BEHIND THE BOOK

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL INITIATIVE
2009-10 PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Background and Introduction

Behind the Book (BtB) works in K-12 public schools in New York City and brings literary authors and illustrators into individual classrooms to build literacy skills and nurture a new generation of readers. The organization's mission states:

Behind the Book is a literacy nonprofit that promotes a reading culture among students in low-income public schools by getting them excited about reading. Our innovative programs address the urgent need to engage children and youth with reading and writing as a first step towards lifelong literacy. Through our Elementary, Middle and High School Reading Initiatives, we bring authors, illustrators and their books into individual classrooms to build literacy skills and a new generation of book readers. Behind the Book authors and illustrators visit classrooms to teach a series of workshops and guide students through the completion of a unique final project.

Behind the Book creates a customized in-school reading promotion program for each K-12 class we work with. Our programs are always part of the class curriculum and meet both NY State Learning Standards and the NYC Blueprint for the Arts. In addition, they include book donations to students, classrooms and school libraries, field trips relevant to the topic of study, and professional development for teachers.

While each program has its own specific objectives related to the needs of the classroom and the content and genre of the book utilized, all of our programs have the following goals:

• To engage students with reading and writing as a way to increase literacy skills;
• To support a culture of reading in the classroom that will sustain the engagement;
• To empower students through the creation and sharing of their original work;
• To provide teachers with a rich experience that will influence their teaching.

The Elementary School Initiative (ELSI) is Behind the Book’s arts-in-education model for Kindergarten through Fifth grade students. In a series of between two and six sessions spaced over a semester, an author, illustrator and/or other teaching artist leads an individual classroom in a series of workshops that involves reading the author’s and/or illustrator’s books, exploring the literary genre and art form found in the text and illustration of the book, and experiencing the artistic process themselves through art and writing-based final projects.

ELSI currently serves approximately 500 students in five elementary schools in New York City: PS 165 on the Upper West Side, PS 376A in Bushwick, PS46 in Fort Greene, PS 116 in Jamaica, and CS 21 in Bedford Stuyvesant.

Methodology

During spring 2010, I conducted an evaluation of the BtB elementary school program focused on two schools, CS 21 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and PS 165 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The evaluation process was limited in scope to the two schools and sought to examine:

• Impact on student engagement and motivation to read;
• Improvement of literacy skills;
• The quality and teaching skills of BtB authors and illustrators; and
• The impact of BtB programs on teaching practice.

The evaluation design was qualitative and data was collected through

• Observations of authors and a teaching artist in the classroom (n = 4)
• CS 21 student focus group employing open ended questions (n = 11)
• CS 21 focus group with experienced teachers using open-ended questions (n = 5)

The teachers in the focus group had participated in BtB programs in third-fifth grades for at least two years and included the school librarian, who is the CS 21 school coordinator for BtB. Fourth and fifth grade students in the focus group were selected by teachers and were currently participating in BtB or had participated in previous years.

Focus group participants were informed that their comments would not be attributed to specific individuals to encourage an open and frank discussion. Typical of focus groups, many comments and thoughts emerged. After reviewing the transcription recording, only the comments that were relevant to the focus of this report are included. In some instances, comments are paraphrased for clarity and similar ideas voiced by several participants are conflated for brevity.

I reviewed the 2007-08 Program Evaluation conducted by Dr. Robert Horowitz to determine the extent to which his findings (drawn from surveys, observations, and interviews) have remained consistent or have changed when compared to the 2010 results (summary page 5). Other BtB background documents were reviewed to understand BtB’s mission, organizational development, and program objectives.

**Evaluation Summary**

This section highlights the key findings detailed later in the report on Pages 15-19.

**Impact on student engagement and motivation to read**

Students were very engaged in the four sessions that I observed. They interacted easily with the authors and the visual artist. The lesson plans were well constructed and challenged students to ask questions and propose solutions, focusing on higher order thinking skills. Peer learning was fostered as students critiqued one another’s writing or illustrations.

Responses in the student focus group confirmed the high level of engagement observed in the classroom. Their comments reveal the positive and lasting impact of the program such as, “After the author came I started to read constantly and constantly,” and “He got me interested and now I read different types of books,” and “I used to write just short sentences, but now my sentences are longer.”

