Volunteers Working with Young Readers
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Chapter 1

Volunteers in the Classroom

How Can You Help?
Your First Days as a Volunteer

So you're all ready to jump in there and help a child on the way to becoming a proficient reader. Thank you. Teachers appreciate willing volunteers in their busy days and crowded classrooms. If you are volunteering in a classroom, remember that the teacher is responsible for all the children in that class. Therefore, you should always work closely with the teacher in planning your visits and in devising an assessment plan that can guide your work with a child or group. The classroom teacher will have the greatest insight into the individual needs of each child and the specific requirements of the curriculum. You would be wise to use the teacher's knowledge as one of your primary resources.

In the classroom, there will be children who are very proficient readers for their age. Those children can often function independently. Other children will be making average- to slightly less-than-average progress in their development as readers and writers. While still others may be struggling with reading. It is my opinion that your role as volunteer in the classroom should be to work with those children who are making slightly less-than-average progress. Those very proficient readers can either work independently or with peers making average or better progress. Your work with slightly below-average students frees the teacher to work with those students who are struggling most. In essence, your presence not only provides much-needed individual and small-group instruction for specific children, it also provides the most highly skilled professional in the classroom with an opportunity to maximize time spent with the least proficient, most "in-need" students in the class.

So maybe you're wondering what you'll be doing when you volunteer your time. There are several ways you can be helpful.

Some Possibilities

What follows is a list of possibilities for your involvement. This list is intended to provide some general guidance as you begin your work as a volunteer.

1. Reading aloud to the class, to a small group, or to an individual child (your reading partner)

- choose books you enjoy
- always rehearse the book aloud before reading for an audience
- remember to give the title as well as the name(s) of the author and illustrator
- use your voice to set the tone or mood of the story
- use your voice to bring the characters to life

2. Listening to a child read aloud

- invite the child to bring something to read for you each time
- listen without interrupting the reader
- expect the child to have a rationale for the selection
- resist the urge to correct every misread word
- make a note when the child struggles with a word or misreads a word that alters meaning

3. Working with a small group over time

- participate in a literature circle

- assist in locating books and other materials for literature circles, author studies, genre studies, or topic studies
- participate in an inquiry project
- assist in recording what is known about the topic
- assist in generating and recording questions for inquiry
- assist the group in making connections between the topic and materials they have previously read
- assist in writing a script for a play, producing the play, and performing the play

4. Working with an individual child over time

- read aloud to the child
- listen to the child read
- help the child locate other titles of interest
- assist in making connections between books
- demonstrate reading strategies that will broaden the child's repertoire

Now let's take each of these activities and open them up a bit. The following elaboration may give you a deeper understanding of each of the possibilities listed above.

Read Aloud to the Class, to a Small Group, or to an Individual Child (Your Reading Partner)

When I was in elementary school I used to look forward to "library day"—that day when my class got to go to the library for the selection of new books. But, selecting a new book was not the thing I looked forward to most about library day. I longed for the voice of Mrs. Hand, our librarian. She could take any story to new heights through her careful, thoughtful, and casually dramatic rendering of text. Her voice was smooth, velvety, and a little deep for a woman, I always thought. A voice something like that of actress Patricia Neal. She could make us tremble at the scary parts. Bring tears at the sad parts. Send us reeling at the humor. She could draw us up to the edge of our seats and nearly have us teetering on the brink of disaster at the dangerous feats of our heroes.

It was in that library sitting in the presence of Mrs. Hand, wrapped in the velvet cloak that was her voice that I believed myself into reading my first chapter book. Mrs. Hand would read just a chapter of *The Boxcar Children* and leave us suspended in space until the next Thursday. All week we talked about Henry, Jesse,Violet, and little Benny hiding out in that boxcar. All week we pretended to be them in the woods at the edge of our school yard. All week we guessed and plotted out what would happen next. Mrs. Hand taught me to hold a story in my hands, to carry it with me throughout the week. She taught me to relish the events of a fictitious place, to go there and visit with my new friends. I will never forget her voice, her love of books, her love for children nor her gift of reading aloud.

