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ABSTRACT

Students at Hauppauge Middle School are writing original children's stories and then telling these stories to preschool children. Before middle school students begin writing their stories, they participate in activities to help them develop a sense of their intended audience. As students write their stories, they work in small groups to discuss their developing stories in the context of activities and focus on story characteristics supporting the structure of text and on story devices reflecting aspects of language. The entire instructional emphasis is on guiding the process rather than on correcting the product. When the stories are completed, volunteers learn storytelling techniques. The creative writing unit and the storytelling activities represent a rewarding bridge from the middle school to the preschool. Hauppauge High School sponsors a preschool program through its home economics and careers department. Older and younger children benefit from their creative involvement, the teachers also gain useful insights about the importance of language stimulation for young children. Observation of the young children who are active in the program is continuous, and their parents, as well as participating middle school students and teachers, are surveyed. Findings show that most of the preschool children read more books, select a wide variety of materials, maintain a desire to read, and tell their own stories. The middle school students increase their sensitivity for communicating with a unique audience and they report an improved awareness of children's ability to use and appreciate language. (Three figures are included.) (MG)

Reading, Writing, and Storytelling: A Bridge from the Middle School to the Preschool

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In the March 1983 issue of Phi Delta Kappan, I described an innovation concerning high school seniors writing original children's stories and then telling these stories to preschool children (Sanacore, 1983). This innovation was initiated at the Hauppauge High School, Long Island, New York, and recently was expanded to include the Hauppuage Middle School. In this article, we would like to discuss this updated version.

Unique Links between Reading and Writing

The students in grades 6,7, and 8 experience a variety of writing activities that one would expect in the typical language arts classroom. They write narrative, descriptive, and expository passages, and they complete journal entries on a regular basis. They also write for a variety of purposes, including to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. These and other activities are stimulated by the English teacher and by a variety of resources.

A unique aspect of the language arts program is a voluntary unit on writing and illustrating children's stories, to be used for future storytelling with the district's preschool and kindergarten children. Before middle school students begin writing their stories, they either visit and observe their intended audience or discuss younger siblings at home. The teacher also guides the students to become more sensitive to young children's behavior, especially behavior concerning interests and

attending ability. When a sense of audience is developed, the students immerse themselves in published works of children's literature. This exposure helps them to identify and appreciate special characteristics used by professional writers; some of these characteristics also have value for effective storytelling, an important part of the middle school innovation. For example, Huck, Hepler, and Hickman (1987, p. 648) believe that stories worth telling should "include a quick beginning, action, a definite climax, natural dialogue, and a satisfying conclusion." They further suggest selecting stories with no more than four speaking characters. Examples include such folktales as "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" and "Chicken Little." In addition, the students' immersion in children's stories increases their awareness of special devices. For example, much alliteration in Kipling's Just So Stories provides opportunities for children to get involved in storytelling activities. Similarly, longer repeated refrains in Slobodkina's Caps for Sale and incremental refrains in Raskin's Ghost in a Four Room Apartment entice children to participate in storytelling (Stewig, 1978). Thus, as middle school students read a wide variety of children's literature, they focus on ways of improving their own creative writing and on characteristics and devices for involving preschool and kindergarten children during future storytelling.

The following sampling of stories has been used effectively by our middle school students. This sampling is not extensive,

nor is it sacrosanct. In fact, we add to and delete from the list each year.

Marie Haluns Bloch's "The Cat and Chanticleer," Ukrainian Folk Tales

Marcia Brown's The Bun

Marcia Brown's Cinderella

Marcia Brown's The Three Billy Goats Gruff

Anthony Browne's Hansel and Gretel

Lorinda Bryan Cauley's Jack and the Beanstalk

Donna Diamond's Rumpelstiltskin

Paul Galdone's The Gingerbread Boy

Paul Galdone's The Three Bears

Rumer Godden's The Mousewife

Randall Jarrell's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Steven Kellogg's Chicken Little

Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories

Ellen Raskin's Ghost in a Four Room Apartment

Elizabeth Shub's Clever Kate

Esphyr Slobodkina's Caps for Sale

The library media specialists serve as major resources for helping English teachers update the list of children's books.

These experiences and materials provide a sound foundation for writing children's literature. When the students begin

writing and illustrating their stories, the classroom teacher (and if available, an art teacher) offers praise, provides suggestions for improvement, and encourages individuals to share ideas. As students work in small groups, they discuss their developing stories in the context of activities, such as reading the stories aloud while the listeners develop a "feel" for how the stories "tell." More specifically, students focus on story characteristics supporting the structure of text and on story devices reflecting aspects of language, including alliteration, repeated refrains, and incremental refrains (see discussion questions in Figure 1). The entire instructional emphasis, therefore, is on guiding the process rather than on correcting the product. This immersion in the process is a major source of support for enhancing the writing and illustrating of authentic stories.