The impact on student motivation and reading was amplified during the teacher focus group. Teachers were enthusiastic about the catalytic effect of the authors. A few selected comments include, “…they understand that a book has an author, a process, vocabulary, formats and structures, and “I was surprised that the fourth graders that had BtB retained so much of what they learned now as fifth graders; it’s impressive.”

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Students as PS 165 were likewise engaged in their author workshops. They were full of questions about writing process and the personal dimensions of the author’s life, but equally animated about their own writing.

**Improvement of literacy skills**

The class observations and focus group comments support BtB’s goal of improving literacy skills. CS 21 students (100%) cited their own progress as writers due to BtB authors. Likewise, the CS 21 teachers recounted how students checked-out more books from the library, undertook independent projects outside of the BtB sessions, and incorporated poetry into the writing curriculum.

While the CS 21 observations combined writing and visual art, the PS 165 program was centered on student writing. Most of the time in the two sessions was allocated to students reading and critiquing their final chapter of *Dave at Night*, which extended the conclusion after the author’s 38th chapter. The exchange among author, students, and teacher examined characterization, narrative structure, setting, use of metaphor and simile, etc. The group discussion and analysis after each student reading was very beneficial for the whole class. It helped each student to understand where to improve their writing as the author and fellow students identified strengths and weaknesses.

**The quality and teaching skills of BtB authors and illustrators**

Authors, Andrea Davis Pinkney and Gail Carson Levine, and visual artist, Barbara Korein, are very capable teachers. They were well prepared, demonstrated a command of content, managed the class successfully, designed and delivered age-appropriate activities, intentionally reinforced the curriculum, and exhibited an easy rapport with the students and teachers. A teacher in the CS 21 focus group summed it up by saying, “The authors are at the top of their game as educators.”

**Impact of BtB programs on teaching practice**

Building the capacity of teachers to incorporate arts learning into their practice is a vital dimension of BtB programs. I did not have the opportunity to interview Ms. Morales at PS 165, but 100% of the CS 21 teachers cited examples of how authors had given them new teaching tools and processes. One teacher said, “I use one of the author’s exercises with my students.” Another stated, “I observed that an author’s book from last year was used as a theme for this year for one of the BtB teachers even though she didn’t have an author this year. Those creative writing processes and ideas carried over this year; she did it on her own.” Teachers at CS 21 are open to a more formal program of professional development.

Even though these data are taken from a smaller sample, in general, they are consistent with the November 2008 Horowitz evaluation. A brief summary of those findings and a teacher survey chart are excerpted below:
“Behind the Book is an effective and well-run program that helps develop students’ interest in reading. Students learned about the process of writing from visiting authors. Teachers learned new ways to engage students in reading and the program helped develop a culture of reading in participating classrooms.

School teachers responded very positively to survey items about collaborating with Behind the Book. They overwhelmingly reported that Behind the Book “was an effective partner for their classroom.” They reported that authors were successful at engaging students, effective at working with the students’ age group, and that they aligned their activities with the teachers’ curriculum.¹”

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<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>Behind the Book was an effective partner for my classroom.</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
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<td>Behind the Book activities successfully aligned with my curriculum.</td>
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<td>The author was effective at working with my age group.</td>
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<td>The author was successful at engaging my students.</td>
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CS 21 Observations

I observed author Andrea Davis Pinkney and visual artist Barbara Korein at CS 21 in Ms. LeBron’s fourth grade class. The two workshops were linked to the study of the civil rights movement. This was the second year LeBron has participated in BtB programs. Each session was 90 minutes and served 20-25 students. Pinkney is a New York Times bestselling author of more than 20 books for children, including the Caldecott Honor Book Duke Ellington, illustrated by her husband, Brian Pinkney, and Alvin Ailey, a Parenting Publication Gold medal winner. In 2010, her book, Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up By Sitting Down, was published on the 50th anniversary of the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins of 1960. This book was given to students and was autographed.

