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Chapter 21

Up Close and Personal: Hosting Diverse Authors

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ABSTRACT

Preparing diverse students to become lifetime readers and writers is best facilitated through experiences with high quality, diverse literature and through the models of the authors and illustrators who create those works. Nothing quite brings an author or illustrator to life like hearing from them in person by hosting an author visit. This chapter explores the value of planning an author visit as an authentic means to learn about diverse authors and their work. Information is provided about identifying and choosing a diverse author or illustrator, planning the logistics of the visit, and preparing to build background and interest within the school and the community in anticipation of the visit. This information is framed with the elements for an assignment that could be employed in a children's literature course offered to pre-service teachers and librarians to create a mock plan for an in-person author visit in a school. Students could carry this assignment forward to their classrooms or libraries to plan an author visit or to write a grant to fund a visit.

INTRODUCTION

Author study is a frequent feature in children's literature courses and in K-12 classrooms (Kennedy, 2012). The study of an author's body of work allows readers to find patterns through familiar themes, characters, or settings across an author's work. These studies often include learning about the author's life as well as their craft. Learning about an author as a person serves to humanize the author and the work of the author. The inclusion of authors who are Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPOC) has the additional benefit of expanding the reader's conception of who does the work of writing, where their ideas come from, and the variety of experiences found in literature. These studies may be enlarged by videos of the author or through other opportunities to hear them speak. Opportunities to interact with authors in real time can provide a deeper engagement with the author as well as excitement about their writing. This chapter explores the value of planning an author visit as an authentic means to learn about

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diverse authors and their work. In a literature course at the university level, the traditional author study might be replaced with the project described in this chapter, which has real-world application.

This chapter focuses on planning a school-wide, one-day visit for an author, author-illustrator, or illustrator visit. In this chapter, “author” is used to refer to an author, author-illustrator, or illustrator. Visits from book illustrators have many of the same benefits as an author visit. They may inspire different students to get excited about books and reading. Illustrators will often draw as part of their presentation, or even draw something for individual students as they autograph books. Creators of graphic novels may also be popular choices (Tamaki et al., 2015).

An author visit is a huge undertaking for schools. As a school librarian for over fifteen years, I have experience with planning and hosting author visits. I was fortunate early in my career to share the planning and preparation for an author visit with several more experienced and knowledgeable school librarians. I hope my experience will provide similar inspiration and support to future educators and the university educators who teach courses in children’s literature. Exposure to the planning elements for such an event during pre-service education allows future teachers and librarians to learn about an author or illustrator and think through the steps of hosting an author visit. Students could carry this assignment forward to their classrooms or libraries to plan an author visit or to write a grant to fund a visit. While the focus of this chapter is planning for a school visit, the advice in this chapter might also be used by university educators to guide the planning and implementation of an author visit for a course. An instructor might work with community partners including libraries, bookstores, schools and/or universities to bring such experiences to their students and the community. Community partnerships such as this lend themselves to funding applications to both internal university grants and external, national grant solicitations.

There are other models for author visits that allow students to meet or work with an author in a small group or workshop. Hand (2006), a librarian, talks about moving away from an assembly format to having smaller workshop events with students and reports these had longer lasting impacts on students. A multi-day visit with master classes connected to the research process rather than specific curricula allowed students to engage in a deep dive into the process of research and writing with impacts on achievement including test scores. Another model (Varsalona, 2006) is to host a student authors conference where students write to compete for slots where they can get to meet and work with an author. Both of these models have a lot to offer but may be more costly and exclusive. This chapter will focus on the one-day, whole school author visit as a means to connect the most students with the event.

Background

Windows and Mirrors

Much has been written about the need for windows and mirrors in children’s literature ever since Bishop (1990) coined the phrase. Experts acknowledge that readers need to identify with characters and experiences in what they read in order to build the connections needed for comprehension. Gilmore and Bell (2006) articulate the reasons for using diverse literature as increasing confidence and motivation of children from diverse families and showing them their families are valued. Children also learn by encountering families different from their own, or who may have different values and concerns. Books also serve to build empathy and expand understanding of others and other cultures. In order for a multi-cultural society to be successful, everyone needs to see themselves reflected in the society’s culture and

to see others acknowledged as part of the culture. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2020) posted a statement about the importance of the inclusion of a diverse curriculum for all students:

Part of this discrimination takes place in the form of erasure, and these communities continue to face a school curriculum that, for them, frequently downplays or does not include their communities' work and contributions. Ironically, it is also a curriculum which, in a different fashion, deprives white students and teachers by denying them opportunities to gain a more complete and accurate picture of the diverse and intricately connected constellations of histories and literatures of the United States.

