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How Can I Use Volunteers Effectively in the Classroom?

Volunteers can support your literacy instruction activities. But developing volunteer tasks that support your objectives takes extra work. What type of support do you need to enhance your students' success? Who are the volunteers? What are their orientation and training needs? These are the questions examined in this unit.

Probably the most important task when working with volunteers is clarification of your instructional objectives

Volunteer support for your literacy program has to be just that: help and support for you, the teacher. Volunteers cannot take primary responsibility for assuring that beginning readers and writers receive appropriate instruction.

Probably the most important task when working with volunteers is clarification of your instructional objectives, and the ways in which they are expressed for the diverse learners in your charge. Reflect upon whether:

- these objectives are developed in a form that you can communicate to novices;
- you are up to date with student assessments, so that volunteers' activities will be appropriate and challenging to your students; and
- your teaching methods and experience are set up in a way that allows employment of volunteers, while maintaining your ultimate responsibility for instruction.

Developing volunteer tasks takes extra work, especially initially, as you set up a system to enhance children's success. Keep in mind that you may want to utilize volunteers in a different way than you have previously.



What kind of volunteer help do we need?
The first task is to define your needs and the ways in which volunteers can help you meet those needs.

Table 1 Defining your volunteer needs

Do I need the following? (Check as appropriate)	Need is very great	Would be useful	Don't need at this time
Help with grading and organizing assessment information so that it is useful for instruction			
Help with developing curriculum materials, finding web sites, photocopying			
Help to provide individual attention by:			
listening to child's oral reading			
reading to a child			
discussing child's reading or writing			
tutoring in reading or writing			
Help for children to complete their homework			
Help with children's behavior regulation:			
while they complete independent activities			
during large group activities			
Help in organizing classroom library			
Write in areas of need not identified above:			

The next step is to describe procedures for completing these tasks, adding specific details about the instructional needs of your students. More information is provided below.

Pair or group children for shared book experiences. Children with the same interests can work together and start book clubs, in which they read and discuss the same or similar books. Teachers might use volunteers to help with these clubs. Or children can read books at home with their parents and report on them the next day in their clubs.¹

Who are the usual volunteers?

Family members as volunteers

Immediate and extended family members are naturally involved in efforts to support teachers' literacy goals. Families are an accessible resource (in a teacher survey, 30% of primary teachers had in-class volunteers²), but often are not engaged in the most

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effective way. In the survey cited above, 45% of primary teachers were found to be dissatisfied with parental involvement. Reasons for such dissatisfaction included the following:

- Teachers were not clear about what they wanted the family volunteer to do.
- Family members did not understand the social and cultural expectations that accompanied volunteering in their children's classes.
- Teachers did not understand the social and cultural backgrounds of the families and were not able to communicate needs effectively.
- Family members did not understand that a teacher wanted them to work with a number of children, rather than just their own child.
- Teachers did not have enough time to set up the volunteer program.
- The assigned tasks did not match the volunteers' schedules or interests.

Cross-age student volunteers

Depending on your needs, students in higher grades can be a valuable resource. They can help with directed activities such as playing "sight-word memory" or just read books that are of interest to both children. In some cases, older students may be more motivating to young children than adult volunteers are. Like family members, student tutors cannot be successful volunteers unless they are well trained.

Community members as volunteers

College students, senior citizens, and local business employees can all be helpful volunteers. A desire to exercise one's responsibility to others, or to gain recognition for one's skills, can often lead to a mutually satisfying experience.

Recruitment and retention involve thoughtful planning. Remember that there are many people who would like to volunteer but are unsure of how to do so. Whenever possible, allow volunteers to do what they do best. Screen individuals to find out whether their expertise meets your needs. Take time to prepare for and train your volunteers. Provide feedback—are they doing what is needed? Make sure that you recognize their hard work, both privately and publicly. It takes effort to keep them coming back.

What are your orientation and training needs?

All volunteers need orientation and training for their new role. The level of this training is relative to their particular task and the extent of their experience.

