

MAKING EVERY BOOK COUNT

by Maria P. Walther and Carol J. Fuhler

Creating a Literacy Community

"Real communities flourish when we bring together the voices, hearts, and souls of the people who inhabit them." —Debbie Miller, Reading with Meaning (Stenhouse, 2002)

As the year begins anew, we welcome students, some eager, others apprehensive, into our classrooms and libraries. The books we read coupled with meaningful community-building activities help students form a bond that will encourage them to share their learning throughout the year. From getting acquainted to engaging in meaningful discussions, the following suggestions will have you well on your way to creating a caring community from the very first days of school. For a complete list of the books mentioned here, turn to "Comprehensive Bibliography" on p.62.



"Building a caring classroom community that is conducive to learning for every student takes time, talk, and commitment."

Building Classroom Community

In the Primary Grades

Providing opportunities for students to learn each other's names, backgrounds, and interests is essential to building a community of respect and understanding. The following book-related lessons will assist you in getting to know more about your primary-grade learners.

After reading the story *The Name Quilt* by Phyllis Root (Farrar, 2003), model writing a short piece about an event in your life. Invite students to draw a picture or

write about a special moment in their lives. Then create construction-paper quilt squares labeled with each student's name. Arrange the quilt squares and display them on a bulletin board surrounded by their stories.

In the book *A Box of Friends* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (Gingham Dog, 2003), Annie and her grandma assemble a box of items to preserve Annie's fond memories of her former playmates. After reading this title aloud, create a "box of friends" to represent the students in the class. Ask students to bring in one item apiece that represents themselves. Place each item in a plastic bag or take a digital photograph of it and create a "Box of Friends" display.

In the second- or third-grade classroom, reading Megan McDonald's book *Judy Moody* (Candlewick, 2000) will inspire children to design their own "Me Collages." Visit the author's Web site at <http://www.meganmcdonald.net> for more teaching ideas.

In the Intermediate Grades

Booktalk an assortment of titles set early in the school year. Collect multiple copies so that students can select the title that most interests them. Then form book clubs, where students gather to read and discuss the same title. Ask them to read with an eye on how to build a supportive community based upon what they learn from

each of the main characters' experiences. Among the titles you might include are Kate DiCamillo's *The Tiger Rising* (Candlewick, 2001), Esmé Raji Codell's *Sahara Special* (Hyperion, 2003), *Beany and the Meany* by Susan Wojciechowski (Candlewick, 2005), and *Jake Drake, Class Clown* by Andrew Clements (Simon & Schuster, 2002). Each character has relevant experiences and lessons to share.

Once students finish their books, hold a whole-class discussion to glean ideas about ways to make the school a

positive place in which to live and learn in the upcoming months. Display these ideas on a bulletin board in a chart entitled "Community Beliefs." This bulletin board can also feature the smiling faces of your eager learners through the magic of your digital camera. After taking students' pictures, have each one write three interesting facts about him- or herself on a 4-by-6-inch index card to display with the picture.


Establishing Guidelines for School Living

If students are going to learn and work together they

must listen to others, be kind and caring, and cooperate with one another. For our youngest learners, Helen Lester's book *Listen Buddy* (Houghton/Walter Lorraine, 1995), coupled with a discussion of good listening behaviors, sets expectations for students. Margery Cuyler's rhyming book *Kindness Is Cooler, Mrs. Ruler* (Simon & Schuster, 2007) ends with a challenge to engage in acts of kindness. Have a bulletin board ready to post students' own acts of kindness. For students across the grades, extend kindness and caring beyond the walls of your school by starting a Do Something Club (<http://www.dosomething.org/clubs>), where classmates work together to make a difference and change the world.

To promote an accepting school and classroom community, the issue of bullying is a must for discussion from the first day onward. Kindergarten and first-grade readers can learn from Katie Sue, who challenges the biggest bully on the playground in *The Recess Queen* by Alexis O'Neill (Scholastic, 2002), while second-grade students can relate to Richard, who is preyed on by Patrick in Jamie Gilson's *Gotcha!* (Clarion, 2006). Older readers will want to share opinions about Allie's

solutions in Meg Cabot's *Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls: The New Girl* (Scholastic, August 2008). To prompt additional discussion on bullies and those who silently stand by, share *Not My Fault* by Leif Kristiansson (Heryin, 2006) with intermediate-grade students. Be sure to pre-read this powerful book—you may choose to omit the images on the last few pages if they seem too graphic for your learners.

Building a caring classroom community that is conducive to learning for every student takes time, talk, and commitment on the part of teachers, students, and the librarians who support them. When the groundwork is laid with memorable books, the lessons learned may last long after the classroom door closes at the end of the year. 

Maria P. Walther is a first-grade teacher in Aurora, Illinois. **Carol J. Fuhler** is an associate professor who teaches literacy courses at Iowa State University. They are the coauthors of *Literature Is Back! Using the Best Books for Teaching Readers and Writers across Genres* (Scholastic, 2007). Visit <http://www.scholastic.com/professional> to hear Walther and Fuhler talk more about using literature in the classroom.



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