Hunter (2015) also provides a strong rationale about why diverse literature is for everyone, reminding readers that diverse literature also represents great storytelling that promotes empathy with all readers. Mabbot (2017) clearly states the need for all children to see diversity in literature and for white children as well to read about the experiences of people of color (p. 519).

Diverse Authors

Recent events have brought considerable attention to diverse literature for children. It has been acknowledged for years that literature for young people has been sorely lacking in literature by and about Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). Christopher Myers (cited in Mabbot, 2017) termed it an “apartheid of literature.” While many recognize Nancy Larrick’s 1965 publication as seminal in its attention to the issue, others have noted she was not the first to call attention to the issue (Thomas, 2016). Criticisms have been lobbied particularly at the lack of diverse authorship. Indeed, the evidence continues to support the concern that books written by BIPOC lag behind those featuring BIPOC. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) annually tracks the underrepresentation of people of color as characters in children’s literature but also highlight the even lower numbers for BIPOC authors. In the latest statistics from 2019, books with characters representing a particular race or ethnicity outnumbered those authored by persons in that group. For example, in 2019, the number of books with Black characters (471) more than doubled the 232 books written by Black authors (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2020).

Readers clearly deserve to see themselves in the characters who come to life on the pages of the books they read, but they also need to see people like themselves who have successfully written or illustrated and published one or more books. The fact that there remain more books featuring BIPOC than books authored by BIPOC suggests that authors are writing about characters from other cultures. Thomas (2016) asks “Who has the right to tell diverse stories” (Thomas, 2016, p. 113) and suggests that books about a culture authored by those outside the culture may contribute to mis-representation and stereotyping. Can someone from a different culture authentically write about that culture or in the voice of that culture? A growing movement, “Ownvoices” (Duyvis, n.d.), seeks to highlight those authors who write about their own experience and culture and calls our attention not just to literature featuring diverse peoples but literature about and by diverse people. “Ownvoices” has expanded to include not only authors of color or from different ethnic cultures but also authors whose experience represents the disability or LGBTQ experience. These authors embody the people and experiences they write about. Their visibility on book flaps, publisher’s websites, in promotional materials, on stages, and in interviews demonstrate that diversity also applies to those who author books.

In their 2015 statement about diverse literature, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) released a position statement on the “need for diverse children’s and young adult books” that put forth two resolutions. The first was to have diverse experience reflected in literature for children while a second resolution was to “highlight and support” authors and illustrators among others whose “work represents multiple perspectives and cultural diversity in the lives of *all* children.” Children just don’t need literature about diverse perspectives: They need authors and illustrators who represent that diversity. If we are placing a value on representation of diversity not only in the books we read and share with young people but representation among the authors and illustrators of those works, then we must not just support but celebrate those authors and illustrators. Young BIPOC readers who witness this representation among the authors and illustrators of published books may be more likely to find models who mirror their experience to serve as their heroes and mentors.

Importance of Mentors

Teachers and librarians can feature diverse authors in their literature choices, on bulletin boards, and in author studies. The visibility of diverse authors provides more opportunities for young people to see people who look like them and who have been successful authors. Young people deserve career models who look like them. In his strong opinion piece in the *New York Times*, Walter Dean Myers (2014) relates his experience as an adult meeting the Black author, James Baldwin and reflects, “how much more meaningful it would have been to have known Baldwin’s story at 15, or 14. Perhaps even younger before I had started my subconscious quest for identity.” In formative childhood and adolescent years, young people begin to develop identities and ideas about who they want to be when they grow up. This type of career visioning must also be acknowledged as important. Young people of color need to see professionals who look like them authoring the books they read. When we host career events in schools, Booth (2018) suggests finding local authors through the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) to feature as part of a career event. Follos (2004) suggests hearing from an author allows us to get the “story behind the story” (p. 2). Bringing diverse authors and illustrators to career events provides the opportunity for young people to learn the stories of the people who write the stories we find in books.

