Everything You Need to Know to Teach First Grade

Pat Barrett Dragan

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
To all my family, especially my husband, George, my mom, and Sherry, Jim, Debi, Marsha, and Bev
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A hundred years from now
It will not matter
What my bank account was,
What sort of house I lived in,
Or what kind of car I drove.
But the world may be different
Because I was important
In the life of a child.

—Anonymous

Figure I–1
We share many miracles together during our first-grade year.
First grade is a magical time. Children are open to everything, full of wonder and awe. They are enthusiastic and eager to learn. More than anything, they want to be able to do things and to be and become competent. They want very much to be up to the learning tasks at hand. At this age, five or six years old at the beginning of the first-grade school year, children are on the edge of becoming capable of many intellectual as well as physical and analytical tasks. They will accomplish more in this academic year than I ever would have dreamed possible. I have to remind myself each school year what first-grade children are like at the beginning. It is always a surprise. The end of the year is so full of achievements that it seems many years and worlds away.

This book covers first grade from before school starts to the last day and beyond. It encompasses everything from helpful tips and things I learned the hard way, to ways to accomplish curriculum goals and achieve joyful learning. I have taken a close look at the whole year and tried to bring it to life. I have especially tried to include things I would have loved to know when I began my teaching career.

You Can’t Do It All . . .

My wise friend, first-grade teacher Laurel Sherry-Armstrong, always says, “You can do anything, but you cannot do everything.” Since our time with our students is limited, and always being packed with yet more curricula to squeeze into our days, it is crucial that we make choices. We need to give our children the best of our knowledge and materials first, and get the biggest educational payoff we can for the time we have. We can’t do it all, so we have to pick and choose with reflection and deliberation.

As elementary teachers we are generalists. We are responsible for teaching all curriculum areas in the most expert ways we can. Some of the best ways for us to become experts are to read and keep abreast of professional literature, take classes, attend conferences and inservices, and learn from colleagues whose work we respect. This kind of professional input helps me sharpen my skills and be at my best in my first-grade classroom.

With this in mind, I have included in this book some ideas and information I have learned from other educators whose work I value. Many are close friends. I work with some of them. I met others in
workshops and classes and places like bookstores and educational conferences. I appreciate them giving me permission to include their wisdom and breakthrough ideas in my book.

**Characteristics of First Graders**

I feel fortunate to have spent so much of my life and teaching career among first graders. They want to like their teacher and hope their teacher will like them. A first grader can seem babyish one minute and at the cutting edge of independence the next. Children at this age like cheerful, upbeat people and adults with integrity and a sense of humor. So do I.

First graders are busy creating their own schemas—figuring out their ideas about the world. It is important to them that things are fair and just. They are sincere. And sometimes they are wise.

As Darnell, one of my first graders, told me earnestly on the first day of school last year, “Sometimes kids know things that big people don’t know.”

I had to agree with him.

No one is more candid than five- and six-year-olds. They will let you know exactly what they think, with complete and devastating honesty. One very articulate child, Maggie, said to me one day with perfect candor, “You are a wonderful teacher, and you teach us a lot, but you sure can’t sing!” (My friend Laurel was right: We can’t do it all! But we try.) Another child looked at my photograph in a children’s book I had written and said critically, “You look different now, like way older.” She was right. My unspoken response was to think, “Yes, I look *lots* older. I’ve had you in class all year!”

First grade is all about beginnings. Even for children who have learned to read at home or in kindergarten, this is still a time of starting many different things. I do try to stress with my new children right away, during our first morning together, that they know and can do so much already. I want them to feel competent, be in a can-do mode, and feel energized and ready to go, top of the heap, rather than feel like blank slates. I want this to be a year of learning together that is full of discovery, excitement, and *construction* of meaning, as opposed to one of *transmission*. I don’t want to merely transfer to the children knowledge I think they need to learn. I want us to explore and discover
together. I want to help children feel comfortable and capable as learners, to build on what they already know and to invite all of them to travel as far as they can go on their own learning journeys. I want their time at school with me to be the most joyful of experiences.

**Acceleration of Knowledge**

Whether you are a beginning teacher, are new to the grade level, or are a veteran, first grade has new challenges each year: changes in curriculum, shifts in materials available, even new knowledge about how children learn. Depending upon which source you consult, scientists estimate that knowledge now doubles every two to five years. The exact number is not important. The point is that knowledge is accelerating at an incredibly rapid rate. Even as I write, that pace is increasing. No wonder it can seem difficult to keep up with existing information and ideas.

