study "how has their child's social skills changed through the book club", "have the parents noticed any changes in their reading habits" and "how satisfied are the parents with an inclusive book club". The interviews were then compared and analyzed to note the changes seen in their children.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The two participants in the inclusive book club were Mary, a 10-year-old female, with a diagnosis of down syndrome and Ethan, a 9.5- year-old male with a diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity and sensory integration disorder.

To maximize participation in the book club, participants were required to be able to express themselves either verbally or through the use of a device, and be reading near grade level. Participants were recruited via emails advertisements from area speech-language pathologists, inclusive activity directors, a list-serve and a posting on a closed social media site.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected both before and after the book club sessions. The book club was held for eight, seventy-five minute sessions at the local university library.

Interviews were conducted with the parents of the children who participated in the book club both before and after the book club. All participants signed a release form before any questions were asked or testing was done. Parents were given a questionnaire (Appendix A) to fill out before the book club started about their child's age, current grade level, diagnosis (or non-diagnoses), current and previous experiences with book clubs and book club expectations. The parents then did an in-person interview after the book club was completed and transcriptions were created. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants in the study. The interview questions were pre-written and are attached in Appendix B.

After the book club was complete, the parents were given a post interview. The interviews were analyzed by comparing the transcripts to note similarities and differences between the two interviews. Next, the interviews were searched for answers to the research

questions. Information pertaining to the research questions was found in both the interviews and the questionnaires that were filled out before the interview took place.

### **Data Analysis**

Research for this paper was qualitative and consisted of a review of literature and personal interviews after the book club was completed. All aspects of the study were approved by the internal review board, including all interview questions and questionnaires given. The overall book club focused on giving instruction on reading/listening comprehension strategies, providing tools for collaborative learning, and teaching new topics. The participants were also given the opportunity to complete an art project corresponding to the story being read each week to see if art increased social interactions surrounding the text. The main topic of research that will be discussed focuses the parents' perspective of the impact of the inclusive book club.

## Results

Results will be shared through a case study approach to describe the participants based on the information given by their parents during the surveys and interviews. Information will also be included that was observed during the book club sessions

### Participant 1: Mary

Mary was a 10-year-old female enrolled in third grade, who had a diagnosis of Down syndrome. She loved to read books that she could relate to, like *Sid the Dinosaur* and *Duck Undercover*. Mary's was able to read most third grade texts, but had difficulty with comprehension. She could comprehend texts between a first and second grade level. Mary had never been a part of a book club before and her mother, Ann, hoped that she would participate, learn about peer interactions, and increase her comprehension.

Ann's initial ideas about the book club was to read and discuss books and use different materials to help explain the books read. She was pleased that her initial ideas were correct and was impressed with all of the interactive activities that the group came up with. Ann believed that there were many positive outcomes of participating in the book club. She said it enhanced Mary's love and understanding of reading, along with enhancing her social skills. A disadvantage that Ann had with the book club setting was that the reading material was a little bit too difficult for Mary to fully understand, especially the graphic novel.

Ann said that Mary's social skills changed during the book club by allowing her to grow in her confidence of reading and adding to the variety books that she likes to read. Mary talked about the book club often at home and enjoyed writing stories about it at school. Ann stated that Mary would definitely participate again if a book club was held and that she was overall satisfied

with the experience. The only recommendation that Ann had, was for the reading requirement be changed and that next time she hoped that more people would want to attend.

Overall, Mary demonstrated difficulty with social and emotional responsiveness to the other peer and to the books. Mary also struggled with maintaining a topic during conversations due to difficulty understanding and interpreting the stories that she read and had difficulty interpreting the nonverbal and social cues from peers at each meeting.

### **Participant 2: Ethan**

Ethan was a 9.5- year-old male enrolled in third grade, who had attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and sensory processing issues. He was able to read between a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level and enjoyed reading science and nonfiction books, especially graphic novels. Ethan had not been a part of a book club before and his mother, Fay, hoped that it will help him expand the types of books he can read and learn skills to decode unfamiliar words he encounters during reading. Most of all, Fay hoped that he will learn reading strategies, have more social interactions with the kids and staff during the book club and be exposed to different types of books.

