

JR IDEAS

THE
NEWSLETTER
OF
THE
ONTARIO
ASSOCIATION
OF
JUNIOR
EDUCATORS

FEBRUARY
2010



Call for Executive

OAJE is looking for additional members to join the OAJE Executive now and for the 2010/2011 school year. This is an exciting opportunity to connect with colleagues interested in junior education and to help support junior educators across the province.

OAJE Executive members are able to attend meetings during weekdays or after school approximately 8 times per year from September to June without cost to OAJE. These meetings are often held in the Greater Toronto area but can be attended through teleconference.

If you are interested and available please send a brief email before the end of February outlining your background and interests to Don Jones at jonesdo@hdsb.ca.

Conference a Huge Success

On January 23rd, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education hosted a one-day, regional OAJE conference. Reviews for the conference were stellar. From the organization to the workshop presentations, participants raved about the value of this event. Along with Junior teachers and Principals from the Greater Toronto area, a number of students from Faculties of Education also attended. Here are what some participants had to say . . .

"I really enjoyed it and I got great ideas to apply to my classroom. The workshops that I went to were very relevant and interesting. Thank you."

"I just wanted to let you know that I was really impressed by the quality of the speakers today. I would say that this was possibly one of the most useful conferences that I have attended in a while. From practical strategies that I feel as though I can walk into my classroom on Monday morning and use, to excellent resources for teaching my upcoming Social Studies Unit, I feel that today has equipped me with a number of excellent teaching tools."

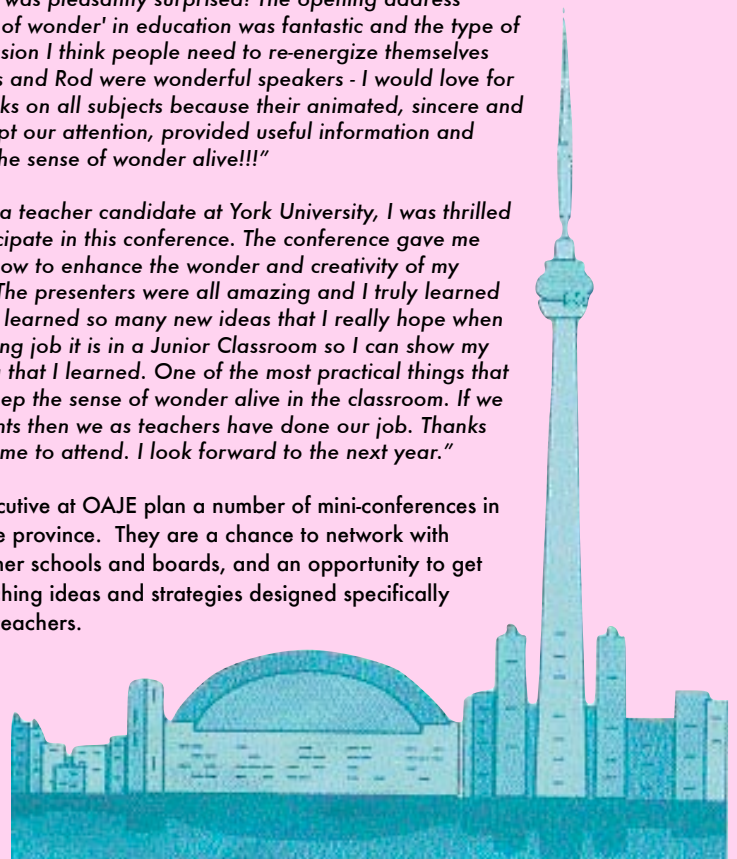
"I am a teacher candidate with York University. I attended yesterday's OAJE 'Building Big Ideas in Junior Conferences' at OISE. I loved it. It was definitely worthwhile and I will keep coming to the OAJE conferences as they are useful."

"To be honest, as a Teacher Candidate I wasn't sure what to expect from the conference so I was pleasantly surprised! The opening address regarding 'a sense of wonder' in education was fantastic and the type of inspiration and passion I think people need to re-energize themselves now and again. Les and Rod were wonderful speakers - I would love for them to provide talks on all subjects because their animated, sincere and 'hooking' tactics kept our attention, provided useful information and modeled keeping the sense of wonder alive!!!"

