The first-grade school year has just ended, and I am leaving a roomful of readers—children who can’t wait to see what’s in the new books I bring in, who read independently, and who value books and reading. This class can’t pass the Caldecott poster in the school library without stopping to excitedly name all the books they know and love. Each morning they anticipate the books they will take home “for overnight.” They have written letters to next year’s first graders. One of the things almost all of them wrote: “You will learn to read.” As I look back over the year I am thrilled to see how far these children have come.

Coming Together as a School Family: Starting the Year

When the school year began in late August there were only five or six children who knew the alphabet or any letter sounds. Only four children were native English speakers. At least four different languages were spoken in the homes of children in the class. There were several transfers from other schools, and many behavior problems. We began working together as a literature group immediately, a few minutes after the children entered the classroom. We gathered together on the rug, enjoyed a story, and talked about it. We said poetry together and played with it, chanted it, and mimed it. We learned each other’s names and talked about how the names looked and what letters they contained. Even before recess we had built some memories together and were on our way to becoming a school family.

Since attention spans are short, the beginning days of school are a constant back-and-forth between activities—stories, talking, poetry, movement, drawing, writing, singing. I have many things planned and many picture books and poems

The more we read together, together, together
The more we read together
The happier we’ll be!
—Adapted from Traditional Song
picked out so that I can easily move to a different activity when I see that the children need to switch gears.

**Learning Names**

I keep a pocket chart in front of the classroom by my chair. Near it I keep an alphabet strip, double sets of lowercase alphabet letters, a set of capital letters, and double sets of manila tagboard strips with the children’s names on them. Right away we can use these cards for reading the children’s names, matching name or alphabet cards, and spelling names with the alphabet letters. Names are of great interest to first graders. These name strips may be used to choose students for lining up, for passing out materials, for grouping, and for jobs and games. There is a lot of anticipation among students looking to see if their names have been selected for jobs or activities. A third set of names is available for the top of each child’s desk. Later in the year we will have “name days” and enjoy writing each other’s names.

**Grouping Reading Materials**

Books are all over the classroom, organized in tubs and baskets, on bookshelves, and in assorted book display racks with covers facing out. There are a variety of magazines. Many stuffed animals stand with their favorite picture books: A toy bat puppet hangs over Janell Cannon’s book *Stellaluna*; stuffed “wild things” hover around Maurice Sendak’s classic *Where the Wild Things Are*. A stuffed dog and a basket of other items hold John Burningham’s *The Shopping Basket*. Two bears, one large, one small, sit with *Can’t You Sleep, Little Bear?* by Martin Waddell, and Madeline and Curious George sit with their respective picture books. A tubful of other book characters and animals sits nearby.

These groupings change, and are frequently rearranged by the children and by me, depending upon what we are reading; what we are enjoying as a roomful of readers. The books and stuffed characters are not decorations. Sometimes these stuffed animals and figures are used to act out the stories. They are real to us; they become real as children hear and read and retell the stories. They play a large part in the imaginative life of the classroom. The children want to learn to read, to be involved with books. These characters and books are visual metaphors of our work with literacy.

**Making Wishes for the School Year**

One of our first-day activities is to talk about wishes, hopes, and goals for the school year. First graders have some very specific ideas about school. Many assume
they are going to learn to read on the first day, and they want to be sure it happens so they can go home and let everyone know.

As the children talk about their expectations I write down their thoughts on a large chart. I point out a few things as I write, such as some capital letters, sounds, and letter names, then we “read” their words together. We talk about making pictures in our heads to visualize what these words mean. Sometime during the day we illustrate this chart. Each child makes a crayon or marking-pen picture about a hope or wish for the year. These are cut out and glued onto the chart. We refer to this chart and these illustrations often throughout the beginning of the school year.

Usually there are more illustrations than there is space on the chart paper. It is very effective to place this chart in the center of a bulletin board and pin or tack the remainder of the children’s drawings around it. In this way all the children are represented, and almost immediately there is something up on the wall that matters to all of us.
Several times during the school year we will revisit the idea of learning to read, and the children will have time to articulate how they feel about reading and about learning to read.

Sharing Special Books

Whenever I read to children I want to celebrate reading—to enchant, enthrall—to make reading and story an irresistible, essential part of their lives. I always choose the books I read aloud carefully, but I spend even more time choosing books for the first day and the first week of school. I try to pick literature that subtly deals with beginning-of-school-year concerns, such as Wemberley Worried by Keven Henkes; Willy Bear by Mildred Kantrowitz; Emily’s First 100 Days of School and Timothy Goes to School by Rosemary Wells; Leo the Late Bloomer by Robert Kraus; When Will I Read? by Myriam Cohen; and King of the Playground by Phyllis Naylor.

When I read aloud to children I introduce the title and the author, and explain (with my mentor, Kay Goines’, words ringing in my ears) that “the author couldn’t come today.” Almost immediately the children are annoyed that “the author didn’t come today.” However, they do make the connection that books are written by people, people who also have lives and do other things besides write.