In addition to career choices, education seeks to develop identities of readers and writers. Books by and about diverse people are critical to the development of readers. In order to develop fluency and reading comprehension skills, readers need to be able to make connections (Song & Catapano, 2006) between what they read and their own experiences. Comprehension involves making meaningful connections with what is read; otherwise, a reader may struggle with reading and become discouraged. Smith-D’Arezzo (2003) also provides similar discussion related to disability depicted in books.

Culham (2018) suggests finding mentor texts as a way to entice diverse readers to see themselves as writers. Much has been written about the use of “mentor texts” to teach writing by providing learners with models from real-world texts and authors (Gallagher, 2011). Mentor texts provide readers with the experience of reading through the eyes of the writer in order to study what writers do. Readers may consider what techniques authors employ to “amaze and challenge us,” and how might we use “those same techniques as we write for ourselves and for others” (Culham, 2018, p. 510). If we wish to develop more diverse authors, we need to offer more diverse texts in schools. Shubitz (2019) suggests infusing writing instruction with social justice texts offering examples and sources for finding similar texts. Author visits are one means to bring the mentoring offered by quality literature to life for students.

Up Close and Personal

Nothing quite brings an author or illustrator to life like hearing from them in person whether it's at a conference, in an online video, or autographing in a bookstore or festival. As recently as 2014, the *We Need Diverse Books* movement grew out of a growing frustration with the preponderance of white male authors in author events (Mabbot, 2017). Some kinds of diversity are not apparent from a still photo but must be expressed by the author as they discuss their lived experiences and how these have influenced their craft and their career path. What kinds of adversity have they needed to overcome? What advice do they have for those who aspire to similar careers? Seeing them as living, speaking, moving people conveys a stronger message than glossy photos in publisher's promotional materials. These kinds of "real life" encounters are more memorable, more humanizing, and more deeply felt and understood.

Culham (2018) discusses the ways reading a powerfully written text by a diverse author allows readers to feel "... as though the author is right there with you and your students" (p. 512-13). Well, what better than to actually have the author right there? Two sisters (Aguirre & Torres, 2021) report how author Brad Meltzer's visit to their high school inspired them as writers: "I saw an actual author who had gone to my school and made me feel like, 'This gift that you have; you can make something of it.'" An author visit lifts the curtain on the work that writers do (Follos, 2004) and makes the work accessible and human to students. When students prepare for and experience an author visit, they have the chance to see models of writers but also of readers as the parents, teachers, and other adults who are involved in preparation for the visit join students in reading and talking about the author's work.

As children's literature professionals, we have likely had the experience of hearing from authors and illustrators at professional conferences. We attend storytelling or book festivals for fun, even planning family vacations around such events. We may be especially attuned to author appearances and autographing events at the bookstores we frequent. In other words, we may seek out opportunities to hear from authors and illustrators as they talk about their work. These events may be high points in our professional development. But what about our students who are pre-service teachers and librarians in our children's literature classes? How can we invite them to learn about and appreciate these kinds of opportunities? We may mentor them to follow our example through talking about and publicizing attendance at conferences and other events. We can lift the curtain on the work of the people who author and illustrate the books for our students as we share our experiences and enthusiasm in children's literature classes.

Few studies have explored the use of author visits with pre-service educators. DuBois and Keller (2016) provide a detailed examination of the value of engaging pre-service teachers in planning for a school author visit in collaboration with an area school district. The researchers noted the planning, leadership, and reflection engendered by the experience set these pre-service teachers apart when it came to the job market. A professor of children's literature and book author (Walker & Feldman, 2014) surveyed students from multiple sections of a children's literature course featuring a Skype author visit and found students benefitted from the interaction with the author and reported a better understanding of the writing and publishing process.

Once we, as children's literature professionals, have hooked our students on the excitement and satisfaction of hearing from authors, we should encourage them to bring those experiences to their young students and patrons. And there is no better way to do that than through an author visit to the school or library. One of the strongest means to interject diversity into children's literature is through encounters with the living people who embody that diversity and convey it through their work. Thomas (2016) explicitly suggests inviting a diverse author to speak at a school as a strategy to incorporate diverse voices.

