Learning for all: reflections on a parent volunteer reading program

Years 7 – 12

Sharon McDonough

This narrative is a personal reflection based upon my experiences as Special Education Coordinator in a Catholic secondary school, where I was responsible for overseeing a reading program which used parent volunteers as tutors for students with literacy difficulties.

"Excuse me Miss McDonough, can I have the work we're going to do today? I want to take it to PART."

My eyes widened in surprise as Sam came up to me at the beginning of class and made this request. He was in Year 7 and transition reports from his primary school had indicated that he was a student who experienced learning difficulties combined with a lack of motivation (not surprisingly!). Yet here he was, standing before me at the beginning of second term and asking for work to take to his PART lesson. At the beginning of the year I would never have imagined that this student would feel enthusiasm towards learning tasks and it was at this point that I became convinced of the benefits of the parent volunteer program.

Midway through 1999 I took over the role of Special Education Coordinator in a rural Catholic secondary school. Prior to taking over the position my experience of the PART program had been limited to students disappearing from my English class once a week to have their weekly lesson. The program, Parents as Reading Tutors program (PART) was the responsibility of the Special Education Department with the organization of timetables, liaison with parents and preparation of material for tutors looked after by a member of the Special Ed staff. The program had been running successfully at the college for the past five or six years. The PART program lists its specific aims as being:

• to increase the confidence, self-esteem and literacy skills of underachievers in reading,
• to empower a group of voluntary helpers to provide direct instruction and increased support for those students, and
• to increase parent participation in schools. (PART Parent Manual, 1994)

In the school the program ran with each student attending one lesson of PART per week. Ideally PART would occur at least twice a week in the secondary school setting, but the reality of running such a program in this environment with its diverse curriculum meant that getting students to attend once a week often proved to be challenging enough. To my frustration, a program designed to foster both self-confidence and literacy skill levels in students was relegated to being carried out on the edges of the educational program. Furthermore, the subjects students were to be removed from for tutoring were limited to English, SOSE and RE. Why? I'd questioned when I took over. The reply was based around the fact that traditionally that was how things had been and that removing students from other subject areas left them open to missing too much valuable information.

As an English teacher I was affronted by the thought that this kind of logic implied I wasn't teaching anything valuable on a regular basis, and that we were still adhering to the notion that subjects such as maths and science were more important. This kind of attitude requires a paradigm shift that is yet to occur in many schools; a shift to a philosophy that recognizes literacy as the responsibility of all departments, not just English, and one that recognizes that in all subjects - science, maths, home economics, biology, etc - students require literacy skills in...
order to reach their full potential. Until such a shift occurs the issue of addressing student literacy levels will be unresolved, as it is only when all teachers accept the teaching of literacy as their responsibility, that the challenge of fostering development amongst students can be effectively tackled.

Nonetheless, the program ran successfully due to a team of hard-working parents and one staff member who was dedicated to seeing students gain a sense of accomplishment. We were particularly lucky in that this staff member was a Catholic nun who no longer had a teaching load, but was there to run programs such as ‘Seasons’ and to provide assistance to individual students. She was in some senses a ‘godsend’ as the program’s success seemed to grow with the time and energy she had available to develop a team of volunteers who felt valued and recognized within the school environment.

The PART lesson itself could be as structured or as fluid as the tutor liked and quite often this would depend on both the needs of the individual students and the length of time the tutor had been working with the student. Some tutors had been working with students since Year 7 and with students now in Year 10, they found the one lesson per week provided valuable time to focus on work from an English class. Usually the lesson would consist of oral reading, spelling, and story/sentence construction. Quite often the student would bring in an assignment from English or SOSE and the time would be spent working on this.

One of the things immediately noticeable about the program was the limited resources with which it was running: books were limited in number, the same old worksheets were being photocopied and there was no space that was given over to either the storing of resources or to an area for students to see as a designated PART space. In 1999 the school began to change that by purchasing resources including texts with accompanying tapes, books with bright, attractive covers (many of the existing books were bland-looking and we felt that reluctant readers would be turned off by even the sight of them), and even finding a tape player that we could claim as our own! In a school with limited space, finding a room that could be set aside for PART was never going to be easy and when I left the school at the end of 2000 this still hadn't happened. In the meantime students worked with their tutor in the teacher resource room of the library, as it was quiet and relatively undisturbed.

My role within the program was to conduct literacy assessments on students prior to commencing so that we could work out the best way to help them. One component of this was the administration of the Primary Reading Attitude Scale (L. Ollila, A Primary Reading Attitude Inventory, 1999), which consists of a series of questions which students respond to by circling a visual cue to signify how they feel about it. The cues range from happiness, to relaxation, to fatigue, to anger/frustration. More often that not, students circled the cues associated with negative feelings about reading.

Consider some of Sarah's responses:

_How do you feel when you are asked to read aloud in your class?_  
Tired.

_How do you feel about talking to your teacher about a book you have just read?_  
Tired.

_How do you feel when someone gives you a book for a birthday present?_  
Angry/frustrated.

While:

_How do you feel when you are watching TV?_  
Happy

_How do you feel when you are listening to the radio?_  
Relaxed.

Sarah’s were not unusual responses with most students involved in the program expressing frustration with reading and with their experiences of school based reading programs. Quite often these students did not read at home. Paul, a Year 7 student, stated: “We live in a caravan,
so I'm outside a lot so I don't get in Dad's way. I don't really have much time for reading.” Students like Paul see little relevance in what they are forced to learn in school, finding it doesn't fit with the reality of life outside the school environment.

