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Using Traditional Literature to Address Standards

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by Alison B. Kennedy

Introduction

In this unit, *Using Classic Literature to Address Standards*, it is my goal to make current assessment practices more meaningful within early childhood classrooms. By using classic children's picture books and differentiated instruction, I want to give teachers a way to adhere to mandated standards effectively, and simultaneously to give their students a love of literature. My unit will highlight a few of my favorite storybooks, and show how they can help to teach various reading strategies and story elements. It will also give a variety of ways in which each of these books can be used to differentiate instruction, including dramatization. The unit will help students to have a strong grasp of the elements of literature, and give them the tools with which to discuss and write about these elements.

As an urban teacher, I know how crucial it is to make our students literate. Literacy has become the key focus in most city school systems in the United States today. Urban teachers often grapple with offsetting external factors that impede our students' literacy. Many students in city schools come to Kindergarten with no preschool experience. They have little, if any, exposure to books. Many students come from households where adults are illiterate, and there are few, if any, reading materials available. Many students also are learning English as a second language. Because of factors like these, urban teachers have a daunting task in front of them when they work to make their students literate.

Along with these obstacles, teachers are also being required to have an increasing amount of documentation to show their students' progress. Teachers must make ongoing assessments of their students' progress, and they must make sure that their lessons adhere to national and local standards. While assessment is critical for sound teaching practice, finding meaningful and accurate ways to assess students can be challenging.

Rationale

I have been teaching in urban schools for five years. In that time I have taught kindergarten and first grade. I have seen how difficult the task of teaching students to read can be. It is simply not possible to make up for

every shortcoming our students may have in the allotted time of a school year. If we are going to successfully bridge the achievement gap, standards and assessments are simply not enough. We must create self-starting learners if we realistically expect our students succeed in these circumstances. The best way to create autodidactic learners in early childhood that I have seen is simply to cultivate a love of reading and a love of books in our students.

This type of passion is, of course, fairly difficult to monitor. It is one of many wonderfully intangible results of good teaching that are impossible for standard assessments to address. At the same time it is probably the single most crucial quality we can instill in our students at an early age. If a love of literacy is nurtured it will sustain them as learners for their whole lives.

Although it is difficult to show when this quality has emerged in our students, early childhood teachers everywhere will be able give you instances of the moment when they were able to see it in their students. The moment when a child chooses to read during free choice time. A student delighting over finding a favorite read aloud book in the library. A class that begs you to read a story over and over. These moments are not measurable with data, but they are the true testaments as to whether or not we early childhood educators are doing our jobs.

This past year was the first in my experience in which I was asked to find concrete ways to teach story concepts and track my students' progress in grasping those concepts. Once required to do this, I realized that I hadn't really been as concerned with this aspect of their literacy as I should have been. I realized that I'd thought that exposing them to a variety of books and discussing these using key questions was enough to make my students understand them. I started to involve my students in some pre-assessments and realized that exposing them to a variety of books and discussing them was indeed a wonderful way to help them to understand how literature works. I also realized, however, that I needed to find more ways to help my students learn these concepts, and to produce written evidence of their comprehension.

This unit is an attempt to bring meaningful teaching of literary concepts into the

early childhood classroom. In the state tests in both states in which I have taught, the students are required to understand literary concepts such as main idea and themes fairly thoroughly. They are required to show their understanding not only by answering multiple-choice questions but also in their own writing. An emphasis has been placed on reading scores on these standardized tests in deciding whether or not a school is successful. Because of this, requirements to teach to the test have trickled down to first grade and even Kindergarten.

This does not have to be a negative development. When the standards that are written to address these tests are examined, one can see that they require the teaching of crucial and relevant elements of literature. The challenge in this new wave of "teaching to the test" is in merging the required standards and assessments into meaningful, engaging instruction.

One current form of assessment that my school system has brought in to improve student performance is called Data Team. The system was designed by a man named Doug Reeves, whose goal was to have teachers be more collaborative with assessments, and to have ongoing assessment be more clear and accurate. My school implemented this assessment system this year, and my experience with it reflected both the pitfalls of teaching to the test and the success of clear and meaningful ongoing assessment.

