ADOLESCENT BOOK GROUP IMPACT REPORT 2020-21

WHY READING & OUR PARTNERSHIP MATTERS
Not only is reading a foundation to academic achievement, but it is also key to living a free and full life. Development of that skill both begins early and continues throughout a learner’s scholastic career. When learners gain confidence as readers and build reading habits, they have the power to become lifelong learners.

OUR SHARED PURPOSE
At Words Alive, we believe that empowering experiences turn learners into agents of change and advocates for their own education. We also believe that reading is the foundation of community and economic development, and that when everyone can read, whole communities thrive!

During the 2020-21 academic year, Words Alive partnered with like-minded leadership at the following partner locations to deliver our Adolescent Book Group program with 784 learners in 4-12th grade. In response to community needs during the ongoing pandemic and the collective call to action to support learners after a year of interrupted instruction, our network of program partners serving teens and tweens expanded to include more out of school time providers and organizations delivering Level Up summer programs through San Diego Unified School District.

- Barrio Logan College Institute
- Boys and Girls’ Club of Vista
- Groundwork San Diego
- Lindsay Community Day School
- San Ysidro High School
- The Monarch School

To create greater access, we also expanded the Adolescent Book Group model in our first county-wide community invitation to participate in our annual Art & Lit Exhibit. This expansion reached an additional 524 learners through the following program partners.

- Allied Gardens/Benjamin Library
- Challenger Middle School
- Kensington-Normal Heights Library
- Logan Heights Library
- Malcolm X Library (Teen IDEA Lab)
- Mira Mesa High School
- Mission Valley Library
- National City Library
- North Clairemont Library
- North University Community Library
- Oceanside Public Library
- Pacific View Leadership Elementary
- Point Loma Branch Library
- Rancho Bernardo Library
- Serra Mesa-Kearny Mesa Library
- University Community Library
- Wagenheim Middle School
- Walker Elementary School

LEARNERS AT THE MONARCH SCHOOL FOR HOMELESS YOUTH PICKING UP BOOKS AND PAIRED ACTIVITIES
This program and partnerships support strategic goals of all partners:

- To engage the whole community in working together to ensure that children and youth are poised for school success.
- To develop programs, competencies and linkages that support and promote learner empowerment and self-sufficiency.

**OUR PROGRAM METHOD & PROCESS CONDITIONS**

In our research-based program designed to ignite a love of reading, trained Words Alive facilitators team up with learners to discuss, write, and create projects that bring books alive. The diverse and relevant texts make reading matter to teens who find deeper, more meaningful contexts while connecting books to themselves and the world. As learners share perspectives with their peers and caring adults in a safe space, learners improve their communication skills, gain confidence, and enhance their ability to express themselves. Our program is designed to meet the process conditions needed to build the strong engagement that leads to positive learning routines and improved achievement. Each of our program sessions are:

- **Linked to learning:** Content and activities are directly connected to age-appropriate developmental milestones and what learners are expected to do academically.
- **Relational:** Activities help learners build relationships, get to know one another and build trust.
- **Developmental:** Learners are learning new skills, and after participating, better understand how they support reading achievement.
- **Collaborative:** Learners are working together to learn a new skill as a group and with caring adults.
- **Interactive:** Learners practice new skills and have opportunities for corrective feedback.

**OUTCOMES: WHAT CHANGED FOR LEARNERS**

Research shows that providing books alone is not enough to jumpstart or strengthen reading habits among youth. Instead, the most successful program models elevate learner interest in reading via relevant and relatable texts and incorporating group and project-based learning.

Using research and tools identified or developed by our third-party evaluative partners at Dialogues in Action and the University of San Diego’s Caster Center for Non-Profit and Philanthropic Research, our Adolescent Book Group focuses on three key impact goals. That learners:

**Develop an enduring commitment to reading.**

**Objective:** Learners internalize the value of reading as they analyze a close reading of characters, plot, and theme and experience life-changing ideas through discussion with their peers and caring adults.