I observed Pinkney’s second session with the class with Korein assisting. She began by reviewing the previous class and introduced students to a warm-up exercise to focus their writing process. She had them close their eyes and imagine a light – a candle or a flashlight – and a feeling that made them happy. After a few moments, she asked them to open their eyes and she showed them her notebooks where she keeps ideas and notes that help inspire her writing. She asked the students to write three sentences based on their warm-up exercise. Students wrote a number of responses to this “happiness” prompt such as kittens, ice cream, and “my mom’s birthday party.” Then she told students to create a paragraph using these responses as the main elements of a brief story. This exercise set the stage for the main focus of the class, writing a story and sketching illustrations about civil rights based on their research and her book about the North Carolina sit-in.

She then had each student develop five large squares to tell a visual story about the civil rights movement. Students sketched their stories while Pinkney and Korein circulated around the room to assist students. Pinkney illustrated the idea by showing a book dummy of the sit-in book with Brian Pinkney’s draft sketches. After this lesson concluded, students read their draft paragraphs about civil rights and explained their illustrations. Students critiqued one another with Pinkney’s guidance. This lesson concluded by Pinkney reviewing how to begin with a quiet warm-up exercise and then the process for developing ideas for writing. LeBron told Pinkney that her students would continue to work on the writing process. The class ended with Pinkney autographing Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up By Sitting Down for each student.

Koren, a visual artist and former art teacher, returned to LeBron’s class two weeks later to extend Pinkney’s lessons. Korein began by reviewing the function of the five sketch boxes and told students that today’s session would refer to Brian Pinkney’s technique of washing color over several pages as a key element of his illustrations for Sit In. She conducted a question and answer session about this technique and how it interacted with text in the book. Next, she asked students to create three boxes that depicted the beginning, middle, and end of
their stories and to sketch illustrations. Students sketched and periodically came forward in small groups to the paint station at the front of the room. They used wide paintbrushes to create a muted wash over two pages using diluted acrylic paint. After all students created washes, Koren answered students’ questions and described how LeBron would help them improve their three panel illustrations before her next session. Koren returned the following week to help students to combine their illustrations with the paint-washed pages.

CS 21 Teacher Focus Group Responses

If your students benefited from BtB, please explain. What did your students say or write that indicated that they were learning?

• Students are able to understand that a book has an author, a process, a vocabulary, formulas, formats, and structures.
• They get the big picture and make the connection to that book and understand the total creative process, revision, proofreading, illustration, and publishing.
• The artists serve as role models – the students see a person like them, an artist of color, usually young and African-American.
• It opens doors for career ideas, not just as a writer, but illustrator and publisher.
• Students had a very positive experience with poetry; it became an important part of their writing and we used poems in other subjects too. We had a great year of poetry.
• The authors are down to earth; we learned new kinds of poetry and I was surprised that they were interested in the author’s whole book of poems.
• Several kids really connected to the poetry in his book – connections to real life.

Do you see differences in student work, behavior or attitude since they have participated in BtB?

• They take care of books better, there is more respect for books. We went to Random House and learned about the whole publishing process so now there is respect for books and authors.
• Kids come in to the library and ask for books by the BtB authors; they still read their books two years later.
• They remember everything about their projects. I was surprised that the fourth graders that had BtB retained so much of what they learned now as fifth graders; it’s very impressive.

Are there other lasting effects that you can you attribute to BtB?

• It’s not just one-dimensional; it’s good teachers, library support and the authors. Taken together it makes for lasting effects.
• BtB students know the authors; they are on a first name basis with them and seek out their books. In comparison, the Brooklyn Public Library had an author come in, but it had no impact with just one visit. Nothing was left behind.
• They receive autographed books from the BtB authors; the students feel special.
• After the workshop with the poet, the students called themselves poets and they would write “poet” next to their name on their poetry.
• The boys in my class independently made their own comic books and brought them in for the author for critique; even now they still do it.
• Students were taken to a comic book convention – that put them over the top and they loved it. We don’t think they are absorbing some of the teaching, but it’s sticking.
• BtB is a reference point for me; I use the BtB authors to help kids find interesting books.
• Even though BtB serves one or two classes per grade each year, it is a common thread in our school, so that all kids get an author(s) over the years they are at CS 21. I like that.