PLANNING AND HOSTING AN AUTHOR VISIT

Below I will share information about identifying and choosing an author or illustrator, some of the nuts and bolts about securing an author, planning the logistics of the visit, and working with publishers and others to schedule and plan the visit. I will share ideas for building background and interest in the school and the community in anticipation of the visit as well as for the big day of the visit. I have framed this information with the elements for a corresponding assignment that could be employed in a children's literature course offered to pre-service teachers and librarians. The assignment is a mock plan for an in-person author visit in a school. The assignment requires students to identify a diverse author or illustrator and conduct research about the author and their work to inform an author visit. Planning for the visit also includes thinking through elements of critical literacy to prepare teachers, students, and the school community for the experience.

The following sections are divided among four phases of an author visit: 1. Propose the Event, 2. Plan and Prepare for the Event, 3. Host the Event, and 4. Evaluate and Follow up for the Event. Each phase begins with a section in italics providing instructions for an assignment to design a mock author visit that might be used as part of a literature course. Following that is detailed advice with references to what others have said about each phase of the experience and how to prepare for a successful author visit. I have also included my own experience with planning and hosting an author visit as a school librarian. This information and the resources cited also serve to support that part of the assignment. Instructors are encouraged to share these resources with their students as part of the assignment.

Proposing an Author Visit

Assignment: In this assignment you will be planning an author visit. To start with, you want to choose an author or illustrator. First identify the context for the author visit. What is your target age group, what kinds of diversity are you interested in showcasing, and why is it relevant for this group? What are the mirrors or windows you hope to provide with this visit? Then start looking for an author or illustrator. You should use award lists, publisher or author websites, and conferences or festivals featuring authors or author panels. Your criteria should include: the author's biography represents a type of diversity, the author has at least three publications appropriate for your audience, and you can locate contact information for scheduling a visit. The product for this part of the assignment is a proposal to a potential funding source – this could be a school administrator, a PTA, or a business partner. Your proposal should include a brief rationale for the visit and for this author, a list of the author's work, a brief biography of the author, and the stipend or honorarium charged by this author [if this is not available, find a resource that provides general information about the cost of a visit]. Optional: Develop a fundraising flyer for a visit.

One should pause at the very start of planning to think about the community of the school. Clearly you will want to choose an author with work that represents the reading levels, the curriculum, and the interests of students in the school, but be sure to expand that to include the kinds of diversity represented in the school community. Do you want students to see someone like themselves? Or is it important to expand the kinds of diversity represented or celebrated in this community? Finding an author who matches the diversity found in your students can serve as a mirror for your students; however, finding an author who serves as a window to different cultures may be just as important. Keep in mind that no

school is homogeneous and there are lots of kinds of diversity present in any school. You are likely to find both windows and mirrors in the same author. Consider the author's work in light of the diverse learning needs of your students in order to identify someone who will work for different age groups and reading levels as well as different reading tastes. An author whose work ranges from early picture books to more complex and longer texts may best span the range found in an elementary school, for example. As Follos (2004) recommends, you will get more mileage out of an author whose work spans the interests of your whole school.

Most articles about hosting author visits include little or no discussion of diversity or critical literacy. Yet the purpose of an author visit is enhanced when these dimensions are included. The choice of an author who can model and speak about writing as a person of color, with a disability, or representing other kinds of diversity taps into what we know about windows and mirrors and identities for diverse students. An author might also be chosen for the content or issues addressed in their work. This will allow deep discussion before the visit among students and the adults. There are numerous awards given to diverse authors. Quiroa (2017) lists some great blogs and awards for identifying diverse authors who might be potential author visits.

Several articles have been written about planning and hosting an author visit. Resources offering advice for author visits include several written by librarians (Booth, 2018; Follos, 2004; Hand, 2006; Kahn, 2008) and by authors (Collard, 2012; Messner, 2010; Ross, 2004). Most include advice about finding and choosing an author. Important criteria to consider are the how well the author's work fits the age, community, and curriculum of the school. Advice for finding potential authors in addition to author and publisher's websites includes attending book festivals (Killeen, 2015), using state book award lists (Zuger, 2008), and even Twitter (Booth, 2018). Not all authors are great speakers, and any opportunities to observe a presentation by an author helps to inform the choice. You may also get a sense about the author's presence and speaking through videos found online. References from other schools or libraries about successful author visits can be helpful. The author's website may provide a sense of their experience as speakers with author visits. Some authors provide a menu of possible programming; this indicates thought about what a visit requires from an author.