Each new school year may bring reconfigurations of time schedules, often new staff and administration, and more importantly, new students. We are all locked in our own brains and even confined to our own classrooms. It is important to be as aware as possible of fresh developments in educational philosophy and to weigh and consider new learning strategies in light of our own beliefs. But the sheer amount of information out there can make it hard to get a grip on where to spend our energy, where to begin. I believe we need to pick one area at a time to focus on and get good at. When we are comfortable with that part of the curriculum, we can zero in on another subject area.

**Exploration and Independence**

Although I teach all areas of the curriculum, my own personal focus, passion, and emphasis for the first-grade year is reading/language arts. (And I love integrating the arts with this area of study.) Whenever possible, I connect learning across curriculum fields. Children particularly need reading and language arts skills to succeed in math, science, social studies—and all of the other things they will study.
I feel that one of my roles as a first-grade teacher is to convince children right away that they can read, and are learning to read, so they don’t have to worry about it any more: they can just get on with it! As I expressed in my book *Literacy from Day One* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), I want children to come to literacy easily, exuberantly. I feel they should learn the joys of literacy from someone who loves to read, loves books—reading, writing, and illustrations. I want to be that person for them.

Ideally, children have had wonderful years of being read to and talked with at home, before they ever start school. These experiences help make reading both a treasured pastime and an effortless learning endeavor. Children who have not been fortunate enough to have a literacy background will be helped so much by being read to at school and having the opportunity to experience wonderful literature in a nurturing environment.

According to scientists and archeologists, it took thousands of years for reading and writing to evolve. The concept of number, invention of numerals, and mathematic and scientific theories all took eons to develop as well. What is amazing to me, and I try to impress this upon my first graders, is that they will acquire some of these skills and more in a single year. It is a year for catching on to things and celebrating achievements—a time for “Ahas!” I expect to see lights go on, and hear lots of “Ooooooohs,” “Now I get it!” and “I can do it!”

There is nothing like the magic of seeing children take their first steps to literacy and watching them grow in knowledge and independence as they explore books and ideas, learn science and social studies concepts, and become mathematicians, artists, and musicians. That’s what keeps me, ever fascinated, in the first-grade classroom.

**First Graders Keep You on Your Toes**

First grade definitely requires a light, whimsical, and imaginative touch. First-grade teachers walk a fine line between helping children learn to settle down and focus and introducing them to the excitement and pleasure of learning. A lot of what we do, especially at the beginning of the year, is to act as if children can do things. And before we know it, they really can!
I feel it is important to help children take subject matter seriously without intimidating them—to help them learn to work both independently and in large and small groups without overstructuring them. I believe most of all that we need to keep alive, and foster in children, the sense of play they need so much if they are to explore, achieve, and apply themselves with confidence to the learning tasks and adventures ahead of them.

Once upon a time, in my younger teaching days, I did a real slapstick routine in the classroom when I fell backward over a whole bank of desks. I think I possibly did a back flip—the only one of my life. At any rate, whatever I did, I landed on my feet. My children were absolutely beside themselves. They applauded and shouted with glee, convinced that I had executed this madcap move for their entertainment and edification. “Do it again, do it again, Teacher!” they all cried.

It was the only time I had the full attention of that class all year. With that group, accidental slapstick was my ticket to credibility.

Now I’m faced with the idea of credibility in a new way: The title of this book implies full expertise. I am a little intimidated by this, since there are certainly things I don’t know about teaching first grade, especially with the knowledge base expanding and multiplying all the time. But first grade has been my life for more than thirty years; it still is, and I do know more than I used to. And, since I actively try hard to learn and grow, I always hope that tomorrow I will know more than I do today.

Since those beginning days of my career, I’ve given up back flips over desks and learned other ways to acquire integrity and credibility in my first-grade classroom—ways to inveigle, wangle, and keep children’s attention to help them learn. These ideas are the ones I’d like to pass along in this book.
It's tricky to do a new thing,
Like go to first grade,
But then you go,
And you aren’t scared so much,
And then you like it.
—Lilybeth

Greeting Your New Class—Have a Puppet in Your Pocket and Some Poems in Your Head!