**Become life-long learners.**

**Objective:** Learners experience positive attitudinal shifts about learning and recognize their own ability to seek out information to solve problems, acquire critical thinking skills, and transition successfully into post-secondary education or career.

**Become advocates for themselves and their futures.**

**Objective:** Learners become empowered to invest in their futures by increasing self-esteem and clarity as readers, writers, and speakers who use effective communication strategies to express themselves.

Our objective is that learners believe in the power of reading and love what reading means in their lives. That is the tipping point between someone who can read and someone who calls themselves a reader. To get there, our program aims to influence what learners know, how they feel, and what they do about their own reading development and enjoyment.
DEMOGRAPHICS
Of 183 reporting learners...

- the average age was 14 years old.
- 65% speak a language other than English at home with their families. Represented languages include Chinese, Farsi, Italian, Mandarin, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.
WHAT LEARNERS SAID

Participating learners were asked to complete a retroactive evaluation survey after completing the project. This survey intends to measure learner skillsets, interest, confidence, and value placed on reading, with importance placed on indicators of social-emotional learning after the program.

LEARNER SURVEY RESPONSES

*It is well documented in research on literacy development in adolescents that skills, motivation or interest to read, and confidence as a reader work in concert to propel learner ability forward.*

In that vein, survey responses from learners who participated in the program were positive and demonstrated growth in these three key areas. Learners stated that the books chosen were relevant to their lives and that reading in the program had broadened their perspective; improved their ability to express themselves as readers, speakers and writers; and influenced their perceived value of reading.

*As summarized in Figure 1 (right), learners demonstrated growth in key areas of interest, confidence, and time spent reading.*

**After participating:**
- The number of learners who rated reading as a good or great way to spend time increased by 64%.
- The number of learners who rated themselves as a good or great reader increased by 51%
- The number of learners who reported spending a lot or most of their free time reading increased by 171%

Figure 2 below shows the percentage of learners who agreed or strongly agreed that a specific academic skill was strengthened via participation in the program. (Note that n=183).
Figure 3 below shows the percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed that a specific social-emotional skill was strengthened via participation in the program (n=183).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>think about the real world issues that characters deal with in the story.</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>think about how real world issues in the story relate to my own life.</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel more aware of what I was thinking and feeling.</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care more about what others were thinking and feeling.</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BOOK CHOICE**

Providing access to diverse and relevant books that reflect the life experiences of the learners we serve is a central pillar of the Adolescent Book Group program model. When readers see themselves in positive characters who look and sound like them, it sends a message that they too belong and have a valuable place in our social fabric while unlocking a world of role models who can show them what is possible. Learners read a variety of texts in the program, and as shown in Figure 4, reported that the book choice was relevant, inspired them to keep reading, and a good fit for their reading level.

**Figure 4: Learners who agreed or strongly agreed that the book choice was...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant to their lived experience</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting and made them want to keep reading</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good fit for their reading level</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“Relevant” is described within the evaluation as “I could relate to the story, it’s characters, and/or the author.” “A good fit” for learners’ reading level is described in the evaluation as “I understood the vocabulary and what was happening.”**

Participating teachers also commented favorably on the influence of book choice on learner interest:

“**Our middle school learners are experiencing those dynamics; the text connections are right on with them.**”

“I’ve even had learners research what else Jason Reynolds has written. That’s a good sign if they are researching the author on their own.”

“Many learners would have never considered reading **Ghost** before but adored it. The learners actively talked about the book outside of class discussions.”
ACCESS AND BOOK OWNERSHIP
In addition to reading fresh and relevant titles, participating learners took home 1,785 books to keep, growing the average size of their home library by 14% to 11 age-appropriate books.

AUTHOR TALKS
Meeting authors and illustrators behind the characters we love deepens the context of what we read and encourages learners to imagine themselves as thinkers, readers, and future creators of stories that shape our world. Those moments - especially when authors and illustrators reflect readers’ identities and lived experiences - spark curiosity and can change the way young people view who and what belongs on the page.