“Reading” Pictures

Before I read a book to the children we often take a “picture walk.” We look through the book together, discussing what may be going on, commenting on pictures, characters, and setting, and making predictions. This technique is important to new readers because it gives them strategies to use to help them read. It is also important for children from homes where no one can read, or where no one can read English. It is an enjoyable activity and gives children time to give their own input and interpretations, and to talk about similar experiences.

I tell my first graders that children can “read” pictures better than most grown-ups can. I truly believe that many adults have forgotten how to use this skill. I remember having to relearn it when I first became a teacher.

When children are involved in a picture walk, they create possible text through their discussion of the pictures. They try to find as many clues as they can in the pictures, using the sequence and the structure of the book to help them interpret what is going on in the story. They are really pretelling the story. The pictures help them make sense of the story, help them learn the content, and ultimately help them learn language and learn to read. This focus on illustration teaches children about different art media, story sequence, illustrators’ styles, and fine art. It also validates a skill they have and frequently use—creating a story scene with pencils, crayons, and other art media.
Learning About Authors

When reading to my first graders, as often as possible I tell them about the author and share a photograph. Frequently the back of a book jacket has a photograph of the author and biographical data. I share information about the illustrator as well. Children are always very excited when we find this kind of information on the book flap or the back of the cover. Children’s book club magazines typically feature author and illustrator interviews.

I make a point of sharing author and illustrator information with children because soon they will be authors and illustrators themselves. They will sit in the author/illustrator’s chair in front of the classroom, or with a small group of children, and read their own stories and show their own art to a group of readers. I want children to make this “books are by people” connection right away because this concept makes the idea of writing, drawing, and being an author or illustrator very accessible to them.

Using Engaging Literature and Songs

Nursery rhymes and poetry are some of the most important literature for children to experience. The rhyme and rhythm are infectious; the words and visual pictures they evoke live easily in the mind and heart. Using poetry and nursery rhymes gives children an active break from sitting and listening. These activities develop language and the rhythm of language in a meaningful way.

Music is another activity that extends and enhances the literature experience. Many songs are good literature extensions, as well as being important activities in their own right. Some picture books are songs, such as Wheels on the Bus: The Traditional Song, pop-up edition, adapted and illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky, and Five Little Ducks by Raffi. Music-based picture books have a powerful impact on children and can play a large part in helping children learn to read. If children know the song and can track words by pointing to the correct ones as they say them, they have a wonderful way to practice reading all by themselves.

Using Reading as a Life-Shaper

When children commit to mind and heart the words to poetry, nursery rhymes, and songs, they are internalizing language. This skill will help them to read, to write, to articulate, and to live. I often tell children about the words I always recited when I was little, when I was frightened: a few lines from Sir Archibald by Wolo. In the picture book the main character, a little monkey named Sir Archibald, is very scared as he walks through a thick forest full of trees. He refuses to be intimidated. He shouts, “Don’t hear you. Don’t see you. You’re nothing
to me! And how in the world can a nothing scare me!” This logic made a lot of sense to me when I was small. I felt that if these words were good enough for Sir Archibald, they were good enough for me. I said them to myself when I needed them, protecting myself for years with words from a story I loved.

Repeating the excerpt from this picture book helped me through scary situations and strengthened my resolve when I was facing a difficult task. The words from Sir Archibald were a safety net for me—a way of nudging myself onward when frightened, of making sure I did my personal, honorable best. The book connected with my own being at a very deep level. It gave me a creative way to think about problems and a way to face them.

I shared this memory about Sir Archibald with educators in a children’s literature class I was teaching. The next day several members of the group approached me individually and related that my story had been very meaningful. People told me personal experiences that they helped solve through a strong connection to a special book, book excerpt, or poem. Literature has that power for all of us. It helps us to know who we are, helps us to shape our lives, both as children and as adults.

Internalizing Poetry and Book Excerpts

The book excerpts I emphasize in the classroom are for me the words that are the heart of the book. Often the children and I look through books we love together, to decide which parts are the ones to commit to memory. We recite, repeat, and chant book excerpts in the same way we do with poetry, in spare moments, in “apt” moments, walking to the lunchroom or waiting for the bell to ring, loving the sound and rhythm as well as the meaning of the words.

Poetry and book excerpts are such an integral part of the daily life of our classroom that a casual happening will evoke a poem or an excerpt from a book. For example, I had read Farmer Duck by Martin Waddell (illustrated by Helen Oxenbury) to my class on several occasions. I had seen the children spontaneously act out the book during free-choice situations, and we had done it as a classroom group as well. An overworked duck is the main character in the book. This poor duck is doing all the chores on the farm while the lazy farmer lies in bed eating chocolates. At intervals the farmer will shout, “How goes the work?” and the duck shouts, with varying degrees of annoyance as the story progresses, “QUACK!”

I finished reading Farmer Duck and went over to sharpen pencils while the children were busy with other tasks. A child looked over at me and asked loudly, “How goes the work?” Several other children echoed the question.
“QUACK!” I replied, and we all broke up laughing. I felt that this was a very sophisticated literature response from six- and seven-year-olds. It was also an “in joke” for all of my first graders because of their deep connection to and common experience with a piece of literature they love.