The process allows teachers to break down standards to identify what the examiners are really asking for. It also allows teachers to work together as a team to find ways to judge how far along the students have come

in understanding the concepts required to meet the standard they are focusing on. After teachers have had their students take part in a pre-assessment, the teachers look at the results and discuss strategies to improve student performance. After implementing these strategies, teachers once again assess their students to monitor their progress. Because this was a new process, we were always looking for ways to make it more meaningful during these team meetings. Collaborating on specific literacy standards was extremely useful for improving class performance. However, I found that the work that was required for these assessments often had the downside that can come from teaching to the test. The instruction was often unrelated to any other instruction in the classroom. It became extra work, something that could be overwhelming in a full and sometimes scripted curriculum. Time was taken away from regular classroom instruction to perform pre-tests and post-tests, and we often had trouble finding appropriate materials to use for assessing standards that had really been created to address the needs of students who were in older grades and required to take the state's standardized tests. The process, while useful, began to be mechanical and was void of any enthusiasm for learning. Working on these data teams, I realized that they could be extremely useful for monitoring our students' progress, as well as finding ways to collaborate with colleagues. I also realized that in order to be worthwhile they needed to be worked into curriculum in a meaningful way. The assessments needed to be part of everyday activities in the classroom rather than a separate entity. I also decided to try to incorporate instilling a love of literature into the process by using storybooks that seemed to appeal to my students time and again.

Objectives

During the data team process this year we addressed standards that dealt with reading comprehension and literary elements. Comprehension was an area that students in my school often struggle with, and because comprehension is crucial to creating a truly literate individual, I concentrate on this area of literacy in this unit. I have decided to give examples of how classic picture books can lend themselves especially well to teaching young students about literary concepts. Literary concepts that I will address will be main idea, summarizing and sequencing. I will give strategies to help children to make personal connections to text. I will also show how to use these same books to introduce the concepts of setting, characters (including main character), problem and solution, and point of view. Each of the books I will highlight have been used in my classroom, and often become class favorites. If they use books that it is easy for the students to love, I believe that teachers will have more success in not only teaching their students story concepts, but also instilling in them a love of literature.

In the unit I will explain more thoroughly how I incorporate my teaching strategies into various activities during our daily routine. I will show how using the appropriate literature along with the assessment process can help us to teach literary elements to our students in a way that is also meaningful for them. I will focus on some picture books that have been particularly successful in my classroom. I will discuss in detail lessons I have used with the literature, as well as which story concepts each particularly lends itself to. At the end of the unit I will compile a brief list of literature that would be appropriate for teaching each literary concept to early childhood students.

Each title I have chosen has shown itself to be a book students in my classes have consistently loved. Each of these stories lends itself to teaching various story concepts and also allows for various teaching methods in order to differentiate instruction. I will show how these books can be used to help students to understand

literary concepts. I will also explain how I used the books within my own classroom, and describe various center activities I have implemented with success.

Many of these books also lend themselves to dramatizing the story as a class. As a final project for a unit with these books, a dramatization of the story is an ideal culmination. This type of culminating activity will give children with different learning styles a chance to excel in the classroom. It also gives the students a chance to work together towards a mutual goal, therefore creating a more positive classroom community, and it allows the class to share their hard work and results with the extended community of school and home, by inviting parents and school administrators or other classes. It also allows students to feel a sense of pride in their efforts and will help to solidify their knowledge of the story concepts taught.

In the unit I explain how to go about setting up, rehearsing, and carrying out a classroom performance of a beloved storybook. These dramatizations can be extremely casual, performed within the time of a lesson and only for the class, or else formally with costumes, sets, and invitations. The execution of either approach will be discussed in the unit.

I have often had my students dramatize stories that we have been reading and doing work on in class. It is a way for students to enjoy the story in a playful way that is still considered educationally sound. It also allows students to celebrate a story they have grown to love.

I hope this unit helps teachers to pursue meaningful instruction for the purpose of assessment in their classrooms, while also instilling a love of literature in their students. Through this unit I hope to give teachers some useful ways to use classic storybooks in the classroom effectively.

Strategies

When I ask my students questions about comprehension I often find that they do grasp certain elements of literature but lack the proper vocabulary to really let that comprehension be known. I also see that certain types of elements are more challenging to grasp. There are ways that I have found particularly useful in addressing both issues.

Scaffolding Student Learning

When teaching these concepts it is important to remember to start with the simplest ideas and build on them. Many elements of literature have a natural progression, such as setting to mood, and main idea to theme. Start with the simpler elements of a concept and move into the more complex ideas gradually.

