

"Barbershops Encouraging Black Boys to Read"

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Abstract

This research project involved interviewing Title I personnel in Charles County Public Schools and visiting six barbershop owners in Charles County Maryland who are a part of the Barbershop Books project. The visit to these barbershops included interviewing the owners of the barbershops as well as reviewing the books used in the project. These barbershops display a variety of books for young black boys to read while they are waiting to get their hair cut. These books are located on a small bookcase in the corner of the barbershops' waiting area. The idea of books in the barbershops was to help improve reading skills for Black boys in elementary school. The project was purposed and funded by the Charles County Public Schools Title I Program. The literacy project began in August 2018. Mr. Alvin Irby, who is a former kindergarten teacher in New York City, is the founder of Barbershop Books.

Keywords: Barbershop Books, Mr. Alvin Irby, urban, Charles County Public Schools Title I

Introduction

Across the United States, various literacy programs are being implemented in barbershops that are located in urban neighborhoods. The main purpose of these programs is to demonstrate to black boys the importance of reading. According to the US Department of Education 85% of American's black males in fourth-grade are not proficient in reading.

As a result, there are various programs in different states that have developed literacy programs in barbershops. For example, in Cleveland, Ohio January 28, 2017, a report discussed how Claudette Cole heads a project called Outliners Barbershop whereby barbers provide books for black boys to read when they come in for haircuts. Ms. Cole receives no funding for the program, it is strictly done on a voluntary basis. Twenty-one (21) barbershops are involved in this project. One barbershop Urban Kutz Barbershop has two rules before a customer can view television in the shop, he must read a book. The second rule is that the customer may take a book and upon completion of the book, it must be given to a friend.

In the Houston, Texas area, the Razor Sharp Barbershop is one of dozens of barbershops that has partnered with the Houston Public Library, the Barbara Bush Literacy Project and a Book Foundation to provide books for black boys who visit their barbershops.

Mr. Alvin Irby, a former kindergarten teacher in New York City, is the founder of Barbershop Books. The Barbershops Books is a nonprofit organization that provides a small bookcase in the waiting area of

barbershops in the urban communities across the country. The mission is two-fold: to inspire black boys between the ages of 4 and 8 years-old to identify as readers in a male-centered space and to involve Black men in the boys early reading experiences. There are fifty (50) barbershops in twenty (20) cities and twelve (12) states that are involved with the Barbershop Books Program. An example of Barbershop Books project is in Wilmington, Delaware, where the Wilmington Library sponsors twenty (20) barbershops who have been participating in the project since April 2018. The project has become a fixture in these barbershops and have become another avenue that is expected to benefit black boys.

Materials and Methods

This research project that commenced in August 2018 involved interviewing the Title I coordinator and Title I parent liaison in Charles County Public Schools, in addition, to specifically visiting six Charles County Maryland barbershops that are part of the Barbershops Books project. The visit to these barbershops included interviewing the owners of the barbershops and reviewing the books in the barbershops. These barbershops have a variety of books for their young boys to read. The books are also located on a bookstand in the corner of the barbershops’ waiting area.

Table 1 identifies the interview questions that were asked to the barbers and their responses.

Table I -Interview Questions and responses

Length of Time in Business	What makes the literacy project effective?	Are you happy your involved in the program?	What advice would you give other businesses, if they were interested in the literacy project?	How would you rate the literacy project on a Scale from 1-5- 5 being the highest score?
Barber 1 26 years	The boys and their siblings grab the books to read. He tells them they can take the books if they like.	Yes.	Make the project fun, interesting and challenging,	5
Barber 2 16 years	It not only supports the boys who come in for a haircut but the boys and girls (generally their siblings) that come in with them.	Yes. The program makes a difference.	Promote reading.	5
Barber 3 13 years	More children are interested in the books than the parents. This barber will tell the parents to	Yes.	Develop project every place there	4

	read to their children. He tells them they can take the books but they usually bring the books back when they have finished reading them.		is a small Black business.	
Barber 4 8 years *	Children enjoy the books both boys and girls and they know how to read the books.	Yes. It is positive for kids	Make sure every child engaged with a book!	5
Barber 5 6.5 years	The kids come in and read the books.	Oh, yes. Wants to continue this project in an additional shop that he will open.	Absolutely!	5
Barber 6 2 years	Intentionally, this barber has no television in his shop, so immediately the boys and girls pick up the books to read.	Yes, I can make a difference.	Basketball coaches. Double-AA coaches need to know.	5

Results and Discussion

The barbers’ length of time as owners of their barbershops varied from two (2) years to twenty-six (26) years. The barber who had been in business for eight (8) years was in the present barbershop for three (3) years. Overall, the barbers expressed how not only the boys would read the books but their siblings would read the books as well. The books are not only benefitting the clients but the other children, both boys and girls who come into the barbershop and are waiting for their sibling or parent.

Table I reflects that all the barbers were happy to be involved in the literacy project. In addition, the statements in the table reflects the barbers’ positive attitudes regarding the project. Only one barber has attended board meetings. He was invited by the Title I personnel.

When asked about parents encouraging their children to read in the barbershop, all the barbers agreed that parents do encourage their child to read, in addition to some parents reading to their child and other parents instructing their child to get a book, whereas the child would get books on his own.

