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Readers Theatre in the Elementary Classroom*

Gretchen Owocki is an associate professor at Saginaw Valley State University where she teaches courses in literacy, teacher research, and early childhood education.

Christian Bush's first-grade students are performing their first readers theatre script:

Children: Harry and the Dirty Dog, by Gene Zion.

Narrator 1: Harry was a white dog with black spots.

Narrator 2: He played with some other dogs and became dirty.

Narrator 3: He slid down a coal chute and became even dirtier. In fact, he changed. Now he was a black dog with white spots.

Harry: [playing and sliding and getting dirty]

Little Girl: By the way, has anyone seen Harry?

Enter a classroom during a readers theatre performance and you are likely to see a small group of children confidently reading aloud a text—one they have chosen themselves, analyzed extensively, and transformed into a script. The audience is likely to be engrossed by the performance, laughing, empathizing with characters, or simply being amazed by what their peers have accomplished.

What Is Readers Theatre?

Readers theatre is a forum for interpreting and orally presenting a written text. Typically, children choose a piece of literature, and if it is not already in the form of a script, they transform it into one. Then they rehearse the script extensively and read it for an audience. Performances usually involve few physical actions, props, sets, or costumes. The audience relies on the oral interpretation of the cast as well as on their own imaginations (Pickering

1975). For children, the benefits of participating in a readers theatre are many, as we will see.

Children Develop Appreciation for Literature and Drama

Readers theatre provides a forum for children to deeply engage in and develop appreciation for literature and drama. As children read, interpret, and rehearse texts, they transport themselves to colorful worlds where wolves blow down houses, slaves escape to freedom, raindrops talk, and children solve big problems. What child would not want to play around in such a world? When these worlds are shared with an appreciative audience, the experience is even further enhanced; there is laughter, silliness, drama, and intensity, with *children* as the creators. A major benefit of classroom drama is that children develop multiple perspectives as they are "encouraged to think about the world from other places and times" (Schneider and Jackson 2000, 46). If a goal for your literature program is to help children develop positive dispositions for and from reading, then readers theatre makes good sense.

Children are Motivated Toward Quality Reading and Writing

As children play around in their theatrical text worlds, internal motivations for quality writing and reading run high. Children want to perform well because it is fun and because it feels good to bring pleasure to an audience. With these goals in mind, they work hard to understand

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characters and events, to tailor scripts for clarity, and to rehearse until they sound just right. Developing such internal motivation for literate activity is important because it inspires long-term literacy commitments, enhances strategy development, and increases time spent in literate activities (Sweet and Guthrie 1996).

Language Is Integrated

Another positive aspect of readers theatre is that it is an integrated language event that refines children's ability to read, write, listen, and speak effectively (Sloyer 1982; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner 1990; Watts-Taffe and Truscott 2000). Composing processes develop as children collaboratively write scripts, exploring together the choices that authors make to create texts that are just right for conveying their intended meanings (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner 1990). Reading fluency and expressiveness develop as children engage in repeated readings (rehearsals) (Martinez, Roser, and Strecker 1998/1999). From the first rehearsal to the time of the performance, there is almost always an exciting and marked improvement. Readers theatre also helps children develop their language and vocabulary. Through rehearsals, discussions, and writing, children are immersed in actual use of language and "surrounded by situations which provide crucial, and often subtle, connotative meaning" (Busching 1981, p. 333).

Second-language learners especially benefit from the contextualized use of language (Pross 1986) and from hearing language as they follow along with text. The expressive readings can help these children follow story actions and events; and develop their language proficiency. Theatre activities help put language structures as well as content into place for all users of language.

All Children Can Participate

A final benefit of readers theatre is that with a little thoughtful planning, all children are able to participate successfully. You can ensure success for every child by reading aloud to or with the class the pieces to be used for scripts. Thoroughly discuss these pieces and consider arranging for children to do a little drawing or writing to help them further think about the

content. Then, spend some extra time with children who may not have grasped the essential meanings and important elements. Children who have a good understanding of the piece will find it easier to script and dramatize. You can also arrange for parts of scripts to be written at different levels to meet children's varied reading needs. Either take dictation or require that children write their own speaking parts. Allow all children adequate time for practice; some may need more practice than others. Finally, as children move into small groups to rehearse, continue to observe them, finding ways to support those who need extra help.