Finding a lesser known but emerging author can also be rewarding. The costs of an author visit include a set stipend which will vary often based on how famous or successful the author has been. These costs can be found on an author's website or through the publisher. But numerous other expenses need to be calculated including transportation, lodging, and meals (generally not part of the author's flat stipend fee). The choice of a local and emerging author may help to minimize these additional expenses. An author from the state or region may have the further advantage of being a member of the local community. One way to find regional authors is through state award lists; many feature authors who live in the state. Local literacy or library conferences often feature regional authors, and local bookstores and libraries may also provide leads. Killeen (2015) suggests attending area book festivals and literary events to learn about regional authors.

While there is often a flat rate for the author's visit, other costs can also be considerable. A school or library will also want to purchase extra copies of the author's work. Booth (2018) shares some cost-saving tips including direct negotiation with the author or their representative. Booth also relates that some authors are willing to swing by a low-resourced school if they are going to be in an area for another appearance. You may need to seek funding from various sources. For example, a school might have funds to cover the costs of purchasing materials for instructional activities related to the author's work including multiple copies of the author's books. Follos (2014) suggests holding fundraisers to pay for the event.

But additional funding could be requested elsewhere such as a parent-teacher association (PTA), local businesses, or grants. Local grants, for example, might fund the author's fee or another aspect of the visit. Look for connections between local grant opportunities and an author's work. A local arts grant might be interested in assisting with the visit and demonstration from an illustrator. A garden club or local environmental group might sponsor an author whose work relates to the natural world. Related to diversity, there may be various grants or groups with a particular interest in diversity or inclusion who could sponsor some aspect of the author's visit. PTAs are often willing to fund parts of the visit and provide volunteers for the preparation and hosting of the event.

Other additional costs to consider may be associated with publicizing the visit, decorating the school, and needs expressed by the author for specific events during the visit. An author, for example, may want one or more chart stands with a certain type of chart paper, specific markers for the presentation, and special pens for autographing. If the author is spending the day, you may want to serve breakfast and lunch and or host a reception at the end of the day. These costs add up, and a site may want to explore bundling the visit with others such as a nearby bookstore, book festival, or schools in the area who might want to host their own event with the author. The costs of travel, accommodations, and some hospitality can then be shared. Tasks such as meeting the author at the airport and providing local transportation can be divided among the groups. For example, at the school district where I was, the four schools sharing the author shared a dinner out or at the home of a faculty member; those invited included the author and key people involved in the visit such as administrators and their families.

Planning an Author Visit

Assignment: Planning an author visit begins months in advance. Collard (2012) suggests you get your money's worth from a visit with these goals:

- 1) *Provide a positive role model for kids.*
- 2) *Inspire kids to read and write.*
- 3) *Build upon and expand student knowledge of specific topics.*

And 4) Give teachers ideas that they can use in the classroom before and after the visit. (p. 48)

With this in mind, create a guide for teachers that includes:

1. *A brief bio of the author. List resources you find about the author and their work including websites, Twitter, interviews, and publisher promotional material about the author.*
2. *Three to five learning objectives for this author visit (at least one of these should be a reading or writing objective).*
3. *Plans to build background through publicity for the event including a way to engage parents, plans to decorate classroom doors or bulletin boards, and strategies to make students aware of the author and their work.*
4. *A selective and annotated list of the author's works with curricular and grade level connections. Look for published and freely available curriculum ideas that can be shared. An author or their publisher may have ideas or even teachers' guides.*
5. *Choose one or two of the author's books and develop a list of five to eight questions designed to provoke deeper thinking about the author's purpose, point of view, and craft in the writing process.*