For example, before students can discuss resolution in a story they must be able to identify the problem that is resolved. To start students on the road to understanding this concept, I have them identify the character's big problem in the story. So when I have my students discuss *Dr. DeSoto* by William Steig, for example, I ask them what *Dr. DeSoto's* problem was. The problem, that he is afraid he and his wife will be eaten, is stated very clearly in the text. The first time I read a book like *Dr. DeSoto*, if the students are able to identify a problem on their own, I have them think of possible solutions before we find out the ending of the story. This not only helps them begin to understand what a solution is, but is also an exercise in prediction. After our responses are completed, we then find out whether any of the solutions were the solution that actually

transpires in the story. I reinforce this lesson with more stories with clear problems and solutions like Dr. DeSoto, and the students are soon able to identify not only the problem, but also the solution in works of literature independently.

Read Aloud Book Talks

For all literacy concepts to be understood by young children it is essential that they be exposed to many different stories. They need to hear many stories and be able to discuss them. In order to make this possible for my students I read at least one book a day that has an interesting and rich storyline, and have a book talk afterwards. I will choose books that are either particularly useful for teaching a specific concept or are in line with a current theme in the class.

During this time I can begin to guide my students in using a vocabulary that enables an effective discussion of literature. When students are given a framework in which to discuss books, their discussion is much more precise. Therefore I give students a structured environment and specific terminology to use during our discussions. I base this framework on the book talk model that Columbia University created to be used in conjunction with their reading and writing workshop models. I was trained in this method during my tenure as a New York City school teacher, and although I do not use the model verbatim many of its elements are used in my approach.

I use this book talk time to have the students talk about the stories in as many ways as we talk about books as adult readers. I often let the students' conversation or interest guide the talk. But, aside from a brief explanation of how I set up my book talk time so that it is successful, I will focus on how to teach the students to talk about specific story elements during book talk.

When I introduce the students to structured book talk I first instruct them in the etiquette in which they need to behave for the discussion to be fair and productive in a group discussion. I teach them how to listen and respond to each other in a respectful way.

I make sure that these guidelines are clear and understood and that students adhere to them. As with all classroom management, if this behavior is not in place then this type of learning will not proceed successfully.

With all these strategies the key is to start simply and gradually increase the complexity of the task. When I introduce the words that we will use to discuss each concept I start with instruction that is simple and explicit. I find that this is the type of instruction many students need to begin this process. Although they are able to achieve the results that I expect at the end, many have absolutely no communication skills that would enable them to begin the process on their own. This is why the structure of the talk is so pronounced and why, as I explain in the next few paragraphs, the students are given a specific outline to structure the dialogue concerning each story concept around.

When I teach students to identify the main idea of a story I begin by having them practice simple retelling. Teaching the sequence of a story allows me to eventually have the students discriminate between details and the whole idea of a story. For example, I would first use a simple book like *The Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. I would have the students explain to me what happens first, next, next, etc. and in the end. I would have them use this framework to tell me the progression. As they become more comfortable with talking about sequencing, I will then begin to explain the difference between details and big ideas. I give them the vocabulary to discuss each concept, using phrases that not only will help them in the oral and written assessments of their comprehension of the concepts in our class, but also allow them to succeed when they

use them on the state standardized tests. For example I will tell them a detail in this story is that the caterpillar ate a slice of pizza, a big idea or main idea is that the caterpillar was hungry. I then have students identify details and main ideas in this and other stories.

When teaching all concepts in literature I make sure that the framework of pertinent vocabulary will be as useful as possible for my students. I make sure to consult with teachers of the upper grades, as they know what type of vocabulary will best serve the students when they eventually take tests. For example, they need to know that the big ideas in a story are the main ideas because that is the terminology on the test. I also get a working knowledge of what the tests my students will be taking focus on. For instance, one area that I am especially careful to have my students use the correct terminology for is in making connections to text, as that is a central feature of the writing portion of our standard test in Connecticut.

