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## **ABSTRACT**

This report presents the results of an exploratory study which examines the author event in libraries, schools and bookshops. The preliminary findings reveal that it is insufficient merely to consider the benefits of such events, as these are undisputed. The investigation therefore is whether these benefits play a sufficient rôle in a child's creative and educational development to justify the cost of hosting an author event.

The research methodology for this study comprises a triangulation of qualitative techniques, including interviews, questionnaires, letters, electronic mail and observation. Quantitative methods were generally ignored because of the difficulty of drawing on a sufficiently large sample of subjects to obtain reliable data in such a short period of time.

A brief survey of the literature available in the field of author events is included, which traces the development of the subject in literary terms, and illustrates the influences which this literature had on the present study. It is acknowledged, however, that literature is not the main source of information in this underdeveloped subject area.

The format of the author event is analysed in some depth, with a view to designing a framework for good practice with the needs of the events organiser in mind. The difficult issue of proving the value of the author visit is then considered in qualitative terms, for example by looking at the long-term benefits and at the value of the children's enlightenment. The final section examines existing means of evaluation and proposes six means of assessing that which is often an intangible result.

Tentative conclusions are offered in the form of practical recommendations which could be implemented in order to improve the current situation, and a number of suggestions are made as to possible further research.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

## PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF THE SUBJECT

The idea of bringing children into contact with living writers is by no means a recent development; the Literature Panel of the Arts Council of England implemented a *Writers in Education* programme in 1969 which was extremely popular by 1980, when the scheme devolved upon the various regional arts associations in the country. These regional bodies generally bore half the cost of a wide range of activities, from the single visit or workshop session to the long-term writer's residency.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this time, it seems that the value of the author event was rarely questioned, if at all: what need was there for evaluating when funding was so readily available? Over the past decade, however, the application process for funding has become increasingly strict to the extent that now, in 1997, the Arts Council, who '*largely felt that it was of no value to have authors working for one day*' [Arts Council 1], are no longer funding the shorter author visit.

If the Arts Council are no longer funding the one-day visit, then surely the longer writer's residency - which can still be funded - would be a more sensible programme for schools to adopt? Perhaps so, but unfortunately the vast majority of schools who would like to host an author event could not begin to raise sufficient funds to pay for even half of the cost of a residency. Furthermore, such schools now believe that there is little point in considering an author event when there are insufficient resources available to buy the author's books.

Yet for the Sheffield-based author Linda Hoy, it is *because of* this lack of funding that teachers and librarians must strive to ensure that the author visit does not become a thing of the past:

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Sampson, F. (1987) 'Interactive fiction: an experience of the *Writers in Education* scheme, *Children's Literature in Education*, 18 (3), 184-91

*'We're in quite desperate times: a lot of older children don't read...books are expensive and inaccessible...literacy is very much a middle class activity. Children today think that books are not relevant, [and] teachers don't have the time to read children's books, so it is only an author coming in that gives kids some idea of this relevance...'* [Author 11]

In order to make a reasoned assessment of the current situation - and to determine how improvements could be made - it would first be appropriate to make a brief examination of the benefits and drawbacks which both participant and organiser derive from the author event.

### **1.1 The benefits derived by the children: *Scriveners are flesh and blood***

In an interview he recorded for Radio Nottingham, Challis (1986) asked Helen Cresswell, the children's author of the renowned *Bagthorpe Saga*, whether she had done any work with children in schools.

*'Oh yes, she replied. The kids are always surprised...they think all writers are dead.'* (21)

Challis therefore suggested that a potential benefit of the then active East Midlands scheme *Book a Writer!* would be to fill a need by illustrating *'that scriveners are flesh and blood, just like real people.'* (21)

But what benefit would the children derive from knowing that not all authors were dead? Speaking at the 1997 Hay Children's Festival (24/05/97), the author Anne Fine admitted that when she was a child there were no chatshows, cultural programmes or author visits to introduce the public to authors as real people, so she long considered that

*'Books were born on the library shelf...I didn't realise that people wrote them...I did assume that all authors were dead.'*

When they meet the author, therefore, and see for themselves that books are not in fact ‘born on the library shelf’ but are the result not only of inspiration but, as Gloria D. Miklowitz puts it, ‘*a whole lot of hard work, rejection and sticking power*’, children will not be able to recognise that anyone can become an author

*‘...if he or she has a story to tell and can write it down in such a way that others will want to read it.’* [Author 13]

To the potential author - that is, arguably any child - meeting a writer could serve to satisfy an *authorly* need in the child. Not only does the visit leave the young reader with an author’s voice in their head in all future readings, but it also serves, as Adèle Geras states, ‘*to have the process of writing demystified a little*’ [Author 6], to see that no author is infallible, that the fact that the child makes mistakes in his or her writing does not mean that they do not have the potential to become a writer in later life.

### **1.1.1** *‘...now I think I will go and read a poetry book...’*

However prestigious the author or poet may or may not be, his/her visit can clearly have a very positive effect on the reading and writing habits of the young person. As one thirteen year old boy wrote to the local poet Trevor Dickinson,

*‘I am not a person who will go and read any kind of books but now I will go and read a poetry book because I didn’t think they could be so [much] fun.’* [See Appendix Six]

### **1:1:2** *‘...you can break out...’*

It would seem that reading and writing encouragement are not the only benefits a child can derive from meeting an author, but that the social and psychological benefits must also be taken into account. The Sheffield-based

author Linda Hoy makes a special effort to meet children from what she describes as ‘*deprived backgrounds*’, as she herself grew up on the socially disadvantaged Manor Park Estate in the city. Her message is therefore that she comes from the same sort of difficult background as many of the young people she meets, but that if you are determined enough, ‘*you can break out of that.*’

The American teenage writer Gloria D. Miklowitz revealed that she is sometimes called upon in the unusual capacity of author-counsellor:

‘Teachers have sent suicidal teens to speak with me because I wrote *close to the edge* about suicide, the deep sense of hopelessness and the way to fight it...’ [Author 13]

Authors are clearly not always regarded by their readers as mere *writers*, but the actual content of their work can also have a part to play in the relationship they share. A desperate teenager may feel more able to talk to Miklowitz about his/her problems than to a counsellor, as she has written intimate and accessible accounts of characters whose lives reflect their own.