How do you grade or evaluate BtB student work?

• One author had students work in groups; we monitored their interaction. The author and BtB volunteers made good observations about my students; it was helpful to me to get another opinion; others can see that my students are using processes that I’ve taught and it connects with other subjects. I’m interested in how kids work together and on their own.
• Others talents come out that I don’t normally see; I have kids that are excellent artists but I didn’t know that; others create good story lines. It forced me to go my students and probe them about what they are learning and what they are best at, this takes evaluation to a different level.

How do you maintain continuity between the BtB author visits?

• Authors sometimes give assignments and homework, which I follow through on.
• I use the author’s prompts and poems in between, and also I use them instead of what other teachers are using;
• I keep checking on student work in between BtB visits to make sure they are doing the work. But I reassign kids sometimes to play to their strengths; they all contribute to something in the project. They critiqued each other’s comics in a respectful way; they were serious.
• Sometimes students would be absent and miss the first day of the BtB author visit, but other students would help them get up to speed and take on that facilitator role like the author did. This helps develop leadership skills. This is a great value of BtB - children develop leadership skills.

What has been your experience with the BtB illustrators?
• Kids respected the illustrator's work, and there were lots of questions and answers. They learned to use artist materials very carefully.
• Enthusiasm is key, some (illustrators) are ok, but the presentation of one illustrator was bland and boring to kids, although his paintings were excellent.
• I've never had the illustrators, just writers.

Do you have suggestions about how to select or prepare the authors and/or illustrators who work in your classrooms?

• We fill out an evaluation survey, but it's not about what authors we liked. It's a general evaluation. It could be more specific to the author.
• We choose the authors carefully, but the illustrators sometimes are the ones in the author's book, but sometimes not. Illustrators are not as important as the authors.
• I need an outline of what the author is expecting so I'm prepared. We spend some time planning, but it should be more than email and conversation with BtB staff, a syllabus or lesson plan from the author would be better.
• Flexibility works too; it depends on the class. For example, we took a field trip as part of the project and that worked well even though it wasn't planned.

Should the programs be longer or shorter and how can BtB become more of a partner with you and CS21?

• Two sessions is not enough, a session is 90 minutes. Four sessions would be better. Sometimes students aren't done with their books and related projects, but the author is finished and doesn't return to the class.
• It could be longer; it depends on the project and author.
• The kids want the author to see their final projects; which doesn't work out if the author's visits are finished.
• The issue is money. We don't have enough. Sometimes I make a decision to give a class more sessions and others get fewer.
• The book fair, PTA, and school store is where funding comes from. There is usually no funding that comes directly from the school budget, but sometimes we do have school funds.

What was the most challenging about participating in BtB?

• Time; there is already a lot to cover. We want students to enjoy it, but we have to change our schedules/lessons to work with BtB.
• Teachers that have BtB want more, those that don't have BtB want an author, so there is a lot of demand for BtB.

How do you schedule BtB program activities?
• I try to match schedules after we find out who is available; but we choose authors first. I match authors to a specific class because I know the student profiles and the content of the book.
• Jo will help us find an author that we are interested in even if it’s one that is not on the list of authors.

What has been the impact, if any, of BtB on your teaching practice?

• I use one of the author’s exercises with my students. I get them to focus using soft music and I ask them, “Where are you now?” And then they write a post card from where they are in their imagination. It stimulates interpretation, imagination, and visualization.
• It has changed my view of students – their strengths and weaknesses. I can recommend which students can share with one another for peer-to-peer assistance. Kids teach each other well.
• I observed that an author’s book from last year was used as a theme for this year for one of the BtB teachers even though she didn’t have an author this year. Those creative writing processes and ideas carried over this year; she did it on her own.

Would you be interested in professional development after school? If BtB could not pay you, would you still be interested? If not, is there another time that you’d consider?

• Yes, after school.
• We will come with or without compensation.
• Planning on the phone or email worked out ok, but after school meetings would be good.
• It could be too much time to have face-to-face planning; I’d have to see if I could make time after school.

Do you have any other recommendations for improving the program?