Procedures for Implementing Readers Theatre

To introduce your students to readers theatre, read a few play or scripts with them. Aaron Shepard's readers theatre page (www.aaronsherp.com/rt/RTE.html) includes a variety of scripts for grade 1 and up that may be copied for classroom use. As you introduce scripts, help children attend to both content and format. First, let them enjoy the piece as a whole, then help them understand its format: what names in margins mean, how dialogue is used, what a narrator does, and so on. Having a good feel for the format of scripts helps children to plan for their own. Once they have read and studied a few scripts, they will be ready to do just that.

Selecting Materials

It is likely that your first efforts at script writing will be at the whole-class level. For initial demonstrations, choose books that are class favorites. As children move into constructing their own scripts, allow them to take part in deciding which texts to use. Offer several choices and invite children to form groups by choosing the book they would most like to explore. By allowing students to choose their instructional material, we convey the idea that their interests and opinions matter, and we make learning easier by ensuring that reading topics are meaningful. Whether writing with you or independently, younger children will find it easiest to work with short, simple texts.

Both fiction and non-fiction are appropriate for readers theatre. If fiction is your genre choice, choose stories with tight plots, clear endings, suspense, interesting characters, and appealing themes (Tierney, Readence and Dishner 1990). This draws performers into the world of their characters and leads to an exciting performance for the audience. If you use non-fiction, choose biographies or autobiographies written about interesting personalities with interesting things to say or choose other kinds of pieces that connect

with the children's interests. Nonfiction script-writing often requires some creativity. For example, if children are reading about trees, they may take on the roles of trees: "I need water, sunlight, soil, and air to grow." Ideally, nonfiction pieces should connect with curricular concepts your class is exploring. Figure 1 offers some suggested texts for readers theatre. The amount and type of support you will need to provide for writing the scripts will depend on the length, style, and level of difficulty of the book you choose.

Figure 1

Recommended Books for Readers Theatre

The Fat Cat by Jack Kent

A Danish folktale about a cat who eats everyone and everything he sees.

Goldilocks and the Three Bears by James Marshall

The traditional tale told in a very humorous way.

The Three Billy Goats Gruff by Paul Galdone

Three clever billy goats outsmart the troll who lives under the bridge.

The Three Little Pigs by Paul Galdone

Three little pigs go head-to-head with a crafty wolf.

Lon Po Po by Ed Young

A Red Riding Hood story from China.

The Rough-Face Girl by Rafe Martin

An Algonquin Indian Cinderella tale in which human integrity prevails.

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe

Goodness triumphs in this story inspired by an African folktale.

The First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story by Joseph Bruchac

A Cherokee legend explaining how strawberries came to be.

It's Mine! by Leo Lionni

A fable in which three frogs learn a valuable lesson.

The Flying Dragon Room by Audrey Woo

With a special set of tools, Patrick creates something out-of-this-world.

Rain Talk by Mary Serfozo

Listen to the onomatopoeic talk of the raindrops.

Walter the Baker by Eric Carle

The duke and duchess love Walter's baking—until a mishap almost costs him his job.

Tacky the Penguin by Helen Lester

A tale about individuality.

The Great Kapok Tree by Lynne Cherry

A menagerie of animals living in a Kapok tree urges a man to leave it standing.

The Empty Pot by Demi

A Chinese emperor must choose his successor to the throne.

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears by Verna

Aardema

An African folk tale.

Mirandy and Brother Wind by Patricia McKissack

Mirandy sets out to catch the wind.

My Many Colored Days by Theodore Geisel Suess

Dr. Seuss pairs emotions with color.

Owl Babies by Martin Waddell

Three owl babies awake to find their mother missing from the trunk of their tree.

Prince William by Gloria Rand

After a tanker spills oil into the waters of Prince William Sound, a girl rescues a seal pup.

Heroes by Ken Mochizuki

A story about a Japanese-American boy who is treated by his peers as "the enemy."

Babushka Baba Yaga by Patricia Polacco

A warm little community learns a life lesson from the loving Baba Yaga.

Solar System by Gregory Vogt

An informational book about the sun, planets, comets, asteroids, and space exploration.

A Tree is Growing by Arthur Dorros

A fact-filled book about the growth of trees.