My baby bear puppet is the best thing I’ve ever found to use when I’m welcoming my new first graders. The puppet is small, vulnerable, and looks so much like a real bear that no one is sure whether it’s alive or not. I hold my free hand and arm over the place where the puppet fits on my hand and the children really think they are looking at a very tiny baby bear about 6 inches tall.

I bring the bear right out on the playground with me and pull it out of my pocket when I greet my new class. The little bear is the pied piper the children follow into the classroom on the first day of school.

This small creature captivates children and their parents. The bear hides under my arm, comes out for a peek, retreats, wiggles around,
and so on. I encourage it to “be brave” and “get to know the new first
graders.” I tell it that it’s “okay to be scared.” I may ask a few chil-
dren (those perhaps with watery eyes or a trembling lower lip) to pet
it or tickle its tummy. Other children will have turns later. I put the
bear up on a window ledge next to an even bigger bear. I do so in such
a way that the children don’t see me remove my hand, and the puppet
opening is not showing. It seems important not to destroy the magic
of the moment.

A little later in the morning, to break the tension and give us a
chance to move around, I teach the children the poem “No Bears Out
Tonight,” using different intonations with each line. We enjoy recit-
ing it together and acting it out.

Figure 3–1
Children meet
Little Bear on the
first day of school.
No bears out tonight.
No bears out tonight.
No bears out tonight,
They’ve all gone away.
—Traditional

Find Your Way to Captivate and Enthrall

There are innumerable ways of meeting your new class. The point is to find one that is comfortable for you and helps children forget the big step they are taking—into your classroom! During your first few minutes with your children, help them to focus on something enjoyable and fascinating: a great poster, a giant stuffed animal, or a wonderful storybook. Books are always a good choice for me. Directing children to something of interest right away will help their nerves and, ultimately yours, too.

Relieving Parents’ Minds—Outside the Classroom Door

When parents see their children interested and involved, it is easier for them to leave. I never ask parents not to come into the room; I just say a brief cordial greeting to parents at the door and then turn my complete attention to the children. Many parents leave at this point. The children enter the classroom and sit on the rug with me. I try to avert parental interaction by getting the children engrossed with me right away. (My attention can be on the parents or on the children, but not both. And for me, the children win!) There are teachers who enjoy having parents in the classroom for part of the day at the beginning of the school year. I’m just not one of them. Once in a while, a child becomes very upset when a parent is leaving. This reminds the rest of the students that maybe they should be upset, too. I try to avoid this “parting is such sweet sorrow” scenario. It can be contagious.

Parents who do come into the room typically watch for a while and then leave. This is a good thing, especially if it happens naturally and without fanfare. Many children do not notice parents leaving. Six inches of fur and two little beady bear eyes are a powerful draw.
The children and I talk about the little bear and I introduce some of the other classroom animals. I begin reading *Willy Bear, Little Bear, or Timothy Goes to School.* Almost before we know it, the children and I are alone in the room together and we’re on our way to becoming a school family.

### What to Do About Criers

Once in a while, there are children who cry when they come to class for the first time. Distractions are in order! It can be helpful to enlist these children’s help with a plum job, such as passing out brand-new crayons and putting them on desks. Introducing them to classroom animals can work, especially the Biggest Bear, a truly gigantic teddy. I try to be sensitive to the moment and follow my intuition about each child.

Occasionally, if a child is upset and parents are still in the classroom, I may whisper to parents that I think it would be easier for their child if they were to leave.

### “I Want My Mother!”

This year I had a child who held up beautifully until the time came for the flag salute. Suddenly the enormity of being in first grade hit him. He burst into tears and wailed, “I want my mother!”

I hugged him and heard myself saying, from my heart, “I want her, too!” He looked at me, astonished, and almost managed a smile. We got through a bad moment—a shared moment—and the situation was eased for both of us.

### Greeting Each Child by Name

I strive to know all the children’s names before the first day of school. I make a point to interact with some of them the previous year while they are eating lunch. The easiest way for me to quickly learn names is to study photocopies of last year’s kindergarten class pictures for a
few days before school starts. I make copies the previous June and refer to them a few times before the first day of school. Nametags can also be helpful.

Being able to call each child by name right away gives me a certain amount of confidence and helps the children feel comfortable. It also astonishes parents, who wonder how on earth that happened!

