

IN THE CLASSROOM

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An invitation to reading fluency

Carl Walley

Teachers have long been aware of the power that fluent reading has for enhancing students' comprehension. Fluent readers are in control of their reading and, as a result, are able to focus on the meaning of the passage. The easy, fluid reading that fluent readers produce allows them to devote more attention to the critical features of text material. In addition, by practicing oral communication in content area instruction, readers can begin to realize a sense of control over their learning.

Uniting fluent oral reading, drama, and content area information poses both challenges and instructional opportunities. Selection of appropriate text material seems to be a critical step in this process. Cumulative stories lend themselves to use with this approach because of their structure. Cumulatives, by definition, have a minimum of plot but a maximum of rhythm and rhyme (Sutherland & Arbuthnot, 1991). Each episode builds on preceding entries to produce a logically constructed tale relying on a cadenced rhyme to produce its characteristic rhythmic quality.

Jane Yolen's (1976) *An Invitation to the Butterfly Ball* is an example of a cumulative story that can be combined with choral reading and puppetry for primary-grade students. This cumulative story involves 10 kinds of animals invited to a dance by a tiny elf. Each animal is described in a cleverly worded rhyme. The story begins, "One little mouse in great distress looks all around for a floor-length dress," and builds by adding 2 moles, 3 rabbits, and so on, up to 10 porcupines. To integrate puppetry and choral reading with the book, I made 10 bag puppets,

one for each group of animals. On the back side of each puppet, I reproduced in primary type the rhyme associated with that animal in the book.

Procedures to promote fluency

The fluency activity is introduced by reading the story aloud to the students. Emphasis is placed on interpreting the characters through effective oral expression. Once students are familiar with the text, they are grouped into pairs with one reader slightly more fluent than the other. The teams practice until the words on their puppet can be read in unison with ease. When students are familiar with their parts, the whole class participates in the presentation. The activity begins with all students chanting "Knock, knock. Who's coming to call?" In turn, each team stands holding its puppet and chorally reads its part. Following the addition of each new animal, the pairs previously introduced in the choral reading repeat their lines, building on the cumulative story line.

Children who have opportunities with this form of oral communication rapidly become more expressive readers. Many students experience the joy of reading with rhythm and expression for the first time. As an extension to this activity, children can make their own puppets and create original verses based on the repetitive rhyme pattern. One second grader made his own puppet and then wrote, "Eleven reindeer yell, 'Oh, my!' as they search for the one red bow tie."

Cumulative tales such as *An Invitation to the Butterfly Ball* provide an interesting way to connect reading fluency and mathematics. Once the students are familiar with the story's repetitive rhyme and cumulative form, teachers can frame questions that become math story problems for students

to solve. Questions such as "How many animals came to the ball in all?" require students to read the tale and add a series of numbers. Spurred by the challenge to solve this problem, the children are encouraged to create their own story problems using information from the text. One student wrote, "If the fox chased the rabbits around the hall, how many animals would be running in all?"

Since the tale involves a variety of animal types, discussions about these animals naturally follow the reading. In many schools, the primary-level science curriculum presents a section on the eating habits of animals and begins the process of categorizing these animals as predators and prey. Teachers might open a discussion based on these science concepts with questions like "How many animals were omnivores, carnivores, or herbivores?" and "What refreshments would be on the table at the Butterfly Ball?" Blending science and mathematics knowledge, third-grade students could classify the animals mentioned in the text as reptiles, amphibians, and mammals. Using these data, the students could then create graphs comparing the frequency of animals in each classification.

Reading fluently is only one aspect of the literacy spectrum, but it is important nonetheless because fluency enables students to focus on constructing meaning from text. When students read a selection repeatedly, their word recognition improves. With fluency and efficient word recognition, students can devote their attention to understanding the text. Cumulative stories prove to be a key component in promoting fluency because the student's attention is drawn to the repetition and rhyme. In classrooms accustomed to a shared book time, this activity provides a variation to large-

group choral reading. In all settings, the shared reading that evolves from the cumulative story acts to minimize the tension some children experience when they are asked to read aloud. Finally, readers who are fluent and able to make connections across content areas do so because they have assumed control of the reading process and of themselves as readers.

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References

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Reading chapter books for fun

Frances Delrose

After teaching third grade for many years, I was concerned when the majority of my students came back from the library each week with picture books or books containing small amounts of print. Most of these books could be read from cover to cover in 15 minutes or less. Even my better readers seemed hesitant to choose a chapter book. It seemed that the lack of pictures and the vast amount of print were so intimidating that nearly everyone ignored these books and gravitated toward picture books week after week.

Because I have always loved books and reading, I knew I had to foster the same feelings in my students. I thought I could accomplish this goal by finding good literature for children and reading aloud daily. My students loved our read-aloud time, but it did not accomplish my goal. It did not encourage them to choose their own chapter books on library day.

Then I hit upon a plan that I have used successfully with my third graders for the past 18 years. While browsing through book orders that I intended

to send home with the children, I realized that several good chapter books by noted children's authors were offered each month.

I picked out five selections from an order form and wrote the titles on the board. After passing out the order form to the children, we read and discussed the descriptions of the five books. We then voted on the book that sparked the most curiosity. I told them I wanted to start a book club and that they could be in my club with their parents' permission. To be a member, they would have to purchase the book that had received the most votes. We would sit on the floor each day and read a chapter of our book orally. We would enjoy the story and talk about it, but there would be no tests, work sheets, or book reports. They were excited! Eight-year-olds love to be in clubs. Now I had to convince their parents.

I sent a letter home along with the book order form. I explained to parents that my goal was to instill in their children a real love of reading; that my dream was to help children realize that reading could be fun rather than something equated with drudgery and work sheets. The club was strictly to be for enjoyment. Reading might even become so exciting that children would choose to read instead of watching television or playing. I further explained that I wanted to involve the children in a sustained reading activity rather than one that could be accomplished in 15 minutes. I wanted them to become immersed in a story over a long period of time and to look forward to each chapter with anticipation.

I asked for parents' support in the purchase of the selection from the book order. The book, upon completion, would become a part of the child's home library. I stressed that the club was an optional activity and that I would provide other meaningful reading activities for those children who were not involved. I emphasized that funds were available if this activity placed a financial burden on anyone. Parents simply had to mark the order blank and return it to me (with or without money) in the sealed envelope. I received unanimous support from parents and our book club began. From

that time on, my class and I have read approximately six books per year.

Over the last 18 years I have received numerous letters from parents thanking me for encouraging their children to read. I have had many students return as teenagers and young adults to visit and talk about our book-club days. My greatest reward, though, occurs each time we finish a book and I hear a child say, "I can't wait to take this home and read it again."

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Easing the K-1 transition through language experiences

Vicky Brain

The transition from kindergarten to first grade is often traumatic for young children. At year's end, kindergartners often express anxiety over leaving their beloved teacher. They are concerned about having to stay at school all day or having to eat lunch at school when they return the next fall. Similarly, the first few months of first grade may present a trying adjustment period for children and their families.

The following two-part project is intended to ease this anxiety, provide teachers with insight about children's comfort levels, and develop language skills. It employs the K-W-L strategy (Ogle, 1986) as the basic framework for the child's investigation of first grade. Language experience activities and the creation of a big book help to make this a whole language lesson that incorporates listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

This project requires a cooperative effort between the kindergarten and first-grade staff. The children complete Part I with their classroom teacher near the end of kindergarten. Part II is then carried out with the first-grade teacher near the end of the first quarter of the first-grade year.