"Even though I am a teacher candidate at York University, I was thrilled to be able to participate in this conference. The conference gave me practical ideas of how to enhance the wonder and creativity of my teaching practice. The presenters were all amazing and I truly learned a lot. In fact I have learned so many new ideas that I really hope when I get my first teaching job it is in a Junior Classroom so I can show my students everything that I learned. One of the most practical things that I learned was to keep the sense of wonder alive in the classroom. If we have curious students then we as teachers have done our job. Thanks again for allowing me to attend. I look forward to the next year."

Each year, the Executive at OAJE plan a number of mini-conferences in various areas of the province. They are a chance to network with colleagues from other schools and boards, and an opportunity to get some practical teaching ideas and strategies designed specifically for Junior Division teachers.

Watch for notices about the next OAJE conference.



Classroom-ready Ideas for Teachers of Grades Four Through Six

The Ontario Association of Junior Educators (OAJE) provides a network for education professionals to share ideas and resources, to assist and support teachers and to advocate on behalf of students and teachers in the Junior grades.

Members of OAJE receive a newsletter outlining news, events, conferences and teaching tips. They are also invited to provide input, information and opinions for the Ministry of Education about issues of importance to Junior Division teachers. And, by joining, you will be sure to receive all future editions of this newsletter, along with lots of other valuable teaching ideas.

To become a member of OAJE, simply register online at <http://oajemembership.eventbrite.com>

JOIN OAJE
FOR
FREE!

WORD PLAY

Having students memorize long lists of random words improves neither their spelling prowess or the vocabulary of their writing. There are three central methods for improving the quality and clarity of the words that one uses in written communication. First among these is exposure. Exposure through hearing and reading a rich and varied vocabulary. Second, is exploring how language works to convey meaning. The third, and sometimes the most overlooked, is writing, writing, writing - with feedback from an audience to one's written communication.

As teachers we have many roles and responsibilities related to developing our students' writing skills. We read aloud and utilize quality reading materials - poetry, non fiction, and fiction in all of their forms. We explore the nature of language and how it is used. And, we seek out ways to have our students' writing read by authentic audiences, so that they have an opportunity to have feedback from readers.

Getting Their Writing Read

My students were working hard at our 'children's book' unit. We had looked at all kinds of children's books - non-fiction, storybooks, alphabet books, number books, pop-up books, poetry books . . .

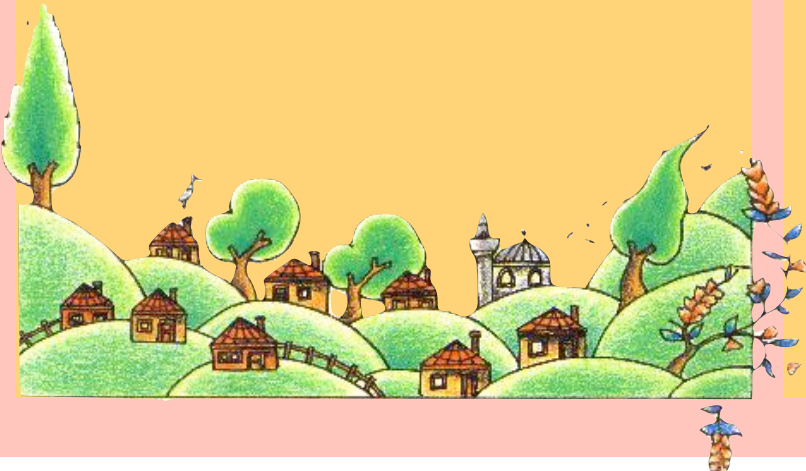
We spent a lot of time exploring the language that was used and how the books were set-up to make them most appealing to the reader. We surveyed the younger children in our school to determine not only what books were most popular but why they were. *(lots of data management and surveying in our classroom math program)

And then, we decided to get down to writing and publishing our own books, based on all that we had learned. So, my class developed drafts of their stories, edited them, had the stories peer edited, and I helped guide them through my editing and teaching - we had review audiences of younger children read the stories and offer their comments and suggestions. It was a wonderful writing experience - except for one thing. As hard as we had worked, we still hadn't gotten a sense of audience.

