

A Reading—Writing Connection For First Grade

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Overview

Teaching literacy in the first grade is a daunting task. None of its components can be expected to be present in September, so none can be ignored. The least studied and emphasized portion of a first grade literacy program usually is the writing component. It is easy to neglect because all the other aspects of the literacy process must begin thoroughly and deliberately in first grade. Never will a teacher have as much time to devote to phonemic awareness or phonics than in first grade. I propose to expand all aspects of literacy: decoding, encoding, comprehension and interpretation, vocabulary development and writing by including a *reading-- writing connection* to the prescribed curriculum

One aspect of literacy that first grade teachers do well is interactive read alouds that in the Pittsburgh Public Schools translate into Text Talk procedures. These encourage comprehension for first graders without the laborious mechanics of decoding that must occur when most students begin to read. First grade teachers also introduce comprehension strategies so students get in the habit of knowing that words have meaning and that the purpose for those words is for the reader to understand the author's message.

Learning about the craft of writing can be as directly and specifically taught as the other literacy components. I would like to encourage children to think about writing and the writer along with thinking about the meaning of a text. There are strategies I present to encourage this as the children hear a book read to them or as they are reading from an anthology, a decodable text or a pleasure book. If a child thinks he is a writer he will become aware of how other writers use words to be meaningful. Then there are models so he can expand his writing repertoire as well.

Using Patricia Polacco's work as a starting point, I have designed strategies to assist teachers in helping students think like writers and hopefully begin to explore the craft of writing. Polacco's books are well written and illustrated. They are interesting to first graders but usually more complicated to read than they can manage. By using good children's literature, such as Polacco's books, first grade teachers can help students begin to think about and explore language expression as they to explore language in their own texts.

Rationale

The Pittsburgh Public Schools has moved from a theory-based to a more research-based literacy curriculum. The Harcourt reading series is the center of the program but it is not good enough. With the assistance of The Beck Group from the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh and a grant that includes literacy coaches and professional development training for teachers, we seem to be moving along the meandering path towards reading and writing fluency and proficiency. We are not there yet, however. I would like to take the first grade curriculum our district has adopted and expand upon it so the students' fluency, comprehension and writing capabilities increase, preparing them for continued growth in the later grades.

Explicit, direct instruction seems to be the key in teaching literacy. Some children learn to read through osmosis but most children must learn to break the code of our highly irregular language through informed, systematic phonemic and phonetic instruction (Snow, 41-75). First grade is devoted to phonics instruction. Frequent wordbuilding practice, decoding and encoding the words, and reading decodable texts are all ways we teach phonics. Rarely, however, is phonics instruction in isolation because words have meaning and we must teach children to always be thoughtful about words. So, after wordbuilding we have Silly Questions. These are decodable questions that make children think about the words in a silly context but also in a way that they must react and respond. *Can a man have a nap in a pan? Can you get a hen in a pan?* Accountable talk expects children to respond to these silly questions with an explanation, not just a yes or no. Practice makes perfect, and by the second semester we often see the "ah – hah" miracle as children begin to break the code and sounding and blending is replaced by fluent reading.

Comprehension is always on our minds. It is very difficult to comprehend when one is expending so much time and brainpower on sounding out the words. That is why multiple readings, individually, with the group or in pairs, are essential to reach fluency and understanding. But there is something else that has become evident. Many children do not automatically think when they read or

listen. Children “read the way they watch TV. They just sit there in a daze.... [They] are simply disengaged as they read”(Keene & Zimmerman 36).

Just as we give explicit, direct instruction to decode, we are trying to do the same for comprehension. I encourage my first graders to be meta-cognitive by asking them to “ get the smart person inside you awake.” They have to start to become active in their learning. Many reading comprehension studies were done in the 1980’s. Generally, the studies found that proficient readers used only seven or eight strategies to help them understand and integrate the text into other contexts. “If teachers taught these thinking strategies, instead of much of the traditional isolated skills, students ...would be better equipped to comprehend and analyze text independently” (Keene & Zimmerman 21).

Keene and Zimmerman are quick to point out that comprehension techniques must be thoroughly modeled and practiced so that children learn to engage in these strategies even when the teacher is not around to reinforce them. A good way, but not the only way, is through first graders listening and discussing children’s stories, non-fiction texts and poetry. The mechanics of decoding are left behind and their brains can be engaged in the content of the text and the word choices that make the text so enthralling.

Below is a list of strategies I systematically teach my children to assist them with comprehension. I gleaned this list from my experience as a first grade teacher, Mosaic of Thought by Keene and Zimmerman, and the Harcourt teacher’s manuals. The students learn these strategies as we read the Harcourt texts, as they choose their own books, and as they listen to me read them good literature.