Teaching Script Writing

To help children understand the scripting process, engage with them in shared script writing. Older children, with practice, are eventually able to construct scripts on their own. (With careful instruction, younger children can be independent at the process, too. Christian Bush is a first-grade teacher whose students were able to write scripts independently by February, with some teacher support. We found it helpful to have at least one strong reader per group). Following are some tips for teaching script writing:

- Use short, familiar pieces that are full of dialogue. If possible, use a big book or have multiple copies of the text at hand, so the children can see how to make the transfer from book to script. Spend quality time on initial readings and discussions of the text. A good understanding of content facilitates the scripting process.
- If appropriate, children may choose a favorite scene, rather than working through a whole piece. If this option is used, the scene should convey a "whole" message so that you can emphasize the importance of getting across key events and ideas. For first- and second-grade children, final scripts work well if they take only two to five minutes to read. Older students' scripts may range from six to twelve minutes.
- When scripting fiction, engage with the children in a discussion of characterization, settings, problem, plot episodes, and resolution, helping them see why all are necessary to a meaningful presentation. With nonfiction, discuss which main ideas and supporting details need to be included. Story maps or graphic organizers are helpful in pulling out key information, providing a visual representation of what to include, and in helping children to organize their thinking (Cooper 2000; Cronin, Meadows & Sinatra 1990).
- When the piece has been read and discussed (and possibly arranged on a map or organizer) invite the children to help you list the characters and to determine whether a

narrator is needed. Help them understand that narration serves a special function; it can take the audience "into the air, through mouse holes, and into the minds of the characters. Characters can swim in the ocean, leap from parapets, and change bodily form" (Busching 1981, p. 335). Before writing, talk about whether it would make sense to a) copy the existing dialogue or b) retell the story through your own words. Let children know that in a readers theater, book ideas can be changed, added, dismissed, and put into their own language. Allow creative expression as long as students maintain the basic theme, character descriptions, and sequence of events. To begin, refer to the map and/or the book to decide who should talk first. Write speaker names in the margin. Help your students see why they don't need to include language such as "he said" and "she said." Finally, determine whether actions or sound effects would be helpful in conveying the message. If so, show children how to use brackets. Bracketed words indicate *action* as opposed to *dialogue*.

- As you demonstrate script writing, continually reread what has been written. Help children develop a sense for revision by asking "Does this make sense?" and "Does it sound right?" Encourage continual evaluation of whether the audience will understand what is happening. Ask, "How will you let the audience know what this character is thinking or doing?" "Will this make sense to the audience?" Through this process, children learn to communicate effectively and think from the perspective of those who will be listening.
- Throughout the year, you may wish to construct all of your scripts with the whole class, and then divide children into groups to rehearse and perform the same piece. Or, you may wish to follow scripting procedures with small groups, and construct four or five different scripts. As an alternative to traditional script writing, children may simply highlight their speaking parts on a

photocopy of the text they are going to perform. Another option is for children to expressively read a piece as it is, including both the narration and dialogue. If you teach kindergarten you may wish to have your students dramatize their roles as you read.

Rehearsing

Once a script is ready, allow for several rehearsals. Encourage children to show their character's personality by using their voices and expression. Do not encourage children to memorize lines. This causes anxiety and unnatural stage habits and is not very helpful in advancing development (Busching 1981). Rehearsals should be aimed at playing around in the text world and at making reading expressive and fluent.

Encourage children to try out varying roles, but let them choose their own roles for the actual performances. Some may need help easing into performances and some may be most comfortable reading their lines chorally. It is important that all children feel capable to do their parts and do not feel excluded because of what they may not be able to do well in the eyes of other children. Be careful that theatre does not become something that limits some children's aspirations (Kohl 1988, p. 2).

If students have written their own scripts, their rehearsals are likely to reveal some areas that need fixing up. Allow them to decide on the kinds of editing and revising are appropriate. Don't worry about getting it perfect. They should be encouraged to use their own fix-up ideas—with encouragement and support from you—and should be acknowledged for recognizing the needs of their audience.

The Production

When the time comes for the performance, value process over product. More important than the actual performance is what children do and learn along the way. If a script is not just right, go ahead with it anyway. If somebody gets stuck on a word or loses his or her place, provide the necessary support. In prevention of getting stuck, children should be able to easily read the scripts

and should have had many opportunities to practice. Still, young learners can be unpredictable, especially as they try new things. If children stop for any reason during the performance, simply provide the necessary help and then remind the audience what was happening before the cut.

