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COLLEGE STUDENTS READING TO PRESCHOOLERS

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It is not enough to expose future teachers and parents to good literature for children. It is important that they see young children reacting to books being read to them, an opportunity education majors get during preservice training. Non-education majors enrolled in my children's literature class were given, as an alternative to a traditional term paper, a chance to interact with preschoolers through the medium of books. Twenty-one students chose to participate in this project.

Local libraries and preschools are usually eager to have volunteer help for reading and telling stories to groups of children. Dr. Patricia Crook, of the University faculty, had long utilized them in conjunction with children's literature classes she teaches. In all, I found seven facilities willing to accommodate the needs of the project. Seven students were assigned to the University's Child Development Center, two students to the University's Speech and Hearing preschool, six students to three local libraries, and six students to two local preschools.

Each student's assignment included reading/telling stories to a group of children for a total of six sessions, spaced a week apart. Each student then submitted a written report to me, describing his or her experiences with the children. These reports provided the data for this article. All twenty-one students completed the assignment.

The Students

Students participating in the project were non-education majors. They attended different schools of the University including Arts and Sciences, Commerce, and Nursing. They were sophomores, juniors and seniors, and no one was planning a teaching career.

The Class

Students in this project attended weekly classes in children's literature. This contact was important for several reasons. It enabled the students to explore the many kinds of books for young children, ranging from Mother Goose rhymes to contemporary realistic fiction. In a class setting, these books were analyzed as to their literary quality, value orientation, and relevance for young children. Comparing books with similar themes, as sibling

rivalry or divorce, gave students a basis from which to select books to share with their young audiences.

The children's literature class also provided a chance for the students to meet and discuss common concerns about their reading experiences. For example, a student having difficulty with keeping children's attention had twenty other students' experience to draw upon in finding a solution.

The knowledge base of the course provided students with valuable information. A focus of the course is matching available books to the cognitive level of developing children. Such topics as egocentricity in preoperational children and evolving attention to print were explored in the course.

Perhaps the most important aspect of taking the course while participating in the project was that the importance of reading to children was constantly being reinforced. Discussions often focused on the value of having been read to in the students' own early lives in terms of concept development, development of a sense of story structure, familiarity with the unique prosody of the written word, and promoting a lifelong love of books. These understandings easily transferred to the reading experiences being shared with the children.

The Preschoolers

The children being read to ranged in age from two to six, with the majority preschoolers as well as a few kindergarteners and first graders who attended the libraries' story hour sessions. A cross-section of the community's children were represented in the reading groups. Children from two to six constituted the library story hour groups, while in the preschool settings, children of two and three were usually in a different group from that of the four year olds. Group size varied from about three to eight children. The preschool groups tended to remain constant over the weeks, while the library groups changed from week to week.

Lessons Learned

All students found their experiences rewarding, but most incurred some conflict or problem over the course of the sessions. The written reports demonstrated that many lessons were learned from reading to groups of children. Recommendations abounded concerning motivation, attention span, related activities, and kinds of books. These areas will be discussed in turn.

Motivation

Children naturally like being read to. At times it takes little else than just an announcement that a story is about to be read for children to flock around the reader. Yet, children involved in other play activities often need a more creative introduction to reading time than a mere call to gather. Most of the students reported that they just didn't start in with the story. A few of their successful motivating techniques follow:

- 1) The student sat in a chair and began to sing. A quiet, yet catchy tune initiates interest in the singer who soon becomes reader/teller.

- 2) The student entered the room quacking and waddling like a duck, and proceeded to read a story about ducks. Assuming a novel role adds excitement to reading time.
- 3) The student called each child to her, by name, one at a time. This special touch makes the story hour warm and personal.
- 4) Once the student had the children in front of her, she learned to direct their attention to her and the book she was about to read. The student learned that the book must face the children so that the illustrations could be seen by all.

Attention Span

Preschoolers have notoriously short attention spans. Students who chose lengthy stories soon learned that they had lost their audience. Following are some recommendations for maintaining attention to the reading activity:

- 1) The student selected more than one book to share during the story hour. A rule of thumb is three or four short books per half hour.
- 2) The student varied the types of books being shared. Rather than reading three folktales, better to choose one folktale, one concept book and some short narrative story.
- 3) The student involved the children in the stories through vocal participation, questioning, and being responsive to children's comments about the story. While a couple students were annoyed by children's interruptions of the reading, most observed that this verbal interaction is a positive opportunity for oral language development.
- 4) The student rehearsed the book before sharing it with children. This pre-reading gave the reader more confidence in stressing key phrases and unique dialogue. When one reads a book and really likes it, enthusiasm for the story is shared along with the book itself.
- 5) The student learned to have respect for the audience, despite their young years. Children have a genuine interest in listening to stories, and while some restlessness is natural for young children, a rising volume of seat squirming is an indication that a particular book is not interesting. Not all stories will appeal to all children, and some stories will appeal to very few.