Engaged Reading Comprehension Strategies

1. The basic story map stuff
 - Who, what, when, where
 - Problem and solution for fiction
 - Theme
 - Sequence of events
 - Important facts in non-fiction book
 - Get a movie or picture going in your head of what is happening or of the information that is given
2. Making connections
 - Text to self - Did the story remind you of anything that has happened to you?

- Text to text - Did the story remind you of another book or books you have read or heard?
 - Text to world - Does this story give you insight into life, the world?
3. Inferences
 - Can you predict what is going to happen next?
 - What did the author mean by _____? [a word or phrase the kids may not understand. This also might be where there is a vocabulary word I want to flag (focus) or casually explain]
 4. Have kids ask questions
 - What are you wondering about while the story is being read?
 - What questions do you have for the author?
 5. Determine what is important in the text
 - What do you think the author was trying to tell his, her readers?
 - What are the important concepts? [usually in non-fiction]
 - How can you use what you learned in your life? What do you understand now that you didn't have words for, or that you didn't understand or know, before?
 6. Retelling
 - Child retells what he knows.
 - I put in my words what I think the child was trying to say and let the child confirm or explain further

“Vocabulary development is an important part of comprehension ability” (Snow 63). It is related to how much talking, explaining, reading, positive reinforcement and varied experiences a child has received in his/her pre-school years. A means to reduce the gap between the students who face a text with a broad range of vocabulary and the ability to accommodate new words easily and those students from the opposite end of the spectrum is also by explicit, direct vocabulary instruction that encourages the use of enriching words in numerous contexts over the entire school year. The words chosen are best when they have some significance in a contextual situation either in the story that has been read or by a word given to the students that works well in relation to a text. For instance, in the Harcourt story *A Bed Full of Cats*, Lee's pet cat disappears. He is quite saddened by this and the entire family goes into action to try to find the cat. The students can usually identify with this story and how Lee feels. Giving them another word such as *forlorn* rather than sad is a great way to for them to increase their range of vocabulary and also remember it. When Lee's cat returns with her kittens, Lee is not just happy but *ecstatic*. Finding other times to use these words and encouraging the children to “own” these words and use it them themselves means their vocabulary has truly increased (Beck).

While higher level questioning and vocabulary development can be done with the Harcourt decodable books and the anthology stories, the simplicity of first grade texts leaves much to be desired. Comprehension, as well, can take a back seat to the laborious task of sight word recognition and the “phonological decoding process” (Snow 65). Listening to stories eliminates the decoding struggle and provides a larger range of story development, sentence complexity, vocabulary, and world knowledge.

Text Talk, as conceived by the Beck Group at the University of Pittsburgh for the Pittsburgh Public Schools Literacy Plus initiative, is designed to encourage comprehension. First Grade teachers are expected to read twenty-seven fiction storybooks in an interactive fashion in order to get their students in the habit of becoming actively thinking. In the Text Talk teacher’s manual each of the twenty-seven books shows page-by-page pausings during the reading for scripted questionings. The questions and observations are similar to the comprehension strategies listed above. It is a good model that also includes vocabulary development by systematically teaching two or three rich vocabulary words for each book.

Text Talk does not go far enough, though. Many of the stories are too simplistic and not worth the instructional time. Few of them are multiracial. Few of them are designed to provide a wider view of the world and to increase future background knowledge. None of them are non-fiction or poetry. And, there is no mention of the author as a player in the text. There is also no attempt to extend a child’s thinking to relate the text to himself, the world or other texts. The vocabulary words come right from the written words of the text. This is fine but an added dimension of providing at least one vocabulary word that also reflects the essence of the story or a portion of the story would do a lot towards ensuring that a word is worth remembering.

The weakest link in the Literacy Plus plan for first graders is the writing component. Writing is another struggle for first graders. As they learn the look and sound of our letters, so they must also learn how to print them –two ways in fact. Plus, they begin to learn when to use those capital and lower case letters. Then there is remembering how to write the spellings for the sounds in words, putting spaces between words and determining the completion of a sentence and how to punctuate it. Wow! Another complicated series of language skills to assimilate!

Writing as first graders are learning to read is a complex procedure. I am not certain that we have this process down right as yet. Thanks to good kindergarten practices, students are often beyond invented spelling and have moved to phonetic and transitional spelling (Tompkins,106). They must move beyond the typical fill

in the blank practice of one sentence to match a picture in kindergarten to expressing complete, original thoughts of their own. This is a truly Herculean task, considering everything is pretty new to them and every stroke they use requires thought. The automaticity of most language conventions has not arrived, yet they are aware of those standards and so they can become frustrated by their lack of competency. By the second half of the year, many students have advanced quite a bit and they are also willing to be more patient with their transitional stage. Writing can be more productive and less frustrating. Helping the students write often and with confidence is the most important assistance we can give them (Calkins 290).

While all these conventions are rolling around in their heads, simmering to later become an automatic process, children also do see themselves as authors. Calkins believes that the children who most see themselves as writers are our kindergartners and first graders. “See what I did!” “I made a book for you!” (Usually a piece of paper folded with pictures at the top and words at the bottom.)

