Children making choices

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At Forrest School in Canberra, teachers were looking for ways to encourage children to read widely and to develop particular interest in authors and the writing process. We aimed to establish a promotional peer group in which book selection and discussion of authors and their works were focal to their Library Resource Centre sessions. What evolved was an innovative multimedia unit that incorporated Information Literacy and Information Technology skills being developed in the Grade 6 children at the school.

Forrest School has approximately four-hundred-and-seventy children from thirty-two cultures. Specialist teachers include English as a Second Language, Languages other than English (Indonesian and Spanish), Learning Advancement, Physical Education and the Library Resource Centre manager.

In 1994 the school had taken part in the ACT Department of Education's 'Schools Program Review and Development' formal assessment. In 1995 in line with the review recommendations the school had leased a number of Apple Mac's and Powerbooks to enable the acquisition of additional computing skills for all classes from Kindergarten to Grade 6. In addition the school had leased a 630 Mac, a Quicktake 150 digital camera and a colour printer for the Library Resource Centre.

Teaching staff have engaged in professional development courses that enabled them to integrate use of computing skills into Key Learning Areas. By 1996, children had access to ClarisWorks and graphics packages.

The Library Resource Centre had access to the Internet and a fledgling school web site was in place. The challenge was to integrate all of the hardware into the timetabled programs already in existence both in the Library Resource Centre and in the classroom.

School parliament, a system of child oriented school management run by the children in Grade 6 and conducted along Parliamentary lines, raised $150.00 to purchase resources. The Library Resource Centre allocated $850.00 for the overall program. It was decided that I would take children selected by the school parliament to various bookshops around Canberra. The school parliament also sent representatives to each classroom to ask children what books they wanted. A discussion ensued about the titles listed, a search was made of the school's database and new items for cataloguing and amendments identified. A final list was then compiled and acted as the focus for our initial browsing search in the bookstores.

Once items were selected we had a discussion about cost versus quality and appropriateness for inclusion.

It was amazing how rationally the children went about excluding titles that did not represent good reading value for money or would not stand the rigours of vigorous use. I was challenged on several occasions for considering expensive reference books that were not on the agreed list and asked to purchase them from my own funds!

Within a short time all children wanted to be selected for book buying duties. Adjustments had to be made to the method of preview and selection to speed up the process and to enable the whole Grade 6 class to be involved simultaneously. Jacaranda Educational agreed to make boxes of new titles available for viewing, reading and selecting.

At whole-class discussions children had to present a draft review, argue how the title would enhance or augment the collection and make links with other titles that their particular author had written. This task involved checking our database and taking a print of holdings. Creating biographies was an off-shoot of this task as children pored through blurbs and biographical reference books to support their chosen author and argue for purchase.
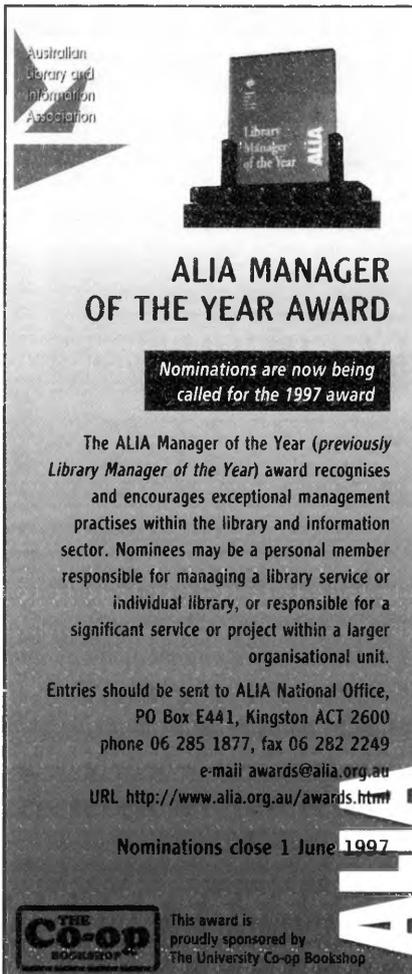
Formal written reviews were then presented on disk with overall suggestions about costings. A debate on paperback versus hardback was inevitable and resulted in more paperback editions being purchased. Children were taught the rudiments of cataloguing following the simplified process of author statement/illustrator statement, title statement, publisher, place and date as well as a collation note. Drafts of cataloguing assisted on purchase of items and enabled speedy cataloguing.

We were then in a position to give instruction on the use of the Quicktake 150 digital camera. This proved to be a great success with an initial small group being trained who then trained others.

Children posed with the book of their choice and this assisted the promotional activities of reviews and titles on display in the school foyer. As Children's Book Week was approaching we discussed the possibility of linking with the ACT Library and Information Services, Griffith Branch. We had reviews, pictures of the titles and decided that we could videotape reviews to add a further dimension to our display.

Our final activity involved marking up the reviews in HTML. Once again a core of children who felt confident to try taught their peers to mark up and put files up onto our web site. Parents were asked for written permission for children's work to appear on the site. In all cases the parents agreed to allow their children's work to be downloaded, marked up and uploaded onto our web site. We promoted our work through the school's weekly newsletter and made bookmarks that gave our URL. Parents seemed to be greatly interested, visiting our site and sending e-mail advice and encouragement.

So where will we go to from here? We fully intend to continue to present this program to the older grades, perhaps taking it down to Grade 4 children and using Information Technology and Information Literacy skills in all levels of research. Visits by authors and illustrators will continue to be part of the Library Resource Centre's program with a special emphasis on videorecording. A writer's in residence workshop will be negotiated after discussion with the teaching staff, School Board and the Parents and Citizens group. ■