

The value of reading buddies

SCHOOL'S CORNER

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In my January article, I wrote about how a strong learning atmosphere is created when children feel safe, surrounded by kindness and respect. In that environment of safety, children feel free to take risks, pushing themselves into new learning realms.

As a follow up, I would like to look at the value of our tradition of 'Reading Buddies', which encourages special relationships; shared learning between age groups; builds confidence; and grows a strong school community.

At the Village School, we have four classrooms: Preschool, kindergarten-first grade, second/third grade, and fourth through sixth grade. Within those combined-age classrooms, children get along well and work together on projects, generally ignoring age and grade.

At the Village School, we all have recess together on a grassed-in playground that includes the edge of the woods.

When we were a young school, we noticed that when children went out to play, they segregated themselves into age groups. Sometimes the sixth graders would grumble that the kindergartners ruined their snow fort, or preschoolers would complain that third graders changed their sand-waterway construction. Younger children reported that the older children were not sharing the swings.

Like all schools, we wanted

children to get along; in fact, we wanted children of all ages to have mutual respect.

When we saw children of disparate ages not interacting in the playground, we decided to experiment with the Reading Buddy project.

Originally, we paired fourth to sixth grade students with a Reading Buddy from the preschool and K-1 classrooms. Once a week for fifteen minutes, at 8:45 a.m., the older students came to the younger classrooms and read to their assigned buddies, from a picture book in the classroom.

Older Reading Buddies went through a short training to learn how to help pick books to read to their buddy and how to help a reluctant or shy younger child. In sessions with their teachers, the older children discussed what it meant to be a buddy, and practiced role-playing potentially challenging situations.

Teachers used interactive modeling, acting out a Reading Buddy situation in front of the students. The students made observations and then the children practiced by acting it out themselves.

Reading Buddies immediately took off. Preschoolers and K-1 children looked forward to sitting with their buddies. Older buddies developed a big brother-big sister relationship with their younger buddies. Children were paired with each other for the whole year, giving time for them to develop their special friendship.

Within a month, the playground had changed. Older buddies greeted their younger buddies when they came out to recess, and pushed them on the swings. Younger buddies were invited to join in the older children's games, so that it's not unusual to see first graders and

sixth graders happily playing soccer together.

New visitors often remark on what we now take for granted, "In your recess, all the ages play together, and the groups are all mixed!"

Over the next few years, the relationships developed and extended beyond recess. The second and third graders also became Reading Buddies to the preschool students. We experimented with some All-School Projects, such as the All-School Poetry Project when older buddies work with their younger buddies to write poems together. This has become an annual tradition.

Buddies often sit together at special events and the older children help their younger buddies stay focused. Buddies sit together at the Annual Teddy Bear Picnic and introduce their teddy bears to each other. On Field Day, the older buddies look out for the younger ones. Older Buddies bring favorite books from home to share with their younger buddies.

Every Monday morning, the whole school gathers for All School Sing. Buddies sit and sing together. Perhaps the biggest sign of the impact of the Reading Buddy system was this year, when a kindergarten child named her new puppy after her second grade Reading Buddy.

Now, after fifteen years of Reading Buddies, younger buddies look forward to the day they can become an older buddy and practice the skills their older buddy modeled for them. Both the older and younger children gain confidence from the Reading Buddy relationship. When children are happy socially, learning can take place freely, creatively, and most important, confidently, thanks to the support from peers of all ages.

EDUCATIO

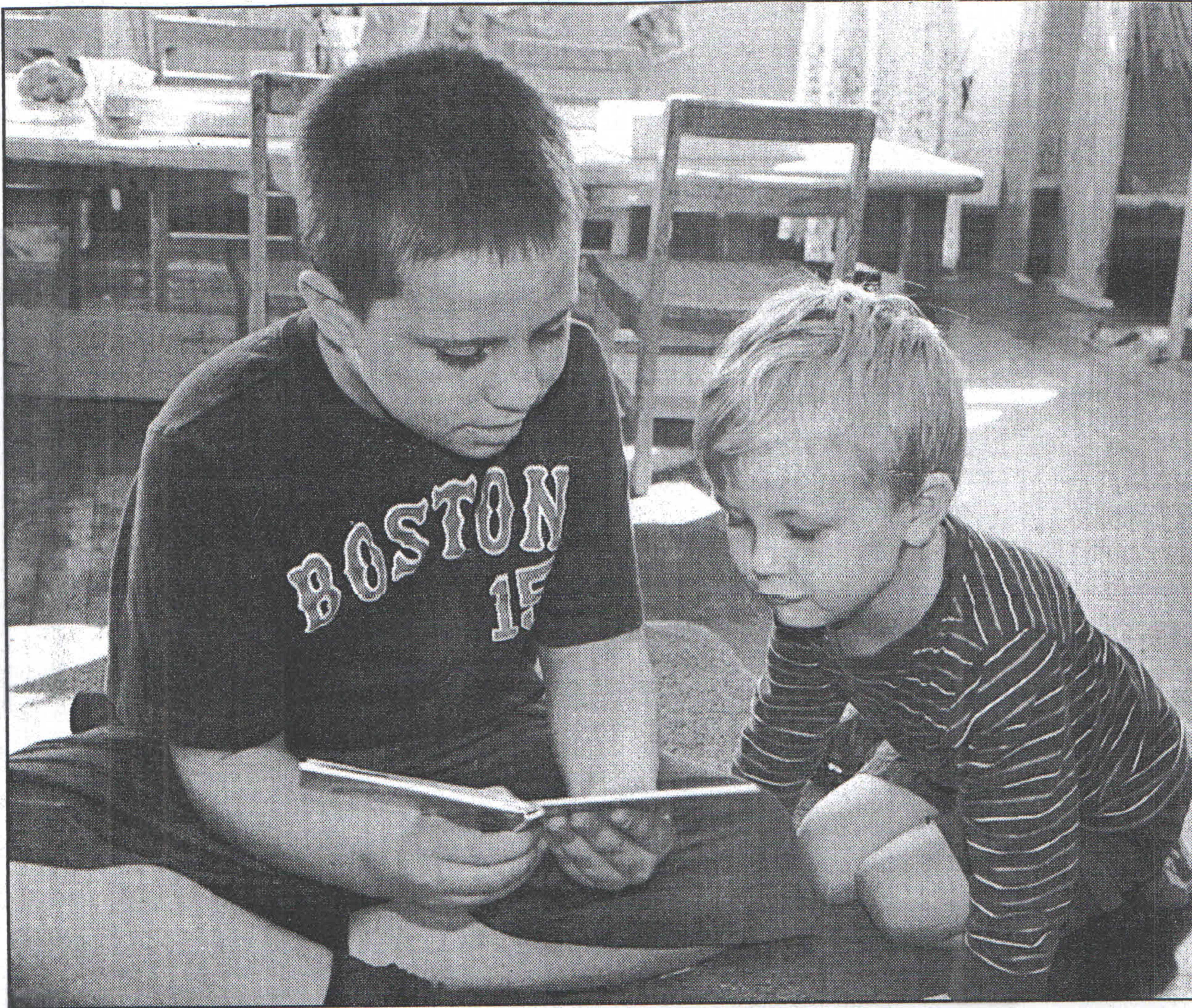


Photo courtesy of the VILLAGE SCHOOL
Milo, of Orange, left and Grant, from Petersham, have their eyes on a book as part of the Village School's "Reading Buddies" program that teams students from different grades together.

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