Storytelling

When the stories are completed, volunteers learn storytelling techniques. According to Farrell (1983) and Nessel (1985), storytellers should select literature they like and want to tell. Farnsworth (1981) also believes that a major prerequisite to effective storytelling is liking the story one plans to tell. "Any misgivings or reservations you have about the story will be communicated to your listeners. So feeling that it is 'your' story comes first" (p. 164). Farnsworth's concern is

well-received and fits nicely in the context of the course unit, since students who volunteer to "tell" their stories are, in fact, the authors of these stories. This increases the chances of liking the stories and of communicating this feeling to younger children.

With this accomplished, the volunteers learn and practice a variety of techniques. Although comprehensive sources about storytelling are available, Stewig (1978) offers excellent suggestions for teachers that are adapted easily for students. These adaptations at the Hauppauge Middle School are as follows:

1. The teacher or librarian models storytelling techniques with a variety of children's literature.
2. Students divide their plots into separate units of action, and they practice them in sequence. "This does not mean memorizing the story word for word, but rather learning the sequence necessary to moving the story ahead" (p. 340).
3. Students identify sections of their stories that should be memorized. For example, a repeated refrain that contributes significantly to the mood of a story should be committed to memory and be incorporated into the storytelling.
4. Students develop fluency by practicing about twice a day for at least a week. During these practice sessions, storytellers blend the memorized sections with the sequenced units of action. Becoming

accustomed to the sounds of their voices during storytelling is necessary; students therefore rehearse in a comfortable environment, for example, with friends, with parents, or in front of a mirror.

5. Students monitor their progress by tape recording the "telling" of their stories. To assure objectivity during the evaluation of their oral presentations, they wait several days before they listen to the tape recordings. Then, thoughtful analysis focuses on achieving greater fluency, modifying aspects of the stories to generate more effectiveness, choosing different words to inspire mood clarity, and changing paralinguistic elements (pause, tempo, pitch, etc.).
6. Students change aspects of their presentations, based on their thoughtful analysis. They also continue to practice their storytelling until they are finally ready to share their stories with children!

The storytelling environment at the Hauppauge School District is unique, since some of the children are three and four years of age and attend the district's Child and Family program. This program is sponsored by the home economics and careers department, and it is offered in the Hauppauge High School. Home economics students work with the children and gain concrete insights concerning the physical, emotional, social, and

intellectual development of the children. The preschoolers also derive benefits by being exposed to a variety of activities, including listening to and participating in storytelling. As the middle school students "tell" their stories (see sampling in Figure 2), the home economics students observe the children's behavior.

Usually, the storyteller prepares the children with an introductory approach adapted from Burns, Roe, and Ross (1988, p. 52). The student says: "This morning I'm going to tell you my story, and I think you may already know something about it. It is called_____. How many of you know something about it? This story is about (the storyteller reveals a brief summary of the plot). I want you to help me tell the story. When the rabbit says (the storyteller mentions a key sentence or repeated refrain), I want you to say it along with me. Let's try it now, all together." The children practice saying this line with the storyteller. Then the student tells the story and signals to the children when it is the right time for them to say the line.

Some of the storytelling activities are video taped so that the storytellers can view their strengths (what they have done effectively) and, if necessary, may consider strategies for improvement. In addition, future storytellers are able to view the video tapes and thus to experience vicariously the excitement and challenge of working creatively with young children. These viewing experiences also help new students improve their own storytelling techniques. Some video tapes appear on local cable channels, enabling the Hauppauge community to observe and respond

to warm, creative happenings in the middle school. Besides the Child and Family program, these activities take place in kindergarten classes located in the district's two elementary schools.

Benefits

The benefits of meshing the course unit with the storytelling activities are numerous. These benefits include:

1. Students enjoy writing and telling stories. Here are some of their comments:

   I had a lot of fun with storytelling. Working with my friends in a small group was really helpful. (Mary, 6th grade)

   I never believed I could get up in front of others and tell my own story. I feel more confident. Now I speak up more in all my classes. (John, 7th grade)

   The kids actually enjoyed my story! I don't believe it! I feel great! I think I'll become a professional writer! (Charlie, 8th grade)

2. Students increase their sensitivity to a range of audiences by communicating with a unique public, namely young children. The anticipation of a real audience, eager to hear the stories, is both a

valuable motivation for the students and a useful simulation of the working conditions of professional writers.