A social benefit of a slightly different kind is that which children derived from a visit from author John Cunliffe to a school in Leeds. The audience consisted almost entirely of Asian children, and the class teacher told the author afterwards of the ‘*enormous impact*’ his presentation clearly had on the pupils whom the Senior Children’s Librarian in Leeds described as

‘...kids whose normal pathway is from home to school, from school to home, who wouldn’t go into town to a library, such is their culture...to meet someone like that defies quantifying...’ [Librarian 5]

A further type of benefit which has emerged during the course of this study is that which is experienced by children with so-called *special needs*. In their examination of the Arts Council’s *Artists in Schools* programme, Sharpe and Dust (1990) suggest that the visiting artist could help those children not only to improve their reading and writing skills, but to give them something far more valuable, through

*'...the sharing of a creative experience involving group interaction and co-operation...self-expression through the arts can be a great release, enabling children to explore feelings and aspects of themselves which would normally be buried.'* (138)

An example of such an experience is that which took place during a visit by the author Aliko to a school in North Tyneside. The notes written by the class teacher following the visit outline these *alternative* benefits. He explains,

*'These children can also sometimes be isolated socially as they don't attend their local school, and they may be more confined in activities, so Aliko's theories of loneliness, friendship and acceptance are particularly poignant for some.'*<sup>2</sup>

The author visit seems to have the potential to reach all children in more than just the obvious way of encouraging them to read their books.

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<sup>2</sup> Northern Children's Book Festival (1990: 45)

## **1:2 Benefits to the author**

*‘I always tell children that the best thing that can happen to an author is to meet the people she writes for, and this is true.’*

[Author 3]

Although it might be assumed that these words of author Berlie Doherty would be echoed by all authors discussing the value of his or her visit to a school, library or bookshop, this is not necessarily the case. One disillusioned author asks,

*‘Do I find this activity [author visits] to be an important part of being an author? No. They have nothing to do with being an author, and everything to do with promoting books, which you don’t have to be an author to do...writing books is something I do, an author is not something I am. And visiting schools has nothing to do with what I do when I sit down to write.’* [Author 9]

This study therefore includes the following brief section which is intended to prove that the author can derive far more than financial benefit from meeting his/her young readers.

### **1:2:1 Boosting the authorial ego**

*‘What do I gain from meeting my readers? The fashionable phrase is self-esteem, I suppose. An older and more accurate word would be conceit...’* [Author 17]

Julia Jarman is here voicing the opinion echoed by a number of other authors involved in this study, i.e. that a major benefit of visiting schools, libraries or bookshops as a guest speaker is that it confirms people’s interest in your work. This may to a certain extent be conceit, but it could simply be said that for an author, meeting his/her reading public is a valuable form of communication.

## **1:2:2 The importance of maintaining contact with the reading public**

*'It is useful for me to hear what they [the children] appreciate about my work: kids' books are not reviewed very often and then not by children.'* [Author 11]

For Linda Hoy, it is clear that the feedback she obtains during and as a result of her meetings with her young readers is important to her development as an author. For all writers, the audience tends to be remote, far removed from the authorly process, and it can prove beneficial to the children's author to meet his/her reading public. As Theresa Tomlinson states, this contact

*'...stops me getting carried away and forgetting about the children.'* [Author 19]

Kaye Umansky, author of the highly popular *Pongwiffy* series, uses the children she meets as a *'sounding board'*:

*'...talking to eight and nine year olds is essential so that I can continue to 'pitch' my work at the correct level.'* [Author 15]

Similarly, the American author, Gloria D. Miklowitz, ensures that the books she writes contain current issues, subjects which the children view as interesting and important, by using her visits

*'...to answer their question, to see what they wear, to ask them about their interests, concerns, even what they would like me to write about.'* [Author 13]

Certainly in the course of this study, many authors have described occasions on which contact with their young audience has directly affected their work.

Following the publication of *'Goggle Eyes'* in 1989, Anne Fine received a number of letters from readers who, like the main character, had divorced parents

with new partners. Whereas many felt encouraged by the positive outcome the story provides, others were less convinced:

*'I have a step father and I will never like him...I was disappointed with your ending.'*<sup>3</sup>

'*Step by Wicked Step*' (1995), a book of seven short stories about step families of varying happiness, was therefore written as a direct result of the interaction Anne Fine has with her young readers.

Michael Hardcastle [Author 7], the author of many sports-based books for young people, claims that he is generally influenced by the audiences at his author visits, as he believes that their opinions '*are rarely in conflict with my own attitudes to writing.*' However, he admits that he takes all requests he receives very seriously, and after listening to a member of one of his audiences complaining that she had been unable to find any stories on netball, he decided to write such a book.

Yet authors' work is not only affected by complaints. Jean Ure [Author 10], for example, told a group of eleven year olds how she would have loved to learn ballet when she was younger, but that her parents could not afford to pay for lessons. After her presentation a boy shyly told her that he was a ballet dancer, but that he was too embarrassed to tell his classmates '*in case they laugh at me.*' As a result of this brief conversation, Jean Ure wrote '*A proper little Nooryeff*', about a boy who becomes a ballet dancer.

To return to the original idea that authors do not merely attend literary events for reasons of financial gain, local poet John Kitching can be taken as an example of someone who visits schools for purely altruistic reasons: Trevor Dickinson, a former Schools Inspector and therefore a well-known figure in local schools, is also a published poet who writes under the name of John Kitching.

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking at the Hay Children's Festival 24/05/97

When he visits schools, however, he does not tell the pupils of his *altar ego*, thus having no obvious intention of increasing the sales of his poems.