One of the first things I teach students to do in book talk is to explain how the book reminds them of their own life. This text to self connection is extremely powerful in having students return to books, and nurturing a love for books within them. It also will help students begin to understand story elements such as theme, point of view and problem and solution. When I first introduce this concept of relating text to self I use a picture book that is realistic fiction. Knowing my class dynamic, I try to find a book that will have circumstances that are within the realm of their experience. I have found that all the books in the Jamaica series by Juanita Havil are successful with this. I usually begin with one of my three favorites. Jamaica Tag Along, Jamaica's Find, or Jamaica and the Blue Marker. Each of these books deals with things my students can relate to. When I introduce the book I tell the students what I want them to be thinking about during the story. I explain that I want them to think about a time when something happened to them that was like what happened to Jamaica. After the reading and before I start the discussion I explain to the students that they need to explain why they were like Jamaica by reminding us what happened to her as well. I will then give them a framework in which to set up their response. I will write on a board or chart paper: I was like Jamaica because I (blank) and Jamaica (blank) too. This is simply a matter of taking a writing prompt and translating it to dialogue. We found that in order to be successful in text to self connection in the older grades, students had to relate back to the text. This was true of many of the writing prompts in the comprehension section of the standardized test. So I make it a point to have my students do this with all of their responses to text. Once the students are using this relation of text to self easily, I make it more complicated by having them begin to compare and contrast their experience to that of the characters. They of course can have used the same framework to talk about how they are not like Jamaica. Eventually, then, they are able to discuss both resemblance and difference. I was like Jamaica because (blank), but different because (blank). They also begin to relate to each other: I was like so and so and Jamaica. When given this tool in discussion it is easy for them to translate it into written work, as you will see in the next strategy.

The following are some of the frameworks I use for some literature elements in both book talks and on the graphic organizers that I discuss in the following section.

For main ideas and eventually themes, I have the students start their statement with "The whole book is about..." Using the word whole allows students to evaluate whether or not what they are saying is indeed true. For main idea I will also have the students rename the story and design a cover as an assessment.

When talking about sequencing I have the students first use a beginning, middle, end format. They then can move to first, next, next, next, last.

When learning about setting and mood I have the students use "The story took place at/in (blank)." They then move on to "The story feels, or made me feel (blank)". They then move to "The story makes me feel (blank)

because (blank)."

When talking about characters, I first have the students identify main characters and secondary characters. I then have them describe character traits simply using the "(the character) is (description)". I then have the students explain the trait by using "(the character) is (description). I know this because (detail from the story)". "After they have been taught this, the students can move to point of view by using "(The character) would feel/think (blank) because (blank). "

I use these phrases consistently in the book talks and graphic organizers so that students feel comfortable using them, and know what element of literature we are discussing when such phrases are used.

Creating Graphic Organizers for Literary Elements

After we have had practice using a somewhat scripted dialogue within the book discussions, I have my students begin to use it in their writing. I find that the more assistance and direction they have written down for them when they begin this process the more successful they are. So I create a form for each of the story elements so that the students will be familiar with them and reference them throughout the year. These forms are graphic organizers that are designed specifically for the students to illustrate specific literary elements. The organizers usually allow plenty of space for writing and drawing. As the year progresses the students will be given less and less assistance on each of the organizers so that eventually they are able to execute the same task on simple writing paper. Again I will use a book from the Jamaica series called Jamaica Tag Along to explain how I set up this format by relating text to self. After having used the wording that I indicated in the previous explanation of book discussion, I have the students begin to communicate this type of connection through the written word. The form that I initially give them is full of guides to allow them to organize their writing in a comprehensive fashion. The paper is divided in half, each side having room for writing and drawing. The bottom of the page is a few lines for writing that go across both pages. On one side I have my students draw and write what happened to the character. On the other side they draw and write about something in their own experience that the text reminded them of. On the bottom lines they create the phrase to join the two. I was like/not like Jamaica, because x happened to Jamaica and x happened to me. In this way they are able to show their ability to make a text to self connection, thus showing their understanding of this literary concept.

Creating Useful Assessment

I address the student's ability to discuss and comprehend these concepts of literature through both the writing and the oral discussion. The forms that I briefly described above are what I use to formally assess my students' progress. I include a monthly example of each of the forms in the students' portfolios as they are introduced and I also grade one whole group lesson of each on a rubric at least once a semester. As the year progresses, so do the forms. A new type of graphic organizer is introduced for each introduction of a literary element, and as time passes students will have icons or other crutches taken away for the elements that are worked with early on. The format and elements addressed will vary in the portfolio, but the basic idea of this type of written response stays the same.