Calkins says that, “ Little children believe they are pilots, doctors, kings, and queens...and we can easily help them believe they are writers as well ” (279). She makes a very good point when she theorizes that one reason this may be true is that it is much easier for a first grader to mimic what she/he sees in a simple, illustrated story book like Shortcut by Donald Crews than it is for a fourth grader to believe he/she is writing like E.B. White in Charlotte’s Web. Both books are riveting and excellently crafted but the “the gaps between what they write and what they read [seems] more easily bridged” (Calkins 279).

I have talked about how the Pittsburgh Public Schools teach children to be fluent and engaged readers. What I would like to do is extend this process to promote the *reading- - writing connection* (Calkins’ term). The best way I know is through an integration with the reading and listening we already present to our students daily. An explicit, direct focus on how writers use their craft will bring writers and their writing to the students’ conscious attention. Katie Wood Ray in *Wonderous Words* says “reading (and listening) is the writer’s way of visiting another craftperson’s ‘gallery’” (13). Calkins notes, “ Unless children are conscious of an author’s technique when they read, it is hard to imagine that they will deliberately borrow these techniques when they write” (283). If our first graders see themselves as writers then we must encourage them to think not only about what the words they read or listen to mean but also we must teach them to read “like a writer and understand the individual (not unique) nature of writing itself” (Wood Ray 19). Wood Ray points out we all have the same words to work with. It is the ideas, the style, the choice of words and how we structure the piece that is different. Even young children can admire a writer and take what he/she

likes about that writer's craft and incorporate it into her/his writing. Farther on down the grades, this skill will be further perfected.

A man planning a garden looks at gardens on his way home from work for just the same reason – he's looking for garden possibilities. And when writers read, they can't help but see writing possibilities in the texts they encounter. If we know that a particular activity is something we will be doing (writing), if we see ourselves as someone who does this thing(writes), then we have a different way of looking at that thing (text) as we make our way through the world. (Wood Ray 13)

This additional *reading--writing connection* can be presented to a first grade class along, during or after the comprehension discussion of a text. The Harcourt decodable stories and the stories in the anthologies can be used. The Text Talk stories the student listen to and discuss is another avenue. These texts tend to be more complex and varied in terms of style and presentation. Other good texts should be included for this process.

Last week I read Amos and Boris by William Steig to my class. It is a long Text Talk book and longer when we take the time to be thoughtful and use the strategies that enhance understanding. We treated it as a chapter book and read it over two days. I could feel the interest and engagement mount. The class was with me all the way through. They were ready to talk about how and why they liked the story and the author's choice to make the ending bittersweet. I am certain they will be willing to return to this book and discuss Mr. Steig's craft and discuss the story in terms of the writing. Calkins believes, and I concur, " any single wonderful text can teach students about dialogue, language, drama, detail, and everything else there is to learn about literature" (278).

These magical texts can take on a life of their own for a class or a student. I know it when, after I read a book and place it on the chalk tray, it is gone by the next day. Someone had taken it to his or her desk to read or look over. Someone else may ask for it. I may be asked to tape it for future reference. These books can be the "touchstone books" Calkins talks about (277-278). They are texts we can read often, ones that affect us so much that it influences our writing. I have read Amos and Boris other years without this level of affect. The nature of the class, the day of week, my particular involvement at the time with them and the book, whatever it was, this is a book that did touch an entire class. This class will be willing to have me use Steig's text as a source for good descriptions, using interesting verbs, creating an ending, or whatever else is needed for a mini-lesson.

Coming up with well-written, enjoyable fiction, non-fiction and poems that a class can relate to is a trial and error proposition. There is, however, no sense in a

teacher thrusting her favorites onto a class. The students have enough forced upon them, a touchstone book should not be another. One prolific author that a majority of first graders find appealing is Patricia Polacco. I have chosen some of her thirty-six books to begin a book and author study. Dr. Polacco has written and beautifully illustrated personal narratives, historical fiction and fictional children's literature. Her stories are multigenerational and multiethnic. Some of the texts are complicated for first graders so the author study could continue throughout the elementary grades. Many of her books are perfect for first grade instructional listening, particularly the personal narratives. *Firetalking* is an autobiography she wrote for children that talks about herself and her writing. She has an excellent web site that also make her into a real person who writes real books and struggles with writing just like they do.

