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

Heinemann
A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world
© 2003 by Pat Barrett Dragan

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review, with the following exceptions: Appendices, pages 373–412, may be photocopied for classroom use only.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Barrett Dragan, Patricia.
Everything you need to know to teach first grade / Pat Barrett Dragan. p. cm.
1. First grade (Education)—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Elementary school teaching—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.
LB15711st .B37 2003
372.1102—dc21 2003013817

Editor: Lois Bridges
Production: Sonja S. Chapman
Cover design: Joni Doherty
Compositor: House of Equations, Inc.
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier
Cover photo: Bob Doerr, Doerr Studios

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
07 06 05 04 03 ML 1 2 3 4 5
Acknowledgments  v
Introduction: The Magic of First Grade  vii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Getting Ready to Teach</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Designing and Setting Up Your First-Grade Classroom</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Celebrating the First Day of School</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Managing Your Classroom and Motivating Your Students</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Connecting with Families</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Helping Children Work on Discipline and Self-Control</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Our School Family: Creating Community, Managing Conflicts</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Beginnings of Literacy: Children's Faces Looking Up</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reading Isn't Just Curriculum, It's a Miracle!</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Creating and Maintaining Literacy Centers</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Teaching Writing: From Scribbles to Authorship</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Math Matters</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ya Gotta Have Art!</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Making Social Studies, Health, and Science</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

CHAPTER 15  Making Music  335
CHAPTER 16  Physical Education: Play Everything!  342
CHAPTER 17  Assessing Your Children, Evaluating Yourself  355
CHAPTER 18  Saying Good-Bye  362

Appendices  373
Resources  413
Index  439
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
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 in-services, 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.
Introduction: The Magic of First Grade

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.
We can enrich children’s worlds forever by introducing them to wonderful children’s literature and the language of story and poetry. Children need to hear the sounds and flow of language. They need the opportunity to become immersed in the world of story and experience the magnificence and magic of quality picture book illustrations. This helps them learn to read and gives them reasons to want to acquire this skill. By listening to stories and experiencing them together, children become a bonded community, a group of learners with common experiences, reference points, and memories.

As we learn from Jim Trelease, author of the best-selling book *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2001), when we read aloud to a child, we take the most important step of all in “raising a reader. . . . If reading to children were common instead of a rarity, we’d be facing fewer academic and social problems in this nation” (p. xiii).

As teachers, we need to help make books available to children, both at school and for overnight. We need to facilitate children being read
Important ways to begin our literacy journey in first grade are to read aloud to children in class and help them have access to books they want to read in class and take home.

**Overnight Books: Making Literature Available to All Our Children**

Many children in our population are read to at home and have books available. However, a great many children lack these resources: books and people who are able to read to them. It is crucial that we level the playing field by giving all our children rich read-aloud and storytelling experiences. I believe that a powerful part of our work as teachers is to help make books and poetry and stories available to all the children in our classes, in school and at home. We also need to confer-ence with adults about how to use these books, especially if people are not able to read or not able to read English.

In my book *Literacy from Day One*, I describe my overnight book program and many different literacy experiences that are an integral part of our curriculum. My first graders each take a book home every
night for someone at home to read to them. *Literacy from Day One* details easy ways to manage this type of program and help children and their families have contact with literature.

**Helping Parents Connect with Books and Stories**

When I meet with parents at our first parent conference, early in the school year, I tell them about the overnight book program. If parents are not able to read English, I show them how to take a picture walk and talk about the story in their child’s own language. Parents love this access to books and are very appreciative of efforts to bring books and stories into their children’s lives. Many parents say things like, “I don’t remember these books!” or “Where were these books when I was little?” They often mention that the whole family enjoys the books their children bring home. (See Figure 8–2.)

---

**Letter from parents about overnight book program**

Dear Mrs. Barrett - Aragon,

We wanted to let you know how great the overnight book program is. Christopher has actually learned to figure out words that he has not even read yet! He even surprises himself at how he can sound out new words. He bring home books that he enjoy - he’ll read to me or we’ll read to him. So great that he gets to choose a book he is interested in and not forced to bring an assigned book from school for “homework”.

Hopefully, this program will continue as he really looks forward to showing us how well he can read. We notice he has learned so much about all the animals, insects & dinosaurs he has read about.

Sincerely,

Mrs. & Mrs. Johnny Liu
Pairs of Books in Two Languages

In order to facilitate reading for parents who do not speak English, I have been collecting take-home books in Spanish and some other languages. I have several pairs of English and Spanish editions of the same book. Children may choose either or both of the books that are shelved together. We keep them faceout on our overnight bookshelves, one behind the other.