Interaction with their young readers is clearly important to many authors, whether this means replying to children's letters or writing a book based on a plot requested by a member of the audience at an author visit. To Rony Robinson and Ian McMillan, however, the relationship they have with their readers is absolutely *crucial*: discussing his 1988 book '*The Beano*', which was made into a large-scale Sheffield Libraries activities day, a '*public celebration*', Robinson said,

*'...it is very satisfying to move it into the public arena, from the solitariness of writing a book.'* [Author 14]

Ian McMillan, asked to explain what he gains from meeting the readers of his books, replied:

*'I don't really see them as readers - I see them as people participating in an event, a unique event...'* [Author 5]

### **1:3 Benefits to the events organiser**

#### **1:3:1 The teacher**

With the mounting pressure of the OFSTED school inspections, certain writers believe that schools are trying to improve their reputation by having a prestigious author visit just before the inspection is due to take place. Anne Fine is among those who resentfully feels that she is often '*used as a resource*' in this way. As she asks,

*'Which is my job - being a teaching resource or a writer?'* [Author 4]

Yet it would be cynical to suggest that this is the only benefit the teacher derives from an author visit to his/her class. A representative from the

Sheffield Local Education Authority, for example, suggests that as long as the teachers participate fully, they *'should take away new techniques and insights to enrich their work.'* [Teacher 1]

A current Yorkshire schools inspector would take this idea a step further and suggest that in order to participate fully, a teacher without creative writing experience should attend a course or workshop *'in the art of writing'* [Teacher 2]. Teachers will then find the authors' words concerning the pleasures and in particular the difficulties of writing to be far more pertinent. An English teacher at a High School in Selby explains:

*'The authors who visit the school are always saying how difficult the process of writing is, and thus remind both teachers and children of the fact. Teachers are therefore more likely to be understanding of a child with writing difficulties: schoolchildren are expected to be creative every single day, and it's a lot to ask.'*  
[Teacher 4]

### **1:3:2 The librarian**

The author visit clearly raises the profile of the library, but it can also benefit staff at a more individual level. A senior librarian at Sheffield Central Library says that she experiences *'a great deal of fun, satisfaction, the pleasure of meeting the author...'* [Librarian 7]

A school librarian in Connecticut, in the United States, agrees that satisfaction is an important benefit to be derived. As she says,

*'I still find my greatest feeling of accomplishment is met whenever I match a kid with a book or turn a kid on to the entire body of work of a particular author...I also believe that a yearly author visit is a necessary - and logical - coupling.'* [Librarian 10]

### **1:3:3 The bookseller**

Evidently, the reasons for which a bookshop will host an author event are far more commercial than those of the school or library. Yet apart from the financial gain, the shop will also benefit from the network of contacts such an event will establish. The Manager of a children's bookshop in Huddersfield says that by organising an author visit,

*'I get to be in touch...I'm out in the sticks in publishing terms...[it]keeps the shop on the map.'* [Bookseller 2]

### **1:4 Cross-curricular benefits of the author visit**

*'Author visits don't have to be a waste of valuable time and resources but I have regrettably come to the conclusion that they are in fact just such a waste...'* [Author 18]

Although the American author Norma Fox Mazer is undoubtedly not alone in her view that the author visit is an expensive and worthless luxury, there are many more arguments to support its educational benefits, not merely in terms of English language and literature but across the entire educational curriculum. A current schools inspector supports his argument that writers' visits are essential by summarising the National Curriculum which states

*'...that pupils should hear writers lifting their text from the page, talking about the process of writing - the ideas, style, audience, structure...'* [Teacher 2]

And a representative from NAWE, the National Association of Writers in Education, claims that

*'...writers' work provides perhaps the core resource for education at all levels...'* [Teacher 7]

The Headteacher of a Chesterfield Junior School [Teacher 5] always makes an effort to ensure that the staff involved in the organisation of a visit by an author or storyteller '*tie it in with what we're doing.*' For example, the school has an annual theme, and in 1996 this was ethnicity so she invited two Nigerian women currently studying at Sheffield University to tell the children stories from their home country. This year the theme is music, and a steel drummer who is also a storyteller has been invited to entertain the children. At a secondary school level there are also teachers such as an English teacher at a Selby High School who tries to ensure that the educational value of the author visit is brought out:

*'We try to fit it in to our schemes of work if we can.'* [Teacher 4]

Authors, too, are aware that their visits are more beneficial to the children if they can be applied to more than the English lesson. Because of the historical nature of her books, sometimes the teachers preparing for a visit by Sheffield-based author Theresa Tomlinson will combine her visit with the class history studies. She finds any such projects to be extremely encouraging, and is pleased if her work has the result of '*sparking off other people*' in their creativity.

When author Anthony Masters visited a High School in North Tyneside the work he and the teachers did with the pupils became fully integrated into the G.C.S.E. programme with, for example, debates and taped discussion; flow diagrams; book logs; time charts and book cover designs. As the class teacher stated in his notes from the visit,

*'We intended from the outset that all work, both written and oral, should be integrated into the G.C.S.E. programme...'* (NCBF, 1990: 54)

In order for an author visit to be effective *in the long-term*, therefore, it would seem that it must not be regarded as an isolated event, but should instead be part of an ongoing, broad programme of work, involving as many elements of the curriculum as possible.

## 1:5 The negative side of the author visit

*‘Am I ever directly influenced by their ideas when I write?  
Absolutely not. I write my own stories, and frankly I couldn’t  
care less what other people think, children or adult. Soliciting  
other people’s opinions is a short-cut to insanity, moral  
derangement, physical decay, poverty, ruin, and death.’ [Author 9]*

Interaction with his young readers is clearly not as necessary an experience to Philip Pullman as it has been demonstrated to be with a number of other authors [Section 1:2]. For a number of writers, despite their probable enjoyment of the visits they make to libraries, schools or bookshops, there is little or no creative benefit to be derived.