• I can’t think of anything. We just need more money to get more authors for more kids. But the program is excellent; it flows and fits with each class.
• It became team teaching. The authors are at the top of their game as educators.
• More outside trips would help to solidify the program. We could also go on the trips ourselves too. This needs to be fine-tuned. They need to see the whole process at a publisher.

Is there anything you would like to add - either a topic we have not covered or other insights you that you would like to share?

• The enthusiasm level for these teachers is very high even though they have been in the program for several years. We all have collections of books signed by the authors, which is special.
• It resuscitates my teaching (28 years). It prompts me to think more about my teaching, how I view my students, and has given me new tools.
• BtB helps to make so many more connections with writing - in books, research, TV, libraries, online, etc.

CS 21 Student Focus Group Responses

Do you like to read?

• I like to read books with facts, descriptions, and bios about what you want to be in life.
• I read action books, science books about animals, and chapter books.
• I have lots of books at home; I go to the library at school.

How would you describe BtB to other students or your parents?

• The author comes and talks about his/her book and the ideas behind it.
• After they come in, the author autographs the book.
• It’s fun – activities are good, like writing poems (It was a little hard at first.) and one was a self-portrait.
• The author shows the creative process.
• Illustrators come too; they showed us how to develop ideas with drawing and painting; they teach you how to draw or to cut out shapes to make your own shape.
• They helped us think about how to depict characters and to make a book cover.

What was the best part of the BtB program?

• The author read to us and brought us inside the process.
• We made capes for the action hero project.
• He had us smell things (as a prompt); we had to describe it; we had to write what we thought it was; it was related to the author’s story of the child who had asthma and his mom rubbed medicine on him – he remembered the smell.
• It made me more interested in books.
• We made a family tree.

Did you share your BtB book with other students or parents?

• We shared with others and discussed the book with friends, but sometimes they say it’s not interesting.
• We did a gallery walk in our class to look at other books.
• Others students in school would like BtB.

Are you more interested in reading after meeting the authors?

• Yes, it (my interest) lasted a long time, I thought reading was boring, but afterward I liked reading more.
• He got me interested and now I can read different types of books.
• After the author came I started to read constantly and constantly.
• It made me want to create my own characters in comics.
• At first I didn’t read much, but then when the authors came in I started reading more.

Did your teacher follow-up the project after the author visits?
• Jo (BtB executive director) called the teacher sometimes to give her help.
• We sent our comics to the author at his home and he made books for us.
• Ms. LeBron made us write more poetry and draw images to match poetry.

Did you take field trips?
• We went with the author to a comic book museum.
• We went to the Archie comic book exhibit and the guide showed us how different illustrators depicted the characters over the years.
• We went to Random House

How did the author influence your writing and do you think you improved?
• Yes, Tony Medina, told us to read and write more. I used to write just short sentences, but now my sentences are longer.
• We received new vocabulary words and phrases.
• The author taught me how to put my own voice in my writing.
• We had to make up a story for our character – he made us use bigger words and new vocabulary.

Do you want more authors and illustrators to come to your class?
• Yes (100% students responded).
• They should go to high schools because they need it. Kids need to see that they could be authors and this would help keep them out of trouble.
• Kids would make better choices because authors would help them find their own voice; the authors are role models for kids.
• I want them to keep coming back so I stay interested in books.

What would you do to make BtB better?
• We want to add other parts to the book after the author leaves; we need more time to make extra chapters.
• We want more meetings with authors (responded four students),
• Learn more vocabulary.
• Give things to the kids to remember BtB, like tee shirts.
• I would like more important artists to come – like J.K. Rowling and others.
• Surprises for us, like a book festival where we can get books.
Do you like some authors better than others?

- Sometimes the authors read books that are not that interesting.
- They could read more cool books.
- We should always build characters and writing for comics.
- I wish they would bring in new books, not old ones that they wrote years ago.

PS 165 Observations

I observed author Gail Carson Levine teach two 90-minute workshops in Millie Morales's fifth grade class, one the first week and a second the following week. Levine's workshops were part of a four-session program that included a visit to the National Jazz Museum of Harlem and a visual arts workshop with Barbara Korein. Levine is a well-known children's writer. Her first book for children, *Ella Enchanted*, was a 1998 Newbery Honor Book and was made into a popular movie. Levine's other books include among others, *Fairest; Dave at Night*, an ALA Notable Book and Best Book for Young Adults; *The Wish; The Two Princesses of Bamarre*; and the six Princess Tales books.