I’m now collecting pairs of books in other languages also, such as *Come Along, Daisy!* in English (Simmons 2003) and Arabic (*Eja, Dejzil!* 2002) and some other books in English and Tagalog. Children find it very interesting to compare the text in the paired books. This type of experience gives them a little taste of another language and culture. They can see the written language differences, which are quite pronounced. One child, Martin, was so excited about seeing Chinese writing that he looked at the Chinese book I showed him for days. He even wrote about the experience in his writing notebook.

The Excitement of Choosing Books

Children become so passionate about books that they hide them from each other (unfortunately) and must be stopped from leaping the tables when it’s time to choose tonight’s read. One of our class visitors, Linda Carlisle, a teacher from England, said she had never seen children so excited about picking books to read. “They swarmed those books!” she said, as she watched the children go back to their tables, write their titles in their book logs, and contentedly begin reading their chosen books.

By helping children have access to books both in and out of the classroom, we make it possible for them to become readers, become people who have active and real literary lives. We need to introduce students and their parents to the public library, in case they have not been there. Parents also need to be aware that through public libraries, they can borrow children’s books and the tapes that go with them. This is particularly important for families who speak a language other than English at home.

And of course, we need to use the school library and make some of our own classroom book collections available as well. A lot can be accomplished with a minimum of books, although certainly a rich classroom library is something to strive for.
Building a Rich Classroom Library

Here are some ways to develop your classroom library so children have access to a variety of reading materials:

- See if you can borrow twenty to thirty books at a time, every three weeks or so, from your school library. If so, great! If not, use the books your students check out. Let children take their library book home overnight. Then keep library books in a separate place, such as under the chalk trays, leaning faceout. Allow children who really want to keep their library books themselves for a week to do so. Now you probably have about fifteen to twenty school library books left over that children may take home for overnight. It is especially important to keep careful track when writing down who is taking these books home, since your school library has signed them out to other children.

- Check out a number of public library books for extended teacher loan, if this service is available in your area. A note of caution: books are heavy! And you need to keep especially good notes on who has taken public library books home, since you are the one who is responsible for getting the books back on time and in good condition.

- Let colleagues, families of your students, and your own family and friends know that you are working to build up your classroom library. (When I was first trying to find some specific special books for my classroom, my husband, George, searched out a list of them and gave them to me for my birthday!)


- Attend library sales. Many quality children’s books are available for twenty-five cents or fifty cents each. And they are already covered with protective plastic covers, and in most cases, are ready to send home.

Pat’s Tip

Repair tears and damage first. Avoid severely damaged books and books you are not familiar with. Do study children's literature so that
you have the knowledge to choose the best! Be selective. You can probably purchase enough quality literature books with a fifteen- to twenty-dollar investment to start your overnight book program. All you need to begin this program is one book per child and a few extras.

■ Go to flea markets and garage sales. Often people, especially at garage sales, are willing to let books go for a minimal fee when they realize they will be used in classroom libraries.

■ Swap books with colleagues. Visit and hold planned book swaps, or designate a special place in the teachers room for books up for grabs.

■ Find out if your school district has a warehouse or other repository for books withdrawn from school libraries. Some of these older books are treasures!

■ Write a grant to buy books for your classroom.

■ Check with children in your own extended family. Perhaps they have books they have outgrown. Maybe they would be willing to trade books they no longer find interesting for a new book or a small number of books of their own choice. This can be a real win-win situation, but it needs to be handled carefully. There are special books that will always be meaningful to children. I believe it is important to encourage children to keep any books that are important to them.

■ Check bookstores for sales, especially of remainders—books that haven’t sold well and are sold at very reduced rates. Sometimes quality books are available. Peruse books carefully, and you are sure to find some special things you’ve been looking for. If you aren’t familiar with a book, read it before you purchase it.

■ Suggest to parents that children may enjoy donating a book from a teacher wish list to the classroom library to celebrate birthdays. If a child brings a book for the class, I put the child’s photo on the inside cover along with the child’s name, birth date, and current date.
Once you start building your classroom library, it is important that your first graders know what books are available and how books are sorted. (See pages 199–200.)

**Book Field Trips**

The public library is a wonderful place for a field trip. Children can get library cards, hear a storyteller, or listen to read-alouds, as well as check out their own books. It is good to help children become familiar with their local library. As part of our Family Literacy Program (see Chapter 5), we took parents and children to the library. Many parents from other countries had not been aware that they could use the library. And they were amazed at all the materials and services available!