Orientation

Your school and district have policies on volunteers—know these policies and make a check-sheet of the main points for the volunteer. These may include:

- confidentiality policies and penalties;
- basic requirements, such as TB tests, liability insurance, etc.—make sure that potential volunteers have access to services that will help them meet these requirements;
- availability of transportation or meals—this may be particularly important for senior citizens or students coming from other schools; and
- daily schedules, so that volunteers know what will happen while they are in class.

For oversight/
management
activities,
volunteers need
descriptions
of your own
practices.

Brief training for tasks that require no student contact

Written instruction might be all that is necessary for this purpose. If there is a typical set of common tasks to be completed, have written instructions available. The written material may be as simple as an index card explaining the task. If the task was photocopying, for example, you would need to write down the location of the machine, basic procedures, passwords, etc. The names and locations of people to contact for help with the machine should also be listed. You would go over this information with first-time volunteers; they could refresh their memory later by reading the card. This avoids repetition and interruptions. Materials to be copied could then be left in a cubby with a note detailing the number of copies needed. The index card collection can be saved and used again later, with other volunteers.

Even if the task is somewhat more complex, you can still develop a routine to help volunteers find the necessary materials (i.e., a share box or cubby). You may also wish to write out a general set of rules that apply to all activities: for example, rules defining which materials are appropriate for classroom use. Again, having these instructions in writing ensures clear communication and documents the information for future use.

All of the procedures mentioned in this section can also be adapted for off-site activities, such as repairing torn and damaged books from classroom libraries.

Training for oversight responsibilities or shortdefined tasks that have student contact

For oversight/management activities, volunteers need descriptions of your own practices. If the volunteer is to have direct contact with children—whether to help with behavior regulation or reading and writing activities—they need a clear understanding of your ground rules. This information should be explained and followed up with written notes.

Following are two examples of what the volunteer might need to know to manage children as they complete independent work. Remember that while some of these concepts may seem obvious to you as a teacher, they will be new to most volunteers. In all cases, begin by providing written instructions. Then review the written material together, in order to be sure that the volunteer understands. Finally, give them a “Quick Check” card like the two below, so that they have a way to identify important concepts.

Quick Check— handling behavior problems

- Remind child of task—let them know that you are interested in their success.
- Separate disruptive child to another table to complete work—again remind them that you are interested in their success.
- Call teacher for help in addressing problem.



A successful volunteer program relies on effective feedback.

Quick Check— helping a child who cannot decode a word

- Ask the child to take a look at the word.
- Ask what sound the word begins with.
- Since your role in the activity is oversight rather than instruction, if the above hints did not work, tell the child the word, saying, “it begins with /b/ and is boat.”

Training volunteers as literacy tutors

Successful volunteer tutoring programs carefully screen, prepare, and supervise their tutors. The training of literacy volunteers is a large undertaking, requiring the design and evaluation of models, as well as a variety of other tasks that will require more personnel time than you alone can provide. Keep this in mind when embarking on such a project.

How do I maintain feedback with volunteers?

A successful volunteer program relies on effective feedback. Volunteers also need a routine way to give you information about student efforts. If the volunteer is working with an individual child to practice sight words, for example, then the following form might be one easy way to encourage feedback:

Table 2 Typical feedback form

	Words the child identified with ease	Words the child had difficulty identifying
Child's name		

Done right, this feedback can also help you provide the necessary guidance. For volunteers there is nothing more satisfying than children's success and enthusiasm for literacy.

Conclusion

With a clear understanding of roles and the time needed to implement a program, you can receive much-needed help from volunteers. You will need to plan:

- The kind of help you want.
- Whom you can recruit as volunteers.
- The types of orientation and training required.

- Who can help with orientation and training.
- The necessary procedures for various tasks.
- The materials that will help the process run smoothly.
- Effective means for volunteers to provide feedback to teachers.
- Effective means for teachers to provide feedback to volunteers.

The outcomes will be more time for you to provide high-quality reading instruction, and more opportunities to encourage children's success in and enthusiasm for reading.

Suggested reading

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Notes

¹ Snow, Burns, & Griffin, (Eds.), 1999, p. 74.

² Linek, Rasinski, & Harkins, 1997.