Reading aloud to children in groups or as individuals plays an important role in their overall literacy development. This seemingly simple and rather pleasurable act accomplishes so much with so little effort. Being read to allows children the opportunity to become familiar with the language of story, poetry, information books, pamphlets, directions, etc. In addition, it is through the experience of listening to an engaging reader that children first begin to grasp the notion that those marks on the page tell fascinating stories. The act of reading aloud to children demonstrates how written language should sound, what readers do with phrasing, intonation, inflection to bring life to otherwise still and quiet print. Through repeated readings of favorite stories, children come to understand that the print tells the story, that print is stable and says the same thing each time it is read. Rereading could also allow you to discover more meaning in the same words. Reading aloud allows children to see and hear how language can be organized in various forms to accomplish a variety of purposes for different audiences. For example, the language in a *Frog and Toad* story is organized differently than the language of a pamphlet for the hands-on science museum the class will visit next month on a field trip. The language of a predictable book such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* is organized differently than the language of a traditional tale such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears.*

It is through repeated exposure to such language that children first begin to explore the possibility of using different forms in their own writing. In each meeting with your reading partner plan some time to read aloud for the child's pleasure. It's valuable instruction without pain. Here are some things to keep in mind when reading aloud to children. Read the story or text yourself a few times and rehearse it aloud before sharing it with an audience, even an audience of one. Know where you need to slow down, where a word needs to stretch, where you need to increase the speed or volume a bit. Know where your voice needs to rise and fall. Note the use at punctuation, line breaks, bold print and other conventions of print as signals to how the language should sound. All these things enhance the delivery of the story, engage the listener, and bring the characters to life. In *A Sense of Wonder* (1995) Katherine Paterson has said "'Let me hear you read it' is a test. 'Let me read it to you' is a gift" (pp. 281-282). In short, think of your reading aloud as a gift. Select carefully with knowledge of the recipient in mind; package it beautifully and present it with love.

Jim Trelease (1982) in his now famous book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook,* offers some additional advice, which I have summarized below, combining it with my own suggestions on the subject.

- The art of listening is taught and cultivated gradually.
- Don't feel that you have to tie every book to classwork.
- Don't overwhelm the audience. When choosing a book you should consider the intellectual, social, and emotional level of your audience.
- Don't read stories that you don't enjoy yourself.
- Don't start unless you have time to do justice to the story.
- Adjust your pace to fit the story.
- Reluctant readers or unusually active children frequently find it difficult to just sit and listen. Paper, crayons, and pencils allow them to keep their hands busy while listening.
- Don't be fooled by awards. Not all award-winning books make good read-alouds.
- Use plenty of expression when reading. Change the tone of your voice to fit the dialogue or set the mood when possible.

Listening to a Child Read Aloud

A good listener is hard to find. Too often, children view the act of reading aloud to an adult as a test of some sort. Many children, especially those who are developing more slowly as readers, are asked to read to an adult only for the adult to assess progress. At each meeting with your young partner, invite the child to select something to read to you. Let the child know you expect to hear why he or she picked this selection to read for you. Therefore, at each meeting, before you begin to read aloud to the child, you should introduce your selection (book, story, poem, etc.) and also tell why you chose it. For example, "I found the most beautiful book to read for you today. It's called *All the Places to Love.* I just love the way this sounds, just listen. And the pictures are so real. It makes me feel as if I could step into the book. I chose this one because it reminds me of my visits to my grandmother's farm when I was little. I hope you enjoy it."

By doing this each time you read aloud for the child, you repeat a demonstration that will help your young partner learn the possibilities for how books are selected, the reasons for sharing, and the driving force behind our pleasures in reading aloud.

When the child presents his or her selection remember to be a good listener. Focus on the selection and the child's reasons for choosing it. The child may choose a piece because it is very funny. Then you validate the humor. Perhaps because of the rich description, in which case you validate the image-rich language. Maybe the selection was chosen because it was confusing. Then, you note the confusion and help to clarify. Whatever the rationale, try to help support the child’s growing sense of self as reader and writer. Try to help the child grow into the literate life he or she has envisioned. Support strategies for making selections and continue to offer demonstrations of how you do that yourself.

As the child reads aloud to you, accept the gift graciously and don't turn the event into an evaluation. Resist the urge to correct every misread word. Encourage the child to ask her- or himself if the language is making sense. You might note on an index card or a sticky note when the child struggles with a word or misreads a word that alters meaning (for example, horse for house). These notes will give you something to come back to later (see Chapter 3 for a more in depth discussion of the topic).