At first these students were suspicious of being offered the chance to take part in the program, seeing it as further punishment for not achieving at school in the way we teachers want them to. Addressing this issue was not easy, and we wanted to reconstruct what the program meant within the school culture. This process began by the staff member who was the contact point for students and parents going to various year levels and classes and highlighting how everyone's experience of school and of learning is different. She opened up to students the possibility of going to PART not only for reading help, but also for help with organization or for one-off assistance with a project.

From implementing this type of approach we hoped to make the program more accessible to a variety of students, not just those with literacy difficulties, in the hope that this would remove student perceptions which saw it as a remedial program for students who were "dumb". We began to see the attitudinal shift start to happen, particularly in the junior secondary levels, where students have taken advantage of the program for different purposes. I will never forget seeing a very bright student with horrendous organizational skills heading off to a PART session, with his folders bulging with papers that he had lost control of! As part of our vision for where the program could go we hoped to make PART more school wide and extend it to mentoring and tutoring for students in VCE levels.

But what are the benefits for students and parents involved in the program? It is clear that there are specific benefits intended for the tutors, with the parent manual devoting a page to the outcomes for parent tutors including:

- improve self-confidence when working with their own and other children,
- realize the power of positive reinforcement as a powerful teaching tool,
- develop an appreciation of the complexities of learning, and a sensitivity to children's needs,
- develop and reinforce positive home/school relationships. (PART Parent Manual p. 4)

At the end of 1999 we extended to parent volunteers the opportunity to provide us with feedback on their experiences as a tutor. Generally this was positive with parents writing of the pleasure they had in helping a student, and more frequently, of the bond they were able to develop with students. One tutor was highly critical of her participation in the program, stating that she could see no progression or link between what she was doing, and that she wanted more explicit guidance on what to be focusing on with particular students. This response came as a shock to us as we had previously felt that we were providing tutors with enough guidance, yet here was evidence that perhaps we weren't as effective as we had imagined. This provided a learning experience for us, and moving into 2000 would provide us with the challenge of meeting the needs of both students and tutors, while continuing to try and expand the program.

In 2000 I took on the role of a tutor as well, partly to fill a gap that we couldn't fill with a volunteer, but in the process to gain personal experiences of what it meant to be a tutor in the program. The process was to be as much about learning for me as it was for the student. For me it was a valuable experience, providing me with the opportunity to develop a bond with a student in a way that I don't get the chance to do in a class of 30. And that is where I see one of the main benefits of the program lying - in the opportunities it provides for learning for all groups involved.

Many of the parents I talked to about the program spoke eagerly of the fact that their involvement in the program provided them with an opportunity to use their skills in a different way. Some of the tutors were from farms and for them, working as a volunteer tutor provided them with a focus outside of farm life and a feeling of self-worth that they could own as individuals, not in relation to a family or a farming identity. One tutor was keen to use her skills,
because she had no formal qualifications she had found it difficult to make inroads in a profession, but as a tutor she could use her skills to help others. Another parent took great pride in telling me that her involvement in the program "had given me back my self-confidence". It provided parents with the opportunity to learn about the problems facing different students, the realities of young people's lives and of the valuable role that they could play in our school community.

Each parent tutor brought to the program a unique range of skills. Not every match with a student was perfect, but often students "clicked" with this person, and were able to build a relationship different to that which they had with staff members. So highlighting the appreciation we had for these parents was seen as a key way that we could recognize their contributions. We incorporated celebration into the end of year program, so that all tutors could come together and share a meal with us to reflect back on the year. For me this was a highlight of the experience, watching a group of volunteers and valuable members of our school community coming together to discuss the highs and lows of their year.

The students spoke of benefits that were not confined to literacy skills only. Although most students could be seen to be developing in terms of their reading, writing and comprehension skills, more importantly for us, they seemed to take more responsibility for their involvement in the program. So like Sam, who asked for work to take to his PART lesson, students became more self-directed in both confirming their PART time, notifying the office if they couldn't attend and finding work to take with them. Students reported growth in their enjoyment of reading and spoke strongly of the relationship they had formed with their tutor. For me it is these outcomes which signify a positive change in students who were quite often disenchanted with school. The learning that was occurring for them was more than development in their literacy skills and this is, I believe, the key to enabling these students to recognize the enjoyment and value which can be obtained from learning.

That is not to say the program is entirely without its flaws, there definitely needs to be a greater recognition from the school community that this program has positive benefits. Enabling the program to move into the centre of our educational space will allow it to grow and to reach a wider population. The development of a home/school partnership such as this, can have a much wider impact than is currently occurring. In terms of volunteers I would love to have had a male parent volunteer as a tutor. So far we had only women, but I believe getting men involved as tutors could have fantastic results, particularly for some of the male students who are struggling with literacy and who don't view reading as a valuable past-time or a necessary part of their school experience.

The program would surely benefit from being able to have a space that students would come to know as somewhere they could go for help, a learning centre within the school where any student from any year level could go and get assistance. It is here that the unique skills of our parents could really be allowed to flourish.

These are my perceptions and my experiences of what it meant to be involved in the program. So perhaps the next step forward in realizing the value of the program lies in allowing others, students, tutors, staff members, to construct their narratives of what the program means. For it is in the richness of the personal narrative that we can best see how learning for all is taking place. Issues such as lack of resources, time, money, the logistics of organizing students to come out of classes - all these can be things which make a program like PART difficult to run.

So why do it? Do it because of the positive relationships formed. Do it because of the pleasure students learn to feel when learning. Do it because of the parents who say they've rediscovered their confidence. Do it because children like Sam are gathering up their books and, with a smile on their face, heading to discover one of the good things in their school week.