Indeed, for Anne Fine, the visit could be described as *‘incredibly wasteful of the author’s time...’*, with the planning and organisation for each including at least:

- 4-5 letters
- Hours of telephone calls
- Uncomfortable train journeys
- Saying ‘no’ takes almost as much time...
- Tiredness: an inability to work the next day, the event as a whole is disrupting, even damaging to her work

And in July, author Julia Jarman admitted to having just re-started a novel she last worked on in May, because of the number of author visits she has been making.

If authors are prepared to disrupt their work schedule in order not to disappoint their young readers, is their expertise being suitably employed by the events organiser? Unfortunately, it would seem that a number of authors thoroughly resent the fact that some teachers regard their visits as the opportunity to have a break while the pupils are entertained. As the American author Norma Fox Mazer asks,

*‘What does this have to do with love of literature, with writing and reading?’ [Author 18]*

A representative from the Sheffield Local Education Authority suggests that the reason for which teachers expect such entertainment from the visiting author is that they have *‘little prior knowledge of their coming or of their work’* [Teacher 1]. If they made the effort to communicate with the author prior to his/her visit, in order to discover the educational and inspirational potential of such an experience for the children, perhaps all involved would derive more satisfaction from the event?

Despite the frequently positive views of the author visit which have been expressed by participants and organisers alike, there are also a number of dissatisfied and disillusioned people who would like to see a number of changes being made to the current system.

The initial proposal for this study was to consider whether the author/child meeting had a positive result on both parties. However, it has emerged during the course of this study that this is not the question which needs to be asked, as there are clearly far more reasons to support the positive side of the argument.

The issue is now to consider the difficulties which lead many people - not merely funding bodies - to believe that the author visit, although an excellent idea in theory, is not sufficiently worthwhile to justify the expense: is there a means of overcoming the difficulties and providing sufficient evidence to prove that the author visit is not merely an enjoyable luxury, but a valuable and necessary aspect of our children’s education?

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In order to successfully examine the issue of the interaction between the author and the child, either at an author visit or elsewhere, there are a number of investigations which need to be carried out:

One of the questions to be asked in the course of this study is which of the three usual locations for the author event - the bookshop, library or the school - is the most suitable. As such, this methodology has been adapted to include all three, but not necessarily by taking each one separately, as on occasions there can be an overlap.

The reactions of both children and authors have been monitored using one or more of the methods outlined below. Additionally, contact has been maintained with various people from the fields of education, bookselling and librarianship, in order to form a more informed view of the issues in question.

#### **2:1 Qualitative or quantitative methods**

This study has been conducted using largely qualitative methods. As Walker (1985) states, qualitative research tends to be less structured than quantitative, and can therefore be made to be

*‘...more responsive to the needs of respondents and to the nature of the subject matter.’ (3)*

Qualitative research is thus the more appropriate method for a study such as this whose subjects are from a wide range of social backgrounds, ages and professions. The quantitative survey tends to be rigid in structure, and would not have adapted well to such a necessarily varied and flexible approach to the subject.

Furthermore, a quantitative study would have had to draw on such a large sample (in order to obtain reliable and accurate data) that the three months allocated for the study would have been insufficient. In the case of the pupil questionnaires, therefore [Section 2:4], 28 responses out of a possible 105 is insufficient to calculate reliable percentages. As Sharpe and Dust (1990) warn,

‘...beware of giving the percentage of small numbers - this can be quite misleading.’ (114)

The decision had therefore to be taken to largely limit the more in-depth aspects of the research - interview, observation and visits - to the Sheffield area. This does not mean, however, that there is a lack of variety to the research methods, as every effort has been made to ensure that authors, librarians, booksellers, teachers, educational and literary experts and children have been consulted.

## **2:2 Interview method**

Because of the varied nature of the subjects, therefore, the interview structure has had to be adapted according to the individual needs of the interviewee.

The first interview which was conducted was with Mrs. Sheila Cowlshaw, the Librarian of the Children’s Section of the Westgate Central Library in Oxford. [Librarian 1]. This semi-structured interview (i.e. a list was prepared of the general subject areas to cover) could not, however, be regarded as the pilot study as at this early stage the exact subject for this project had not been decided upon, and merely had the idea of *Means of promoting children’s literature and libraries* as a general area. It was nonetheless a helpful interview in that it provided background information and underlined various problems - mainly of a financial nature - which would have to be borne in mind when carrying out a study relating at least in part to the *public* library service.

According to Oppenheim (1992) there are essentially two kinds of interview, the **standardised** and the **exploratory** interview. The former is that which collects quantitative data used in, for example, public opinion polls or market research. The latter is the more in-depth conversation, or *depth interview*, either free-style or formal, with longer responses anticipated, and, as Oppenheim suggests,

*‘It is concerned with trying to understand how ordinary people think and feel about the topics of concern to the research.’ (67)*

Clearly, for the purposes of this study, the latter approach is the more suitable: the standardised interview leaves very little room for personal opinion, which obviously forms a large part of a qualitative study into the interaction between two groups of people. This method was therefore adopted for the pilot study, which took place in Sheffield, interviewing three representatives from the Learning and Young People’s Unit at Bannerdale Education Centre.

*‘In principle, almost anything about a social survey can and should be piloted...it is dangerous to assume that we know in advance how respondents or fieldworkers will react..’*  
(Oppenheim, 1992 :48)

The purpose of the pilot study was therefore to collect all ideas into a workable format and to develop the issues to be researched. It was originally assumed that a structured list of questions would ensure that more useful and *directed* information would be obtained from the interviewee, but it was realised during the course of this pilot interview that this is not necessarily the case, and that a series of far more general subject areas gives the interviewee far more opportunity to express his/her opinion, and the time spent is far more productive. As Oppenheim (1992) states,

*‘...in a depth interview that is going well, there should hardly be any need for questions as such. The interviewer may merely suggest a topic with a word, or an unfinished sentence left trailing,*

*and the respondent will 'take it away' and will produce a rounded and personalised response...'* (73-4)

All subsequent interviews were therefore fairly *non-directive*, as the pilot revealed that less stilted and far more personalised information was obtained when the conversation was allowed, in a sense, to *run itself*. And as the interaction between two groups of people (i.e. the author and the child) can only be examined when personal opinions are expressed, the less structured method yields more results.

