

THE LITTLE BOOKSTORE THAT GREW TO A THOUSAND

BY LYRIC WALLWORK WINIK

Well, this is one of those wonderful stories. We often hear talk of the power of ideas, but seldom do we encounter such a pure example of how one person with a good idea and the determination to carry it out can enrich the lives of so many. Six years ago, in the Spring of 1992, we published an article by a New York City school teacher named Robin Cohen that described how she hit upon the idea of opening a children's bookstore right inside her school building. I told Robin at the time that I was sure, once others heard about it, the idea would spread to many schools across the country. And has it ever! A big helping hand came when Lyric Wallwork Winik, a contributing editor of Parade magazine, read the article in American Educator and wrote a story about it for Parade, thus catapulting the idea into the living rooms of millions of Sunday morning newspaper readers.

To make a long story short, there are now more than one thousand bookstores in forty-seven states across the country, ranging from large cities such as Los Angeles, Houston, and Baltimore, to small towns such as Point Pleasant, West Virginia; Glencoe, Minnesota; and Wiscasset, Maine.

For those of you who missed it the first time around and for everyone who has joined the ranks of teaching since it first appeared, we are reprinting here the article from Parade magazine, which was featured in its February 14, 1993, issue.

But there's more to this story. As you will note in the Parade article, the one problem that Robin and her teacher colleague Veray Darby were having was finding enough low-cost books to enable them to keep the prices they charged the children at an affordable level. They wanted to keep their average cost at about a dollar per book, but that was only possible if they could buy in very large volume from the publishers. That's when Robin Cohen's venture became a family affair. Her son Jess, fresh from Columbia University and starting with his parents' basement as a warehouse, began buying in volume from the publishers and supplying the burgeoning number of school bookstores around the country with reasonably priced, high-quality children's literature. The other two Cohen siblings, Russ and Jennifer,

soon joined the effort, and today their business, now in its fifth year and called Invest in Children's Education: The School Bookstore Company, has helped place more than 1 million books into the hands of children. Last November, in appreciation of their work, the Cohens were presented the Friend of Reading Award by the New York State Reading Association, an affiliate of the International Reading Association (IRA).

So, everyone out there, let's shoot for one thousand more stores. Or why not five thousand more! Let's have our students banging out at their own school bookstores, browsing, buying, talking about their favorites, taking them home to show their parents and siblings, reading them and sharing them, putting them on their bookshelves and dressers and windowsills and otherwise cluttering the house with them, and returning to them whenever they have a banking for an old friend.

And finally, let's give a big thank you to Robin Cohen for starting it all.

—Editor

Every Tuesday and Thursday at 7:45 A.M., three cashiers, three security guards and three stock clerks appear at the back door of P.S. 121, an elementary school in New York City's Bronx borough. The employees quickly start unstacking tables and setting up a display rack. By 8 A.M., they have transformed a small, drab entryway into The Children's Bookstore.

During the next thirty minutes, they assist forty to fifty customers and take in \$60 to \$100. Then these nine employees, all fifth-graders, leave for class. So do their supervisors: Robin Cohen, a reading teacher, who created this thriving bookstore; and her partner, Veray Darby, a fourth-grade teacher.

Cohen explained how the bookstore started: "Students wanted to read outside of class but they had no books. There were no bookstores in this part of the

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Brian Coates



Left: This photo of bookstore founder Robin Cohen helping a student make a selection at the PS 121 bookstore appeared in the original *American Educator* story, Spring 1992. Above: Students crowd around the cashiers at the Epps Island Elementary School Children's Bookstore in Houston, Texas.

Bronx, and the local library's hours had been severely cut. The children were begging for books, and we had nothing for them."

Like many teachers at P.S. 121, Cohen had a classroom library, but she knew her students needed more. "It's vital that students read and be read to at home, so their reading skills grow stronger and they learn to enjoy books," she said.

Using her own money, she bought enough books to fill two large buckets, then let students borrow the books to read at home. There was a \$2 replacement fee for lost or damaged books.

Soon, many students were reporting books lost and paying the fines. Cohen thought the children were being irresponsible—until she noticed some of the "lost" books in their book bags and desks. But when she told the students they could return the books and she would refund their money, they refused. They wanted to keep the books. That's when Cohen realized that the students were "buying" their favorite books.