The students carefully illustrated their books with one of the techniques we had studied as we examined how children's books were illustrated. Some students used bubble prints as a background, others carefully drew the characters from their story, others used digital photographs they had taken of classmates, and family members acting out the events in their story . . . it was truly amazing to see the creativity of all that they had done. But, we still hadn't figured out how to get a sense of an audience.

We tried sharing the books with the younger kids in the school, which was OK, but not the kind of sense of audience that a writer gets with feedback from total strangers who respond to his/her writing.

And then it hit me . . . where are some places that people wait for long periods of time? Where might they enjoy reading a book or two written by students in a local school?



I set out to get local professionals - doctors, dentists, lawyers - to put away the scruffy, dated magazines from their waiting rooms and to feature some of my student's books. When we published the books we included a number of 'tear out pages' where readers were invited to write a note to the author. My promise to the local professionals was that we would replace our books every month (we rotated them around five different offices).

The first round of books came back into the classroom. I had 'pre-screened' the books to make sure that no one had written any inappropriate comments - and I was stunned.

Not only had people written comments, they had written wonderful notes of encouragement, citing specific things about the book that they had enjoyed. My kids were so excited to review the comments from their readers.

The students were enthusiastic to continue with their writing, especially if it was going to find its way to an audience.

The professionals in whose offices we placed our books reported that they had wonderfully positive comments about them.

In looking over the nature and length of the comments our books received, we made some observations that helped us better understand where to place future writings. Obstetrician offices garnered the most positive and detailed comments. Family doctor practices were also good. Pediatrician offices generated short, nice comments, but the books we sent endured more wear and tear than the other locations. Dentist offices were great. Legal offices generated the shortest comments.

We moved from professional offices to the lunch rooms of two, large local manufacturing plants. Again, we were pleasantly surprised by the number and quality of the comments to the authors.

In the end, I was able to accomplish a number of goals with this simple activity. First and foremost, the kids were motivated to write. They started to care more about mechanical conventions like spelling and grammar - evidence of a growing sense of audience. Secondly, by sending edited, final draft work - polished and refined writing - to public places, we were able to share the wonderful ideas and efforts of our students.

And, in the end, we were able to let people in our community know about the great writing program we have going on at our school.



Liberating Some Lively Language

I had read so many of the kid's stories that my head felt like it was going to explode and my eyes were growing dim. Their characters 'said' this, and then they 'said' that - said, said said. And then they 'went' here and then they 'went' there. The language in the stories my students were writing was plain, simple and BORING. "Not their problem", I muttered to myself, "I need to inspire them to write with more descriptive language."

So, the next day I read the class the most boring, most repetitive, most uninspired short story. Every time someone spoke, it read 'he said'. Every time someone moved, it read 'he went'. I read it in the most boring, monotone voice I could muster. I yawned repeatedly throughout the story, periodically becoming distracted and asking my listeners if they could remember what had happened last so that I could find my place.

I asked the students to work with a partner and to identify ways in which I could have improved the story and made it more interesting. Of course, they mentioned my reading voice, yawning and other obvious distractions - but many clued in on the uninspired language of the story itself.

This opened up a great learning opportunity. I wrote the word 'said' on the white board and challenged the students to think about all of the words that they could use instead that would be more create a clearer picture in the mind of the reader. We were able to come up with over twenty words to use instead of 'said' in just a few minutes. We talked about when we would use each of the words in our stories - what mood and meaning they would convey. That evening I printed out our twenty words for our 'word wall' under the title 'Instead of Said'. The next day I invited the students to think about when they would use the word 'said' in their stories and when they might better use another word. I asked them to note their alternative to 'said' on a piece of paper and to post it on our word wall.

SAID	
whispered	remarked
commented	uttered
spoke	protested
sputtered	chuckled
teased	echoed
urged	cried
	gulped

Over the next week, our word wall grew to over two hundred words! And I started to notice the students using a bit more thought in the choice of some of the words in their stories. One of my favourites was a story that a student had written about based upon some of the events in our classroom. One particular line in the story caught my attention. "Please stop reading that incredibly boring story", the students moaned as they struggled to remain awake in class. Mission accomplished!

Later in the term, I tried the same strategy with the word 'went' and had similar success.

The key to this and other vocabulary building strategies, is to link the new learning to purposeful and meaningful writing experiences - practical applications embed the new words into student writing.

