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# CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: Views and Reviews

by Jane M. Bingham

How long has it been since you engaged your children in a choral speaking experience? Or maybe you haven't ever tried it! All too often we forget what a joyful occasion choral speaking can provide for children - and what a "painless" way it is to provide a fine literary experience at the same time. Children who sometimes think they "hate" poetry can find themselves entering into choral speaking with vigor and enthusiasm. And all children like to perform, even the shy ones (who in this case are able to feel the security of group performance). Choral speaking (when the teacher provides fine poems and short prose pieces to work with) provides a rich literary experience, a powerful exercise in vocal control, an exciting means of working together to produce a certain effect, and - when done well - that special feeling of satisfaction that comes only after successful dramatic performance: "Good Show!"

While choral speaking lends itself well to all levels and many degrees of sophistication, it generally falls into four types that are most useful with elementary school children: unison, refrain, line-a-child, and responsive (or antiphonal). Unison (all voices speaking the same words together) might seem to be the simplest for the youngest children, it is not necessarily so. Unison requires diction that is crisp and precise. While some young children (pre-schoolers and primary) are able to speak together as a unit, the effect is often somewhat labored and lacking in dramatic effect. Refrain is probably best for the beginner.

Refrain consists of a leader speaking the verse and the group chiming in on the chorus (or the refrain). The

teacher has to be the leader at first, but with practice and even with very young children, the child leader or verse-giver can speak his/her lines and the group pick up the refrain.

Line-a-child is also an ideal type for beginners. Just as the term implies, each child speaks a line simply without dropping the rhythm or losing the dramatic tone of the piece. It takes practice to get the timing just right - and the poem must be one that uses "unit" lines not run-on lines - but it can be an effective means of involving a whole group of children, each having his or her turn as a soloist.

The responsive (or antiphonal) form of choral speaking is simply one group of voices speaking and a second responding to the first. The children can be divided into high and low voices, or boys and girls, or simply one half of the group responding to the other half.

In all cases, the type of choral speaking done depends on the verse or short prose piece chosen. And in the beginning, this selection must be the teacher's. After the group has become more proficient and experienced, the children should be encouraged to find pieces that lend themselves well to each of the four types. In the beginning, the teacher will also have to be the interpreter. The teacher will have to assign not only the piece to be interpreted and the type, but also give clear cut directions for interpreting. Parts (lines, verses, etc.) must be assigned to individuals or to groups and the teacher must suggest interpretations and must also be the director.

(It's always a good idea for the teacher to read the piece to be practiced to the group as the initial step,

even before assigning parts. Reading and re-reading the piece to establish mood and feeling and even discussing the meaning if necessary, helps to set the stage for the children's participation.)

After the group has worked with choral speaking for awhile and has had some successful experiences using the teacher's interpretations, it's time to ask for the children's ideas about which type of choral speaking the piece lends itself to and how they would interpret the lines. Eventually it will be time to turn the whole experience over to the children - having a child take over as the leader, do the

interpreting, and direct the group. The leader's position should alternate, of course, but it will be necessary to see to it that fairly strong leaders are chosen as directing a group of speakers takes a certain amount of self-assurance. To put a shy child in this position might be an unduly taxing experience which would have the reverse on the child that the teacher desired.

Choral speaking in the elementary classroom can be an exciting experience for everyone. Don't overlook its possibilities for literary appreciation, as a speech or reading skills exercise, and as a group activity that can hold appeal for the whole group - from the shyest introvert to the loudest "ham."