Several resources, especially those from the point of view of the authors, highlight advance preparation as an important aspect of a successful visit (Collard, 2012; Ross, 2004). This generally involves months of preparing students, families, teachers, and others for the visit. “The better a school prepares, the more they get out of a visit” (Collard, 2012, p. 48). Collard suggests “deep background” research into the author and their work. Clearly you will want to find out about all of an author’s work including their early work. But keep searching all the nooks and crannies for other things featuring the author. These might include YouTube interviews or read-alouds by or of the author’s works, blogs, websites, Twitter feeds, and published interviews or articles featuring the author and their work. Look for published book reviews and author biographies. Acquire copies of as many of their books as possible. At first, this may mean borrowing copies from other local libraries. What can you learn about an author from reading the flaps of their books? Where was the author educated? And what awards or recognitions has the author achieved? For one author visit I hosted, students compiled all of the dedications from the author’s work, learning about their family, mentors, family pets, and even tastes in literature and music. We learned about the author’s favorite band and shared the music at the luncheon to the delight of the author.

The more you can find out about the author and their work and share that information with teachers, students, parents, and others in the community, the more meaningful connections become possible. Authors are often touched by the efforts to get to know them and personalize aspects of their visit. Taking what you know about the author and their work, make plans to publicize the visit in advance through the school’s website and social media. Place banners or announcements outside the school. Contact the local press to share details of the visit and acknowledge any grants or other assistance for the visit. Some schools have contests for creating bulletin boards or decorating classroom doors featuring the author’s work. Grade levels or departments might choose particular books for deeper study. These titles might be selected to match the curriculum or the interests and developmental stages for a particular age level. A school or library will want to acquire multiple copies of the author’s work to meet the demand and interest in the author’s work.

Follos (2004) suggests giving teachers ownership of an author visit early in the planning: “If you help them design a plan, they will use it” (p. 4). Classroom teachers should be encouraged to connect the author’s work with the curriculum (Ross, 2004) through highlighting the life lessons, dispositions, and connections with the writing process. Curriculum connections may range from social studies, science and language arts but also through the fine arts. The art, music, and physical education teachers may serve as a great resource. Hall (2021) offers ideas for incorporating diverse literature with music activities; several of the suggestions might apply to an author visit. For example, students might write a poem inspired by the author’s work and then create a simple melody to convert the poem to a song. Collard (2012) also describes several “over the top” author visits where students had created immersive experiences related to the author’s work such as a constructed rain forest. Book design and illustration are great tie-ins with art instruction. Students might create their own illustrated books in anticipation of an author visit. As Quiroa (2017) suggests, book discussions with other adults can help to expand the knowledge base of educators as they select diverse books for children. This advice can also be applied to preparing for an author’s visit. Teachers might form a book club as professional development surrounding the author’s visit and diverse literature.

Student voice is important in preparation for an author’s visit, particularly if one purpose of studying the author’s work and meeting the author is to promote critical literacy among students. Students who have spent a lot of time reading and discussing an author’s work will develop anticipation for the visit and will provoke the kinds of curiosity and critical questions to ask the author and engage in authentic

conversations with the author about their work and the subject of their work. Follos (2004) reminds us that the more we can inspire a student's curiosity, the more mileage we can achieve from the event. Finding these interesting tidbits about an author in the planning stage may pay off when it comes to talking with students. Follos (2004) recalls, "Their eyes bulged, their little heads wagged. They couldn't wait for his arrival" when she shared with students the author's connection to *Fraggle Rock*, J. K. Rowling, and the *Guinness Book of Records* (p. 4). There are numerous ways to create spaces where students to find a voice related to the author's visit. Students can author their own stories inspired by works from the author that serve as "mentor texts." For example, students may act out a scene or story from an author's book. When this is in preparation for a performance on the day of the visit, it further enhances the sense of excitement and ownership in the day. If you know of another school hosting the same author (for example, if you have bundled as discussed above) then students might write to pen pals with others studying the same author's work.

Parents and other community members are an important component of preparing for an author visit. Some as discussed earlier may provide resources for the visit. Parents often get excited about the chance to meet an author and will want to be invited the day of the visit. Consider dedicating a parent night or other event to learning about the author and their work. Parents can often serve as important volunteers getting the school ready for the visit and helping with the events. For example, parents might happily provide some of the hospitality hosting a luncheon or a reception. Sales in advance of the visit will provide an opportunity to purchase books in advance rather than taking up time and space during the day of the visit. Be as inclusive as possible with consideration of students whose families may not be able to afford to purchase a book. How can those students feel included? Parents might be encouraged to fund the purchase for others. In a setting where you expect many families might struggle to afford the books, a way to overcome this is to select a title that the entire school will acquire and seek funding to purchase a copy for every child in the school. These kinds of bulk purchases will often come with a considerable discount.