Working with a Small Group over Time

In this setting you will be working with your partner and a few other students. Consult with the host teacher to select group members who may have common interests and who may work well together. This small group may represent several levels of ability, and that should be viewed as a positive factor. Clearly this setting will bring children with diverse talents and needs together. Allow children to emerge as leaders where they have talents. You may find that your reading partner works well in a small group. In fact, you will likely discover that you learn a great deal from the interaction that occurs among children. These meetings with your reading partner as a member of a small group may provide you with the insight needed to focus some instruction during your one-on-one time. For example, members of the small group may demonstrate a strategy that you and your partner could borrow.

The small group setting provides an opportunity for you to see your partner employ strategies, observe others, or try out new strategies. You may find it useful to participate with your partner in a literature circle or to assist a small group through the process of an inquiry project, or the production of a play.

Literature Circles. If the idea of a literature circle is new to you it may be helpful to think about a book group you've participated in as an adult or to think about the book club featured on Oprah Winfrey's popular talk show. In each case a small group of people comes together because of common interest in the topic, admiration for the work of a particular author, or shared interest in the specific title or genre selected. These folks do not come together because they have similar scores on a test or show similar deficits in some particular skill. Instead, it is shared interest and common enthusiasm that brings them together. When folks gather for these "book clubs" the selection of a book is usually agreed upon by the members of the group and not imposed by someone else. Typically, there's a standard meeting time and place, and the group agrees upon the amount of time to be devoted to the book. If the group plans to meet prior to reading the whole book, they would agree to reading a specified amount of text for each meeting. The focus of each meeting is to share insights and confusions. The group gathers to discuss what they've connected with and made sense of. They also share what troubles or puzzles them. The discussion builds around these connections and confusions and may extend interpretations of the text. In essence, the group dynamics expands on the third view of reading (see page 5 in the Introduction). Here the insight and understanding gained by the reader rests not only with what the individual brings to the text because in this setting, the reader has the ideas, experiences, and language of the other members of the group to draw upon as well. In the literature circle, then, the interplay between reader and writer enlarges now to an interaction between readers and writer and *among readers* as well.

Also of note is the fact that when folks come together in these settings, there is usually no "quizzing" to see if all the members are prepared for the meeting. When questions are asked, they are asked out of genuine interest in the answers and opinions of others or from a true need to know. In short, this process emphasizes meaning, sharing ideas, broadening insights, and reducing confusions. It isn't about searching the page to find the "right" answer to someone else's questions.

The idea behind literature circles in the classroom is to provide that same opportunity for sharing perspectives, for making meaning, and reading for understanding. The intent is to allow children to bring their insights and interpretations and confusions to a group of their peers, who have interest in the same text. This is important for several reasons:

- children learn that comprehension is more than giving the "right" answer to someone else's questions
- children learn that comprehension is more a process of making sense of what is read than a process of finding the answer on the page

- children learn that sharing differing perspectives broadens the views of everyone and deepens the insights of all who participate
- children learn to read with an open mind seeking broader points of view, questioning the ideas of the writer, seeking to make set of what is read, and to go beyond the details on the page
- children learn to value their own ideas and to respect the views of others even if they are different from their own.

As with any other strategy you work with in the classroom, it is always wise to begin by consulting with the teacher to seek suggestions and feedback as you make plans. Let the teacher be your guide and primary resource. Remember, your work should support and extend the foundation being built in that classroom. The person with the deepest insight into that foundation and with the greatest knowledge of the children there is the classroom teacher. If you are working in a program outside the school setting, your program coordinator would assume this role.

So you may be wondering just what you would do as the adult in this setting. Let's say you are working with a student in the third grade and the teacher suggests that you work with the child and a small group in a literature circle. First, consult the teacher for suggestions to identify appropriate books. You should also talk with the child to find out her interests and whether she has favorite authors or favorite types of stories. Armed with that information consult the librarian/media specialist in the school and bring three or four choices to the child. Give the child a brief "advertisement" for each book and have her identify her first and second choices. Now, your task is to locate enough copies of the book for each student who will be joining the group. In some cases, the teacher may prefer to establish the groups and identify the titles to be selected. If not, you would consult with the teacher to determine which children might be considered for joining your group. Then, you and your partner would present the selection as an invitation for three or four other children to join you in a literature circle with the selected book.

In many classrooms, literature circles will be a standard part of the reading program. In that case, you would simply join the circle your partner has selected. How these are established is determined by the classroom teacher and the children. However, children are typically given several options and join a circle on the basis of their interest in the book or author. As with adults, membership in a literature circle is not generally determined by a test score or skill deficit.