All of the barbers would recommend the literacy project to other businesses. The barbers like the idea of expanding the literacy project to other barbershops and businesses. One barber recommended the idea of

the expansion of the literacy project to any small Black business wherever, there is a waiting room. The barber felt this expansion would be beneficial to the whole community.

On a scale of one (1) to five (5), five (5) being the highest, the barbers were asked, “how would you rate the literacy project.” All of the barbers scored the literacy project with a five (5), except one barber who scored the literacy project with a four (4) because he believed there was always room for improvement. One of the barbers who scored the literacy project with a five (5) said, “I give the project a six (6), I love it.”

When asked if the barbers encouraged the boys to read the books while they wait, the majority of barbers responded “yes”. The barbers discussed that many boys will automatically gravitate to the books, while some of the barbers will tell the boys to read a book while they are waiting. One of the barbers mentioned in the past he would verbally encourage the boys to read a book, but now the boys automatically walk over to the bookcase and select a book to read.

When asked of the barbers, if they needed any special training to be involved in the literacy project, the barbers overall answered “no”. The general response was the Title I Personnel came to their barbershops explained the literacy project and asked if they would like to be involved. Only, one of the barbers attended an initial meeting at the Charles County Board of Education. At this particular meeting the literacy project was introduced by Mr. Alvin Irby, the initiator of the Barbershop Books Project.

The barbers were not interested in changing anything about the literacy project. The barbers made a few suggestions that could enhance the project. The program has been developed so all barbers have extra books and the children are allowed to keep the books. There was also a suggestion to have more books for younger children. In addition, they hoped that more barbers would become involved in order to expand the project. Another suggestion included having a banner posted in every school to advertise the project. One barber said he was going to put a sign up on his bookcase that says you can take the books. The last suggestion was to have a literacy night, with snacks, that introduces the project to the community.

When asked how and why the barbers got involved in the project, the barbers expressed their interest in promoting education in their community and how fundamental reading is in being competent in all the other educational disciplines. One barber made this profound statement, “I promised that I would do something positive in life to help black men.” Others statements were “I have been where these boys are” and “anything to help kids.” The last two quotes were, “It would give kids a better opportunity,” and “you can’t learn, if you can’t read.”

In terms of how the barbers got involved in the project, Title I Personnel from Charles County Public Schools came to their barbershops and asked the barbers if they would like to be involved in the project.

However, one barber said, parents from one of the schools told him about the project and another barber said one of the schools asked him to become involved in the project.

The barbers discussed getting feedback from the boys on reading the books, all the barbers expressed the boys give them feedback, except one barber replied that he did not get feedback from the boys. Some barbers replied that some of the boys will continue reading while they are getting their hair cut and another barber mentioned that some of the boys will discuss the books while they are in the barber's chair getting their haircut.

The project was developed so that the boys could take the book if they so desire.

Since this is almost the completion of the first year of the program, the assessment of the project is in process by the Title I administrators of Charles County Public Schools. The administrators are monitoring the project and they do make sure the barbers have extra books to replenish their bookcase. In closure one of the barbers mentioned,

“the program is doing what it is supposed to do.”

Reviewing Books on the Bookcase

In reviewing the books on the shelves, the books varied from seven (7) to forty-six (46). The books were attractive and varied in age from prekindergarten to second (2nd) grade. The topics of the books ranged from adventure, realism, sports, science-fiction and transportation. There were a few books that would interest upper elementary students such as Greek mythology, graphic novels, and young engineer information. There were even books on ninjas, the Wimpey kids and building towers. These books with such a variety of topics would appeal to boys and girls. A suggestion for additional books would be to include more books for upper elementary students and some culturally-based books. The barbers agreed with this recommendation. The book display appeared to be utilized. It appeared children had taken books and some books had been placed in various directions on the shelves. Some of the barbers mentioned that the other barbers encouraged the boys and girls to read and to take the book if they were not finished reading it.

Overview from Title I Personnel

The major goals of the program are to increase children's home library; to give children a love for reading and to find reading to be fun; and to encourage parents to support their children in reading. The Title I personnel selected the books probably from the curated list of books that Mr. Irby developed from speaking with black boys with respect to their topics of interests.

The Title I personnel generally come to the barbershops monthly to see how the Project is going. When they visit, they give the barbers a backpack of books to replenish the books that have been taken. Also, the

personnel inquire of the barbers whether they have questions or if they need anything to help with the project.

The Title I personnel of the Barbershop Book project in Charles County shared that there are ten (10) barber shops in the county involved in the project. The personnel gave the barbers a one (1) day training to share the project. The personnel shared that some of the barbers have cheat sheets stuck on their mirrors to give them suggestions on how to engage with the boys regarding the books.

As the project grows, the Family Engagement component of Title I personnel intends to assess the effectiveness of the project.

Conclusion

The Barbershop Books project would be an asset to all urban communities. This is a strategy to help bridge the achievement gap. It would be instrumental to develop a partnership with the schools in the community and the barbershops. The idea of expanding the Barbershop Books to other small business as suggested by one of the barbers could be another real asset in promoting literacy. In education, there should be a link among the school, the community and the parent. This is a perfect example of that link. Mr. Irby is to be commended on developing and implementing Barbershop Books. As he said, “research suggest that between the ages of four years-old and eight years-old, it is a critical period for developing literacy.” in addition, Charles County Public Schools Title I Program is an example for the other school districts in the metropolitan area as well as the states that are not involved in the project. This idea is moving the inequities out of education and building on the strengths of black boys.

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