Objectives

I wish to use the entire year, expanding upon the first grade literacy curriculum by including the author's craft in text discussions. The *reading-- writing connection* will be explicitly addressed just like other aspects of the literacy curriculum. As the students are reading and listening to texts, there will be discussions about the author's writing as well as the strategies good readers use to understand a text. Students will see the text from the point of view of the writing and the writer as well as the story content. This added dimension also will be used to notice writing techniques, literary devices, grammatical concepts and other writing skills in mini - lessons and in individual writing conferences. To begin this new dimension, I will focus on some of Patricia Polacco's writing. Her stories can be scattered through out the school year to provide a continuum for writing discussions. The *reading-- writing connection* is meant to be a part of ALL texts where focusing on the author is deemed important. Using Ms. Polacco's books is merely a beginning, a template for other rich literature that is presented to a class. Her web site states that that meteor is now the family headstone at the local cemetery.

Strategies

The *reading--writing connection* in first grade is meant as "ways of adding something to the pot" (Calkins, 200). Some children will attempt a technique right away, others will store it for later use. The words and the magic we are helping a child learn to watch for when reading and listening will spark something when it is needed in a writing piece. Below are three general categories for inquiry and discussion as the class is reading or listening to a good text. These strategies are meant to develop a first grade child's awareness of the *reading--writing connection*. They can be used in tandem with the comprehension strategies or saved for a different day or for an extended second reading.

Engaged Reading--Writing Connection Strategies

1. Thinking about the structure of the book:
 - How does the story (writing) begin? Did it 'hook' you, spark your interest? Could you try something like that?
 - When did you really start to get interested in the text? Why?
 - How did the author end the story? Was it a good way to end it? wrap it up? Keep you wondering? Did it bother you? Why? How?
 - How did the author move the story along and keep your interest? Was there a time when you were the most involved? When were you were the least interested? Why?
2. Discussing the author's ways with words:
 - What were some good words or phrases that really struck you?
 - How did the author explain _____?
 - How did the author describe _____?
 - Discuss: Using sounds to help describe or to gain interest
 - Power verbs
 - Striking adjectives, adverbs
 - The uses of commas, periods, and other techniques that bring meaning to the text
 - Discuss the author's "voice". How does the author bring the text alive? How does the author bring you in to get to "know" him/her?
3. Thinking about the author as a person and as a writer:
 - Check out the author's web site and any books about this author. Discuss.
 - Why do you think the author wanted to write this text, story, narrative?
 - Does this give you an idea for a writing or for a response to this text?
 - Talk about what you may know about the author and how this might relate to the text?
 - What about other books, poems, and texts you know by this author? Compare and contrast them.
 - What texts by another author remind you of this writing style, choice of words, story line or topic?

Classroom Activities

The following are books by Patricia Polacco that are meant to help primary teachers begin the reading-- writing connection with texts used in the classroom. These books are not for a unit but can be presented throughout the school year when it is suitable to the classroom needs. Calkins believes that before a child can

envision using an author's craft in a writing the child must truly get to 'know' that book and find it truly special. "Only when we read and reread a dearly loved poem or story can the text affect us so much that it affects our writing" (Calkins 277). A book that is worthy of the comprehension introspection is also worthy of discussing rich vocabulary words and the reading-- writing connection.

In lieu of day-by-day lesson plans for this paper, some of Polacco's texts will be introduced. Insights into the *reading--writing connection* for each book and a few rich vocabulary words will be offered. It is not necessary to fully script reading-writing connection. Each teacher has a unique style and knows the strengths and needs of a particular class. Teachers can refer to the Engaged Comprehension Strategies in the Rationale section of this paper and to the Engaged *Reading--Writing Connection* Strategies in the Strategies section for further guidance. Some ideas for writing prompts, and the writer's craft and style will be mentioned.

The Bee Tree

This is a good book to start the year. Mary Ellen is tired of reading her book so her grandpa takes her on an invigorating quest to find a bee hive. The story includes ethnicity, ritual and parable. Read this book before *Thank You Mr. Falker*. There is a connection to this book that would be best served by introducing *The Bee Tree* first.

Polacco uses the structure of a cumulative story, as in *The Gingerbread Man*, for most of this book. The chase after the bees to locate the hive and the folks who follow along is humorous and hectic. She manages to make the chase more and more frantic through her sound words and the descriptions she uses for each follower. "*Slap, bump, bleat, honk, tweedle-deedle-squeek fump!* they went as they ran. Hoofs clattered. Rows of corn parted. Nothing really mattered but chasing that bee!" The perspective and pace dramatically change when the grandfather takes Mary Ellen away from the honey finding celebration to his study for the bee / honey parable.

There are many wonderful explicit and descriptive verbs that would help increase vocabulary. Making a list (swooped, pitched, sprinted, soared, pitched and swayed, for example) and practicing them in other contexts would be a good exercise if bland verbs is an issue in the class.

"There was music, dancing, tall tales and raucous laughter as they all buzzed about the sweet adventure of the day." Her choice of words is perfect for the tale.

Suggested vocabulary: Commotion – confusion, excitement, a big scene.

Kids can give numerous examples of times they have been around commotion. It is a good journal topic.

Pursue - to go after something, to search, follow, continue along. There was a pursuit for honey and an expectation that the girl will pursue knowledge and find it sweet as well.