Idioms

How often do you hear idioms either when people are speaking to you or on the television? One day, during an art lesson, a student proclaimed 'this was a piece of cake'. I asked the student what she meant. She replied, "You know. It's easy to do." I asked her where she thought that 'a piece of cake' had come from. She stared back with a blank look and I moved on to the next group of students.

The next morning the student from the art lesson asked if she could share something with the class. She told the story about the phrase she had used and explained that she had gone home that night and asked her family. No one knew where the comment 'a piece of cake' had come from. Her Mom had suggested that they use the internet to find some answers, and together they had gone in search of the origin of 'a piece of cake'.

She reported that it wasn't entirely clear where 'a piece of cake' had come from and how it became to mean something that was easy to do. She shared that most explanations focused on an American poet by the name of Ogden Nash who wrote "Her picture's in the papers now, And life's a piece of cake."

We set out to figure out more of these idioms we use in our everyday talking and writing . . . and groups of students selected one to do some research on to find where they had originated.

I was pleased to see a few idioms start to appear in the students' writing - and enjoyed having students share new idioms that they had start to notice in the books they were reading.

learning the ropes

burning the candle at both ends

letting the cat out of the bag

facing the music

down to the wire (or under the wire)

water over the dam

squeaky wheels get the grease

taking candy from a baby

a drop in the bucket

Can Birds See Colour?



It started with a simple question posed by a student - "can birds see colours?"

It was such a great question, I took a few moments one day with the class about their suggestions as to how we could find out an answer. The students had lots of ideas . . . but in the end we narrowed it down to one - let's colour bird food and put it out to see which colour of food the birds eat first.

This led to a two-week long investigation, perfect for life in a Canadian winter.

We constructed a platform from wood and nailed it onto the top of a post. The post was carefully positioned outside of the classroom window so that we could see the amounts of bird food on it. One group of students did some research into bird feeders and learned that they worked best if the birds had 'cover' or bushes and trees nearby. That way they were less vulnerable when feeding. We decided to put food out for a two weeks first, just to get the birds used to our feeder. We soon learned that we needed to close the window blind nearest to our feeder, otherwise the movement in our classroom disturbed our bird subjects.



We used food colouring to change the appearance of equal amounts of bird food and put it out in equal quantities on four quadrants of our feeder. Each afternoon we measured how much was left from each quadrant. We repeated this every day for two weeks, gathered our research data, graphed and interpreted it.

In the end, we think we know the answer to our question. And we carried out a pretty interesting experiment in animal behaviour, controlled variables, used math to interpret our results and had some fun doing it.

Essentially Science & Technology

Get in Touch with your Feelings

YOU WILL NEED:

- | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|---------------|--|------------|------------|
| a shoe box (with a lid) | pen cap | eraser | tape | paper clip | candle |
| marble | piece of sponge | sea shell | cotton ball | crayon | bottle cap |
| cotton swab | rubber band | small battery | (any other small object you would like to use) | | |

When people talk about the five senses, they almost always list sight and hearing as the two most important. But the human sense of touch is also an important sense. Touch is very sensitive and can communicate a lot of information. Try this activity with your class when you do the Human Systems unit with your grade five students . . . and have them get a feel for what we mean.

ADVANCE PREPARATION:

Collect shoe boxes so that there is one box for each group of three students. Cut a hole in the end of each box large enough for a student's hand to fit through, but not so big that they can see inside when their hand is in the box. Place an assortment of six to ten small objects in the box. Place the lid on the shoebox and tape it down securely. Repeat this for each of the boxes.

IN ACTION

Challenge your students place one hand inside of the shoe box and to begin touching some of the objects inside. Ask them to pick one item and feel it until they can tell certain things about it, such as whether it is soft or hard, smooth or rough. Have your students write down their touch observations of each object in a chart, using descriptive words like fuzzy, bumpy, round, long and thin, short and fat, spongy, pointy, flat, greasy, stretchy, bendable.

When the students think they have enough information about each of the objects, have them write down what they think it is in the GUESS box. Have the students continue feeling each item and writing down their observations and answers until they think that they have identified all of them. Have the students compare their observations and guesses with the other two students in their group. Ask them to compare their charts and see how many objects they thought were in the box. Ask them to identify which observations were the same, which were different and which objects were easy to identify and which were more difficult.