Host the Event

Assignment: Write a letter to the author you have chosen with a proposed schedule for the day of the visit. Specify the level of your school, the number of students in the school, and the length of the school day. Be sure to think about how you will include every student in the school. Your day should include:

- *An opening event – describe this and relate it specifically to this author or their work.*
- *Time for two or three presentations*
- *Time for autographing*
- *Lunch*
- *An after-school reception*

For each event include who, where, and when.

Finally, it's the day of your big event! You will want to have as much of the day scheduled and planned in advance. The more you can share ahead of time with all of the participants, including the author, the fewer surprises you may encounter on the day of the visit. Planning the itinerary for the event will include knowing the author's travel plans and preferences. It is important to know what an author is comfortable with or requires. Collard (2012), an author, outlines these, such as will someone pick up the author at the

airport, or do they prefer to find their own transportation? Some authors have hotel preferences. Authors need down time after a full day and travel. One author, for example, asked explicitly not to be in a bed and breakfast and most prefer not to stay with hosts for this reason. Be sure to find out any dietary restrictions or preferences. An author who will be speaking a lot may prefer water at room temperature; another may want diet colas throughout the day. Be sure to have at least drinking water on hand throughout the day; you want to keep your author hydrated. On the day of the visit, you or someone you designate should plan to pick up the author to bring them to the school. Be clear about breakfast. Do they prefer to handle it themselves or will you be providing that meal? Similar plans need to be made for the end of the day. Is the author returning to their hotel? Or do you need to provide airport transportation? If there is time after the school day, an author might appreciate visiting a local attraction. For example, I took an author who was doing research on NASCAR to a nearby racecar museum.

The day of the visit should be meticulously planned. Your building is ready with bulletin boards, banners, and other displays celebrating the author and their work. Stay student-focused and be as inclusive as possible. “It’s as much about the conversation as the presentation” (Booth 2018, p. 36). As much as possible, ensure that conversation involves the whole school community. While small intimate opportunities to gather with the author have a lot of appeal, most often you will want to allow everyone a chance to see and hear from the author. This usually means one or more large presentations. Large events may also build excitement and a sense of celebrity. How many students are in the school and what kinds of spaces are available? Often authors specify two to three large presentations, perhaps divided by grade level. Some authors offer a menu of the kinds of presentations they will provide geared to particular content or age groups. Can you move furniture away to fit large groups in the library? Is your auditorium also the school cafeteria or gymnasium that must be scheduled around other needs? Don’t forget technology for the visit. Again, an author will probably specify the type of microphone, computer, or screen if needed. Be sure you have tested everything ahead of time and have extra batteries if required. Additionally, an illustrator or author may want chart paper and markers for their presentation.

How would you like the day to start? Will there be music? Maybe a small tour of the school or another way to welcome the author? First impressions are important and set the tone for the visit. Students may perform small skits or music interpreting the author’s work. Another idea is to have a panel of students interview the author during their session. In addition to the specified large group presentations, you need to plan some small breaks, lunch for the author, and plenty of time for autographing. When does the school day begin and end? If the school day ends early enough in the afternoon, you might plan a reception for teachers or invited guests after students have left. This also allows the focus to be entirely on students when they are in the building. Be considerate of the author’s time and energy and clear about your expectations as well as theirs.

Often autographing events are a highlight of an author’s visit. And today of course, plan to take selfies (Booth, 2018). Allow plenty of time so that every student gets to stand in front of the author and have a book personalized for them. Advice about autographing includes sticky notes ready with the spelling of names and someone stationed with the author to keep the flow going. It’s really important that every child be included; find funding to purchase a book for every child. A good practice is to sell books in advance and hold student books for the day of the visit. You can avoid the book left on the bus or at home in this way. Finding the time for every student to get an autograph may require limiting in-person autographing to one book per child and asking adults to wait for after school. Even if you have sold books in advance, you will want to plan to sell books the day of the visit for teachers, parents and others. Schedule volunteers to sell books the day of the visit. Authors may be willing to take a box or two

of books back to their hotel room to finish autographing. Don't forget to get autographs for classroom and library copies of books.