Could something be done to help students own books to read for pleasure? Cohen decided to start a bookstore right inside the school. The idea was a gamble. "We couldn't envision how it would work," recalled Dianne Dessereau, president of the P.S. 121 Parents' Association. But the leaders of the 500-member group were impressed by the enthusiasm of the two teachers. With the parents' support—as well as that of the school's principal, Virginia Fiore, and a \$1,300 start-up grant from the New York City Teachers' Consortium—Cohen and Darby bought book racks, a cart, plastic baskets and about \$500 worth of books.

The two teachers put up fliers seeking future fifth-graders to work as everything from clerks to book critics to advertising executives. Students had to fill out a job application, stating their qualifications and why they wanted the job. They also needed a teacher's recommendation and a parent's permission. Applicants were interviewed during lunch hour. Then the new employees were trained.

Stock clerks learned how to reorganize display tables and help students make selections. Cashiers learned how to use calculators and make change. Security guards studied how to direct customer traffic and

Bruce Gillbert

check that all books purchased had been stamped.

Cohen and Darby also hired students as book critics, who read store selections and wrote reviews. Advertising executives made posters to promote the store. The student employees were paid with certificates redeemable for free books—two certificates a month for employees who arrived on time on the mornings they had selected to work.

Parents devised an inventory system for the bookstore. Except for those with tapes, all books sold for \$1.50.

The bookstore opened in the fall of 1991 in an alcove by the school's back door. At first, business was slow. But soon posters, announcements at the school and fliers mailed to homes drew customers. In three months, the bookstore made back its initial investment. It has been operating on its profits ever since.

"We even developed a layaway plan," Cohen said, "because often kids can't pay for a book all at once. The whole thing has become a learning experience. For example, teachers use the critics' reviews as examples of how to write a summary, and the job applications as examples of how to fill out forms.

A majority of the customers at The Children's Bookstore are aged five to eleven. The books are all for children, ranging from classics like *Charlotte's Web* to biographies and books on sports figures. But the bookstore also has attracted adults who come to buy books for their children. "And many parents like being able to spend an extra ten or fifteen minutes with their kids in the morning, browsing in the bookstore," said Dianne Dessereau. "Parents bring in other parents to the bookstore. People talk about the books. The senior kids also get a sense of leadership, a sense of how to relate to people in a workplace."

"When they buy books, the kids are more eager to read them," said Brian McFadden, father of a second-grader, Brian Jr. "My son picks out what he likes, and we sit down and read the books together at home. He also brings his books to school to share with his class."

One morning found Aja Ortiz, a fourth-grader, preparing to purchase a book of mystery stories. "They have a nice selection—books with pictures and also a lot of words," she said. Ian Spence, a second-grader, was examining several books. "I have \$1 with me, so I'll put one on layaway," he said, showing four quarters. "I like to look at the books first."

"I'm good with math, and now I'm learning to be

How To Start a Bookstore In Your School

I.I.C.E. (Invest in Children's Education) Inc., The School Bookstore Company, sells quality books for as little as 99¢ each. They also offer a manual and video on how to start and run a store. For more information, call their toll-free number (1-800-261-9964) or write to them at 80 East Industry Ct., Deer Park, NY 11729. Or to contact Robin Cohen, send her a self-addressed stamped envelope c/o Liberty Elementary School, Dept. P, 142 Lake Road, Valley Cottage, NY 10989.



Molly McGarvey finds a cozy spot to read at the Eagle's Nest bookstore at McAlpine Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina

good with money," said fifth-grader Tamika Brown, a cashier.

"I like to help the kids," said Jennifer Piña, a security guard. "It's fun working in a bookstore. I think I might want to do this when I grow up."

As The Children's Bookstore grows, Cohen and Darby face new challenges. "The hardest part is just getting the books," Cohen said. The two have ordered from book clubs' clearance catalogs, bought books from flea-market vendors and driven to a publisher's warehouse sale in search of low-cost books. But more sources are needed. Last summer, Cohen wrote to children's book publishers across the country, seeking to purchase books. Not one replied.

"To keep prices down, we have to keep our average cost to \$1 per book," she explained. "Any profits are used to buy new books, and we have also given some money to the school." Last spring, the bookstore helped the school buy a tripod and a video recorder.

