

A love for reading is one of life's most valuable assets. Reading is an essential life skill as well as a means of lifelong enjoyment.

However, many children have negative attitudes toward reading. Because traditional basal reading programs do not focus on the concept of authorship, many children do not recognize that the stories are written by a person who sought to entertain or inform. Furthermore, too much attention is given to workbooks and skill sheets, leaving little time for students to actually enjoy the literature. As a result, many children are not aware of good stories, authors, or even the process by which books are written.

For students to see books as living literature, they need to learn that books are written by real people like themselves. Jim Trelease suggests: "Bring the author to life, as well as his book Let them know that books are written by people, not by machines."¹ Lucy McCormick Calkins says that children love hearing interesting facts about authors. For example, they are fascinated to learn that E. B. White spent long hours observing a spider at work in his barn before writing *Charlotte's Web*. As he was writing, he kept a specimen of a spider in a matchbox on his desk.²

Improving Reading Skills

When the reading program focuses on authors, children spend more time reading and responding to literature. They are thus more likely to become skilled readers.³

"Good readers select books by authors. When they read a book they enjoy, they find other books written by

Introducing Children to Authors

BY PAM McTAVISH

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Because traditional basal reading programs do not focus on the concept of authorship, many children do not recognize that the stories are written by a person who sought to entertain or inform.

that person."⁴ As they discuss authors and respond to their literature, students become thinkers. They want to find out why the author wrote the book, where the author got his or her ideas, and how long the book took to write.⁵

As they become familiar with an author, students can make better predictions. This increases their comprehension.⁶ Their search for meaning is informed by knowledge about the author and what he or she is trying to do.⁷ Studies supported by the National Institute of Education indicated that "when readers were familiar with the topic and likely to identify with the author, they were more likely to recall more and be more critical of their reading."⁸ Hence, giving children the opportunity to be-

come acquainted with authors furthers their reading development.

Ideas for Implementation

In *Creating a Classroom for Authors*, Harste, Short, and Burke suggest these procedures for introducing children to authors:

1. Set up a display of the author's work in the classroom and briefly introduce the books to the class.

2. Compile biographical information on the author or illustrator and add this to the display.

3. Introduce the author to the class by briefly telling about his or her back-

ground and sharing any life stories or comments that might be of interest.

4. Over a given time period, share the author's books with the class through a short book introduction, reading excerpts, or reading the entire books.

5. Once students have had the chance to explore the author's work, give them the opportunity to respond in some way. This could include sharing times in which students talk with one another about the book, or doing book-related projects.

After the author and books have been introduced, I allow my students to choose which book they would like to read. Students who choose the same books are called "book buddies." At the end of reading period, "buddies" get together to discuss story development. I give them a list of questions to guide their thinking. One person is chosen as the leader for the day. That student is responsible for asking the questions and drawing out responses from group members. Another student is chosen to be the recorder; he or she writes down the answers the group has agreed upon. Finally, a reporter is chosen to share the group's response with the teacher or the class.

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After they finish the book, the groups enjoy doing a project to share with the class. That makes other class members want to read the book, too!

When I use this program in a multi-grade classroom, I usually keep my younger grades together in a group. Then while the older students are reading or working in their groups, I can work with the younger children. While the younger children are working, I visit the "book buddy" groups to observe and guide their discussions.

Children in a multigrade class enjoy authors such as Dr. Seuss, Ezra Jack

Keats, Maurice Sendak, and Peggy Parish. The older students like to hear about the author just as much as the younger ones, and have fun reading to the younger children.

Recommendations

- Get acquainted with your local librarians. They will recommend authors that children enjoy, as well as books that fit the needs of a particular class.

- For students to develop a complete sense of authorship, they need to be actively involved in the writing process. I schedule an "author's time" when the students themselves are writers. They enjoy composing their own stories and sharing them with the class. After they complete the writing process, they "publish" their book, and place it on our library shelf for others to read.

- Be sure to consider the needs and concerns of your community. Be sensitive to which books may or may not be appropriate to use in the classroom.

- Even if you cannot obtain biographical information on a particular author, you can still use that author. Students will enjoy discovering the

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author's style, comparing his or her books, and even making predictions about what kind of person they think the author might be.

- Having an author visit your classroom can be very helpful. You must, however, prepare carefully for the visit. Allow plenty of time for your students to learn about the author and to read several of his or her works before the visit. The author will appreciate the students' interest, and the visit will be much more meaningful.

Conclusion

Supplementing the reading program by introducing students to authors can enhance students' learning. If children learn that books are created by real people like themselves, they should be more interested in reading and their attitudes toward reading should improve. This will help them become competent readers as well as people who develop lifelong pleasure through reading. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 60.
2. Lucy McCormick Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1986), pp. 229, 230.
3. Bernice E. Cullinan, *Children's Literature in the Reading Program* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1987), p. 12.
4. Linda Leonard Lamme, "Authorship: A Key Facet of Whole Language," *The Reading Teacher* 41:5 (January 1988), p. 705.
5. Calkins, p. 230.
6. Jerome C. Harste, et. al., *Creating a Classroom for Authors* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1988), p. 232.
7. Robert J. Tierney, "Authors' Intentions and Readers' Interpretations, Technical Report No. 276," ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 229740 (May 1983).
8. Tierney, p. 28.
9. Harste, pp. 232, 233.

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BOOK PROJECT IDEAS

1. Create a drama based on a book.
2. Do an art project on the book.
3. Create a display for the book.
4. Write your own story using the book's characters.
5. Write your own story copying the author's style.
6. Write a letter to the author.
7. Compare different books by one author.
8. Celebrate the author's birthday.
9. Listen to a taped interview with the author.
10. Meet an author in person.
11. Make a television commercial to "sell" the book.
12. Create a puppet show using one of the scenes from the book.

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