3. Children become excited about book language and story events. These experiences build a background of knowledge and create a desire to read.

4. Creative storytelling also provides opportunities to involve children. For example, motivating children to help "tell" the stories and encouraging them to use gestures concerning the stories are examples of creative involvement. This active participation reflects a more satisfying experience than passive listening to stories; it also serves as an introduction to creative drama (Stewig, 1978).

5. The relationship between the middle school students and the young children reflects genuine warmth. This relationship seems to provide the children with a positive introduction to school, and it appears to provide the middle school students with realistic insights concerning the capacity of young children to use and appreciate language.

6. Copies of the children's stories are placed in the library media center. They are available for

parents who plan to use them with their children, for children who can use them independently, and for middle school students who are new to storytelling. Similarly, the video tapes of storytelling are available for parents' and students' viewing.

7. The interdisciplinary and interage activities generate positive public relations.

Summary

Thus far, the creative writing unit and the storytelling activities represent a rewarding bridge from the middle school to the preschool. Older and younger children benefit from their creative involvement, and teachers also gain useful insights about the importance of language stimulation for young children. As we support these process-oriented approaches (see Figure 3), we continue to observe and interview the preschool and kindergarten children who are active in the program. We also survey the children's parents as well as the students and teachers who participate. Subjective responses, in the form of self-reports, support the continuation of the Hauppauge School District's efforts. Major findings include:

1. Most of the preschool children read more books, select a wide variety of materials, maintain a

desire to read, and tell their own stories.

2. Most of the middle school students who participate increase their sensitivity for communicating with a unique audience (the preschoolers). The students also report an improved awareness of children's ability to use and appreciate language.

In addition to these findings, educators participating in the program read extensively about children's literature and storytelling. Among their favorite resources are:

Betty Coody, Using Literature with Young Children (Wm. C. Brown)

Bernice Cullinan (Ed.), Children's Literature in the Reading Program (International Reading Association)

Charlotte Huck et al., Children's Literature in the Elementary School (Holt, Rinehart and Winston)

Edna Johnson et al., Anthology of Children's Literature (Houghton Mifflin)

John Warren Stewig and Sam Leaton Sebesta (Eds.), Using Literature in the Elementary Classroom (National Council of Teachers of English)

Dorothy Strickland and Lesley Mandel Morrow (Eds.), Emerging Literacy: Young Children Learn to Read and Write (International Reading Association)

Zena Sutherland, The Arbuthnot Anthology of Children's Literature (Scott, Foresman)

Sylvia Ziskind, Telling Stories to Children (H.W. Wilson)

Overall, although this innovation is not a panacea, it is becoming

stronger probably because it focuses on everyone's strengths and interests.

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Figure 1

Some Discussion Questions Used by Students to Improve Their Developing Stories

1. Does the story have enough appeal for young children?

   Comments: _____

2. Does the story "feel" appropriate for storytelling?

   Comments: _____

3. Is the intended audience able to understand the story?

   Comments: _____

4. Does the story include

   A. a quick beginning?

   B. action?

   C. a definite climax?

   D. natural dialogue?

   E. a satisfying conclusion?

   F. no more than four speaking characters?

   Comments: _____

5. Does the story contain special devices, such as

   A. alliteration?

   B. repeated refrains?

   C. incremental refrains?

   Comments: _____

Figure 2

Sampling of Authentic Stories Generated by Middle School Students for the Purpose of Storytelling

Story Title	Story Focus
The Adventure of Kim the Koala!	Kim leaves Australia to visit friends in the U.S.
Dizzy Dog Meets A. Litterbug	Dizzy and friends encourge A. Litterbug to stop littering in the park.
Dust in the Wind	This story deals realistically with children's fear, lonliness, rejection, and other emotions.
Kids Only	Jenny is not allowed to play at her friend's house, so she dreams about a place for kids only.
The Little Troll	The little troll, who is unhappy with his size, eventually learn to accept himself.
The Magic Pencil	A little boy makes his magic pencil solve his problems, with consequences.
The Magic Trinket	A girl tries to buy friendship with money she receives from a magic trinket.
Nigel the Spider	Playful Nigel finds a four-leaf clover and wishes his problems will go away.
The Nutural	A chipmunk joins the nut league since she is the best nut gatherer in her neighborhood.
Robbie the Rabbit	Robbie, a deformed baby rabbit, experiences rejection and eventually acceptance by his family.

Figure 3

Highlights of Middle School Students' Immersion in Reading, Writing, and Storytelling Processes