Reading always has been important at P.S. 121. "Communication skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—are the most important set of skills you can give children in elementary school," said Principal Fiore. Twice a day, every teacher reads a literature selection aloud in class, and there are also silent reading periods, when both students and teachers read books. "Instead of reading textbooks, we use books of literature, such as *Call of the Wild* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*," Fiore added. "I even give parents a homework assignment: Read to your child at least fifteen minutes a night. A child who is read to will do much better."

She's thrilled that students are still excited about the store—students like Loretta Jackson, ten, a critic who stated on her job application that she wanted to be an undercover detective and a poet. "If I ever stopped reading," Loretta said, "I don't know what would happen to me." □

GETTING AT THE MEANING

(Continued from page 71)

sense with what the author just told us?

HEIDI: This part right here; it's summer now. And this part down here; it's winter, and it snows down here all the time 'cause there's no sun getting down there. Antarctica's right down here, and when the sun comes, Antarctica's getting sun and the sun's coming this way, and it's hitting Antarctica.

Building from Heidi's comment, the teacher recaps what the discussion has revealed so far and prompts students to consider if the author has explained why the sun works this way in Antarctica. The teacher then asks students to recall information that a student had mentioned in an earlier discussion:

TEACHER: Heidi's added some important things. She said that when the globe's going around when it's winter down here, Antarctica never gets any sun, and when it's summer, Antarctica does get sun. Now it seems like that is what the author's telling us. But does the author tell us why?

CLASS: No.

TEACHER: Think about this for a minute. There's something else that Amber said a little while back. She said there's something funny about the earth. It's not straight up and down.

The students begin to work out the explanation for Antarctica's pattern of sunshine and weather:

TAMMY: It's tilted.

TEACHER: It's tilted. Now how does that connect with what the author has told us here?

BRANDY: It doesn't get as much sun in the winter, 'cause the sun has to come up under but it's tilted the other way in the summertime.

THOMAS: I think he's saying, like Brandy said, it goes around for twenty-four hours a day and, here goes the sun, the sun shines on Antarctica, slanted, all the way around twenty-four hours a day.

SHANELLE: Um, um, I think I know what they're saying because when, when the Earth is going around and the sun is coming, it's hitting—the lower part of Antarctica is showing, 'cause it's tilting more. So then it has sunshine twenty-four hours.

As the teacher recaps student contributions, it seems clear that the students have indeed put all the information together; that is, that the tilt in the Earth's axis explains the 24 hours of light in Antarctica.

TEACHER: I think we've worked this out. What Shanelle and Thomas are saying is that because the Earth is tilted when it's going around the sun, we got twenty-four hours of sunlight in the summer, 'cause the sun keeps hitting and keeps hitting Antarctica, even though this part of the globe is in darkness.

There are several specific effects of the *Follow-up Queries* in the "climate of Antarctica" transcript. First,

we can see that with the teacher's guidance, the students were able to link past knowledge with new information in the text. Second, as the discussion unfolded, students built on one another's comments to unravel important information: The author was alluding to a scientific concept they had to understand before they could understand the text. Finally, meanings and explanations emerged from several sources, not only from the students, teacher, or text, but also from a collaboration that involved all three.

* * *

Developing and sustaining an environment that encourages students to share their thinking about text ideas and to work toward building meaning is a highly complex task. As Cazden (1988) says, "It is easy to imagine talk in which ideas are explored rather than answers to teachers' test questions provided and evaluated.... Easy to imagine, but not easy to do."