Many children’s bookstores have programs featuring visiting authors and illustrators. Often stores encourage students and classes to attend. These can be exciting experiences for children. It is worth checking with bookstores in your area to see whether children’s programs are available. These can be excellent field trips.

In my school district we are quite a distance from any children’s bookstores. I sometimes go to hear authors and illustrators myself, purchase a special book, and ask the author to sign it for my first graders. I let authors and illustrators know that my children are striving to create their own published books. Often when writers or artists sign a book, they write messages to my class, encouraging children to continue reading and writing!

**Conferences and Other Contacts with Authors and Illustrators**

I made plans just after September 11 to attend the annual Reading the World children’s literature conference sponsored by the University of San Francisco. Because my friend Dr. Beverly Vaughn Hock is conference chair, I knew that Thacher Hurd would be in attendance. His book *Art Dog* was a great favorite with my first graders. This was a period
of time when my students craved many books about superheroes, and a dog superhero was also of great interest to them. My children loved Art Dog! Some of them were even convinced that they had seen him fly past our classroom windows, presumably protecting us by patrolling the skies.

I mentioned that I would be meeting Thacher Hurd at the conference and suggested to the children that they might wish to create an Art Dog mural for him. My first graders jumped at the chance and absolutely outdid themselves! Their mural was displayed at the Reading the World Conference, and I had the great pleasure of showing it to Thacher. I had my photograph taken in front of the mural with him so that I could bring it to school. And when Thacher Hurd signed the copy of a book I had purchased for my first-grade class, he thanked the children for the mural and drew a picture of Art Dog, paintbrush in hand, shouting “Touche!” (See Figure 8–4.)

The children were absolutely thrilled with the book, the drawing, and the special inscription. They loved the photos and all my stories about their mural. Although they couldn’t make the trip to meet with Thacher Hurd themselves, it was as if he had visited our classroom and left something special behind. This whole experience meant a great deal to the children. And I think it made the idea of writing and illustrating a book a lot more accessible to them.
Literacy Lights Up Our Days

In my first-grade classroom, we enjoy stories and poetry all day long. We weave books and stories and poems in and out of our class curriculum. Literature punctuates and illuminates our days. It’s easy to fit in a short picture book as we stand in line waiting for the recess or dismissal bell to ring. (This is a good management technique as well as a suggestion for enrichment.) We can sing and chant poetry and songs on our way to lunch or as we clean up an art lesson. We discover a new poem on our way to the library and another after lunch. And, of course, we begin the day with a story, as we sit together on the carpet.

Through story we can take a trip into another time, place, or situation; we can even become, for a little while, another person (or creature!) as we live in the pages. Nothing enriches children’s fantasy worlds like a great book. Words have spaces and places to tuck in and to live the story. Books give us the chance to learn about and see what it is like to be someone else. We can savor how words look and how
they sound. We can take pleasure in the anticipation of discovering what they mean and how a story evolves.

Kay Goines

My literature mentor, Kay Goines, introduced me to the concept of an overnight book program in her University of California, Santa Cruz, Extension class. She also taught me about a myriad of quality children’s books. She continues to be a major influence on me in this area. On my birthday this summer I spent a very contented day by her chair, listening to her read and discuss her latest picks from newly released children’s literature books.

When I first met Kay Goines, in 1977, I was very discouraged with my own teaching situation. Many of my students spoke Spanish. At that time, I didn’t. There were often speakers of three to five other languages in my classroom as well. I was attempting to learn Spanish to help me communicate with many children at my school who had limited English. I didn’t realize it then, but I was also looking for a way to bond us as a group and create community. And I was searching for ways to create meaningful literacy experiences in my classroom—experiences that would bypass language barriers and capture us all. Through Kay Goines, I learned of many quality literature and picture books that do just that: transcend language difficulties and literally put us all on the same page, at least for part of our day together. These stories and poems give us beautiful language. They guide us and give us clues about how to live.

Kay Goines Says

When we read aloud to children, we help them see how to make good lives for themselves. We read to children so they know what it’s like to be a human being. Books and stories teach us how things are for someone else. Story has been a guide throughout the ages. We need books about heroes: the kinds of heroes that make us feel we can be and do more, so we’re not stuck with being less.
Kay’s words and wisdom have guided me for most of my teaching career.

What It Means to Love a Book

At the time I wrote *Literacy from Day One*, a first grader in my class was so taken with a special book, *Avocado Baby*, that he chose it to take home almost every night of the school year. Oscar *lived* the story of *Avocado Baby* on a giant fantasy level. He later came back two or three times as a second grader to borrow the book. I always felt guilty I didn’t give it to him, but it was the only copy I had.

