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Birthday Booktalks: Fostering Emergent Literacy and Self-esteem in Young Children

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The celebration of birthdays provides teachers the opportunity to recognize and honor each child, thereby nurturing feelings of self-esteem. When combined with birthday celebrations, booktalks on literature selections related to birthdays are recommended to promote emergent literacy as well as self-esteem. Examples that demonstrate different booktalk formats are given in this article. At the end of the article are additional suggested titles on which teachers may do birthday booktalks.

SELF-ESTEEM REFERS to how we feel about ourselves as human beings and includes our perceptions about our competence and capabilities. Summarizing research on this topic, Taylor, Harris, Pearson, and Garcia (1995) note that people who possess greater "self-efficacy," or feelings of competence and capability for particular tasks, take on more activities, try harder, persist longer, and ultimately perform better than those who see themselves in a less positive light (p. 76).

The role of teachers in promoting self-esteem cannot be underestimated. Spodek and Saracho (1994) affirm that teachers are the crucial factor in the way children "feel about school, themselves, and each other, and how much progress they make" (p. 178). Consequently, because feelings of positive self-worth are critical to success in school and in life, teachers should find ways to create classroom environments that promote self-esteem in learners. For children in preschool and primary grades, classroom activities that value personal experiences may promote the development of self-esteem (Beaty, 1996).

Because birthdays are special in the lives of young children, these events provide teachers with opportunities to celebrate and honor the uniqueness of each child, thus fostering feelings of self-worth. When combined with recommended techniques for booktalks, birthday celebrations also may encourage, through pleasurable experiences, the lifelong habit in emergent readers of voluntary reading.

Many concomitant benefits to growth in literacy result from such reading experiences. Children's language structure becomes more mature, prior knowledge deepens, allowing greater integration of new learning into existing learning, interest in books increases, and knowledge of narrative forms and story grammar grows. Nonreaders have an opportunity to begin developing reading ability earlier than would occur otherwise. And overall reading achievement improves as children are exposed to more and more literature to which they can apply reading competencies already explicitly taught in the classroom (Morrow, 1986).

What Are Booktalks?

Professional literature is rife with suggestions for encouraging readers to connect with good books. Among these recommendations are booktalks, what Bodart (1986) calls "a sales pitch for books" (p. 20). Although they tend to be suggested more for use with upper elementary through secondary levels of instruction, booktalks may be effective in promoting the reading interests of preschool and primary age pupils as well (Norton & Anfin, 1997).

Formats for booktalks may vary and may include such traditional types as the plot summary, anecdote, character, and mood (Bodart, 1985). Others might include author, theme, and genre; which may encompass any of the other four traditional formats (Norton & Anfin, 1997). For instance, showcased books that focus on the theme of birthdays to foster self-worth may also be in the form of plot summary, anecdote, character, or mood.

What follows are examples that demonstrate different booktalk formats to get teachers started on literature selections related to birthdays. At the end of the article are additional suggested titles for birthday booktalks. Teachers may elect to do one for each child's birthday, or if they have large classes they may do one or several booktalks once per month or week to honor groups of children whose birthdays occur during those times. Whichever way teachers choose, they should adhere to what Bodart (1985, p. 5) calls the two "unbreakable" rules of booktalking: never talk about a book not read and never give away the book's ending. The key idea is to present enough interesting detail about the book so that the child will be enticed to get it and read it (Norton & Anfin, 1997).

Plot Summary Booktalks

In the plot summary booktalk, suspense is created by telling just enough of the story to make children want to get the book and read it to find out what will happen next. This idea is illustrated by the presentation below:

A Letter to Amy

Written By Ezra Jack Keats

Published: New York: Harper & Row, 1968

Friends can make a birthday party special. In *A Letter to Amy*, Ezra Jack Keats tells the story of Peter's birthday party. The story begins with Peter writing a special birthday invitation to his friend, Amy. When he and his dog, Willie, walk to the mailbox to mail the invitation to Amy, a strong wind blows the letter out of Peter's hand. As he catches the letter, he bumps into Amy and knocks her down. Before she can see that the letter is for her, Peter stuffs it into the mailbox. Amy runs away crying. Will Amy come to Peter's party? Is she still his special friend? Peter is very sad. If you want to find out whether Peter has a "happy" birthday party, you'll have to read *A Letter To Amy*.

Anecdote

As with the plot summary type, in the anecdotal booktalk the presenter selects interesting details not about a whole book, but about a single incident from a story or about one entire story in an anthology. With this format, the conclusion may be given, thus violating Bodart's fundamental injunction about never revealing the ending (Bodart, 1986). Children should then be exhorted to read the entire book for other exciting incidents or stories like the one focused upon in the presentation. Storybooks with an episodic structure or collections of short stories, folktales, fables, and poetry work well with the anecdotal format. The following three presentations illustrate an anecdote from two picture storybooks and from a poetry anthology.

Mary Wore her Red Dress and Henry Wore his Green Sneakers

Written By Merle Peek

Published: New York: Clarion, 1985

Do you like to sing? Do you like to play guessing games? If you do, you might enjoy *Mary Wore Her Red Dress and Henry Wore His Green Sneakers*, a book adapted and illustrated by Merle Peek. Mary is a squirrel, and Henry is a raccoon. They are only two of the guests at Katy Bear's birthday party. As you can see, the pictures at the beginning

of the book are in black and white. Each animal that comes to the birthday party introduces a new color. These are shown here on the title page. An example of one of the colors is in this next picture. Here, Mary a little squirrel, is going to the birthday party, and she is dressed up in a *red* party dress. As she walks along, Henry, a raccoon, races to catch up with her on this next page. In this particular illustration, Henry is wearing *green* sneakers. At the end of the book, which I'm not going to show you, there are nine different colors in the pictures! The book also has a guessing game, and you may have to think hard and look at the pictures carefully to make a good guess. Take my word for it: *Mary Wore Her Red Dress and Henry Wore His Green Sneakers* is fun to read, and it's available in our classroom reading center.

Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present

Written By Charlotte Zolotow

Illustrated by Maurice Sendak

Published: New York: Harper & Row, 1962

Trying to pick out the right birthday present for someone special can be very difficult. *Mr. Rabbit And The Lovely Present*, written by Charlotte Zolotow and illustrated by Maurice Sendak, tells the story of a little girl who asks a rabbit to help her find a present for her mother's birthday. Because her mother likes red, the little girl decides that she wants to give her mother something that color. The rabbit suggests red underwear, a red roof, red birds or cardinals, red fire engines, and finally red apples. The little girl thinks that red apples are the best suggestion, and so the rabbit and the little girl pick some red apples from an apple tree. But the story doesn't stop there. The rabbit has lots of other ideas to make a very special gift for the little girl's mother. If you would like to find out what birthday surprise the little girl finally gives to her mother, you'll have to read the book!

Happy Birthday

Poems Selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins

Illustrated by Hilary Knight

Published: New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991

Happy Birthday is a collection of poems about birthdays selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins and illustrated by Hilary Knight. Do you remember the first birthday present you were given? Probably not! That was a long time ago! In the poem "My First Birthday Gift," by Sandra Liatsos, a little girl remembers her first birthday gift. Can you guess what it was?

In another poem, "Birthday Surprise," by Margaret Hillert, a little boy describes a birthday present given to him by his brother. The present comes in a big box. When he opens the box and looks inside, he finds another smaller box. When he opens the small box, he finds another box. In the last four lines of the poem, the little boy says:

And there inside the smallest one
Oh, hurry, hurry, HURRY
I found a little baby mouse,
All soft and warm and furry.

In a third poem "Birthday Cake," the author Aileen Fisher wonders how little mice celebrate their birthdays. If you were a mouse, what kind of birthday cake would you like?

If you choose to read *Happy Birthday*, you will have a hard time picking out your favorite poem. I know I did.

Character

This format is appropriate for titles that focus on describing a main character, whether a person, animal, or thing: The teacher speaks in first person, pretending to be the character and thereby infusing drama into the booktalk. Booktalkers will enjoy the acting that these presentations require and so will young listeners.

Leo the Late Bloomer

Written By Robert Kraus

Illustrated by Jose Aruego

Published: New York: Windmill, 1971

Hi! My name is Leo. I'm a tiger. Every year when I celebrate my birthday, I think about how much I've grown up. I'm big now, but when I was little, I was a "late bloomer." Do you know what that means? It means I couldn't do anything! I couldn't draw; I couldn't write; and I couldn't read. I was also a sloppy eater, and I never said a word. My father worried about me, but my mom knew I was just a "late bloomer" and would be able to do things in my own good time. She knew I would bloom eventually, after I was older and had other birthdays. It might take a long time for me to grow and be able to write, to draw, and to eat neatly and to speak, but she had confidence and believed in me. If you would like to find out whether a little tiger like me, who couldn't do much, would grow and bloom, then read *Leo, the Late Bloomer*. It was written by Robert Kraus and illustrated by Jose Aruego.

Mood

This type of presentation lends itself to stories evoking a strong sense of atmosphere, usually created by the writing style, especially specific words, images, and figures of speech. These elements of style may create an overall eerie, joyful, sad, or triumphant feeling. Just as there are an infinite variety of emotions, so may there be an infinite variety of moods. The speaker will work carefully to select words and images, sometimes directly from the text, to evoke the general atmosphere of the work. Frequently, mood booktalks are combined with the three previously discussed. The example below is both mood and plot summary.

Alphie Gives a Hand

Written By Shirley Hughes

Published: New York: Lothrop, 1984

Do you feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations? Have you ever been afraid of going somewhere new? How do you feel when your parents leave you with a baby sitter? You don't know? How did you feel on the first day of school? Sometimes it helps to have an old toy or a special blanket to hold onto when you are in a new place and feel frightened or insecure. In this book, *Alphie Gives a Hand*, Shirley Hughes tells the story of a little boy named Alphie. Alphie is very

excited until he learns that his mother will not be able to go to the birthday party with him. While his mother wraps a birthday present for Bernard, Alphonse grabs his old bit of a blanket that he sleeps with at night. When his mother drops him off at the party, she tries to persuade him to put down his blanket, but Alphonse holds his blanket tightly. At the party, Alphonse discovers that he is not the only one who is afraid. His friend Min begins to cry. And then Alphonse does something that is very brave and very kind. Can you guess what he does to help Min stop crying? I won't tell you how the story ends, but I can tell you that Min and Alphonse have a wonderful time at the birthday party. If you would like to read about the party, check out *Alphonse Gives A Hand*. It's available in our classroom library.

Conclusion

Research indicates booktalks are a useful means of fostering literacy development. Books circulate more among students who have heard booktalks (Overmeyer, 1987; Spencer, 1984). Moreover, teachers who present booktalks have an added opportunity to shepherd children toward high quality literature available in the classroom-reading center (Witucke, 1979). Worthwhile reading selections will expand children's background knowledge and spur their growth in literacy and learning (Vacca & Vacca, 2002). When used in conjunction with events that honor each child's uniqueness as an individual, booktalks with connections to birthday celebrations offer an opportunity to promote not only literacy but feelings of positive self-worth.

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