The rubric is teacher created. Usually it is created in collaboration with other teachers on the grade level. I

find it most useful when we come up with a general rubric that can address any written response to literature and then fine-tune that general rubric for whatever skill or response we are trying to elicit. A few teachers I know have their students begin creating rubrics as the year progresses. I have not done this but I think it sounds like a wonderful way to empower students in their learning, and would be especially effective in the older grades, say second and third grade. How you create a rubric is not important. What is important is that your rubric is addressing what you are trying to assess. That it is understandable to you and anyone else who will be looking at the scores, and gives you a clear picture of your students' progress.

For example, an initial assessment I have created has been on characterization. On the organizer the students have to identify the main character, and use a word to describe that character. The rubric has three levels, 0 being the lowest and 2 the highest. In order to receive a two the student must identify the main character with writing and/or drawing, and use one word that appropriately describes the character.

To prepare students for this assessment we identify main characters as a group during book talk, and have already generated lists of descriptive words for these characters. When the students are assessed, they are reminded of these exercises, but are read a new book in which they have to identify the character and find a word to describe him on their own. Thus if the students were read *The Story of Ferdinand*, by Munro Leaf, and they identified Ferdinand as the main character and described him as sweet, they would receive a 2 on the assessment.

Integrating into the Literacy Block

This past year I used these types of graphic organizers and book discussions with my students to address some of the literary concepts that I have brought up in this unit. We did this with self to text connection, character, setting, problem and solution, and main idea. By the end of the year the majority in my class was able to speak and write about all five of these literary concepts independently and in a group, referring to a variety of books. They displayed a great amount of confidence when writing or speaking about books, especially when addressing these elements. I believe that this is not only effective because these are effective practices, but because with the help of some of my colleagues I found ways to insinuate these practices into all the different segments of our day.

Here I will describe briefly a few of the more effective ways in which I used these practices in my classroom. The most effective and ongoing place to have these practices present for independent and group work once they have been addressed is, of course, in literacy centers. Literacy centers take an hour of our day. The students work in specific centers independently or with a buddy, while the teacher takes small groups for specific instruction. During this time I give my students a variety of ways to explore books. One simple way is to allow the students to read a familiar text with a buddy. In this way the students are encouraged to learn—on their own with a classmate—the type of dialogue that they are taught in book discussion. I also have centers where books are available to read and where students can fill out graphic organizers they have already been exposed to. In this way they are able to reinforce their knowledge of the literary concepts with a variety of texts and have constant exposure to the forms in which they are ultimately assessed. The students will also be given the organizers as a response to stories they hear in listening center, and be given the specific task of having a mini book discussion on occasion.

The teacher can also pull specific groups to address these literary concepts. The guided reading that goes on during center time is, as my literacy coach aptly says, "the most powerful teaching we do all day." Therefore center time is an ideal time for teachers to pull small groups of students who are having difficulty understanding certain concepts. Such concepts can also be touched upon during the discussion before and after the students read in all guided reading groups. I was at first resistant to teaching this type of content during guided reading, thinking that at that time students would need to learn reading strategies and phonics skills, and that focusing on comprehension would take away from their understanding of these strategies. That was until I realized that the students in my class needed to be able to understand how literature worked in order to be able to read. My students were beginning to really understand and use decoding strategies, but a few of my groups were not progressing because they were struggling with choosing a reading strategy, which turned out to be the most crucial factor of all. When they came to a word they did not know my students would decode phonetically, and reread and skip the word and go back, but they were having a difficult time with the underlying necessity of thinking about what makes sense. The unknown words were being attacked in a way that isolated them from the text and the story line and therefore made it much more difficult to decode them. By addressing literary concepts during guided reading along with traditional decoding strategies, we may be able to give our students a better grasp of how to look at words in context.

An easy way to do this is to center the initial reading discussion on the literature concept you wish to highlight. When I want students to think about the mood of a story, I will pick a book like *A Dark, Dark Wood*, by Joy Cowley, so that my students will easily be able to discuss that concept. Before they read the story on their own, I have the students do a picture walk through the book, looking at the pictures. I have them tell me how the pictures make them feel, what the colors are like, and how they think the author wants us to feel when we read the book. I tell them the mood of the book is how it makes us feel. When the students have responded to what type of mood this book evokes (spooky or scary), I tell them that if they come to a word they don't know in the text they should remember that there are probably spooky words in a book like this, and so they need to think about what would make sense within this book. This helps students not only to understand how discuss the mood of a story, but also how to use literature elements to help them with their reading.