### The Rug Area—We’re a Contained Group, and There’s Comfort in Numbers!

During the course of the first-grade year, when I really need children’s attention, I call them to the part of the rug up in front of the classroom. Meeting here on the first day brings us all together immediately and gives me a way to see each child and take attendance. I have every child’s name written on a tagboard strip or card. As I call a name, I show the corresponding name card. Many children enjoy trying to figure out these names before I say them. Often there are a few extra children who aren’t on the class list and belong in other classrooms. Coming together like this provides an easy way to sort this out.

### Name Cards—Our First Reading Experience

I make three sets of name cards and keep double sets in a pocket chart in our meeting area. These name cards can be used immediately for matching, for job assignments, to play a name game, to excuse children to line up for recess, and so on. One set of cards may be cut up and names can be spelled and reassembled like jigsaw puzzles. These name cards will also be used throughout our first month or so for finding specific letters, capital letters, certain sounds, and so forth. We will play with them in many ways. Names will be the first successful reading material for some first graders. (See *Phonics Lessons*, by Pinnell and Fountas [Heinemann 2003], for many more ideas about teaching with names.)

This name card session is also a good time to amend the cards to reflect nicknames, if the children prefer them. I always ask children what they would like to be called. Because I frequently have students
from other countries, I sometimes have difficulty with the pronunciation of their names. We all practice names together. I want children to know it is important to me to use the names they want to be called and to say them correctly.

**ELL Connection**

I particularly do not want to Americanize children’s names or change their names in any way. Alma Flor Ada writes about this experience, from a child’s point of view, in her chapter book *My Name Is Maria Isabel* (1995). When Maria’s teacher decides to call her Mary because there are two children named Maria in class, Maria Isabel feels as if she has lost her identity as well as her name. Not only has she lost the most important part of herself, Maria is constantly scolded for not answering when her new name (unrecognizable to her) is called. This book is available in English and Spanish.

**Pat's Tip**

If children wish to be called by a different name than the one listed on the roll sheet, I honor this, but in figuring it all out, I ask children what parents call them. Children can be pretty creative, as well as convincing. Years ago a child changed her name on the first day of school, and I didn’t find out for weeks, until the parent asked, “Who is Lizzie?”

**Putting Things in Desks or Cubbyholes**

When the children seem somewhat settled, I have a few students at a time put things in cubbyholes. I place a Post-it Note with a name on it inside each child’s cubby and put a little piece of tape on it. Later on during the first week, I make computer labels or sentence strips with
names, for more permanent identification of each child’s personal space. Usually there is a lot of movement the first few days, as well as the sorting out of nicknames, so it doesn’t pay to do this too soon.

**An Underlying Motive: Separate Children Without Them Knowing It**

One reason for having children sit on the rug with me right away is to get them involved and busy. Another is so that I can view their reactions and responses to other children. Often during the first few minutes, as I watch children’s interactions with each other, I see children who need to be sitting on opposite sides of the classroom. When I have children go to seats the first day, I choose their places and can easily and casually separate those who seem to need distance. This does help with class behavior. And it is much easier to avoid behavior problems than to acknowledge them and have to change a child’s seat right away. Leaving a friend and moving to another part of the classroom can be disconcerting to a child during the first few days of school.

The reverse is also true. Some children really do need the confidence of sitting with friends as their first-grade journey begins.

**Let’s Get on with It and Learn to Read!**

After a few preliminaries, as just described (such as taking attendance and getting coats and lunch boxes put away in cubbies), one of the first things we need to do, as a new school family, is to learn to “read.” Children have heard for years that they will learn to read in first grade, and they want to get that out of the way so they can stop worrying about it and do it. This topic comes up immediately when I ask, “What do you want to learn this year? What are your best wishes about first grade?” (I feel that the idea of sharing these personal wishes is very bonding, and my wish is to have a bonded first-grade group.)

The most typical answer is the one Ricky gave: “I want to learn to read today.” Usually children give variations of this answer. They also mention that they want to learn math. Some children say they want
to learn to write. The answer they may or may not give is that they want to have friends. Most of them agree vehemently that they want to learn to read. What interests me about the reading answer is that it usually has a time limit. When new first graders say they want to learn to read today, they mean right now. So that’s what we do. We learn to read right now.