The obvious advantage of the interview is that the response rate will generally be far higher than with the postal questionnaire. However, interviews are also extremely time-consuming - and can be costly in terms of travel - and for such a brief study as this other means of investigation and data collection have had to be considered. This *methodological triangulation* is justified by Denzin (1978<sup>4</sup>) as follows:

'...no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors...Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed...'

 (28)

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<sup>4</sup> Denzin, N.K. (1978) *The Research Act*. New York: McGraw-Hill. In: Patton, M.Q. (1980) *Qualitative evaluation methods*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

## 2:3 Questionnaires

It was decided at an early stage of the research for this study that interviewing children would be too difficult in terms of location and of time. The most suitable location would have been the school, as there would be a group of children who had all experienced the same event, but as this study took place at the end of the academic year their teachers were on the whole unprepared to spare the time for such a lengthy and *non-curricular* process.

Furthermore, as Holmes (1990) discovered, as she tried to conduct interviews with secondary school pupils concerning their views about the storytelling session they had just attended,

‘...they were a bit panic stricken at being interviewed, and one scuttled off to the loo, to avoid it. Others talked to me in groups. I think they were a bit intimidated when they knew I was interviewing for my M.A. thesis but I got some stilted responses in the end.’ (88)

A simple questionnaire was therefore designed, aimed at the 8 - 11 year old pupil, and with the following description in mind:

‘The ideal questionnaire is brief, is attractive, asks unambiguous questions, is interesting and easy to complete...’<sup>5</sup>

Yet this too posed problems of its own. As I was unable to meet the children, I had no opportunity to explain that the sheet was not a test. For example, Teacher 3 made it clear to her pupils that they knew that I was not a teacher, but that I needed help with my project, and she claims that they therefore felt that their responses were important. This could certainly explain why their responses were so detailed [See Appendix 5]. The responses from the second

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<sup>5</sup> Martyn, J. & Lancaster, F.W. (1981) *Investigative methods in library and information science: an introduction*. Arlington: Information Resources Press In: Heather, P. & Stone, S. (1984) *Questionnaires*. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press. CRUS Guide 5

school were far less detailed and expressive, and I had the impression that Teacher 6 gave my questionnaires to the class as she would any other piece of coursework. Sharpe and Dust (1990) suggest that in such instances, pupils

‘...must be reassured that they are not being assessed on the basis of their answers.’ (95)

## **2:4 Letters**

As there was a limited amount of time available for the data collection process of this study, it would have been unfeasible to conduct only interviews with all subjects. The initial stage was therefore to write to a wide range of people with a fairly structured letter which asked for responses to various subject-related questions. Care was nonetheless taken to tailor each letter to the person in question, in order that they felt that their response would be particularly important to my research, and were therefore more likely to reply. Three such examples are included in Appendix 3. The response rate to the letters was therefore fairly high at 70% (56 out of 80), and a number of letters led to an invitation for further contact in the form of an interview. The main advantage of sending an initial letter was that people were generally well prepared for the interview, and had thought in advance of answers to my questions.

## **2:5 Electronic mail**

With the rapid development of electronic networking, it has been feasible to consider electronic mail as a means of questioning people for this study. The majority of those contacted could have been reached by mail or telephone - and indeed, several contacts were established in this way - but electronic mail, described by Dempsey (1992:63) as an ‘*enabling mechanism*’, not only has the capacity to rapidly connect people across vast distances, but also breaks down certain bureaucratic barriers: generally speaking, the language people use in an e-mail is far more informal than that which they would use in a letter, and is more

likely to encourage the subject to provide personal information. It was therefore possible to contact and receive a reply from Dr. Gilroy of the Education Department here at the University within half an hour, whereas it would probably have taken several days to meet him in person.

However, the potential danger of electronic mail is that any official organisation may simply read the sender's message and, if it is unable to reply immediately will send an unhelpful *automatic return message* of the kind received from the Illinois Public Library Enquiries Desk:<sup>6</sup>

*'Hello from the IPL! We regret that we cannot answer the reference question you recently submitted to the IPL Reference Center...our all-volunteer staff has received so many reference questions that we are completely swamped.'*<sup>6</sup>

## **2:6 Observation**

Observational methods have been chosen for certain aspects of this research, mostly out of necessity but also because, as Mullings (1984) suggests,

*'Observation studies events as they actually occur and also what people do rather than what they say they do. This approach can sometimes be preferable to getting respondents to recall past behaviour and experiences.'* (1)

At the Hay Children's Festival both children and authors - i.e. the subjects of this research - were present, and as it proved difficult to conduct an interview with people who had not been previously contacted, an observation of their behaviour was made. Similarly, at the Library Resources Exhibition at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham, the observation carried out was also *semi-*

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<sup>6</sup> From an e-mail to BKT received 05/05/97

*participant* - i.e. I was present at the events but only had a limited opportunity to interact with the subjects.

Kunz et al (1970) provide justification for this form of research method having been chosen:

*‘Whenever actual behaviour is of primary interest instead of statements on behaviour, attitudes, opinions, feelings etc., observation procedures are appropriate.’ (28)*

Through observation, therefore, it is possible to discover that which actually occurs rather than hearing an interviewee’s subjective version of events.

## **2:7 Key to cited interviews and correspondence**

Of the 56 letters received [including electronic mail] and 21 interviews conducted, those which have been cited in this study have been referenced according to date and profession, using the following straightforward key:-

e.g. **Librarian 1** [= S. Cowlshaw ]

e.g. **Author 7** [= Michael Hardcastle]

For a complete list please refer to Appendix 1.