The format of the two sessions was similar and each had three activities:

- Students asked Levine about her writing process and career.
- Students read and discussed their hypothetical final 39th chapter of *Dave at Night*, which all students had read.
- Levine critiqued student writing.

Students gathered around Levine in the corner of the room after her introduction by Morales. Levine talked a bit about *Dave at Night* and showed photographs of a real orphanage, upon which her fictional orphanage was based. Levine based the book loosely on her father's childhood experience. In the book, Dave's father dies and he knows nothing will ever be the same. Dave lands in an orphanage -- the cold and strict Hebrew Home for Boys in Harlem -- far from the life he knew on the Lower East Side. But he knows he'll be okay and if it doesn't work out, he'll just leave and find a better place to stay. But it's not that simple. Outside the gates of the orphanage, the nighttime streets of Harlem buzz with jazz musicians and swindlers, exclusive parties, and mystifying strangers. Inside, another world unfolds, with rare friendships and bitter enemies. Among it all, Dave tries to find a place that feels like home.

Students began peppering Levine with questions, to which she cheerfully responded. A few examples follow:

How long did it take you to write the book?
“I wrote it after my parents died in 1990, originally as an eight-page picture book. Then it took six months for the first draft, but the publisher rejected it. I set it aside and wrote *Ella Enchanted*. Finally, it took me eight years to write it.”
What inspires your fairy tales?
“Some say Dave is a Cinderella story. I love fairy tales’ silliness, like love at first sight.”

How do you come up with the names of your characters?
“Some are based on people I knew, others are a play on words, or derived from other characters in the book.”

Once the students got to know Levine, she began the critique and analysis process of students’ hypothetical 39th chapter of Dave at Night. Each student had a chance to read their chapter – some were short and others quite long – and then other students responded by stating what they liked about the chapter or what they didn’t understand. The student readers did not respond to these comments but listened and made notes for text revisions. After fellow students finished their comments, Levine added her thoughts about the characterization, grammar, action, etc. Levine’s comments also included how to conduct research, proper use of idioms and other writing tips.

This process continued until Morales suggested that students had more questions about writing process. Levine responded to student questions about male and female point of view, how she liked Ella Enchanted as a movie, what happened when she received the Newbery Award, and other questions. The class concluded by Levine and Morales telling students that the next session would focus on the revisions of the chapters and more chapter critiques.

When Levine returned the following week, the session resumed with student readings and critiques. Now that the students better understood the process, they were more comfortable reading and receiving feedback. In general, the student readings were quite good, and one student, Nadia, read her chapter that was superior. Morales supported Levine with minimal intrusion and made sure that all students had a chance to read and respond. The class concluded with Levine signing her books for students and Morales.

**Findings**

The evaluation findings are focused on observations in CS 21 and PS 165 and focus group interviews of participating students and teachers is CS 21. This relatively small sample of program data cannot be used to make generalizations about all of BtB’s elementary programs because it is not representative enough of the entire range of programs. However, one of the goals of this evaluation is to compare this smaller data sample to the Horowitz 2007-08 broad-based evaluation that investigated elementary, middle, and high school programs to look for consistent or contradictory patterns.

This report is more intimate in nature and provides an updated snapshot of classroom instruction and draws on authentic student voices, which were not included in the previous report. The findings are aligned to the evaluation goals.
**Impact on student engagement and motivation to read**

Students were very engaged in the four sessions that I observed. They interacted easily with the authors and the visual artist. The lesson plans were well constructed and challenged students to ask questions and propose solutions, focusing on higher order thinking skills. Students were eager to participate in the activities and each student’s contribution - either the discussion of writing or their artwork – was treated respectfully by the instructors. Peer learning was fostered as students critiqued one another’s writing or illustrations.