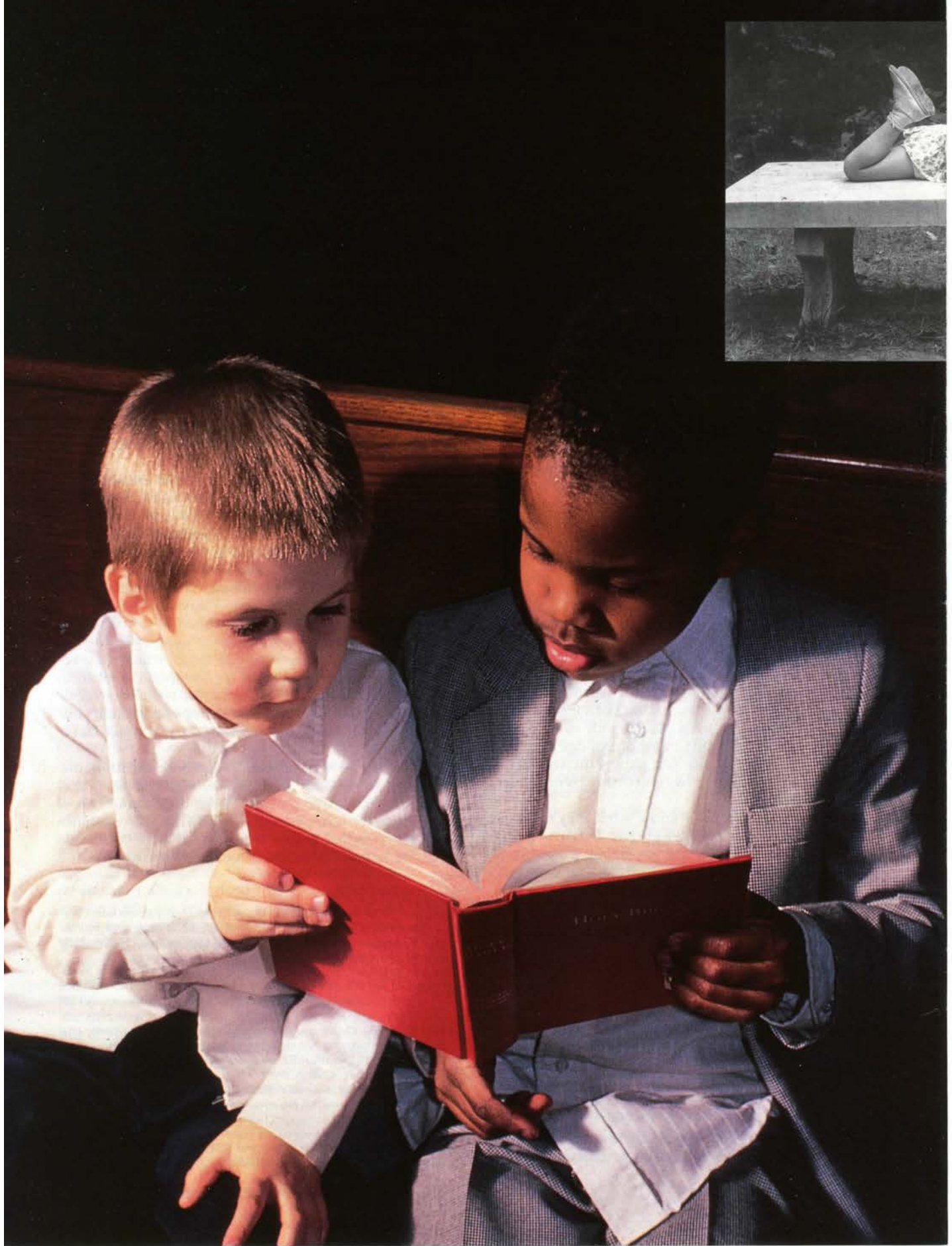
In the course of developing Questioning the Author, we collaborated with fourteen teachers in four different schools, who taught third through eighth grades. And although QtA was "not easy to do," with support each of these teachers became to various degrees competent and comfortable with the orientation, and each of them incorporated their own "styles."

As for the effects on students, teachers often tell us they are surprised at the change that takes place. In a journal she kept during the time we worked together, Kelley Sweeney, one of our first collaborating teachers, described the impact QtA had in her class: "I was astonished at the responses and involvement in the discussion from some of my students who usually never participate. I cannot express my astonishment enough." In this regard, consider a story that Al Shanker used to tell. According to Shanker, if people from Mars came to earth and observed our ways, when they returned they would report that earthlings had a particularly peculiar custom in association with their children. That is, five days a week parents sent their children to a place where the children sat and watched an adult work.

In contrast to that scenario, consider a fifth-grade youngster, who when asked to say what he liked and disliked about QtA, responded, "What I like about QtA is that people let other people know what they're thinking. What I dislike is that it makes us work too hard! When we're done, it makes us feel like we're dead!" □

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