### **N.B. Reference to the author**

Where the author of this study is referred to, the abbreviation BKT will be used.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter contains a selection of the relevant literature which is available in the field of author visits. It therefore illustrates to some extent the ideas and influences which affected my research.

I have focused on the gradual development of the subject, since the establishment in 1968 of the first **Writers in Schools** scheme by the Arts Council of Great Britain, and then more particularly on two major developments which affected the literature in the field. It also seemed convenient to divide the second half of the review into two sections - 'Guidance Literature' and 'Evaluation.'

It would be useful to observe at this point that much of the relevant literature in this area can be termed '*Grey Literature*', which the '*Harrod's Librarians' Glossary*' (Prytherch, 1995) describes as

'Semi-published material, for example reports, internal documents, theses etc. not formally published or available commercially, and consequently difficult to trace bibliographically.' (285)

For example, Yorkshire and Humberside Arts produced a directory (Leahy, 1995) of brief biographies of 'Writers in the Region'. Similarly, the Youth Libraries Group (1996) of the Library Association have published 'From Poets to Puppeteers - an alphabetical listing of the performers.'

These are only two examples of the wealth of grey literature available in this area, without which this study would lose many of its relevant sources of information.

### 3:1 Overview of the current situation

The literature pertaining to children and to the means of encouraging their reading and writing habits is considerable, although only a fraction of this is relevant to the subject of the author event.

Chambers (1991) briefly acknowledges that one of the roles of the librarian is to encourage children to read for themselves by bringing external visitors, for example authors or illustrators, to their schools. Similarly, Marshall (1988) sees the author visit as an important means for the library to promote its services to the young potential reader, but only as part of a

‘...reading week in which authors, publishers, printers, booksellers etc. describe their work; reading encouraged...’ (160),

and Gawith (1987) suggests that children could also become acquainted with different authors by researching their backgrounds in the form of library activities centred around author profiles.

However, these studies all consider the author visit at an extremely superficial level.

### 3:2 Development of the subject

Since the initiation of the **Writers in Schools** scheme in 1968 by the Arts Council of Great Britain who believed

‘...that both schools and writers had much to gain from a fruitful, perhaps challenging, interchange between creative artists and their future readership’ (In: Brownjohn, 1976: 33),

a surprisingly small amount of literature has been produced on the subject. As such, no real examination of its possibilities seems to have been carried out, and the author visit is given no real significance.

The author Alan Brownjohn (1976) wrote an article which briefly outlined some of the potential benefits of the Writers in Schools scheme, both to the school and to the author, who is made to think about the process of writing: whereas

‘...conversations between writers on these matters are almost altogether technical, specialised and introspective, laymen’s questions from school audiences are the most open, challenging and useful ones.’ (35)

Five years later, McGuigan (1981), similarly investigating the Arts Council’s system of **Grants to Writers**, acknowledged that at that point there were very few conclusions to be drawn in such an underdeveloped and generally unexplored area:

‘It is very difficult to come to any definite conclusions about the success of failure of the Arts Council system of Grants to Writers.’  
(105)

### **3:3 Important developments in the field**

In recent years, there have been two developments in particular which have had an effect on the current picture regarding author events.

Firstly, the advent of the **National Curriculum** has clearly revised the place of the arts in the educational field. In the subject area of English, reading and writing attainment targets have been set. The Department of Education and Science (1988) produced a report which emphasised the need for a strong creative writing element to be maintained in the primary school syllabus, stating that good primary school teachers pay attention to the process of writing as practised by experienced writers, and are then able to design classroom activities which allow the children to behave like real writers.

This clearly brings to light the issue of the visiting author, that there may be some educational value to the professional writer working with school children.

Secondly, and more recently, due to financial difficulties at a national level, regional arts authorities have been reducing the amount of funding they offer to schools for one-day visits. In 1997, Yorkshire and Humberside arts are now only funding the larger **Writers in Residence** schemes, and the Arts Council of England's (1997) '*Writers in Residence Guidelines*' is clearly intended to turn people's attention away from the one-day event:

'The programme aims primarily to bring writers from overseas to this country *for an extended period of time*. (4)

### **3:4 Guidance Literature**

Since the Department of Education and Science's (1988) document emphasised the potential importance of author/child interaction, there have been a limited number of attempts to produce literature which provides guidance and assistance to those planning author events, in order that they are able to derive the maximum possible benefit from them.

With such limited funding available, these guidelines are particularly relevant to help schools, libraries, bookshops or any other interested parties, to organise not only effective but *cost effective* events.

In 1990, the findings of the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) examination of the current artists in schools situation were published (Sharpe and Dust, 1990). This remains one of the few publications to address this subject in any depth, but as it attempts to look at all artists in schools - actors, musicians, craftworkers, dancers, etc. - the subject of visiting writers receives only limited attention. However, it does provide seven-point guidelines for a '*Project Brief*' which aims to help both teacher and artist derive the most benefit and pleasure from the event:

‘A general project brief helps to clarify the purpose and the ‘shape’ of the project, so that everyone taking part can get a picture of what will be involved...The brief should be open to negotiations by the school and the artist.’ (38)

Morley took a large step forward in 1991 when he proposed that his work ‘Under the Rainbow’ would

‘...help break down some of the barriers that often exist between the world of the school and that of the arts.’ (9)

Indeed, this is undoubtedly one of the more significant pieces of writing in this area, but as with Sharpe and Dust’s (1990) publication, its attempt to consider *all* categories of ‘Writers and Artists in Schools’ means that coverage of each is fairly superficial.

Miklowitz’s (In: Gallo, 1992) essay, ‘Secrets to successful author visits’, provides a brief but practical guide to teachers and librarians, outlining the need for preparation and follow-up after the visit.