Consider the following ideas for arranging an engaging production:

Stage. Set up a formal stage area in a well-lit area of the room. Dim the audience lights to bring the focus to the players. Provide a plain backdrop. Children may stand or sit on high stools or sturdy boxes.

Seating. Arrange semicircle seating for the audience

Scripts. Scripts should stay open easily, and (especially in early childhood classrooms) be easy for small hands to hold. Music stands can be helpful. Use an easy-to-read font. Avoid situations in which pages must be turned as a performer is reading. Individual parts can be highlighted.

Props and Actions. Although it may be tempting to incorporate props and actions, remember that children need to focus on the script. We don't want readers to break "the dramatic spell" by awkwardly trying to do some kind of action at the same time as holding and reading a script (Busching 1981 p. 336).

Staging. Teach children to place themselves strategically. For example, in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, the troll could sit far left, with each of the three billy goats moving in for their speaking parts. Show children how to convey movement by walking in place, but keep in mind that movement should be minimal so that readers can focus on expressiveness and keeping their place in the script.

Sound Effects. Children who are not part of the actual performance can make sound effects. For example, a shoe could be used to indicate clip-clopping over a troll's bridge.

Introduction. Arrange for the narrator to introduce the performance with the book title, the author's name, and the performers' names.

Costumes. Costumes are not necessary, but may be used. Simple costumes can help the reader get into character, lend a special air of formality, and provide a helpful visual for the audience. For example, in *Little Red Riding Hood*, Little Red could wear a simple cloak, the grandmother a bonnet, and the wolf a furry piece of fabric draped around the shoulders. Another costuming option is to collect a set of large, plain T-shirts to be used as cloaks. Or, bargain pieces of fabric can be turned into cloaks by cutting a hole for the head, hemming the edges, and saving a thin strip for a belt. If costumes get in the way of reading, they should not be used.

Meeting Audience Needs. Allow time for discussions about meeting audience needs. The following tips may be helpful:

- When you are reading, keep the script down from your face. Speak so that the audience can hear you, but don't use a "yelling" voice. Read slowly, even if you can read fast.
- When it is not your turn, follow the lines of the script along with the reader. It may help to use your finger. Stand or sit very still; audience attention should always be on the reader.
- If the audience laughs, pause until it is quiet. Try to stay in character. Keep your focus on the next line to be read.
- If a reader gets stuck for more than 3 seconds, someone should help.
- If you lose your place, ask someone to help.

Closing. To indicate that a performance is over, readers close their scripts, hold them by their sides, and bow together.

Cast Parties. Have cast parties. The goal of the cast party "is to create a sense of community through theatre, one that just might spill over to the rest of the time the class spends together and even to life beyond the school" (Kohl 1988, p. 6).

Video Recordings. Videotape the performances and provide a copy for families to view. Video recordings are a way for children to watch themselves and for the parents to discover their children's literacy in a different way.

Studying the Art

Studying the art of drama can enhance children's enjoyment of readers theatre activities as well as their development of literacy. You may want to explore the following topics with your students.

Use of Voice. Encourage children to talk in the voice of characters. They can try louder or softer voices; speak quickly or slowly; or adjust their tone or pitch. Ask: "What does a worried voice sound like? How does an excited voice sound?" and so on.

Use of Facial Expressions. Study facial expressions with children. For example: "Look at the picture in the book. What do you see in the character's face?" "How does a face show love?" "How does it show fear?" Have mirrors available.

Use of Gesture. Study dramatic uses of gesture: "Look at the picture in the book. What do you see in the way the body is positioned?" "How does a body show sadness?" "How does it show joy?" "What do we do to show that we are confused?" "What does *sneaky* or *clever* look like?" "What techniques can one character use to indicate that another is large? Small? Far away? Out of sight? Intimidating?"

Dramatic Creativity. To stimulate creativity, help children warm up with some improvisations:

- Pet a mouse; a cat; a dog; a horse; an elephant; a dinosaur.
- Climb a tree; climb over a fence; climb over a couch; crawl under a bed; crawl into a box.
- Pass an imaginary object around in a circle (Cecil and Lauritzen 1994). The object may be hot, cold, small, large, alive, sticky, slippery, and so on.
- Take on the roles of the characters in scripts, but extend words and actions into new situations (Kohl 1988).
- Decide the who, the what, and the where for a scene, and act it out in any manner (Pross 1986).