Fay's initial ideas of the book club focused on increasing Ethan's ability to express his ideas more often, work on his social skills, and be able to communicate clearly with peers and adults. Fay's initial ideas of the book club stayed the same, but was excited with how much the activities made the books come alive and lead discussions to be more active. Fay believed that the way Ethan was learning at book club, was stimulating for him and helped him interact more appropriately with kids his own age because he had models of good behavior from the adults in

the room. Fay stated “I think it is harder for [Ethan] to work with kids his own age because sometimes they are on the same level and sometimes they are just not.”

According to Fay, some positive things that came out of the book club was Ethan’s increased interest in different varieties of books and different topics of books. Fay thought it was a good idea that there were four vastly different types of books that were read over the book club, because that gave Ethan the chance to learn that he can like other series of books besides graphic novels. The books that Ethan found to be more interesting were fiction and science fiction novels without pictures, and now he is reading them all the time. The only disadvantage with the book club that Fay found was that there were not many kids and hoped that there would have been more.

According to Fay, Ethan’s social skills have changed quite a bit since the book club. He is more excited to read books and talk to others about the books. At the beginning of the book club, there were preemptive prompts given to Ethan to help him adjust to the new activity. An example of this was when Fay had to prompt him for two weeks before the start of book club. Fay stated that by the end of book club meetings, she had to remind Ethan that they cannot be too early for book club and that they need to wait for the start time.

Ethan talked about the book club all the time at home and with some friends. Fay stated that Ethan always talks about how much fun he had and what books he was reading. If there was a chance to participate again he would “participate in a heartbeat”. Overall, Fay was satisfied with the book club and liked the variety of materials that we used to make the book come alive and also appreciated that we made a safe place for them to talk about the books and learn different literacy concepts.

Overall, Ethan demonstrated difficulty with social and emotional responsiveness to other peers and to the books. Ethan demonstrated focused interest on topics and at times would only talk about those topics, making it difficult to have conversations related to the book. Also, per parent report, Ethan required two weeks of “preparation/reminders” before the start of book club due to the uncertainty about a new activity and change in his schedule.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, both Ethan and Mary enjoyed attending the book club and their parents felt that they learned a lot from attending the book club. According to Ann and Fay, Mary and Ethan both benefited by learning how to expand their social skills and explore new types of books. The parents both felt like they would participate again and would love to see more people join in the book club experience.

### **Discussion**

Ethan and Mary had similar experiences participating in the book club, but also benefited in different ways. The themes that emerged was the growth of social skills, an increase in understanding of reading material, increase in diversity of book choice and a positive parent response.

The parents both reported that their children have never participated in a book club setting before, but were excited to have the opportunity to see their children's understanding of reading grow. They also hoped that their social skills would improve and that their child's choices of books would expand. In both final interviews, Ann and Fay were happy to report that their initial ideas of the book club met and exceeded their expectations.

### **The Growth of Social Skills**

The confidence that students gain while learning in an inclusive environment promotes the growth of social skills that can then be transferred to activities outside the school setting (Kluth, 2003). The transference of social skills was in Mary and Ethan just as it was with Chelsea. (Kluth, 2003, p. 61). Chelsea grew in her ability to form connections with peers and grow her interactions. By being accepted into other groups with peers her own age, Chelsea was able to expand her horizons and do new activities. Without the push for an inclusive environment, Chelsea's mother did not know if Chelsea's social skills and independence would have grown to the extent that they are currently.

Mary's social skills grew by growing her confidence in herself. She became more confident in the topics she was reading about and in discussion about the literature. Mary's

confidence also grew to expand her ability to look at different genres of books and expand her wiliness to read a variety of different print types. She also began to talk about their book club at home and school, showing that there were carryover effects to her personal life.

Ethan's social skills grew by his willingness to participate in discussions and talk about the book club outside of meeting times. According to Fay, Ethan talked about the book club to his friends, his parent's friends and his grandparents. At one point, Ethan talked about it frequently enough that others started asking him about it, which showed that when Ethan talked about the book club he talked with passion and happiness in his voice.

### **Understanding of Book Club Material**

At the beginning of the book club meetings, Ethan was reluctant to come and participate. Ethan made his mother to be present in the room for most of the time, and took most of the time to adjust to the setting. By the end of the sessions, Ethan was participating with no constraints and was excited to come to the book club. Ethan's discussions were fueled by becoming comfortable with the environment that he was in, but also about his love of books.

As the book club continued, it was evident that the peer interactions were important. As Fruth (2015) said, it is important for these peer interactions to occur because it allows the students to learn more about working together and sometimes it is easier to understand a peer's explanation of a topic than it is to understand a teacher's perspective. Before the book club started, Fay was interested to see how Ethan would participate with other children. She stated that "I think it is harder for [Ethan] to work with kids his own age because sometimes they are on the same level, and sometimes they are just not." By the end of the sessions, Ethan was participating with Mary and able to discuss different topics of comprehension with no difficulty.