Also practical are the NCBF’s (1990) author visit checklists, which comprise a step-by-step series of questions for the event organiser to use as a guideline and ensure that (s)he has covered every necessary aspect of the visit, in the planning stages, on the day, and following the event.

### **3:5 Evaluation**

The area of author visits which is least well represented in the available literature is undoubtedly that of evaluation. There have been a number of authors who have emphasised the difficulties which arise when attempts are made to assess their value. Brownjohn (1976) wrote an article outlining some of the problems associated with such schemes, and even suggested that their evaluation was impossible, because

‘...there are too many variables and imponderables.’ (33)

Similarly, McGuigan (1981) asks:

‘Would quantity, for instance the number of books resulting from assistance, or quality, the literary value of assisted work, constitute ‘*success*’? Enumeration is easier than evaluation, but in itself would hardly provide a vantage point for assessing the results of a scheme for assisting artistic creation.’ (1)

A useful step was taken in 1986 by the teachers Nightingale and Norton who, although claiming that it is ‘largely impossible’ (18) to measure the success of author events, nonetheless suggest that there are ‘useful indicators’ (18) which would help the organiser to obtain feedback:

‘The local children’s librarian told us that in the term leading up to the event they had never had so many children visit them. Our own library loans, in school...rose by some 500% and a high level of borrowing was, and is, being maintained long after it has finished.’ (18)

However, in what is often regarded as one of the definitive works on the subject of children’s librarianship, Hill (1973) suggests that these kinds of effects are ‘irrelevant’ (81) in determining the value of author events, as

‘Anything which draws attention to books and relates them to other aspects of life is valuable; anything which makes libraries into lively, vivid and contemporary places is good...’ (81)

There is clearly divided opinion as to the means of evaluating the impact or otherwise of the author visit on all parties involved, and that which there is has not been stated in any real detail or depth of analysis.

Holmes’ (1990) study of ‘*The Problems and Possibilities of Writers in Schools*’ seems to represent the most comprehensive attempt made thus far to analyse the author visit in any significant depth. The author, herself a visiting writer, observed behaviour in schools during both one-day visits and, more particularly, at longer writer in residence schemes over a period of two years.

Despite the implications of the title, the subject of Holmes' work is an examination of the ambiguities in the roles of the writer and the teacher, and although it does consider the issue of the evaluation of the author visit, it proposes no real means of doing so. Furthermore, it does not consider the author event which takes place in any venue other than the school.

### **3:6 The present study**

The aim of this present study is therefore to extend Holmes' work by focusing on a wider range, not only of authors and teachers, but also of educationalists, librarians, booksellers and funding bodies in order to produce an effective framework for the evaluation of the author visit.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE FORMAT OF THE AUTHOR EVENT

What would be the preferred format of the author event for all interested parties, and could these opinions be correlated in order to produce one *ideal* framework from which to produce a list of recommendations which would attempt to ensure future satisfaction for all?

#### 4:1 The Basic Structure

*'Here I am, then', she announced. 'As arranged. In writing. Several months ago. So I suggest you simply show me to your school library, clear me a table, bring in no more than sixty pupils to whom I'll speak about the business of writing books, and then you can come back and fetch them an hour and a half later.'* (Fine, 1991:9)

This is a description of an author visit at its most basic, but it is nonetheless an outline of a format which has proved to be extremely successful with many authors. In general the authors who were consulted for the purpose of this study adopt essentially the same programme outline, which will last for between one and one and a half hours:

- ◆ The author's introduction to the children, making sure they know his/her work
- ◆ A description of the authorly process, i.e. how (s)he writes and where (s)he finds the ideas for his/her books
- ◆ Readings from selected books to illustrate points which have been made
- ◆ A question and answer session during which the children ask the author questions they may or may not have prepared in advance
- ◆ A booksigning period where additional questions may possibly be asked of the author

The length of time spent on each section varies according to the author's personal preferences: Michael Hardcastle, for example, devotes the larger part of

his session to answering the children's questions in as much detail as possible, whereas Kaye Umansky prefers to read from her books for most of her visit. Both seem to be very successful, in that they are repeatedly asked to visit schools, libraries and bookshops to meet their young readers. Yet there are other opinions which need also to be taken into consideration in this study, such as that which is expressed by a representative from the Schools' Library Service in Sheffield: he is completely disinterested in the mere *literary event*, such as the example given above, and would prefer to see the author involved in more *activities* for the children, of the nature usually included in the Writer in Residence programmes [See Section 4:8].

At the Northern Arts Conference, *Artists in Schools*, held in Darlington in November 1988, artists and educationalists joined forces to identify the four most commonly adopted styles of working at author events, which are as follows:

1. A '*looking-over-the-shoulder*' style where pupils are given no artistic instruction but are given the opportunity to learn about the artist's creative process.
2. A '*half-and-half*' approach, in which part of the artist's time is spent on his/her own work, and the remainder on directing pupils' work.
3. A 100% involvement by the artist in directing pupils' work on an agreed project.
4. A '*gradual and developing involvement*' which is based on both artist and pupil becoming more aware of each other's needs and working methods.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Morley (1991:52) *Under the Rainbow: writers and artists in schools*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.

Morley (1991) claims that all four styles could be used for either the short visit or the longer, full-time residency, but for reasons of time the first two are most commonly used for the former, the second two for the latter. Essentially, however, there is no infallible recipe for the perfect visit, and the events organiser must have a flexible programme which (s)he is prepared to adapt according to the needs of all participants. As Challis (1986) suggests,

*'It needs different approaches altogether to keep feet off desks and elbows on.'* (22)

Yet what are those different approaches? Which aspects of issues need to be taken into consideration when organising - or participating in - an author event?

#### **4:2 Preparation: '*...we live and breathe the author for months...*'**

It would seem reasonable to suggest that no events organiser would consider inviting an author to speak to the children without first attempting to ensure that the audience is at least vaguely familiar with his or her work. However, it will become clear that there are many different ways in which this preparation can take place.