Recently I visited with John Burningham, the author, at a book fair sponsored by the Bring Me a Book Foundation, Palo Alto, California. John had brought copies of *Avocado Baby* from England, where the book is still in print. I purchased several copies, including one for Oscar, but I wondered whether it would still be meaningful for him two years later. I found out recently, when I held a parent conference for Oscar’s younger brother Cesar. The whole family came to the appointment. “I’m glad you’re here,” I said to Oscar, as I handed him a signed copy of *Avocado Baby*. “This is for you.”

When Oscar saw the book, his face lit up like a beacon; his parents laughed and rolled their eyes. And Oscar spent the next twenty minutes reading the book to himself, to his younger brothers, and again, several times to himself. I really feel that the book will always mean something special to him and will always be a part of his life. And I assured Cesar that one day soon, when I had an idea about a book he especially cared about, I would have a book for him.

The Magic of Reading Aloud to Children

My first and most exciting goal in my first-grade classroom is to help children become passionate about books and stories and reading. To do that, I read aloud to them several times a day. It will not matter *what* reading program I use, or *how* I teach reading, if I do not en-
sure that books and stories are important to my children—an essential, crucial, part of their lives.

I begin reading aloud to my first graders as soon as we come together as a group on day one. I share the best literature available: literature I love, books that most likely will connect to the children’s lives and experiences, as well as to our curriculum. (See Resources for some suggestions and many book lists.)

When I read to the children we have wonderful discussions and revel in words and ideas and illustrations. The books we find irresistible connect us as a school family. They enrich our time together and impact our lives. Those infrequent days when an assembly or other activity prevents us from beginning with a story just don’t have the same rhythm, the same “starting the day together” feeling. On those days, everything feels just a little bit off.

I read to the children a number of times a day, sometimes more than one book at a sitting. I like to stop before the children are tired. I want them to crave more, not less, of a variety of literacy experiences. Children’s capacity for concentration—their ability to relax and listen to a story—lengthens as the year progresses. They develop awareness of the rhythm of language, learn to rhyme, begin to play with words, and memorize poems and parts of stories they especially like. Memorized poetry is easy for them to read and gives them a way in to becoming accomplished readers.

Time spent listening to good literature also helps children focus and develop listening skills that will benefit them in all curriculum areas. And, of course, listening to picture books, looking at illustrations, and sharing comments are major ways for children to practice, comprehend, and strengthen oral language. They are also ways to convey information as well as teach ethics and moral values. Through story we see how other people handle challenges and live their lives. And the art in a picture book can bring children a museum experience between covers!

Reading aloud is an investment in the creation of readers. Children love stories, and the time spent this way is valuable beyond description. It teaches them that story is worth pursuing, investing in. Reading aloud to children lets them experience the end result of reading instruction—and lets them know that it is worth their efforts to learn to read and spend time this way.
A Book Reaches All of Us!

Once in a while I try to document, as closely as possible, children’s reactions to a book I read. I do this when the children’s response is intense or perhaps a bit unusual. Now and then I get an almost electric tingling up my spine as I read a book aloud. I feel as if this same sort of silent electric hum is coming from the children as well; then I know it’s a book that is reaching all of us! A few of the books that have caused this response are Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak (1988); Goodnight Moon, by Margaret Wise Brown (1991); Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse, by Kevin Henkes (1996); and Angelo, by David Macaulay (2002).

There are times when we laugh our way through a story, as with William Steig’s book Pete’s a Pizza (1998); Martha Speaks by Susan Meddaugh (1995); and Chewy Louie by Howie Schneider (2000). Sometimes we cry, as we did when I read Charlotte’s Web, by E. B. White (1999), and Stone Fox, by John Gardiner (1988). I think that many books empower us, as we face recess on the big playground and other new experiences of first grade.

Overheard Overnight Book Conversation: Being Engaged by Books

One of the skills I’ve learned as a teacher is to become a good eavesdropper and a good observer. Yetta Goodman calls this kidwatching (2002).

Sometimes as the children choose overnight books and record their titles, I listen in on inspiring conversations. I recorded this dialogue verbatim in my spiral notebook the children call my Remember Book. (They have their own Remember Books, too!) I started documenting the conversation when Julian and Ricky had just chosen books for overnight and I heard them excitedly comparing titles:

Julian: I have reptiles too! We could study together!

Ricky: Yeah, we could read our books together! [To me] Could we read our books together?
Matthew: I need a reptile book, too!

Danny: I gotta get a turtle book!