Our First Shared Writing and Shared Reading Experiences

As the children tell me their wishes, I act as scribe and write their thoughts down on large chart paper. It is best to use 27-by-32½-inch tablet paper. I now place the paper horizontally so I can fit more words across and it is easier to read. (See Interactive Writing: How Language & Literacy Come Together, K–2, by McCarrier, Pinnell, and Fountas, [2000]). I prefer the tablet paper with a light blue grid, as I can use these light lines to organize and space my writing.

As I write, “‘I want to learn to read today,’ said Ricky,” I point out a few things, such as specific words or letters. I don’t expect to get a wish or a sentence from everyone so soon in the school year, so I sometimes add names next to sentences children agree are their wishes, too. Angel’s original sentence then becomes amended to “‘I want to learn to read to my baby brother,’ said Angel, Ivan, Tatiana, and Willy.” I try to have everyone’s name somewhere on this new chart. Some years this evolves into a simple list of things children want to learn.

I do this activity as quickly as possible and condense the list if it is too lengthy. We can just begin this brainstorming session on the first day and then complete our First-Grade Wishes chart over a two- or three-day period. Children do not have a very long attention span at the beginning of the school year, and the last thing I want to do on the first day of school is make reading and writing boring for them!

After the chart has a sentence or two, we “read” children’s wishes together. We talk about how, if you know what words say, that’s real reading! We try to figure out what the words are on the chart, and then congratulate each other that we are real readers.
We Are Illustrators, Too!

When we illustrate our First-Grade Wishes chart, probably over several days, children use white drawing paper and marking pens or crayons. We trim these illustrations using scissors or by tearing away the extra paper around the drawings. Sometimes I do this part myself, in the interest of the fast completion of a new chart.

I place our masterpiece on a blank bulletin board that has been titled First-Grade Wishes and put up the illustrations all around it. This gives us an immediate first-day or first-week display that reflects our deepest feelings about why we are here in the classroom in the first place. We will reread our work and enjoy it many times. We will celebrate the look of it, our artwork, and the fact that we can read this chart together.

Figure 3–2
First-Grade Wishes list
Movement Is Crucial

Since beginning first graders need to move around a lot, we take stretch breaks, play Simon says, and do songs, nursery rhymes, and poems with movements. Frequent breaks are important at this stage of the game. I try specifically to go back and forth from tables to the rug so that children are listening, talking, moving, singing, chanting, drawing, and so on. This is kind of like cookies and milk: a little bite of this, a sip of that, and so on. I sometimes view the week as a sandwich. I have a pretty good idea of what I want to put in between the bread, but it might take me the whole week to get all the bits in there.

We Read What We Already Know

Nursery rhymes are great read-alouds for the first day of school. Two of my favorite nursery rhyme books are *My Very First Mother Goose* (1996) and *Here Comes Mother Goose* (1999). Both volumes are edited by Iona Archibald Opie and illustrated by Rosemary Wells. The text of these books is large, and the pictures are whimsical and very imaginative.

The children love to recite nursery rhymes they know and eventually choose a favorite to read together. In *Literacy from Day One*, I describe a beginning reading activity using the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty.” The children learn the rhyme, illustrate it in a little booklet, and “read” it on a chart where the words have mysteriously appeared. Then they practice reading their booklets. We role-play reading to parents in response to the certain question the children will be asked after school: “What did you do at school today?” The children practice asking the question their way, for example, “Hi, Sweetie, what did you learn today?” Response, from another participant: “Hi, Mom. I learned how to read! Want to hear me read ‘Humpty Dumpty’?”

Our Readers Theatre Production

For our grand first-day finale, we make small drawings on sheets of overhead transparency plastic using nontoxic permanent marking pens. Then we have our own Humpty Dumpty show.
The children run this show and enthusiastically read “Humpty Dumpty” together. We admire our reading, our illustrations, and our theatre production. By the time we leave for the day, we’re on our way to becoming a close-knit, fun-loving, and literate community!

**Making Reading Accessible to Children**

Reading is a complex accomplishment, and we will approach it with many kinds of activities and experiences this year. I feel my main role on the first day of school is to help children relax about the idea of learning to read and feel successful with some beginning reading experiences. We play with a few ideas and enjoy some books and stories together. (Reading instruction is discussed more fully in Chapter 9.)