Evaluate and Follow Up the Event

Assignment: What do you hope students or teachers will take away from this visit? Create an eight to ten question evaluative survey to follow the visit. At least two questions should specifically relate to the author you have chosen.

An author visit requires a lot of resources and planning. Take some time after the event to evaluate what went well and what you might do differently next time. If you received a grant to fund part of the visit, you may have an evaluation and accounting of funds due to that agency. If it seems appropriate, survey teachers, students or parents about the visit. Their enthusiastic responses will appeal to granting agencies. Hopefully, you took lots of photographs of the day to include in the evaluation. Use those for the school's website, social media, or in-school screens and broadcasts. Or, you may share up photos on a follow-up bulletin board.

Don't forget thank-you notes to all of the people who made the day a success: volunteers, fundraisers, teachers, administrators, custodians, etc. Ask students to create hand-written thank you notes to the author with specifics about their visit and/or their books. Imagine the impact that package might have on the author.

Hopefully, your students and teachers have been energized by the visit. Capture that energy with student writing, maybe authoring and autographing copies of their own books. If the author or the author's work relates to social issues, a visit may spark action such as Booth (2018) describes related to the book *One Plastic Bag* about recycling, and woman-owned business.

CONCLUSION

"Author visits transform quiet written words from a private exchange between reader and author into a lively community discussion" (Follos, 2004, p. 1). Hopefully students in a children's literature class will engage in thinking through the ways to generate these community discussions in their future workplaces. After creating a plan for an author visit, students will leave your class with steps toward a real and impactful project they might conduct in their own schools. Their work might serve as the basis for a grant proposal since it includes the type of details grant sources care about: partnerships, learning outcomes, evidence of planning, and ideas about evaluation and assessment. Many of these ideas could be adapted to a college-sponsored event as well.

Today we are very aware of the benefits and challenges presented by remote learning. Virtual author visits offer affordable and accessible alternatives to an in-person author visit. A decade before COVID-19, Messner (2010) wrote about virtual author visits as having many of the same benefits as being there in person but without being able to "make real eye contact" (p. 43). Springen (2012) presciently stated, "But like a Skype chat with a beloved grandmother, a virtual visit is far better than no visit at all" (p. 18). Authors who visit classrooms and libraries remotely also agree it is easier on them than traveling in addition to being more affordable for schools. A virtual visit may also feel more intimate than the whole school assembly model. Additionally, it's possible to break up a Skype visit so the students work

on a project and then the author returns later in the day to share or discuss their work. Remote visits also allow a class to host multiple visits in the same year; the logistics and costs to do this in person would be prohibitive for many. Booth (2018) also extols benefits of online as affordable and comfortable for today's kids and offers several tips for a virtual visit.

Virtual may also be good practice for an actual visit and will definitely whet appetites for more up close and personal encounters with authors. Instructors of children's literature courses may find that the assignment detailed in this chapter offers an appetizing alternative to the traditional author study. Students may walk away with a desire and a plan to bring an author to their classroom or library. The choice of an author or illustrator who represents one or more kinds of diversity will further deepen the experience as students discover mirrors and windows in the people who write and illustrate books for children. Through careful planning and detailed preparation, educators can enhance that experience leading students to find connections and expand their ideas about who does the work of writing and illustrating the books we find in classrooms and libraries.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Author Study: The study of an author's life and work. Often an assignment in literature classes.

Author Visit: Any opportunity for an author or illustrator to meet and interact with readers in real time either virtually or in-person.

Autographing: Often a feature of an in-person author visit is an opportunity to have the author or illustrator sign copies of their books.

Children's Literature Class: A course often required of pre-service teachers and school librarians. In this article, the term is meant to be inclusive of preschool-high school educators.

Up Close and Personal

Critical Literacy: An approach to literacy that invites critical inquiry into the author's purpose, point of view, and positioning of the reading.

Diverse Literature: Literature written by and about diverse cultures and families including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, disability, and LGBTQ+

Mentor Text: A piece of text used in writing instruction as a model for the craft of writing.