Ricky: [To me] Could Matthew get a reptile book?

Julian: And could we read ’em together?

Four little boys were thrilled that they could read special books of choice together and learn about a topic they were really interested in. Other children scrambled to use this precious bit of early-morning time with friends and books they loved. It was inspiring to me to watch and listen to children interacting with books, enjoying illustrations and text, and experiencing the joy of sharing literature with special friends. And it was a great way to start our day together.

Providing Time to Read Books with Others and Alone

As shown in my class schedule in Chapter 4, I have two different time-slots planned each day for SSR (sustained silent reading), sometimes called DEAR time (drop everything and read) or, more recently, independent reading. One of these times, when we come into the room in the morning, is more social: children can read with a friend, in a group, or alone. The other time slot is later in the day. At this time children read by themselves. I tell the children that we are really lucky to have this time to read and practice. I remind Noe—and the other children (with Noe’s permission)—that he couldn’t tie his shoe a month ago, but he practiced. I stress that we have all learned things recently because we have done them over and over and gotten good at them.

Sometimes we call this special time with books our reading present.

The children know that when we are sharing books first thing in the morning, they are free to read wherever they wish, with or to whomever they wish. Some read to the classroom animals, particularly The Biggest Bear, the Giant Frog, and Caruso, our bear from Italy. Some children choose to read alone, others with a partner or a small group. A special choice they sometimes make is to read under the tables.
Where Are the Children?

One unseasonably cold April day, Sarah Jacobson, our speech teacher, came in to pick up a child and didn’t see a single student. All the children were very much engaged in reading and discussing their books—underneath the tables! Sarah, always interested in what’s going on with our class, just had to ask what was happening. On this gray and drizzly morning, it was warm and cozy on the carpet. I sensed that Sarah, like me, had an urge to crawl under a table and read with a friend. It took her a minute to spot the child she had come to literally pull out for speech. Sarah had just decided to have him come to her room a few minutes late, when he called out, from under the alcove table, “Luis isn’t here today!”

Engaged by Books: The Best Thing

I feel that the best thing I can do in the classroom is to excite children about books and reading. The children want to read, they love books and stories, and so their big goal is to learn to read themselves. As Kay Goines expresses this crucial need for both books and time with quality literature, “We need to get our priorities straight. What is going to matter most in life, a phonics paper or a book we read?”

The Children Know What Matters

One of my first graders, Sabine, says, “Reading is for getting smart.” The children talk a lot about this. They believe it. Ricky says that reading nonfiction is for getting knowledge and he bets I never had another kid who loved nonfiction and knowledge so much. His mother agrees! She said that Ricky never had any particular interest in reading until I began reading nonfiction books and making many nonfiction titles available.

Don’t Neglect Nonfiction Books!

I believe we need to take pains not to overlook reading nonfiction books when we read aloud! This is a very important genre for chi-
The Beginnings of Literacy

dren, and if they do not get time to experience nonfiction books early, it will be harder for some of them to get into them later.

Nonfiction books can be especially difficult for second language learners, until they learn something about the context and get some help with the specialized vocabulary. Prereading and discussing a nonfiction title before it is read to the group can set up children who are learning English so that the book is very accessible to them, too!

I like to bring in realia (real items) and magazine pictures to extend the meaning of these nonfiction books. For example, if we are reading about different kinds of trucks, I will meet first with ELL students and share truck photos, and some clear, simple information about what these trucks are doing. I’ll bring in one or two small truck toys to share and discuss. We will go over the names of some different pieces of equipment and have a little time to get a jump on the content of the nonfiction title the whole group will enjoy.

Children’s Thoughts About What It Means to Read

In early spring, around that time in the school year when children are really committed to reading, and have developed a lot of competency, I was very honored to receive a Celebrate Literacy award from the San Mateo County Reading Association of San Mateo, California. Winning the award was wonderful, and my children were very proud of me. Then I realized I had to write an acceptance speech. So, when I was wondering what to say in my speech, I asked the experts: my first graders. After all, one of our class mottos is Here in our classroom, we help each other. And these children were as involved as I was with the joys and work of acquiring literacy.

I wouldn’t have missed my first graders’ thoughts and ideas for the world. They gave me great insights about their thinking regarding
books and literacy and learning. Their first response, very sensible, was that I should say, “Thank you for the award.” Then they said, “Tell the people that we love books because you showed us how. And we don’t write on them or tear them either. Like some other kids.”

The children said, “Tell the people you helped us know how to read, and now we can read lots of things, and we’re all getting knowledge. And we like stories. And we like the pictures. Tell them we love reading a lot.”
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.