Related Activities

The use of books leads to other, related activities. Some of the creative situations used by the students to hold and expand the impact of stories and concept books follow:

- 1) The student drew pictures of characters as they appeared in the story. This technique brings the story alive for many children. It also proves useful to young children who have difficulty holding all of the story's characters in their minds.
- 2) The student dressed up stuffed animals to represent characters

in the story. A different child held each animal and raised it above his head when the character appeared in the story. This technique helps young children maintain an interest in the actions of a particular character.

- 3) The student had the children act out the actions of the story as she read it. Children must listen closely to a story when they are to represent it in movement.
- 4) The student, after reading the story, had the preschoolers dictate their reactions to the story. Children who have an opportunity to note that their reactions or feelings are being written down realize that their ideas are being valued and have a chance to gain a little more experience with the speech to print match.
- 5) The student used the book about feelings as a springboard for the children to discuss the variety of feelings they share. Books are wonderful motivators for children to open up and talk. They provide a focus for discussion.
- 6) The student told, rather than read, a story. The rich legacy of storytelling brings teller and audience closer as one medium, a book is removed from between them.
- 7) The student, after sharing a book, made it accessible to the children. Children will naturally pick up a book that has been read to them and "read" it themselves, remembering some passages, inventing some dialogue, and feeling successful at this pre-reading stage.

Kinds of Books

Picture books for young children abound. While the students found that most children enjoyed a variety of styles of books, they judged the book's illustrations to be a most important determinant of its appeal. Children responded best to books containing brightly colored yet simply drawn illustrations. One student reported that "the easier the pictures were to understand, the more the book was enjoyed." Following are some of the types and titles of books that were favorites of the preschoolers:

- 1) Books which promote the rhythm of language — Mother Goose books with their familiar rhymes allow children to join in the play of choral resitation. Similarly, Theodor Geisel's Dr. Seuss books make language fun to hear and say. Students read many of the Dr. Seuss titles, including Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?, Dr. Seuss' Sleep Book, and Green Eggs and Ham.
- 2) Wordless Picture Books — The use of these books helps preschoolers understand that books can tell a story and pre-readers themselves may make up a story line to accompany a wordless or nearly wordless book. Some of the books read by the students were Pat Hutchins' Rosie's Walk and Changes Changes, Mercer Mayer's One Frog Too Many, and Peter Spier's Caldecott winner, Noah's Ark.
- 3) Predictable Books—Pre- and beginning readers need books which are predictable in nature. As with other areas of experience,

reading is an anticipatory act wherein the reader or listener wants to verify his expectation of what is likely to happen in a story. Books which highlight this human predilection are both educationally valuable and fun. Sometimes the book capitalizes on repeated phrases, making the book most predictable as Margaret Wise Brown's Goodnight Moon and Maggie Duff's Jonny and His Drum. Other books include events which trigger probable subsequent events as Beatrice Schenk de Regniers' May I Bring a Friend?

- 4) Animal Stories— Children love animals wild and ferocious and animals tame and adorable. Children's inquisitive minds and trusting natures make them responsive to both realistic and fanciful animal stories. Some of the animal stories shared with the preschoolers were Anrold Lobel's How the Rooster Saved the Day, James Marshall's Yummers, and Emily Hanlon's What If A Lion Eats Me and I Fall Into a Hippopotamus Mud Hole?
- 5) Participation Books— There are books which practically seduce the listener into repeating its phrases, oinking like its pigs, howling like its wolves, or quacking like its ducks. No group of preschoolers can resist joining in on "Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions of cats and billions and trillions of cats," from Wanda Gag's classic tale Millions of Cats. Other books shared which invited children's participation included Esphyr Slobodkina's Caps for Sale, Dr. Seuss' Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You? and John Burningham's The Rabbit and The Dog.
- 6) Familiar Characters— How we love to follow the adventures of a favorite character! Children are as eager to hear new episodes of characters met in earlier read books. Many of the students read several books in a series. Among them are Russell Hoban's Frances, Martha Alexander's Blackboard Bear, Else Minarik's Little Bear, and E.A.Rey's Curious George.

The twenty-one students who participated in this reading project learned a great deal about the children and about sharing books with children. Certainly, they learned that reading to children involves a triad of elements: enthusiastic reader, actively involved listener, and meaningful book. On a human level, the book is probably less important than the interaction of reader and listener. As one student so aptly advised, "It's not the book you choose to read but how much of yourself you are willing to put into the children."

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