Dramatization

Another strategy for teaching story elements that is extremely effective and loved by the students is dramatizing the stories or parts of the stories. The best thing about this strategy is that most of the ways you will use this approach will be so much loved by the students and so much fun and so active that the students will not even feel like they are working. But in particular using drama to teach story concepts is effective because it involves the whole child, differentiates the instruction for students who are strong kinesthetic or intrapersonal learners, and really gets to the essence of what storytelling is. I find that dramatizing a story is especially effective in helping children to understand sequencing, main idea, themes, and of course characters, settings and problems and solutions. These dramatizations can be set up formally or informally. I will give an example of how to set up a dramatization more formally in the final project so here I will try to explain how I make it easy to have quick and informal dramatizations of popular stories.

Make sure that you have an easily accessible place to have the students act out the story. Because we always have a large rug in our room for meetings I usually use this area as the "stage". The students who are the

audience gather at three sides of the rug, and one side we use as backstage, or off stage. Unless it is a story that we are extremely familiar with and I have been using dramatization in the class for some time, I usually act as narrator. Costumes for these informal dramatizations can be as simple as a sign around the student's neck, with the character's name and a picture. I also collect plates with animal faces on them and animal noses, as so many children's books have animals as central characters. Hats and smocks can serve as costumes for stories with human characters. I try not to use full facial masks so that the students can be expressive. If it is a story with few characters and many students want a chance to participate I will simply reassign the roles and perform the story two or three times. The students in my classes have never seemed to mind this; in fact they enjoy watching their peers. It gives everyone a chance to perform, and allows students to experience a favorite story more than once.

Acting as narrator, I will read the story while the students perform it. I often encourage the students to say the lines as they remember them, but will read them from the text for students who are shy or unsure. In first grade and Kindergarten, I think that it is much more important that the performing students get the gist of the story or character or situation that they are dramatizing than remember actual phrases. Therefore I do not correct a departure from the text in what children say in their roles if it does not detract from the characters' essence or the storyline. As narrator I am able to guide the story in a way that lends itself to the literary element that I want my students to get a better handle on. For instance, if I am addressing the element of sequence in literature, I will structure my dramatization so that that element is highlighted. I will encourage audience participation by asking continuously what happened next, and getting responses. For consistency's sake I use the same terminology that we used on our graphic organizers and in our book talks to do this. When I teach sequencing in literature, for example, during book talk I have the students refer to the parts of the story by saying in the beginning, in the middle and in the end. I also have them tell a story in sequence, saying first, next, next etc. and last. These are also the words that are present on the two graphic organizers designed for sequential order. So naturally these are the terms I use as narrator to elicit the responses from the audience when this element is my focus.

I find that the use of dramatization is most effective as reinforcement. The students need to be not only familiar with the text but also with any literary elements that we are addressing for the occasion to be fun and successful. Therefore I will often make this a Friday activity. I was trained, both in New York and New Haven, in a literacy program called Breakthrough to Literacy. In this program you focus on one book for the week, addressing a different element each day. Fridays are left for celebration. Unfortunately the books in the program did not often have substantial storylines, so I found it difficult to pull everything I needed to keep the children engaged for these daily lessons until Friday. Because of this I often ended up supplementing these books with a book that had a similar theme from classic literature. Often for our celebration on Friday I would have the students dramatize the story from the classic literature. I find this is good way to get some energy and frivolity into the last day of the school week, as well as show off the fruits of our hard work.

Because I like to give my students a chance to practice all the learning structures we set up in the classroom independently, or in small groups, I also have found some ways to allow students to bring the practice of dramatization into centers. This can be a bit tricky, as students can get rambunctious when left to act out a story on their own. Therefore when I set up dramatization activities in centers I try to create clear and very well structured guidelines. I often will limit the number of students allowed in the center at a time to a very small group, and have alternative centers for students to go to if they do not adhere to the guidelines set for noise level and conduct within the center. I also have found that using puppets and/or small figures can be extremely helpful in controlling the center, so that it can work effectively during a time when we are concentrating on literacy. I will create hand or stick puppets for stories that we have already worked on and

dramatized in class, stories the students are already well acquainted with and can revisit. I put copies of the story in the center along with the puppets and perhaps a small stage set so that the children can perform. This center is usually set up in a corner that will be the least disturbing to other students, a place such as the classroom library or an area where other centers and guided reading are not taking place. As the students become familiar with this type of center, I will allow them to create the puppets and settings themselves. To advance the center farther, I will instruct them to bring in elements of mood or character traits. I will also have them write a summary of the story as a closing activity when we are focusing on summarizing.