At times, the students at CS 21 worked individually on writing or art projects. While there was ample opportunity for students to get off task, the independent work kept students focused and there was little need for discipline. It appeared that students were well prepared for the workshops and the clear connections to the social studies unit on civil rights was a perfect fit for Pinkney’s book, *Sit-In.*

Responses in the student focus group confirmed the high level of engagement observed in the classroom. Students volunteered detailed descriptions of projects and assignments that motivated them, including creating comic book characters, writing poetry, and related field trips to publishing houses or exhibits. The focus group comments from students who participated in last year’s program demonstrated that the lessons and activities were still fresh in their minds even though they did not have an author in their class this year. Several students spoke about how the BtB authors inspired them to read more and improve their writing. Their comments reveal the positive and lasting impact of the program such as, “After the author came I started to read constantly and constantly,” and “He got me interested and now I read different types of books,” and “I used to write just short sentences, but now my sentences are longer.”

The impact on student motivation and reading was amplified during the teacher focus group. Teachers were enthusiastic about the catalytic effect of the authors. A few selected comments include, “…they understand that a book has an author, a process, vocabulary, formats and structures,” and “Students connected poetry to their own life experience and used that in class (text to self),” and “I was surprised that the fourth graders that had BtB retained so much of what they learned now as fifth graders; it’s impressive.” These and other responses indicated that teachers felt that students were engaged and motivated to read during the BtB workshops but also retained interest in reading after the program.

Students at PS 165 were likewise engaged in their author workshops. They were full of questions about writing process and the personal dimensions of the author’s life, but equally animated about their own writing. On several occasions, Levine remarked about the high level of reading comprehension because the student writing demonstrated clear understanding of the characters, the narrative progression, and setting.

**Improvement of literacy skills**
The class observations and focus group comments support BtB’s goal of improving literacy skills. CS 21 students (100%) cited their own progress as writers due to the author’s visits. Likewise, the CS 21 teachers recounted how students checked out more books from the library, undertook independent projects outside of the BtB sessions, and incorporated poetry into the writing curriculum. Pinkney stressed the importance of the writing process that should take place every day. She discussed her notion of an ATM that students see at banks and stores. ATM isn’t just about money she said, but the acronym to her means “Always Trust Magic,” and that when you begin writing you have to trust yourself and find your own voice.

While the CS 21 observations combined writing and visual art, the PS 165 program was centered on student writing. Most of the time in the two sessions was allocated to Levine’s process for students to read and critique their final chapters of *Dave at Night*. The exchange among author, students, and teacher examined characterization, narrative structure, setting, used of metaphor and simile, etc. The group discussion and analysis after each student reading was very beneficial for the whole class. It helped each student to understand where to improve their writing as the author and fellow students identified strengths and weaknesses.

**The quality and teaching skills of BtB authors and illustrators**

Pinkney, Korein, and Levine are very capable teachers. They were well prepared, exhibited command of content, managed the class successfully, designed and delivered age-appropriate activities, intentionally reinforced the curriculum, and exhibited an easy rapport with the students and teachers. A teacher in the CS 21 focus group summed it up by saying, “The authors are at the top of their game as educators.”

Students responded enthusiastically to the authors and the visual artist I observed. It was not just the novelty of having an artist in residence for a few days that brought out the best in the students, but the love of learning and the creative process that was transmitted to students. BtB is able to secure well-known writers, and the “star quality” helps to break down barriers with students. An added bonus is that every student receives a free autographed book by the author creating a bond, cementing the teaching and learning. This personal touch is valuable for the teachers as well. One teacher remarked, “We all have collections of books signed by authors, which is special.”

There were a few comments in the student focus group that some authors were not as engaging as others, but the comments were not specific and appeared to be personal opinions not widely shared by most of the students. Teachers noted that the authors are carefully selected, but “Illustrators are not as important as the authors,” because of the literacy focus of BtB.
Impact of BtB programs on teaching practice

Building the capacity of teachers to incorporate arts learning into their practice is a vital dimension of BtB programs. I did not have the opportunity to interview Ms. Morales at PS 165, but 100% of the CS 21 teachers cited examples of how authors had given them new teaching tools and processes. One teacher said, “I use one of the author’s exercises with my students. I get them to focus using soft music….It stimulates interpretation, imagination, and visualization.” Another stated, “I observed that an author’s book from last year was used as a theme for this year for one of the BtB teachers even though she didn’t have an author this year. Those creative writing processes and ideas carried over this year; she did it on her own.”