Meteor

This is another good book for the beginning of the year because Polacco feels that the spectacular event of a falling star landing on her grandparents farm was the spark that ignited her storytelling nature. She also admits that both sides of her family, the Russian immigrants and the Irish Americans, were fabulous story tellers.

The meteor's landing caused quite an event in the Michigan countryside. The farcical caused to this farm community contrasts with the calm, ordinary evening before the 'event.' Telling the class that this is a true story but with some embellishments will give them more connection to the author. The first person orientation may be the first time they have heard or read it. A discussion of literary license to exaggerate while the truth is still there could be discussed. A mention of this or another special rock is contained in *My Ol' Man*.

The importance of this falling star to the author, its significance to wishes coming true and just plain magic is hinted on the last page of the text. Her web site states that that meteor is now the family headstone at the local cemetery.

First graders believe in magic too. Stone Soup, Cinderella, Snow White, The Wizard of Oz, Santa Clause, the tooth fairy, they all are almost common sense to them. A discussion of and journal writing of their favorite story that includes a magic "something" would be a good text - to - self exercise

Suggested vocabulary: inspire – to stimulate creativity, to animate, instill (a feeling) into a person - The Meteor supposedly inspired many who touched it towards great achievements.

meteoric – rapid like a meteor, dazzling, fast and glorious - "The Chautauqua Circus was going to give a *meteoric* performance."

Thank You, Mr. Falker

As in *The Meteor*, Polacco readily admits it is autobiographical by telling of a chance meeting with this fifth grade teacher when she was an adult. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* is a story about Trisha as an elementary student and her severe dyslexia. She talks about the torture of going to school and the strategies she invented to fool her teachers. She describes the cruel taunting because she was different and she tells of the dedicated fifth grade teacher who turned her life around by painstakingly helping her decode the jumbled scratches in the books.

Unlike the two previous books, there is nothing fanciful or embellished about this book. The story talks of a painful part of a child's life in a well crafted, more serious manner. Like, *Meteor*, this would be a good book to read at the beginning of the year because it expresses beautifully the promise of reading and the anticipation of that special moment, not unlike the expectation most first graders have. It is also related to *Bee Tree* because the honey/knowledge parable was a tradition in Polacco's family and was presented to her by her grandfather right before she entered school. This truly adds to her disappointment and feelings of doubt and stupidity as her school life progresses. Polacco does learn to read and her eureka is more profound than most first graders because it was so long and painful in coming.

A discussion of how hard or easy it is to write about painful times may be in order as well as how difficult or easy the students think it was for Polacco to write this particular book. The catharsis one gets from writing has probably not been a part of an early first grader's experience but this discussion may create an incentive to try it.

The beginning of the book refers to the author's early years in Michigan, living with her mother and brother on her Russian immigrant grandparents' farm. Her close relationship with both her grandparents is evident. The scene with her grandmother and Trisha looking at the stars on a bright summer night is touching. Everyone in the classroom will realize her broad safety net was lost when her grandparents died and she must move to California and face her reading disability without their immediate love.

Last year my class was so enthralled with this book we actually performed the honey/knowledge parable. We did this daily until everyone in the room had a chance to taste the honey (on wax paper on the cover of their favorite book) as the class told each child that just as honey is sweet so is knowledge and just as we must chase the bee to find the honey you will find knowledge is sweet as you chase it through pages of a book. It was interesting to see the book each child picked. It always was a book with which that child connected. Some were touchstone books where the children could make a *reading – writing connection*.

For others, the choice was *the* book that made them realize they had broken the code and they could really read. The choice always gave me insight into the child.

Suggested vocabulary: evade - escape from, avoid doing, outside of one's grasp
Trisha's ability to read evaded her for along time. She, in turn, evaded the task of reading because she really couldn't. expect, expectation - belief, looking forward, want, possibly wish

My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother

This is a great title for a story every child can relate to. There is usually someone in every kid's life who teases unmercifully. The repartee between Patricia and her brother Richie is a good example of dialogue revealing character. Then at the close of the story Richie goes out of his way to rush to give Patricia help when she is injured. That act seemed to change their relationship a bit. Some brothers always tease, though. A lot of writing can happen as kids start to use a sibling in a writing piece. They can get a lot of frustration out this way.

Polacco makes a connection to her audience beautifully by writing a letter to her readers on the inside cover. It is a nice touch that can make her into a real person writing about what she knows best – her life experiences.

There are also good vignettes about her grandmother that illustrate describing someone by narrating scenes that include that person.

The best part about this book for first graders is that they often feel the need to write about a bothersome sibling, relative or neighbor. Often it is the first time they write more than a sentence or two without coaxing.

Bullying is a big discussion in first grade, a precursor to political correctness. A discussion of hoe bullying is the same and/or different from what happens with sibling can be discussed.

