

Author Visits, a

Motivation is the key to developing lifelong readers, as every informed educator knows, and an author visit can be a driving motivational element in the hands of a passionate and dedicated educational team. An author visit is potentially one of the most effective means of encouraging children to read for pleasure, for a deeper experience, and, perhaps, habitually as lifelong readers.

Playing the game

Learning to read for pleasure is a talent based on the development of skills and so can be compared to the development of other lifelong habits that bring pleasure to people's lives. It is what I call "playing the game".

Consider for a moment the steps in learning to play basketball. A beginner spends a lot of time learning and developing each skill of the game: dribbling; passing; performing lay ups; and shooting baskets. These are all essential skills for anyone intent on becoming a proficient basketball player. But, if the experience stops with the learning of skills, then where is the pleasure of the game?

The learner must put all the skills together and actually play the game. Only then do young players learn to love the sport, and then go on to enjoy the game from many angles; as players, as spectators, and perhaps as coaches. Young players also learn from watching and turn their favourite players into heroes.

Similar things can happen when children learn to read. We who teach, know the slow and steady process of reading skills development; the hours, the terms, the years that it takes to develop the skills for decoding, comprehending, and responding, to name a few. It is often not fun for the teacher or the students and there is great danger that the joy of it all can be squelched. Not fun – until you put it all together and play the game. When we play the game, literacy happens. And that is where the author visit comes in.

Orchestrate the visit

Any old author visit will not necessarily make a child a better reader. If, for example, an author just 'happens by', the effect is minimal. But an author visit that is planned and orchestrated by a creative, insightful group of educators can be the one event that can change the reading life of a child for years to come. I have been there and I have seen it happen.

An author visit can create a community of readers. The leaders in such a community are the educators – teacher-librarians and teachers – and the authors, whose passion for language and literacy can move mountains. I have experienced nothing else in my career with the same power to develop a literate community.

The teacher-librarian must play a central role in this game. It takes a person who is a children's literature professional and advocate, and an individual skilled in the art of collaborative planning and teaching to get the ball rolling. The teacher-librarian plants the seeds of the literacy community, nurtures the literacy, meets the parents, cajoles the administrators, welcomes the author, and models literate behaviour to create it anew.

The role of curriculum

An author visit can incorporate many areas of curriculum. Teacher-librarians, whose responsibilities often include prep-time coverage, can link to the language arts curriculum with the activity that would evolve from the planning of an author visit. Many of the benchmarks in the language curriculum, as well as in art and drama, are easily covered in students' responses to the author's work. Other curriculum areas can also be incorporated into the activities leading up to and following an author visit. In fact, choices of authors may be made based on curriculum ties, as many of the books of fine Canadian authors connect to Canadian history, race and culture, and experience. Such choices serve