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A Meeting of Minds: Teaching Using Biographies

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Part I: The end of kindergarten

The kindergarten class is presented with the idea of learning more about first grade by creating a big book entitled *In First Grade*. This group activity should be spread out over a full week, about 20 minutes per day, as follows.

Day 1: The teacher defines the problem. Kindergarten children wondered what first grade was like. They offered what they *knew* about first grade as I listed their thoughts on chart paper at the easel. The children were asked what they *wanted to know* about first grade, and I listed these questions in the same way. The children were told that the next day they would *learn* a way to find the answers.

Day 2: The children make a plan. The class discussed various ways to learn more about first grade, and I listed them on the easel paper. While a number of approaches would work here, my class settled on interviews. The idea of personal interviews with first graders in our school was introduced and discussed. Each child selected a question he or she wanted to ask. I helped students clarify the mechanics of the interview. Each student went back to our original list of questions and chose a specific question to ask of two first graders. A portable tape recorder was used to record responses. The children chose to work in pairs to conduct their interviews.

Day 3: The children carry out their plan. In this case, they took turns visiting the first-grade classrooms to conduct their interviews throughout the day.

Day 4: The information becomes part of a big book. Before class, I wrote the responses from the tape on chart paper. The class listened to the tape and followed along as I pointed to the words of the interview. The interviewers were asked what they learned. These responses were written on pieces of easel paper to become pages of the big book, *In First Grade*.

Day 5: The big book is made. Each child illustrated a page of *In First Grade*. The book was stapled together with two blank pages on top. As the children observed, I wrote the title on the book cover. The title page was then completed by the group by filling in the names of the author-illustrators and

the date of publication. I read our big book for a shared book experience every day until the end of the school year.

Part II: First grade beginnings

In this part of the project, the children compare their prior knowledge of first grade with their current experiences and identify any remaining questions they may have. Ultimately, children write individual stories entitled "All About First Grade." Again, this activity should take about a week, with the group sessions requiring approximately 20 minutes per day, except for the day set aside for the individualized writing task, which generally requires more time.

Day 1: The teacher explains the task. Students were told that they would be writing books about first grade and that their books would be presented to their parents at the parent-teacher conference. The children offered what they knew about first grade as the teacher wrote on the easel paper. The children were told to bring any unanswered questions they had the following day.

Day 2: The students compare their understandings. The teacher reviewed with the children the list of what was known. She shared the big book *In First Grade* with the group. The children compared their present knowledge with the information they had in kindergarten. They discussed the accuracy of the information they had received. They were given a chance to raise further questions, to generate a list of other things they wanted to know, and to design a plan to answer these questions. If children have such questions, an extra day may be required to conduct research. Here the students determined that they were ready to begin the individualized writing task.

Day 3: Children write individually. The children were invited to write individual books about what they had learned. Paper was provided with plenty of room for illustrations. Students were asked to write a minimum of five ideas and to allocate a page for each idea (see Figure).

Day 4: Books are completed. Children prepared title pages for their

books as modeled by the teacher at the easel. A book cover was created by folding a large piece of construction paper in half and decorating it. Each book was assembled, and the cover was stamped "Enjoy—Unedited Writing!"

Days 5 and 6: Books are shared. The children took turns sharing their books in small groups and with the entire class.

The discussions, sharing, and publishing of books in this project engage children in reflective thinking and involve the range of language arts: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. As a result, children are reassured and can move forward with confidence into first grade. In addition, teachers and parents may be alerted to the perceptions, fears, and concerns of these K-1 youngsters through their writing.

The two-part format of this project can be used for reducing anxiety during any major transition, such as a move to a new neighborhood or graduation from elementary school to middle school.

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A Meeting of Minds: Teaching using biographies

Peggy Lathlaen

Seeing the biography of Winston Churchill left in my classroom, I opened the book to the spot where a dog-eared piece of paper was sticking out. "Dear Winston," said the writing scrawl, "You have helped me a lot in facing my goals. Now I can know that I don't have to give up no matter how hard it is." I smiled, knowing that Win-

ston Churchill had become a friend and mentor for my fourth grader, Taylor.

Finding Taylor's note once again confirmed that the "Meeting of Minds" unit we had undertaken was worthwhile. (It was only a few weeks prior to the start of this unit that my students, including Taylor, had complained that they did not want to read any biography.)

The unit, Meeting of Minds, is based on Steve Allen's former television show by the same name. In his show, eminent individuals in history are portrayed by actors who enact discussions of high-level issues and problems. The spontaneous discussions are based on thorough research on the lives of those people played by the actors. Steve Allen led wide-ranging and in-depth discussions that covered current and historical topics as well as personal and societal issues.

In a similar way, students in our unit characterized eminent individuals in historically accurate interpretations based on research they conducted. To "become" those persons in the discussion, the children were encouraged to discover critical information about them, including their achievements, early influences, reactions to issues of their day, and so on. For example, students portraying Thomas Jefferson, Queen Elizabeth I, Barbara Jordan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton might discuss the nature of leadership and the results of the recent election. The spontaneous, natural discussion emanates from the students' research of their subjects' leadership qualities and experiences. At the same time, members of the class might study the topic of leadership to supplement this unit.

Procedures

Although biographies as a genre are highly recommended, I have learned that students may lack the necessary information for choosing a biography. They do not know the names of many well-known figures. After all, they have only been reading for a few years! Therefore, the initial unit activities familiarize students with as many notable persons as possible. To begin, the students code a long list of names from the school and public libraries

according to their familiarity and indicate whether they have enough information to make a selection. After choosing a famous person, students try to persuade their peers to read the biography by presenting personality characteristics and interesting events in his or her life. Other introductory activities include interviewing parents and local actors who portray famous individuals. Games that require the identities of well-known people to be concealed while students take turns guessing are played to increase students' awareness of choices in their reading.