When the circle meets the first time, the group will need to agree upon meeting times, the amount to have read for each meeting, and a final date for having the book finished. Peterson and Eeds (1990) suggest using a literature study contract, which could look something like this.

Literature Study Contract

Name _____Date _____

Title _____

Author _____

I agree to read this book by _____.

This book has a total of ____ pages. I will pace myself according to the schedule below.

Monday _____pages
Tuesday _____pages
Wednesday _____pages
Thursday _____pages
Friday _____pages
Saturday _____pages
Sunday _____pages

I will be prepared for meeting with my circle on _____
Student's signature _____
Tutor's signature _____
Teacher's signature _____
Parent's signature _____

Once the literature circle is formed and the limits have been set, you may play several roles. Your primary role, though, is to support your reading partner. You may listen to him read in between meetings of the circle. You may read with him or to him. You may take a copy of the book home and read it on tape so that he can use a "walkman" with a headset to listen and follow along. You may be reading the same pages at the same time, serving as a sounding board for his ideas, insights, and confusions to build confidence for his full participation in the circle. In short, you provide the level of support needed to allow the child to participate in the conversation with his peers. The type of support will differ from book to book depending upon the content, language, writing style, the child's familiarity with the topic, and his level of comfort with the text.

When the circle meets remember the purpose of the process is not to quiz the members to see if they have read. Instead, you and the children may begin by sharing your general impressions, talking through connections made to other texts (books, poems, songs, movies, etc.), sharing personal connections with the text, talking through confusions or things that made you wonder, and sharing observations or things you noted as a reader. Remember, one goal is to enrich and deepen the readers' understandings and insights. Peterson and Eeds (1990) remind us that "[w]hen a topic surfaces that commands the group's interest and has a potential for altering perception, the talk shifts from sharing to dialogue. Through dialogue, the group . . . works to disclose meaning, thereby potentially expanding the meaning of the work for all participants . . . . Through the collaborative work of the group, time is spent contemplating meaning, and digesting it. Group members help each other begin to see where previously they may have only looked. Our job . . . is to help with this seeing" (p. 13).

In many classrooms, the members of literature circles also keep reading response logs. Again, it is wise to check with your host teacher to determine the extent to which response logs are used. Basically, the log is a place for the reader to record general impressions, to note connections to other texts and to personal experiences, and to write through confusions and noticings. The log could be just a blank notebook or may take a more structured format. A possible structure couldn't include any or all of the following:

- brief retelling
- observations and insights
- connections to other texts
- connections to personal experience
- confusions

The retelling allows readers an opportunity to express the essence of the story in their own words. The observations might focus on details in the story, the writer's choice of words, the use of a repeated phrase throughout the book. The connections to other texts invite readers to note how the story reminds them of other books, stories, poems, movies, TV shows, music, etc. The point is to note how knowledge of various texts makes it easier to make meaning of new texts and to help readers realize that some themes cut across the human experience. The connections to personal experience help readers to bring meaning to the text in order to make sense of the text. Recognizing our personal experiences in the stories of others can be very validating. The confusions might include misunderstandings, a need for more information, clarification of vocabulary, or just curiosity about the plot or why the author chose to write the story as it is.

The writing that readers do in the response logs can be the springboard into the conversations that take place in the literature circles. In short, the whole process is one of read, write, and talk. Each component is of great significance and contributes to the making of meaning. You might say this process is view

three of reading (see Introduction) in action. Clearly, the readers must rely upon all their skills and strategies, making use of all available cues both on the page and in the mind. And most important, the goal—the end result is making sense of what is read.

Locating Books and Other Material for Literature Circles, Author Studies, Genre Studies, or Topic Studies. If you want to help between your tutoring sessions you could assist the teacher in locating texts for literature circles, author studies, genre studies, and topic studies. You may locate and collect books by an author (e.g., titles by Eric Carle, by Bill Martin Jr., and by others) or books about the same topic (e.g., titles about losing a tooth, about moving to a new town, etc.). In this way, you will help to continue the literature circles within the classroom by locating books for your partner and other groups. Your reading partner will benefit from continued participation in literature study. Reading with a small group with a common interest in a title, author, genre, or topic allows your partner to observe the strategies and connections of other readers in the class. In a classroom where a more traditional view of reading is practiced, the developing reader rarely has the opportunity to participate in reading with more proficient readers. Therefore, the strategies most often observed are those of the less proficient readers in the class. It is no wonder that these students tend to have limited skills and strategies. To encourage further participation, it might benefit your partner, as well as others in the class, if you locate sets of books that might be used by the children between your visits. Consult with your host teacher to determine the authors, titles, topics, and genres that might be most appropriate. You can often find enough copies by borrowing from classroom collections in your host school. You may also want to check the school and local libraries. And don't forget to consult the librarians for guidance in using technology that may make the search more fruitful. If you plan ahead, you may find that children have copies to loan and that friends of yours may have copies stored away in their own children's book collections. Suggest any you find particularly interesting yourself. Some possibilities are also included in the appendix.