Thunder Cake

This is another good story where first graders can easily find some empathy. The story is about young Patricia's fear of Michigan thunderstorms. Her grandmother (Babushka) comes to the rescue by supportively encouraging her granddaughter to not only work through her fear of thunderstorms but also other aspects of life on

the farm. By the time the storm arrives there is a delicious cake for them to enjoy, Patricia is no longer under the bed and she has also gathered the ingredients for the cake from some mean animals and a high trellis. She has also learned the counting technique between the lightning and the thunder clap to determine the distance of the approaching storm. All these distractions also have given her courage and control over her fear.

Polacco uses some great descriptive verbs for the thunder as well as ever increasing sound configurations that bring life to the rumblings. Her description of the approaching storm is realistic. She connects to the reader-future writer by supplying the recipe to the thunder cake on the last page. It's a good recipe!

This text can easily spark some writing topics. All first graders can remember an unrealistic fear and the process of overcoming it. One boy this year wrote how he was afraid there were dead people in his dark basement. A bright light and Mom walking down with him a few times solved the problem. He wrote about it in a letter to his mom on Mother's Day.

Suggested vocabulary: distract – divert attention, bother, to take attention away, positively or negatively

conquer – overcome, beat. With her grandmother's help, Patricia conquered her fear of thunderstorms.

ingredients – all the things you put into a recipe to make some kind of food

My Ol' Man

Patricia definitely got her flair for storytelling from her maternal grandmother and her dad. This is a wonderful story about her 'Da' and paternal grandmother during a summer soon after her parents divorced. A traveling salesman, her dad would come home every evening with a tale to tell about someone he encountered on the road. His children were enthralled. When he lost his job he did not lose hope, a good example for children. He landed a job telling Michigan stories on the radio from a piece he wrote for the local newspaper about a magic rock that helped the family get through those bad times. This household appears to be lively and caring. Her grandmother sold paper parrots she made to get Patricia oil paints and a canvas so she could teach her painting techniques.

Polacco personalizes this text with old pictures of her family before and after the text – a real person writing about real times. Kids can be encouraged to bring in pictures from home or to take pictures so they can write about incidents before they are forgotten.

Divorce and job loss, as well as, good memories are topics that can come up in text discussion. How and why Polacco wrote about the problems and the family can become a good discussion. Does the class think it was hard or easy for her to write about the time after her parents' divorce and the worry when the breadwinner loses his job? After this book, these topics may no longer seem forbidden as a writing piece. The children may not know as yet how cathartic writing about sensitive issues may be until they have the courage to try. Hearing a story that is about a real child with a family that has problems can definitely help.

Mr. Lincoln's Way

This is story about school but it is non-biographical. Mr. Lincoln is a principal in a multiracial school in California. Polacco describes Mr. Lincoln by the things he does for all the youngsters, who truly like and respect him. Eugene Esterhause, however, does not seem to be captivated by Mr. Lincoln's spell. Polacco contrasts "Mean Gene" the principal by describing his sassy talk and bullying behaviors. Mr. Lincoln recognizes the troubled boy does not need punishment but a positive way to join in the togetherness of the school. This is accomplished when he discovers Gene has learned a lot about indigenous birds and the strengths of diversity from his grandfather. The new school atrium needs birds so the project begins. A mating pair of mallards arrive along with many other birds. Mr. Lincoln shows his confidence in Gene by trusting him to find a way out of the atrium for the ducklings so they can be at home on the water.

This is a story that celebrates diversity and acceptance. It demonstrates to children that everyone has something positive to offer. Polacco's web site has some good discussion questions if you want to explore diversity/ prejudice issues. Some of the questions will require more knowledge of the issue that first graders usually can handle but we can give them a start in that acquisition. A contrast between home and school standards is a topic that will probably come up when the story is discussed. This is when the prejudice topic may arise.

The Meanest Thing To Say by Bill Cosby and *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert Mc Closkey are two books that would be good text –to-text comparisons about the power of words to demean and the vagaries of ducks trying to be ducks in a city.

Suggested vocabulary: confidence – faith in oneself, trusting oneself and others

atrium – if the class is not from a warm climate -
central courtyard with rooms opening off
it

diversity - variety In this story there is diversity of people, birds, and opinions. Diversity is a theme that runs through Polacco's books

prejudice – This is a suggestion from the web site.
- unfounded hatred, fear or mistrust of a person or group

Chicken Sunday

This story is a tribute to the ability of children to bond and collaborate when prejudice is not in their mind frame. Ms. Eula is Stewart and Winston's grandmother. They live in the same neighborhood as Patricia. Although Jewish, Patricia is allowed to go to church with Ms. Eula and the boys. They then have Sunday dinner of chicken and gravy. Patricia admires Ms. Eula's exuberance and confidence in children. In her text there is a wonderful analogy for Ms. Eula's singing voice is like "low thunder and sweet rain." The children decide to buy Ms. Eula an Easter hat she has admired in Mr. Kodinsky's hat shop. The story takes some interesting twists and turns. The Pysanky eggs that Patricia learned how to make from her babuska come into play as well. Ms. Eula does get her hat and the crabby Mr. Kodinsky is befriended.