One day, after we reread and enjoyed *Millions of Cats* by Wanda Gag together, the children asked to make a mural showing “all these cats.” As a group, we decided to make the cats of torn paper and glue them to a mural with some of the words from the book.

As the children were tearing and creating their animals I could hear Sara singing, chanting, repeating over and over as she worked, “Hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats.” Other children heard her and joined in. This is the book excerpt that we eventually chose to print on the mural with the multitude of torn paper cats.

“Reading” a Nursery Rhyme

Since children’s expectations are that they will read on the first day of school, it is important to honor this need and provide for it. I like to use *Humpty Dumpty* for this activity because it is one of the nursery rhymes children are apt to know when they enter school. I begin reciting *Humpty Dumpty* to the children, and soon they are joining in. We talk about the rhyme, and the pictures they have in their heads when they hear and say the words. I show them the words on a poetry chart. I wait before I point out what these words are, and sure enough, some children begin puzzling out that this is *Humpty Dumpty*.

We “read” the chart together while I track the words by pointing to them as we say them. Then I read aloud Miko Imai’s modern picture book about one of Humpty Dumpty’s descendants, *Little Lumpty*. Little Lumpty has the same love of the wall as his famous ancestor, and climbs it against his mother’s advice. However, Little Lumpty’s mother is a divergent thinker. When her son is trapped on top of the wall, too scared to climb down, she calls for a blanket brigade and has him jump to safety. Children love both the book and the nursery rhyme, and the two pieces of literature work well together.

Using Nursery-Rhyme Booklets

After this read-aloud experience I show the class a folded paper booklet with the title *Humpty Dumpty* on the front cover and the nursery rhyme printed on the remaining three pages. I read it to them as they say the nursery rhyme with me. Then I give the children folded booklets and have them illustrate the poem with crayons, marking pens, or colored pencils.
After the children illustrate their *Humpty Dumpty* booklets we come back to the rug and “read” them together. I remind them how to track by moving a pointer finger under each word as they say the word. We praise each other and celebrate because we can all “read”!

The next step is to let the children know how to show off this new skill at home, or to whoever is picking them up after school. I pretend to be a first grader. I have one of the children pretend to be a parent saying, “Hi Honey. How was school? What did you do today?” (Children love to paraphrase and invent their own conversations.)

*First grader, played by teacher, responding:* “I learned how to read.”

*Parent, played by first grader, acting astonished:* “You did?”

*First grader, played by teacher, responding:* “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,” etc. I “read” and track the *Humpty Dumpty* booklet, while the “parent” faints and falls to the rug.

We play this scene a few times with variations and different children, and enjoy it thoroughly. And, once in a while, I see this “I Can Read” scene reenacted between surprised parent and proud child in the classroom doorway at the end of the day.
Making Booklets I use four-page and eight-page booklets in my classroom for a variety of reading, writing, and other activities similar to the one described. The format for both booklets is simple: Both are made from a single piece of paper. To make the four-page booklet, fold a paper in half the long way. Fold it in half again, left to right. Now you have a small booklet with a cover and three additional pages. (See Appendix 3 for directions for the eight-page booklet.)

Creating a “Reading Is Fun” Poetry Chart

Like most teachers, I probably plan enough for the first day of school to take us through at least a week or two. One of my personal goals each year is to teach the children many poems and help them to have wonderful experiences with poetry. Many of the chants and poems I teach are meant to subtly imprint children with positive attitudes about books and stories and reading. I use this one on the first day of school:

Reading Is Fun
Reading is fun,
Reading is fun,
Reading is fun
For everyone!
The more we read,
The better we read,
So READ! READ! READ!

We recite these words together, enjoying an experience that I hope will shape lives and create readers.

Soon after the children learn this chant I show them a written version. As with the Humpty Dumpty chart, I do not introduce the words on the chart paper—I just hang the chart up and casually start another activity. Soon some of the children will realize that these are the words to the poem we just recited together. This is a big epiphany, a big “aha!” I point out to the children that in figuring this out they are really reading!

We celebrate this feat by illustrating the chart together. Each child does a drawing using such materials as crayons, marking pens, colored pencils, or a combination of these. The drawings are cut out and placed on the chart. Some are glued or taped on with tape rolls on the back of the drawing. Other illustrations are placed around the chart as it is hung on a bulletin board or wall. We refer to this chart often, and “read” it together, always tracking the words with a pointer.
Introducing the Overnight Book Program

I always let the children know about the Overnight Book Program right away—on the first day of school. In this program, each child chooses a book to take home “for overnight” for someone in the family to read aloud. Children are anxious to get this program started. This year one of my first graders calls it the “tonight book.” “Overnight books” are kept on a specific display. They are books I have already read aloud to the students. As soon as I have read twenty to twenty-five books aloud to the class and have done some initial instruction with the children the program can begin. It will be one of the most important things we do all year.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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