**Back-to-School Shopping: Books!**

When I do my own back-to-school shopping, I head for both the library and a children’s bookstore. The best and most important thing
I can do for myself, and for my new first graders, is to have some wonderful new books that excite me, that I just can’t wait to read aloud and share. This helps me fashion our first days together. I believe in reading aloud to children many times throughout the day, in between doing other curriculum work and other activities. The more time we spend like this, enjoying books together, the more we are on the same page, a bonded group, loving and learning through books.

Our Class Motto: Words to Live By

A story I like to tell right away sometime during the first day or first week of school is Hickory, by Palmer Brown (1978). I like to tell it because it is a long chapter book (too long for one sitting, especially at the beginning of the year) and also because it is out of print. By telling a specific part of the book, I can make a point about our first-grade classroom right away. I can also embellish this small portion of the book however I wish. We can all tell this part of the story if we know the basic idea:

Hickory is a small mouse who lives with his parents and his brother and sister, Dickory and Dock, in a grandfather clock. Hickory decides to move out of the clock, and out of the house, to a nearby meadow. On his first day in the meadow, he is almost killed by a cat but is saved by a small grasshopper named Hop.

The next day Hickory thanks his new friend Hop. She tells him that “here in the meadow we do what we can to help one another.” The children and I decide that this is a good way to think about our classroom: “Here in our classroom, we help each other.” This becomes our class motto.

I discovered the power of this little book by accident years ago, when I read it to a mixed group of first and second graders at the beginning of the year. We enjoyed the book over a period of several days. The day I finished it happened to be the day we had our first art lesson. One child finished her art project early, and sat in the middle of an island at her clean desk, with her artwork on top. There was a pile of rubble on the floor surrounding her. I asked, “Tracy, would you please pick up those paper scraps?”

And she responded, as you may have guessed, “They’re not mine.”

Inspiration struck. I replied, “But here in our classroom, we help each other.”
“Oh,” she said, and up she popped and cheerfully straightened out everything. I was flabbergasted and thought of all the times I had missed using *Hickory* or a similar piece of literature to help foster this kind of attitude. Throughout that school year, and since, I often heard children say, “Here in the meadow, we help each other; here in our classroom, we help each other.”

**Making Classroom Rules Together**

An important activity for the beginning of school is deciding on our classroom rules together. As with the first-grade wishes, I write down these ideas for rules. To speed things up, I may write these ideas down on a piece of paper on a clipboard or on a transparency at an overhead projector. I read the children’s rules back to them, and we decide on the ones we want. Later, on another day, I will invite each child to illustrate a rule, and I will take dictation on the computer. I will then put these rules and the illustrations where we can all see them, internalize them, and refer to them. Children have a lot more belief in rules if they have made them themselves. The rules may be modified throughout the year, as the need arises.

I do try to synthesize or combine these rules for a chart, using the ideas of my literature and classroom management mentor, Kay Goines. She has wonderful ideas for all areas of the curriculum.

One of Kay’s classroom rules was *We never hurt anybody on the inside or the outside.* As a class, we discuss this idea and how it hurts people on the inside when we laugh at them, call them names, or do mean things. Another of Kay’s rules was *We all clean up our places each day.* This sounds good to the children, too. I suggest something like *We all try to enjoy learning and learn as much as we can.* The wording varies from year to year, but children generally think this one sounds like a good rule, too. I do try to use the children’s words and ideas.

With some help from the children, I created a piggyback song for our class rules, using a tune somewhat like the song “Ninety-nine Bottles of Pop on the Wall.”

Never hurt anyone on the inside or the outside.
Be a friend, and you’ll have friends, you’ll see.
Learn all you can in every way in every kind of subject,
Always be the best that you can be.

—PBD

We sing our song, illustrate our classroom code of behavior, and internalize it visually, kinesthetically, and in many other ways throughout our year together. I love to hear the children remind each other of our rules and talk about how we’re going to treat each other.

This year the children came up with a more simplified list of rules:

■ Follow directions.
■ Listen carefully.
■ Be a friend.
■ Think and learn.

These rules led to our creation of the “Room 7 Super Star Song,” sung roughly to the tune of “Muffin Man”:

We do our best to listen, think, and learn,
listen, think, and learn,
listen, think, and learn.
We do our best
to be as smart as we can be!
We are the Room 7 Super Stars!