When authors meet with learners in Words Alive programs, they discuss the value of representation in literature, tell relatable experiences from their own lives, reveal their initial failures and the persistence required in their journeys to get published, and encourage learners to make their own voices heard.

After reading his book, learners at San Ysidro High School spoke with Adib Khorram, author of *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, via Zoom. Learner reactions to meeting with the author suggests a new curiosity for the story of the person behind the book and that learners processed what they read in new ways.

Comments from learners following the author’s visit included:

“The impact of getting to meet with an author was amazing, I never believed that one day I could see the author of a book and know more about their story and what it is behind their books.”
– Vanessa

“Getting to meet the author made me view writing in a different way because now when I read something I start to wonder what made the author write this or what was the author thinking when writing this.”
– Ryan
ART & LIT: CONCENTRIC COMMUNITY

Research suggests that young people are struggling the most with their mental health during the prolonged pandemic (Mental Health America, 2020). In response, Words Alive expanded the Adolescent Book Group model in our first county-wide community invitation to participate our annual Art & Lit Exhibit.

Inspired by painter Alma Thomas’ masterpieces, and developed in collaboration with ArtReach San Diego, the 2021 Art & Lit Exhibit engaged learners across San Diego County in creating “Identity Circles” that help develop mindfulness habits and emotional awareness through a connection with reading and art.

Recognizing that learners had spent over a year social distancing, this year’s selections of anchor texts featured characters battling loneliness on their journey to discover themselves. When learners read about characters who face similar challenges with resilience, courage, and kindness they develop their ability to understand their own tribulations and improve their coping skills. Enhancing that connection between books and the world, art helps learners activate that knowledge as a vehicle for self-expression and communication that transcends language.

Because most learners were attending school or community programs virtually from home, families of learners were encouraged to participate in discussion and artwork through targeted activities and prompts included in their project materials. Parents were asked to identify how the project helped support their family during remote learning. Their statements suggested an appreciation for connection with their children by participating in the project.

About supporting their families during remote learning, parents said:

“This was a great way to connect with my child. It opened up a new way to get into a book, and conversations we may have missed. Loved hearing the thoughts of my child, in reference to the book as well as to him personally.”

“I valued that we were together, relaxed and discussing.”

REFLECTIONS

In the 2020-21 program year, two efforts to expand the Adolescent Book Group model resulted in new partnerships and broader access to engaging community programming for youth during a time they needed it most: In addition to an open invitation to participate in our annual Art & Lit Exhibit, we also expanded program content to include learners in 4th and 5th grade, an age by which in the absence of support, children’s frequency of reading for fun and the number of children who say that they love reading begins to decline. In both instances we continue to observe that supporting learner engagement in reading development translates to stronger values of reading and learning in their lives.

Overall, learners reported growth in key areas such as academic and social-emotional skillsets, the size of their home libraries, and their perceived value of reading. However, logistical complications of the ongoing pandemic for schools and community partners prevented the usual duration of the Adolescent Book Group program model. As such, learner growth was not quite as much as that of learners in recent years who were able to participate in the program for a longer period. As we move forward, Words Alive id dedicated to creative solutions that allow for a return to deep connections with texts, volunteers, and each other.

In the meantime, we look forward to connecting more youth to the power of reading through the essential and effective act of reading together.

**SPECIAL THANKS**

Words Alive and participating classrooms share deep gratitude for the philanthropic leaders who invest in our Adolescent Book Group Program and the movement to make reading matter:

**Transformational Leaders**
Anonymous  
Century Club of San Diego  
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The Conrad Prebys Foundation  
William Gumpert Foundation

**Impact Investors**
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Oceanside Community Foundation  
Qualcomm Incorporated  
The Westreich Foundation  
Walter J. & Betty C. Zable Foundation

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Carleton Management Inc.  
Christensen Family Foundation  
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Houlihan Lokey  
Jennifer & Thomas Janes  
The Schoenith Foundation  
Cynthia & Aaron Shenkman  
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