Patricia notes in her web site that Stewart Winston remains one of her best friends. Polacco demonstrates how writing about a scenerio with your best friend is much more interesting than making a sentence list of what you do together. A good mini-lesson can be created from this story.

The author also talks of how very lucky she was to live in Oakland, California when she did because of all the diversity of ethnic cultures she could experience. Easter and Passover occur around the same time of year, a brief explanation of the customs of each religion would be enriching.

Mrs. Katz and Tush

This is a story about befriending an older neighbor and the richness of the relationship for all involved. The multi-ethnic, cross-generational theme is something Polacco does well. Larnel befriends a lonely widow by giving her a tail-less kitten, thus the name Tush. Larnel visits Mrs. Katz daily to help with the kitten and because he realizes he enjoys this time with the widow. Larnel learns a lot about Mrs. Katz and her Polish-Jewish-American culture. Mrs. Katz tells her little black friend about her people being slaves and discriminated against, just like his. Did he realize there have been other groups in the same boat as his? Passover and Hanukkah are mentioned in context. The Passover traditions in

particular are well explained. Making comparisons and broadening experiences for children with an entertaining story are such a good way to reach the goal.

Besides being a good story, Polacco does an excellent job bringing out Mrs. Katz's character through her Bronx/Yiddish speech and the scenes where her character has a chance to shine. Using a few favorite phrases or sentences from someone is a good way to help describe that person. First graders can try this.

Polacco communicated the longevity of their relationship on the last page when she talks about all the celebrations they shared over the years including Larnel as an adult introducing his children to Mrs. Katz and Larnel and his family at her grave site. This is reminiscent of *Meteor* when Polacco talks of the meteor becoming the headstone for her grandmother. One incident [the story] is connected to a long string of events as a conclusion.

From the last two books children may want to write about an older person in their family or they may find it interesting to learn about a custom not done in the family but one that is practiced in other families or groups. Both books have endings that take the reader far into the future to wrap up the story. This is not often seen in primary writing but could be mentioned and possibly tried.

Firetalker

Firetalker is an autobiography written in 1994. It is part of a series of books by Richard C. Owens Publishers, Inc for school age children to learn about authors. There are photographs on every page. Firetalking is what Patricia's grandmother called the times when they would all sit around the fireplace and begin to tell tales.

Both her maternal Ukranian grandparents and her Irish paternal family loved the power of the word and the magic they could create from their memory and imagination. The visual arts were a strong influence and talent she inherited from both sides as well. Polacco talks about her dyslexia and her PhD. in Art History. She talks of the meteor that fell on her grandparent's property in Michigan when her mother was a little girl and the belief that making a wish on the meteor would come true. Always dressed in rich, colorful garb, just looking at her pictures lets one know this woman is an artist.

What is nice about this book is that the children can put a face to the author. They can also use this to theorize on how she came about writing about what she did. The book gives credence to the axiom that we write what we know.

www.patriciapolacco.com

While it is difficult to use this web site in most classrooms as a whole class study of the author, trooping down to the computer room and using the smartboard to show some of the features on this site would be most useful to helping students 'know' the author.

Polacco does not use a computer; I suspect this may have something to do with her dyslexia. The site has puzzles, quizzes on some of her books, a chat room, some color-in pages that relate to her stories, contests and other fun stuff. The most interesting part is when you click onto the information the author gives about herself. A timeline of her life can even be sort of constructed. She makes it very obvious that both sets of grandparents loved her very much. It also makes it clear why she writes so much about young people being influenced by older adults. After living 37 years in Oakland, California, she now is back to her roots in Union City, Michigan. That meteor that she sees as the core to much of her family is now the family headstone in the local cemetery. No mention is made of her husband who is featured in *Firetalker* as a chef from an Italian Jewish family, some of whom died in the holocaust. Another point of discussion could be that she talks of getting her ideas from her imagination, which she had plenty of since she never had a TV! Her advice is to turn off the TV and listen to your own voice.

She talks in the "My Work" section about her Michigan farm and a house she recently bought to use as a studio, particularly for her book illustrations. Her writing process for a new book takes about two months with many rewrites to get it just right. She gets advice and requests from her editors which kids can generalize to be their teachers. Writing, and making it good takes time even for experienced authors. A good lesson to learn. The drawings take about four months so to complete a book for publishing takes her half a year. This can be helpful to kids who think they are being put out by having the process take weeks.

Scattered throughout the site are old and recent pictures of herself, friends, family and the places she has been. This also makes her real and interesting. I recommend this site as a way to help make the reading-writing connection. When to use it is part of professional judgment, depending on the interest and needs of the class.