Observing and Assessing

Because readers theatre involves interpreting, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, it offers many mechanisms through which to observe and

reflect on children's learning. Following are examples of questions you might ask as you inquire into the processes of individual children, groups, or the whole class:

- How do children decide what to include in a script?
- What scripting problems arise as children write? How are they solved? Which areas of script writing need further instruction?
- How do children decide which roles to take?
- What knowledge of the book's content do children demonstrate through their scripts?
- How do children's fluency and expression change over the course of a project?
- What is the experience of children for whom readers theatre seems to not work well?

Readers theatre can play a constructive role in your language arts program. It actively engages children in literature and drama, stimulates intrinsic motivation for reading and writing, and facilitates development in the areas of composing and reading fluency. The process is authentic, and the product is tangible evidence of a job well done.

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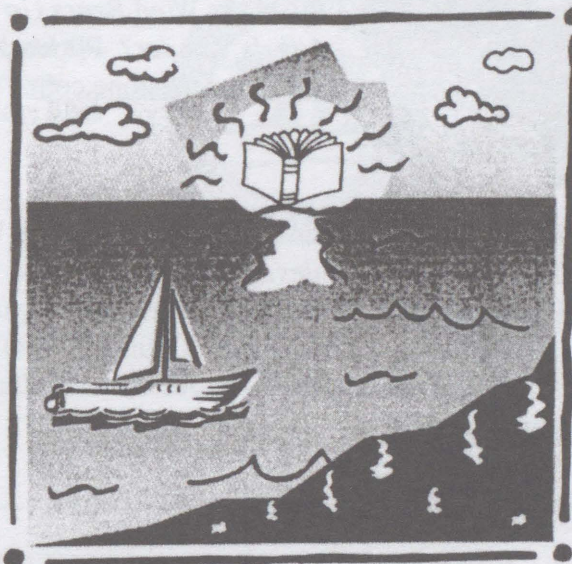
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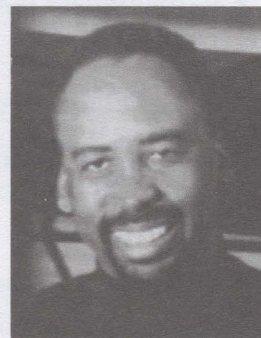
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Phoebe Stone is a successful author and illustrator of young adult and children's books. Some of her titles include *All the Blue Moons at the Wallace Hotel*; *Go Away, Shelley Boo*; *When the Wind Bears Go Dancing*; and *What Night Do the Angels Wander?* Phoebe's website is www.phoebestone.com.

E.B. Lewis has won the Coretta Scott King honor award for illustrating *Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys* (2001), *My Rows and Piles of Coins* (2000), and *The Bat Boy and His Violin* (1999). His other works include *The Other Side*, *Bippity Bop Barbershop*, *Down the Road*, and *Big Boy*. Lewis's latest volume is a collaboration with Clifton L. Taulbert, *Little Cliff and the Cold Place*. Additional information can be found on his website at www.eblewis.com.



Brian "Fox" Ellis "is a dynamic storyteller," says *The Illinois Reading Council Communicator*, "who, in a warmly entertaining manner, captures what is most life affirming and beautiful in the human experience." Check out his website at www.foxtalesint.com.

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Timothy Shanahan is Professor of Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he is coordinator of graduate programs in Reading, Writing, and Literacy and Director of the UIC Center for Literacy. His research focuses on the relationship of reading and writing, school improvement, the assessment of reading ability, and family literacy. He has authored more than 100 research articles, chapters, and other publications.

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Saturday, March 8 through Tuesday, March 11, 2003

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Michigan Reading Association members and fellow educators are cordially invited to submit program proposals for the 2003 Annual Conference "*Making a Difference One Student at a Time.*" **Proposals must be postmarked no later than September 27, 2002.** The Committee will consider all proposals submitted by the due date. Notification of the Committee's decision will be sent no later than November 1, 2002. The person submitting the proposal is responsible for notifying co-presenters of the Program Committee's decision. It is the intention of the Program Committee to gather the best and brightest presenters, authors and illustrators in Grand Rapids to provide the most comprehensive, premier staff development experience for our members. We are looking forward to putting together a program that features Michigan educators who are making a difference in their students.