Teachers at CS 21 are open to a formal program of professional development. Most focus group participants felt that they would attend after school professional development sessions with or without compensation. Jo Umans calls teachers to discuss the options for authors and illustrators to help them prepare for the workshops. She frequently observes classes to offer suggestions for improvement.

Recommendations

CS 21 Teachers and Students

Teachers voiced the need for more class sessions with authors, even though they are challenged to cover the curriculum. A lack of adequate time is a constant concern for teachers that participate in arts learning programs like BtB. It is a credit to the program that teachers would make adjustments in the mandated curriculum to expand the contact with authors and illustrators to benefit their students.

Students echoed this because they value the input from the BtB instructors. Sometimes, projects are started but are not completed in the allotted sessions. Consequently, BtB authors and illustrators don’t get to see the final student projects and offer their feedback.

Teachers requested more curriculum-related field trips to enrich the program. Some classes take them, others don’t. This is a valuable part of the program and where possible, student should receive this exposure. Teachers would be willing to arrange the trips if they were provided the contacts.

Teachers suggested receiving an advance lesson plan outline to better prepare students for the BtB sessions.

Evaluator Recommendations

Increase the number of sessions to deepen the impact for students and teachers. The demand for the BtB is high because of the quality of BtB artists and the
need to boost student literacy. Teachers also remarked that many of the artists are African American and provide excellent role models for students.

Where possible, develop a school wide model in BtB focus schools that have the interest and capacity to better integrate BtB. Teachers at CS 21 noted that students don’t receive BtB every year, but they will have had multiple workshops in various grades by graduation. This is admirable, but sequential or scaffolded programs will serve students more effectively and help teachers anticipate student outcomes and incorporate BtB as students move through the grades.

Incorporate a regular evaluation process for BtB staff to use for class observations. This would improve documentation and help to improve program delivery. Develop a simple evaluation tool for participating teachers to evaluate BtB authors. The tool could identify student indicators that have been met or where improvement is needed.

Provide structured professional development for teachers to use BtB teaching processes and to sustain the impact of BtB after programs conclude. As CS 21 teachers noted, they gained valuable skills by observing authors in their classes and adapting teaching techniques to their own approach.

Conclusion

BtB is an excellent program, based on 2010 evidence gathered at two schools and the wider 2008 evaluation that covered all BtB programs. While this evaluation is not as comprehensive as the Horowitz report, it takes a more granular approach with input with from CS 21 students and teachers that reveal a nuanced view from BtB “customers.” The students at CS 21 were articulate about the value they received from BtB and felt strongly that the program should reach more students. Student voices are often overlooked because the adults make the rules and decide what gets taught. It was refreshing to hear directly from students about what works and what could be improved about BtB. Their enthusiasm for the program and respect for the BtB authors was evident in their remarks and in their focused work in the classroom.

Increasing the organizational capacity of BtB would improve the program development, delivery, and evaluation. Schools need BtB to enhance the literacy and visual arts curriculum, but the economic climate and budget cuts to public schools make it very challenging for schools to help pay for BtB programs. BtB and other cultural organizations in New York are finding it more difficult to raise money for operations and programs due to the recession and the changing interests of donors, many of which are now focusing on social service programs and charter schools.

BtB is a unique organization whose sole purpose is to design and deliver customized literacy programs to schools. While there are other arts groups that provide writing projects for New York City students, BtB has very close relationships with a select group of elementary school partners that are cultivated through multi-year projects. The attention and care given to individual
teachers is a hallmark of this program. In New York’s school system with its focus on high stakes testing, BtB offers teachers a welcome injection of arts learning that is tailored to the learning goals of their students.

In closing, two comments from a CS 21 teacher and a student crystallize the importance of BtB. One teacher stated, “It (BtB) resuscitates my teaching (28 years). It prompts me to think more about my teaching, how I view my students, and has given me new teaching tools.” A student said, “I want them (the authors) to keep coming back so I stay interested in books.”