Touch Observation Chart					
Object #1	Object #2	Object #3	Object #4	Object #5	Object #6
Observations	Observations	Observations	Observations	Observations	Observations
GUESS	GUESS	GUESS	GUESS	GUESS	GUESS

WITNESS TO YESTERDAY

The spark for this project was an anniversary celebration for our school. The school was originally constructed in 1908, and redesigned in the 1920's. Since then it has undergone some changes due to fire codes and upgraded the wiring, but the building itself is still pretty much the way it was from the beginning. The School Council decided to have a big reunion celebration for the school's 100th birthday - and we saw it as a wonderful opportunity for a large-scale project.

First step - brainstorming with the students for ideas about what we might do to celebrate our school's 100th birthday. The adult planning committee was already organizing decade rooms, asking people to loan photos and memorabilia, planning a fifties dance - nothing that really caught our attention.

One of the students talked about his grandmother who had attended the school back in the 1960's. He explained that he loved to hear her tell stories about things that had happened at the school. Knowing the school himself as well as he did, he could really relate to the stories.

We decided to create a book of interesting stories about the school and the many students who had once attended it. We talked about what might need to be done.



- *interview people who attended the school in various decades*
- *develop some communication pieces that explained what we were trying to do and distribute them in local senior's residences, in the neighbourhood and on the school's website*
- *find family members of people who are listed on the WWII plaque in the front hallway (For King and Country) to learn about what happened to them during the war*
- *find and interview former staff members, administrators, custodians and support staff*
- *borrow and scan old photographs which could accompany the stories*
- *we would try to get names and contact information for people to interview from the school board*

We thought it would be a good idea to do a 'practice interview'. We talked about the questions that might be asked former staff members and former students, and created a list of the ones that we thought would be the most interesting for our readers. Joshua's grandmother very kindly came into our classroom and sat in an easy chair at the front of the room. Our student volunteers asked her questions and the rest of the class jot noted ideas for how the interview might be improved. We decided that each interview should have three students - one to ask the question and listen to the answer, and two to write down the answers to the questions. We felt that that would make sure that we didn't miss anything.

We found that one interview led to another. When we located a former staff member, they would often recommend our contacting someone else who they knew had worked at the school. The oldest former student we found and interviewed was ninety-six years old. Visiting the nursing home where she lived opened up new opportunities with other residents who had also attended the school.

One group of students decided it would be interesting to take some of the information from all of the interviews and to write a short article for each decade describing what life was like for kids at the time - what toys were most popular, what television shows were favourites (the kids were shocked to learn that some people didn't grow up with television or computers), what music was listened to and what did kids do for recreation/entertainment.

Some people had old textbooks and notebooks that they loaned to the students to scan into the computer so that images could be used with the stories.

We made some amazing discoveries about our school. A man in his eighties told us about hiding a small box of stuff behind a panel in a cabinet in one of the classrooms. When we looked, it was still there. He always had wondered if it might have survived, but didn't want to bother anyone at the school to look. We discovered an area of the school that we didn't know existed! When the school was built a small apartment was built above the third floor of our school. You couldn't see it from the street, and the maintenance folks and custodian knew about it. Some forty years ago the stairway to this area had been closed off behind a wall because there was only one staircase - a fire safety hazard. You could get to this area by going through a doorway in one of the custodian's closets.

We had so much material that the class decided that in addition to the book, we needed to make a short powerpoint presentation for the big celebration. When the School Council saw the finished copy of our Memory Book, they decided to have a local printer make copies and they sold them to former students, staff and community members.

We learned a lot in the course of this project. The students developed skills of language, interviewing, research, organization and planning. It was a small publishing endeavour where we had a very enthusiastic audience for our finished product.

Two weeks after we finished, one of the students made an observation during our weekly class meeting. She observed that we had met and interviewed a lot of interesting people - many of whom had led fascinating lives. There was the woman who, with her husband, had spent twenty years working in remote villages in China, the man who ran a bush plane service in the North, the woman who had fought in the Hungarian revolt - the velvet revolution, before she immigrated to Canada, the man who explored shipwrecks in the Great Lakes . . . The student suggested that we might want to new book featuring stories from the lives of interesting people in our community. Someone remembered that there was a writer in the local newspaper who wrote such articles - and suggested that we invite him into our classroom so that we could interview him first. Another project was taking shape . . .