Mary was also able to learn by what Ethan said in sessions. It was evident that the both participants worked together to come up with answers whether they were correct or not.

### **Diversity in Book Choice**

The book club helped diversify both Ethan and Mary's choices in literature. At first, Ethan was content with reading graphic novels about science and non-fiction topics, but his interests have grown to include both fiction and science books that do not have any pictures. Fay stated that she believes his growth occurred because of the adult leaders providing ideas about other books he might enjoy and pushing him to try new things. Once Ethan learned that it was okay to try other books, he read them and ended up loving them. Mary's book choices also grew to include a wider selection of books, including books on different topics and books that differ in length.

### **Parent Response**

Fay and Ann were both pleased with the outcomes of the book club. They felt like their children learned a lot and would participate again if they had the opportunity. Fay stated that she liked the variety of materials that was used to make the book club come alive. She also appreciated that we made a safe place for them to talk about the books and learn different literacy concepts. Ann said that the book club turned out to be what she thought it would be and was happy with how much Mary enjoyed coming to the book club week after week. The only recommendations that Ann and Fay had, was that they had hoped that there would have been more children that attended the book club and were sad that no other families took up the offer for their children.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One of the main limitation of the study is that there were only two responses for participation. Due to the small response, there was a small group of children able to participate in the research and fewer opportunities for data to be collected. In addition, both of the students had identified disabilities and the intent of the book club was having an inclusive experience.

In the future, a recommendation is that the reading level may need to be adjusted to be a wider to include more participants with different diagnosis. A lower reading level or adjusted books to fit lower reading levels, may aid in comprehension of tasks and allow more students and family to feel welcomed in the book club.

Further research could be done to compile a larger sample of data to see the benefits an inclusive book club can have on younger children. If research was to be done with more children, additional social aspects of communication could be observed between participants and the understanding of the literature, may change.

Future researchers might want to change items of the study. Some recommendations would be to have a smaller clinician to student ratio, more open-ended questions for the children to talk about, and less rigid structure to the whole session. By having less adults in the room and more open-ended questions, it may open up more conversations between the participants, which can aid in further understanding of the text. This may result in interviews providing more perspectives about book club experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Inclusive book clubs can be beneficial forms of education for all children involved. The purpose of this study was to learn about parent's views on how their child learned in the book club, how social skills have changed and how their view on literature has developed. Past research shows why inclusive education can be beneficial for all children involved and discussed how book clubs for children with ASD are beneficial. However, the research is inconclusive about all the benefits to having an inclusive book club.

In this study, two children participated in an inclusive book club. At the beginning of the book club parents were provided with a demographic survey (Appendix A) and end of the study the parents completed an in person interview (Appendix B). Parents indicated that both students benefited by the inclusive book club. Social skills were developed, comprehension of literature grew and the types of literature that was read grew.

In the future, this study could help educators understand how parents feel about book clubs that might lead educators to improve on such experiences for their children. An inclusive setting does not only help individuals with special needs, but it can help the social skills of all students around them. When children learn in an inclusive environment, ideas are talked about in a different way and understanding can be increased.

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**Appendix A**

Demographic Survey

*Directions: Please answer the questions below*

- 1.) How old is your child? \_\_\_\_\_ What is your child's current grade level in school? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.) If applicable please answer the following questions:
  - what is your child's diagnosis?
  - Does your child have any repetitive behaviors? if so what do they generally mean?
  - Does your child have any sensory needs?
  - Is there anything else you feel we need to know about your child?
- 4.) What is your child's reading level?
- 5.) What are some of your child's favorite books to read?
- 6.) Has your child been a part of a book club before?
- 7.) What are your expectations for this book club?
- 8.) What would you like your child to get out of this book club?

**Appendix B**

Interview Questions

1. What were your initial ideas of a book club?
2. Have your ideas changed since your child has participated?
3. What would you say are some positive things your child has gotten out of the book club?
4. Were there any disadvantages or problems with participation in the book club?
5. How has your child's social skills changed during the book clubs?
6. Has your child talked about the book club at home? if yes, what have they said?
7. If your child had the opportunity to participate again, would you sign them up?
8. Overall, are you satisfied with the outcome of the book club?