—PBD

We sang this often, throughout the year, especially when we needed a boost to remember why we were trying to learn in the first place!

The School Tour: An Alphabet Hunt!

An important (sometimes urgent) activity in a first-grade classroom is a tour of the school, particularly the bathrooms. I read *Chicka Chicka,*
Boom Boom, by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault (2000). Then we take an alphabet walk.

Before we set off on our expedition, I show the children a whiteboard full of magnetic letters. We say the alphabet together and discover that there are spaces: some of the letters are missing. The children and I guess that some of the letters of the alphabet have gotten away and may be playing around in other parts of the school. We decide that we are going to learn about different places in the school and talk to different people who work here, and we are going to capture those letters!

I remind the children to keep careful track, like explorers and reporters, of the adventures we will have, the things we will learn, and the people we will meet. On our way out the door we find the letter l and decide that means we should walk in lines during our journey. We add the l to our magnetic board, and form two lines. (I find that one line drags on too long. For more about lines, see Chapter 4.)

I carry our incomplete magnetic board, and off we go to check out the bathrooms. There we meet the custodian, Jim Gillingham, who gives us a letter b that he has trapped. He mentions to the children how hard he works to keep the bathrooms clean for us. We talk about

Figure 3–4
Our class “Super Star Song”
how the first graders will take care of the bathrooms, too. The children learn Jim’s name and swear allegiance to neat bathrooms and washed hands.

Moving onward on our expedition, we check out the office, where we meet the secretary, who gives us an s, and explains her job. The principal comes to greet us, handing over, no surprise, the letter p. She talks about her job as well.

The children and I travel on to the cafeteria, where we meet the cafeteria manager. We receive information about lunches, lines, and behavior, and retrieve the letters c for cafeteria and f for food. By now, since it’s almost time for recess, we investigate the playground and find the letter p on a nearby pole. We learn how to use the equipment and playground areas.

Figure 3–5
Our custodian, Jim Gillingham, shares the letter b for bathroom.
School Tour Follow-Up

When we come back to the classroom after recess, I use a clipboard to quickly write down the children’s memories of the alphabet hunt. We check our magnetic board and celebrate that all the letters are there. We are great trackers! We all have an alphabet cookie to celebrate.

The children’s words and memories of the trip around school will be part of our curriculum for the next few days. Again I will act as scribe for our shared writing activity each day. I will write down children’s words and thoughts about our alphabet trip and all the places we visited. We will create a page for each place visited and each person we met.

Children will read and reread these adventures with me and will illustrate the pages. We will make a cover. This will become a class big book that we will cherish and share with our school staff.

The Gingerbread Man

An alternate activity to the alphabet hunt is looking for the Gingerbread Man. As described in *Reading, Writing & Learning in ESL*, by Peregoy and Boyle (2000), first graders in Buzz Bertolucci’s new class
have just finished a shared reading experience with a big book titled *The Gingerbread Man* when a school cook enters the room and hands the teacher a note. This note is from the Gingerbread Man, who says he has jumped out of the book and is headed for the cafeteria. “Come and meet me,” the Gingerbread Man taunts the class.

Of course, when the children get to the cafeteria and look in the oven, the Gingerbread Man is gone. A note in the oven informs them that they should check a different place. This goes on, much in the same vein as the alphabet hunt, with children going from place to place around school, meeting school personnel and becoming familiar with the lay of the land.

In this scenario, when the children return to the classroom, they find gingerbread man cookie treats. When I use this activity, I also plant a note from the Gingerbread Man with the cookies: “Ha, ha! You didn’t catch me!”

Sometimes I use this idea with our alphabet tour, and leave a note from a letter that has escaped us. For example, when we came back to the classroom after our alphabet hunt one year, we found the letter *m* on my chair with a gloating note, “Ha! Ha! You missed me, but I came back to join my friends so I could make words!”

With both activities, children are introduced to their new environment and the important people in it. They also experience a work of literature in an interesting way and, I hope, will look forward to future literature books as a result.