Inquiry Project. In many classrooms children participate in a process of inquiring about a topic of intense interest or significance. The process could include identifying the topic; discussing and recording what is already known or believed to be true; generating questions for research; locating resources (print and nonprint); reading, viewing, listening, and note taking; reviewing new information and generating more specific questions; more reading, viewing, note taking; synthesizing the information and deciding how to share the findings. You can help your partner or group talk through the topic and assist with recording what is known. Some teachers do this with a web, some prefer a K-W-L chart. The -K- is the heading for the column where you record what is **K**nown. The -W- heads the column for what we **W**ant to know and the -L- heads the column for what was **L**earned.

As you and the child(ren) get the known recorded, move on to the questions that will guide your search for resources and new information. You should note that initially the questions are likely to be very simple. Remember that the children may need the opportunity to locate a few resources and gather a bit of information before they have enough information to ask more in-depth questions. You may find it helpful to cluster the questions around categories. For example, if the topic is polar bears, the questions might easily cluster around these categories: *physical characteristics, habitat, diet, care, and feeding of the young.* Having the questions and categories can help with locating resources. You could easily use this opportunity to demonstrate the function of the table of contents, the glossary, the appendix, the card catalog, and any technology the library may have to aid in the search for material. For example, as you and your partner begin the search for information, help your partner clearly identify the questions. Next, you may review the table of contents for each of your print resources and compare the entries with each of your questions. As you find a match, place the question number on a sticky note and affix the note on the corresponding page in that resource. This will help your partner learn how to locate information using reference skills and to reduce the amount of time needed.

The appendix can also be used to make your partner's use of resources more efficient. For example, the categories from the polar bear web are key headings for information. You and your partner could use sticky notes (perhaps a different color this time) to list each heading. Then turn to the index in your first resource to search for the category: *habitat.* On the sticky note, jot down the corresponding page numbers. Repeat this process for each resource and each heading. In doing this with your partner, you demonstrate how readers make efficient use of resources. The appendixes in books can be useful in

similar ways, and the glossary can be used to help your partner define unfamiliar terms and to discover other key terms that may prove useful in the quest for information.

The categories from the web can be also useful for organizing notes and may become headings in the final product if the child(ren) should decide to write a summary of the findings. Remember that inquiry, the search for information and insight, tends to feed itself. Each cycle of this process will lead to greater insight, better questions, more skill with identifying and locating resources and more in-depth note taking, and more informed readers and writers. Clearly, this will require focused reading and writing and is a process that will not be limited to one subject. These experiences also enable you to see the range of strategies and skills employed in the classroom. That insight can only broaden the possibilities for you and your partner.

Producing a Play. Most of us can remember being part of a school play during those elementary grades. You may remember the part you played or the butterflies in your stomach when the curtains were parted and the auditorium was filled with more faces than you'd ever stood before. What you may not remember is the amount of focused reading you did to learn your part and to know the parts of others well enough to know when you should act or speak. Working together with your partner alone or with a small group to produce a play can be a rewarding experience for all involved. You may begin with a familiar story and work together to write a script. Then there are parts to read and reread through many rehearsals before the performance is ready for an audience. The play may be presented through the use of puppets with your partner and friends reading the parts of different voices. In any case, the process is clearly one that involves the use of many practical reading strategies and skills.

Working with an Individual Child over Time

Working with one child over an extended period of time, such as one school year, can be among the most rewarding experiences you'll have. The one-to-one setting enables you to gain intense knowledge of the child's reading habits, strengths, strategies, interests, and limitations. When working with one child over time you soon find that you visit libraries with your partner in mind. You find yourself running across a new title or an old favorite saying, "I should check this out, it would be perfect for our next meeting." It is thrilling to make progress as a team, to see your partner gain confidence and competence as a literate being.