

Chapter 21

Up Close and Personal: Hosting Diverse Authors

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ABSTRACT

Preparing diverse students to become lifetime readers and writers is best facilitated through experiences with high quality, diverse literature and through the models of the authors and illustrators who create those works. Nothing quite brings an author or illustrator to life like hearing from them in person by hosting an author visit. This chapter explores the value of planning an author visit as an authentic means to learn about diverse authors and their work. Information is provided about identifying and choosing a diverse author or illustrator, planning the logistics of the visit, and preparing to build background and interest within the school and the community in anticipation of the visit. This information is framed with the elements for an assignment that could be employed in a children's literature course offered to pre-service teachers and librarians to create a mock plan for an in-person author visit in a school. Students could carry this assignment forward to their classrooms or libraries to plan an author visit or to write a grant to fund a visit.

INTRODUCTION

Author study is a frequent feature in children's literature courses and in K-12 classrooms (Kennedy, 2012). The study of an author's body of work allows readers to find patterns through familiar themes, characters, or settings across an author's work. These studies often include learning about the author's life as well as their craft. Learning about an author as a person serves to humanize the author and the work of the author. The inclusion of authors who are Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPOC) has the additional benefit of expanding the reader's conception of who does the work of writing, where their ideas come from, and the variety of experiences found in literature. These studies may be enlarged by videos of the author or through other opportunities to hear them speak. Opportunities to interact with authors in real time can provide a deeper engagement with the author as well as excitement about their writing. This chapter explores the value of planning an author visit as an authentic means to learn about

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diverse authors and their work. In a literature course at the university level, the traditional author study might be replaced with the project described in this chapter, which has real-world application.

This chapter focuses on planning a school-wide, one-day visit for an author, author-illustrator, or illustrator visit. In this chapter, “author” is used to refer to an author, author-illustrator, or illustrator. Visits from book illustrators have many of the same benefits as an author visit. They may inspire different students to get excited about books and reading. Illustrators will often draw as part of their presentation, or even draw something for individual students as they autograph books. Creators of graphic novels may also be popular choices (Tamaki et al., 2015).

An author visit is a huge undertaking for schools. As a school librarian for over fifteen years, I have experience with planning and hosting author visits. I was fortunate early in my career to share the planning and preparation for an author visit with several more experienced and knowledgeable school librarians. I hope my experience will provide similar inspiration and support to future educators and the university educators who teach courses in children’s literature. Exposure to the planning elements for such an event during pre-service education allows future teachers and librarians to learn about an author or illustrator and think through the steps of hosting an author visit. Students could carry this assignment forward to their classrooms or libraries to plan an author visit or to write a grant to fund a visit. While the focus of this chapter is planning for a school visit, the advice in this chapter might also be used by university educators to guide the planning and implementation of an author visit for a course. An instructor might work with community partners including libraries, bookstores, schools and/or universities to bring such experiences to their students and the community. Community partnerships such as this lend themselves to funding applications to both internal university grants and external, national grant solicitations.

There are other models for author visits that allow students to meet or work with an author in a small group or workshop. Hand (2006), a librarian, talks about moving away from an assembly format to having smaller workshop events with students and reports these had longer lasting impacts on students. A multi-day visit with master classes connected to the research process rather than specific curricula allowed students to engage in a deep dive into the process of research and writing with impacts on achievement including test scores. Another model (Varsalona, 2006) is to host a student authors conference where students write to compete for slots where they can get to meet and work with an author. Both of these models have a lot to offer but may be more costly and exclusive. This chapter will focus on the one-day, whole school author visit as a means to connect the most students with the event.

Background

Windows and Mirrors

Much has been written about the need for windows and mirrors in children’s literature ever since Bishop (1990) coined the phrase. Experts acknowledge that readers need to identify with characters and experiences in what they read in order to build the connections needed for comprehension. Gilmore and Bell (2006) articulate the reasons for using diverse literature as increasing confidence and motivation of children from diverse families and showing them their families are valued. Children also learn by encountering families different from their own, or who may have different values and concerns. Books also serve to build empathy and expand understanding of others and other cultures. In order for a multi-cultural society to be successful, everyone needs to see themselves reflected in the society’s culture and

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