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*Children’s Literature Connection*

*The Alphabet Tree*, by Leo Lionni (1990), is a great book to use to connect our alphabet trip to learning about letters and words. In this story, individual letters on an alphabet tree are tossed around by the wind. They band together to form words, and with the help of a caterpillar, learn to get those words together to say something meaningful, in a whole sentence. This book is a parable about the power of the written word. It also shows children there is strength in numbers and in working together.
Crucial Day One Curriculum: Time

One of the things I like to work on the first day of school is the concept of time. Children will never care more! Within the first hour of first grade, you will have heard the questions, “When’s recess?” “When’s lunch?” and “When do we go home?” innumerable times. The best thing to do is to whip out a large educational toy clock and proceed to teach time.

I show children how to tell time to the hour and explain that this is special knowledge they can take home and show off. I set up or draw a few small clocks to show them when we go to recess, lunch, and home. They can figure out if it is time for these activities by matching the small toy clocks or drawings with the classroom clock. If I have the feeling that mentioning going-home time may not be the wisest idea because it might upset some of my new first graders, I skip that time period.

Time is one of those concepts that should be reviewed often. This year I set up a daily schedule with little clocks attached and changed it every day. I think this helps keep alive the concepts we have learned and also helps with that oft-asked, very demanding question, “When’s lunch?”

About the Bathroom and Bathroom Emergencies

My first-grade classroom has no bathroom. I ask children to use bathrooms at recess, but of course, not everyone follows this request. Some students are in such a hurry to play that they forget about using the bathroom. A few children avoid the bathroom when there are other children present. Some boys are uncomfortable about using the urinals and try to wait until they get home. I explain to first-grade boys privately that the bathrooms may look different than those at home, but they work just about the same: they should use them, flush, and wash their hands. For most children, that information is all that is needed.

When it comes to using the bathroom at recess, some children may not choose to do this, regardless of what I have said. I always feel that these children have a secret weapon: they can easily have an accident that requires a change of clothes and the cleaning of our classroom rug!

One way around this problem at the beginning of the year is to get to the bathroom a few minutes before recess. As children come out, I make sure they have washed their hands and so on.
I spend a lot of time reminding children to use bathrooms at recess, particularly the first few days. We talk about emergencies, and how if they have one, they should just take off and get to the bathroom right away, even if it is in the middle of a lesson. I clarify what constitutes an emergency. This works some of the time.

Despite these strategies, it is good to keep a sharp eye out for the bathroom dance, and direct any children doing it out of the classroom and into the bathroom immediately. A little later in the year, we have a sign language signal we use. (See Resources for sign language book suggestions.)

**Bathroom Pass**

When children do need to go to the bathroom during class time, I ask them to place a bathroom pass on their desks. The pass is made from a margarine tub lid with a hole through it. The lid hangs from a piece of yarn. I keep two of these by the classroom door. In this way, I always know who is away at the bathroom. (It can be hard to remember who asked to leave class when you are in the middle of teaching.)

**Planning for Recess: Helping Students Deal with Problems and Find Playmates**

Recess on the first day can be tricky. Children aren’t sure what to do out on the big playground or how to handle themselves. We prepare for this with literature and discussion.

**Children’s Literature Connection**

Three wonderful books that help with the dilemma of how to get along out there in the play area are *King of the Playground*, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1994), *Bootsie Barker Bites*, by Barbara Bottner (1997), and *The Recess Queen*, by Alexis O’Neill (2002). All of these books deal with bullies and what to do when someone is not treating you as a friend.
Before recess on the first day, we discuss possible playground situations and practice looking small, and looking big. We decide that looking big, with arms on hips, legs spread, and eyes staring right at the other person, is a good idea if someone is bothering us. Then we can be like Max, in Where the Wild Things Are, and stare right into their eyes “without blinking once.”

I also inform the children that there are yard-duty teachers on the playground, and they are to go to them if they need help. Children can also help each other by playing together and being good friends. Reviewing games that can be played is a good strategy, too, and helps children figure out how to use their time.

I spend a lot of time on these strategies and on role-playing recess ideas and conflicts for the first week or two of school.

A Sampling of Other Activities for the First Day of School

This brief description of day one in my classroom is not sequential. There is a lot of “how to do it” business to be taken care of on the first day of school: how to walk in line, how to treat each other, how to make sense of what we are doing here. The second day, and beyond, we will settle into routines. But the first day is like no other: above all on our first day, I want children to feel the joyful pull of learning, the zest of acquiring knowledge, and the comfort and pleasure of being part of this adventure together.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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