Final Project

Thus far I have discussed how to use informal dramatization to reinforce literary concepts for early childhood students. When I say informal I mean that the students do not rehearse the dramatization and the audience is primarily made up of members of the class. These informal dramatizations usually take a short amount of time and the planning is primarily the responsibility of the teacher. As a final project of either a unit with a few stories or the examination of one story, a more formal dramatization of the story is a wonderful way to culminate children's hard work and learning.

When choosing to have a real play based on a story used in the classroom, there are some important things to consider. It is important to decide whether the story is one which lends itself to this type of production. All of the students should be involved in one way or another, and I think that early childhood teachers more often than not will find that their students want to participate as actors. If you are going to invite parents as audience it is imperative that all students spend a substantial amount of time on the stage. You also need to think about the script. Although it is not completely unacceptable to be the "narrator" or to have another adult act as narrator, the production will be more meaningful to the students if a large part of the dialogue is theirs. Therefore look for stories with simple, repetitive dialogue that the students will have any easy time remembering. Books like those in the Jamaica series are wonderful for connections, but rather difficult to use in dramatization. Books that will be most successful will be ones that allow for large numbers of students playing roles as choral characters that also speak, and are crucial to the story line. A few examples are *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, where a large portion of the students can be the Wild Things, and *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina, where a large group of students can act as monkeys. Stories like these allow students to participate and be important, and can accommodate any number of students you may have.

Deciding where, when and how the performance or performances will take place is up to you as the teacher. You can decide whom to invite according to how much space you have. Students can help with preparation by helping to design costumes, scenery, props and invitations. The more students become involved in the process, the more they will have invested in the performance.

Before the performance(s) take place make sure you rehearse the students. The stage is a site of extreme emotions, where a success can be exhilarating but a failure can be devastating. Do not set the students up for failure by not allowing them enough time to be prepared. A formal dramatization to be seen by administrators, other classes, and parents, is not the safe atmosphere that the informal class dramatizations are. Therefore, for this to be a positive experience for students, give them plenty of practice time to make mistakes. Make sure that you allow time to practice on stage and in costume and show them exactly how to enter and exit.

I once had my students perform the song Chicken Soup with Rice, which we also had in the form of the book by Maurice Sendak. The performance was in December, and because it was my first year teaching, I didn't realize how much practice time was needed. We had been singing the song all year, so I thought translating those occasions into a performance would be easy. We began to rehearse with two weeks to go, and I saw that that was not nearly enough time for my students to be comfortable with their movements and costumes. I realized I was setting them up for failure. I postponed the performance until March. A week before our March performance the students were groaning about the excessive amount of time we had spent rehearsing, not only the song but entering and exiting the stage and taking final bows. But when the performance came they were able to do exactly what they needed to do despite performance jitters, and not only were our audience members incredibly impressed with their performance, but the pride my students felt in the outcome of their hard work was priceless.

I include this anecdote to emphasize how crucial the rehearsal process is for success in performance, and to show you how overdoing practice time far outweighs underdoing it. Once you have rehearsed, made sets and costumes, have your space ready and have invitations sent out, the performance should take care of itself. In addition to having parents act as audience members, having them help with the performance can be a wonderful way to involve them in the classroom community. Have parents help students into their costumes, talk to students who are feeling nervous, or usher. Including parents is a wonderful experience for both students and [the] parents themselves, and can really help parents to realize the crucial role they play in their children's education.

In this age of data driven education, it is important to remember that learning can be joyful. In fact, it needs to be a joy for our students if we are to create life long learners. This unit is an example of how I find ways in my classroom to teach the concepts that are required while keeping the activities engaging and enjoyable for my students. If we continue to find ways to make assessments meaningful and relevant to what we teach in our classrooms, we will not only empower our students as learners, but ourselves as educators.

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