Annotated Bibliography\ References

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A well researched, balanced discussion on the nature and development of reading proficiency.

Avery, Carol. *...And With A Light Touch: Learning about Reading, Writing and Teaching with First Graders*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 2002.

A very practical book that takes a first grade teacher from the first days of school and setting the climate in the classroom through the small process steps one must take in order to have students reach the goal of being able to read and write in June.

Beck, Isabel, Margaret McKeon, Linda Kucan. *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*. New York, NY :The Guilford Press, 2002.

This team of researchers recognizes the importance of teaching vocabulary to children in a way that is meaningful and lasting.

Calkins, Lucy M. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.

A dedicated teacher of writing and a dedicated writer explains the craft of teaching writing to children.

Committee on Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*; Catherine E. Snow, M. Susan Burns, Peg Griffin, editors. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998.

A seminal work that brings together all the expertise and research that is available to explain to us what works and children at risk for literacy failure.

Dorn, Linda & Carla Soffos. *Scaffolding Young Writers: A Writers' Workshop Approach*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2001.

A practical approach for creating a writer's workshop in the primary grades.

Freeman, Marcia. *Teaching the Youngest Writer : A Practical Guide*, Gainesville, FL: Maupin House Publishing, 1998.

Another practical guide by a children's author and educator to helping primary teachers establish a writing workshop so students can become fluent in writing in all genres.

Hudson, Delores. *Solving Writing Problems with Easy Mini-Lessons*. Huntington Beach, CA: Creative Teaching Press, 1999.

There are eighty mini-lessons in this book with real children's text as examples plus great reproducible to help with the process.

Keene, Ellin Oliver & Susan Zimmerman. *Mosaic of Thought*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1997.

This is an excellent explanation of what reading and listening comprehension is all about and how we can teach children to attend to this task.

Text Talk: First Grade. Developed by the Beck Group for Literacy Plus in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2002.

The scripted listening comprehension for the first grade children's books to improve literacy in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Tompkins, Gail E. *Teaching Writing: Balancing Process and Product*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc. 2000.

Tompkins explains the teaching of writing in elementary and middle school. She has great lists to assist teachers in determining the stages of writing. She includes graphic organizers and lists that are helpful.

Wood Ray, Katie. *Wondrous Words: Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999.

A person who loves children's literature and the teaching of writing, the author merges them together into a very helpful book. She has a good list of writing points for mini-lessons.

Appendices\Standards

Pennsylvania State Reading and Language Arts Standards - Grade 1

1.1 Learning to read independently

- Identify and isolate the initial and final consonants of a spoken word.
- Identify, segment, blend the sounds made by letters to form words
- Recognize initial, medial and final consonant sounds.
- Recognize short and long vowels.
- Recognize consonant blends and consonant digraphs.
- Recognize vowel diphthongs, vowel digraphs, and vowel variants.
- Recognize and read inflected vowels and verbs.
- Recognize and read contractions.
- Recognize, name, match and reproduce all upper and lower case letters.
- Know the order of the alphabet.
- Know print concepts.
- Recognize common sight words.
- Recognize selection and rich\concept vocabulary words.
- Begin to use rich concept\vocabulary in oral language. Notice when difficulties are encountered in understanding text.
- Read independently using various strategies.
- Describe new information gained from text in own words.
- Participate in word building activities.
- Make connections between texts and between text and personal experiences.
- Independently read 15 grade level books.
- Read to be informed and to be entertained.
- Read aloud any first grade book with accuracy and comprehension at the rate of 50 words per minute.

1.2 Reading Critically in all Content Areas

- Identify main idea of selected text.
- Discuss and note specific details of the text.
- Respond to open-ended questions.
- Retell the sequence of the text.
- Make inference within the text.
- Make comparisons within the texts.
- Respond to informational text.

1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

- Identify and describe story elements.

- Identify and discuss rhyming related to poetry.
- Read discuss and role play dramatic texts.
- Respond to literature and show understanding of a narrative text.

1.4 Types of writing

- Write for a variety of purposes.
- Use grade appropriate spelling.
- Write an informational piece.
- Begin writing with a sentence that describes the topic.
- Organize writing to include facts and details.
- Write a narrative piece.
- Include relevant details that support the main ideas.
- Include some interesting words
- Write a procedural piece

1.5 Quality of Writing

- Focus and maintain one topic.
- Include relevant facts and details to support the main idea or actions.
- Use all stages of the writing process.

1.6 Speaking and Listening

- Construct meaning orally in response to open ended probes.
- Participate in group discussion, speaking clearly and using complete sentences.
- Summarize and paraphrase information and ideas from text.
- Participate in group discussions by taking turns, linking comments, and asking questions related to the topic.
- Speak effectively using eye contact, appropriate volume, and pacing.