Learning centers prepare students for the Meeting of Minds discussion. Students create classroom time lines about the individuals to be studied and note on the time lines important life events. These time lines are then compared with general time lines on which are recorded inventions and other significant events. Costumes of the era are also researched. Students read multiple sources, including biographies, autobiographies, and letters. Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* is consulted to reveal memorable quotes made by the individuals being studied.

In addition to discussions, students work with partners to compare the characteristics of their subjects. These comparisons are displayed in a chart or a Venn diagram. Students can role-play scenes from the lives of their subjects, or press conferences can be held to provide opportunities for students to practice and refine their characterizations as they respond to questions. The role players can also work in pairs to interview each other. One memorable scene of our paired role-playing was a discussion between Cleopatra and John F. Kennedy as they compared notes on sibling rivalry.

The students may also study a character in a small-group setting and dramatize the events at a family reunion or at a picnic with members of the famous individual's family. These settings allow the group to re-create the personalities of family members and to imagine the interactions that might take place. In further preparation, the students learn theatrical techniques for portraying a person and develop a list of potential questions to

be asked during the discussion. As the facilitator of the discussion, I prepare notes on the significant attributes and life events of all the famous people who will be attending the discussion.

Rationale

By enacting a Meeting of Minds discussion, students gain deeper understanding of famous people and of themselves. For students who have an emerging knowledge of history, an understanding that comes from knowing about the lives of significant women and men whose ideas and achievements shaped the world is born. By coming to know the human factor of each individual and relating it to their own lives, the children better understand the nature of risk, the need for mentorships, and what is required to overcome obstacles, all of which may be addressed by teaching with biography.

Comer (1990), a Yale professor of child psychiatry, discusses the importance of biographies and notes that many biographies deal with the traditional values of hard work, self-discipline, and fair play, all of which reinforce parents' efforts to pass on such values. Interested parents may want to read a biography or a chapter on the same person so that they might be able to talk about him or her with their child.

Using biographies can provide a way to differentiate for exceptionalities among students while meeting the needs of all students in the classroom. Reading a biography of someone from similar circumstances whose achievements are notable may help other children in much the same way as my underachieving student, Taylor, resonated with the biography of Winston Churchill. I have often noted that students select the biography of the person who has the most to teach them.

Students can learn to respect individual differences, such as the physical handicaps of Franklin Roosevelt, the poor academic performance in elementary school of Isaac Newton, or Werner Von Braun's failure in algebra. Comer believes that biographies have the power to help young people understand commonalities with people from

diverse backgrounds. My students have become comfortable reading books about the lives of diverse people and often choose biographies of individuals whose ethnicity, culture, and gender are different from their own.

In addition, biographies offer gifted students models of people who have applied their abilities. Discussions help students understand how these successful individuals coped with personal characteristics such as paralyzing perfectionism, unrealistic expectations from parents and peers, responsibility for world problems at an early age, and the often pervasive and critical underachievement faced by the gifted.

Exploring options

Instead of the theme of leadership, teachers may want to emphasize biographies that deal with invention and creativity, space exploration and discovery, business, or the fine arts. The perspectives taken by students in examining the lives of these individuals will depend on the students themselves: their cultural awareness, their self-esteem, the degree to which they face adversity, their knowledge of leadership, and their creativity. The issues covered will also depend upon the goals of the teacher, resources in the school community, and the biographies that are available for use. Biographies can be used in conjunction with a science, social studies, or language arts class. A list of recommended biographies can be found in *The Bookfinder* (Dreyer, 1977-1989). Additional sources are the *Children's Catalog* (Yaakov & Price, 1991), *Junior High School Library Catalog*

(Yaakov, 1990), or *Senior High School Library Catalog* (Hillegass & Yaakov, 1987).

The Meeting of Minds

On the day of the high-level discussions, students carrying costumes arrive before class begins. Once in costume, they experience the unique feeling of assuming the persona of Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Susan B. Anthony, Mother Teresa, or Henry Ford. Parents file in, and a hush falls over the room. I take my place and announce that I will facilitate the discussion, emphasizing the role teachers often play in the lives of prominent individuals.

The participants introduce themselves and discuss their achievements. Some participants explain their acquaintance with other discussion participants and provide the details of the friendship. My questions aim at themes I want my students to remember. I often ask about the importance of having a mentor, the need for risk taking, evidence of creativity, and how individuals have overcome obstacles. I encourage a discussion of the positive and negative aspects of human qualities and characteristics so that famous persons are viewed from multiple perspectives.

Parents and students become involved in the questioning and ask high-level, thoughtful questions. As each famous person is questioned, the student portraying that individual formulates an appropriate answer that reflects a mastery of the details of the person's life. Eventually, students begin to interact spontaneously without

being prompted by a question. All of those who have observed a Meeting of Minds discussion agree that participants' vocabulary and thought processes seem to rise to the occasion.

At the end of the discussion, students and parents attend a reception at which the students remain in character. The enthusiasm that pervades a Meeting of Minds discussion demonstrates that the unit provides an educational—even inspirational—experience for students.

Taking Taylor's lead, I have had students write letters before the discussion to the individuals they will portray. Now, in closing, the famous individuals write back:

Dear Taylor,

Thank you for your letter to me. I take it as a great tribute and honor for you to have chosen me for this event.

Winston Churchill

Lathlaen is a gifted and talented resource teacher for Grades 3-5 at Westwood Elementary School in Friendswood, Texas.

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