Program presenters do not receive honoraria or reimbursement for travel, hotel or related expenses. AU presenters and co-presenters must register and pay for the conference. Overhead projector and screen will be provided. Handouts and any additional A/V equipment will be the responsibility of the presenters.

Please submit a separate form for each proposal.

Factors that tend to enhance a proposal:

- specific and descriptive program abstract that does not need editing
- relevance and interest of program to proposed audience
- clarity, conciseness and coherence of proposal
- thoroughness of planning and preparation
- interaction across the disciplines and across roles (teachers, parents, administrators)
- new issues or topics; innovative ways of viewing more traditional issues
- evidence of familiarity with current practices and/or research

Factors that tend to disqualify a proposal:

- promotion of commercial materials or programs
- content completely unrelated to reading or literacy
- failure to complete the proposal according to guidelines

Submit completed proposals to: Conference Chairperson:

Michigan Reading Association
Summer Literacy Conference
668 Three Mile Road NW, Suite C
Grand Rapids, MI 49544
Tel (800) 672-7323

Dr. William J. Devers III
Email: bill.devers@oakland.k12.mi.us
Tel (248) 209-2510

For Office Use Only

Date Received _____ Reviewed By _____ Action _____ A _____ R _____ A-Q _____
Date _____ Time _____ Room _____ Capacity _____
Date _____ Time _____ Room _____ Capacity _____

MRA Program Proposal

SUBMITTAL DEADLINE: POSTMARKED SEPTEMBER 27, 2002

I understand that MRA does not provide honoraria or expenses. All presenters and co-presenters for this session will register and pay for the conference.

Signed _____

I. Person submitting Proposal:

Dr. Ms. Mr. _____
First Name Last Name

Institution/District: _____ Position: _____

Address: _____ City, State, Zip: _____

Day Phone: _____ Evening Phone: _____ Fax: _____

Email: _____

II. Co-Presenters (limited to 3):

Name: _____

Institution/District: _____ Position: _____

Name: _____

Institution/District: _____ Position: _____

Name: _____

Institution/District: _____ Position: _____

III. Topic Area (no more than three):

☐ Adolescent literacy
☐ Balanced reading instruction
☐ Comprehension
☐ Content area literacy
☐ Early intervention
☐ ELL
☐ Family literacy
☐ Guided reading
☐ Literature-based instruction
☐ MEAP
☐ MLPP
☐ Multicultural literature

☐ Newspapers in Education
☐ Performance assessment
☐ Phonemic awareness/Phonics
☐ Preschool literacy instruction
☐ Reading/learning disabilities
☐ Researched-based practice
☐ Standards for reading/language arts
☐ Struggling readers (grade 3 and up)
☐ Teacher education for reading
☐ Technology
☐ Word meaning/Vocabulary
☐ Writing

IV. Of Interest to:

☐ Pre-School
☐ Primary Grades
☐ Intermediate Grades
☐ Middle School
☐ High School
☐ Parents
☐ Adult Literacy
☐ Teacher Educators
☐ Administrators
☐ Title One Educators
☐ Special Education
☐ Researchers

V. Title of Presentation: _____
No more than 10 words

VI. Presentation Objective: _____

VII. Abstract: On a separate sheet of paper, type your title, presenters' information and your abstract. Describe the content of your presentation, in no more than 60 words. PROPOSALS SUBMITTED WITHOUT AN ABSTRACT ARE CONSIDERED INCOMPLETE. THIS ABSTRACT WILL APPEAR IN THE PROGRAM BOOK AND WILL BE EDITED IF NECESSARY.

VIII. Session Time (min): _____ 50 _____ 110 _____ Institute (3 hours)

Audience Size: _____ 0-50 _____ 50-100 _____ 100-150 _____ 150-200 _____ 200+

Day Preference: _____ Sat. _____ Sun. _____ Mon. _____ Tues.

Willing to Repeat: _____ Consecutive time slots _____ Same day, NOT consecutive slots _____ Different day

IX. Audio Visual: Overhead and screen will be provided. Any additional A/V equipment and handouts will be the responsibility of the presenter.

X. Room Set-Up: All rooms will be set up theater-style unless otherwise requested by October 1, 2002 and approved by the Conference Chair.