According to Adèle Geras,

*'A first prerequisite is that the books and the children should be brought together ahead of time. If the children know your work, then meeting you means something to them.'* [Author 6]

At the same time, without this form of preparation, Berlie Doherty believes that the event becomes 'a one-sided performance' and that there is nothing to be gained.

A second Sheffield-based author, Theresa Tomlinson, would take this a step further and suggest that the children should not only read her books before

meeting her but should actually do some work centred around the various historical themes they contain. An example of this took place at a Chesterfield junior school, where pupils preparing for the visit of Michael Rosen not only looked at his work, but also watched recordings of various BBC television programmes he had written or presented in order, as the Headteacher said,

*'...that children got an impression of him before he came.'*

[Teacher 5]

Similarly, a school librarian in Connecticut wrote that during the final two weeks before the day of a visit to her school, she takes the time to meet each class involved with the event in order to exchange information and personal anecdotes concerning the author in question, so that they feel more inclined to meet them in person. Long before these final two weeks, however, the preparation has been very much underway:

*'Frankly, we live and breathe that author for months, and my kids are prepped!'* [Librarian 10]

But what of the teachers? We have already seen that there can frequently be misunderstandings between the teacher and the artist, often due to a lack of preparation on the teacher's part. So how can (s)he prepare if (s)he is unsure as to the purpose or value of the author visit? Bretton Hall College of Higher Education made an attempt in the last decade to overcome this problem as part of their project to extend the effect of visiting writers, *The Bretton Writing Project*. Not only did this encourage children's creativity, it also offered a series of writing workshops for teachers, to take place prior to school visits. The success of these is illustrated in the following comments made by participants following a session by Gillian Clarke for a group of Bradford High School teachers:

- *'How infrequently teachers write creatively'*
- *'It makes you realise how children feel'*

- *'It would be good if children could see some of our writing'* (Tatham, 1987:20)

Hosting an author event after having participated in such an introductory session must surely result not only in a greater awareness of the writer's craft, but also in a greater *willingness* to participate, as a teacher would inevitably be far more comfortable with something that falls within his/her own frame of reference.

For a school librarian, preparing for the author event is simply a matter of ensuring that the teachers whose classes are involved make their pupils aware of the need for preparation. For the public librarian, however, surely the organisation of an author event is far more challenging? In response to this question a senior Children's Librarian in Leeds, whilst acknowledging the difficulty of library events promotion because of the varied locations of their users, remarked upon the relative ease with which library staff *could* produce attractive publicity material for the event, with an eye-catching display of the author's books to be made available to the children both before and after the visit takes place. Children who have been a party to such simple but thorough preparation are far more likely, suggests Theresa Tomlinson, to be enthusiastic and to have more detailed questions to ask the author.

A more *active* preparation was undertaken at the Sdr-jydske Landsbibliotek in Denmark, where staff encouraged the children to prepare a list of ten questions which they would like to ask the authors, so that they would have a prompt - if necessary - on the day of the visit, thereby avoiding any uneasy silence. Inevitably, with the comfort of this prompt,

*'...they also asked questions during the events, which emerged spontaneously.'* [Librarian 9]

Despite the fact that no two schools or libraries will prepare their young audiences for an author visit in the same way, it seems to be generally accepted that those organisers who do not make the books available to the children well in advance are unlikely to host 'successful' events - however success be quantified. This notion is confirmed by a representative from Morley Books, a well-known

school and library bookseller and organiser of large-scale author events for young people - who advises all such organisers that however lowly their visitor and however limited their resources,

*'...if a predetermined plan and brief have been put together then the event will work.'* [Bookseller 3]

#### **4:3 Choice of author: *'...recommendation is always good insurance...'***

There are very few organisations who have a sufficiently large budget that they can regard the author event as anything less than a special occasion, and choosing the most appropriate author for the audience is therefore extremely important. All organisers have their own preferred means of doing so, but there are a number of aspects which are common to each.

In terms of the availability of authors, a representative from Morley Books suggest that the first action an events organiser should take is to see which authors are likely to be prepared to visit by finding out which titles are going to be published, and when. Firstly, authors today need to promote their books more than ever, particularly following the collapse of the Net Book Agreement in October 1995. As Anne Fine says,

*'Writers can write and write but they won't get readers unless there's a serious amount of marketing.'* [Author 4]

Secondly, publishers tend to make available large quantities of free promotional material, often including author profiles, to those who ask for it around the date of the book's market launch.

Generally, however, the first step taken by librarians and teachers is to use the process of **networking**, i.e. using usually informal means of communication to obtain further information. An English teacher at a secondary school in Selby simply uses friends, personal contacts in the first instance, and as she says, 'Sometimes I've just struck lucky.' Networking could also involve contacting

organisations such as the Young Book Trust or the Youth Libraries Group for their view as to the author's suitability for the event you are hosting, or it could simply be a matter of contacting colleagues in other authorities to see whether they have had experience of the author you propose to invite. This is a necessary caution, warns Hazel Townson, herself a children's author, as

*'Sometimes a marvellous author is not a marvellous speaker, and recommendation is always good insurance.'* (in: Youth Libraries Group, 1996:4)

Yet although this 'underground network of contacts' [Bookseller 3] is undoubtedly a starting point, the information it reveals tends not to be particularly critical: accurate information can only be guaranteed when it is acquired at first hand. This view is confirmed by the Senior Children's Librarian for Leeds City Libraries, who would also use the knowledge of children's authors which he has acquired both through his work as a librarian and also through his work with the local Children's Book Group, who often invite authors to their meetings as guest speakers. Where possible, therefore, many librarians - and teachers - would try to hear their proposed author speak before booking them for an event, as what is regarded as a success in one school or library may not necessarily be so in another.

There is yet another school of thought on the subject of author selection, that which is expressed by The Arts Council of England who, in laying down the guidelines for their *Writers in Residence* programme, suggest that events organisers need not go to such lengths before making a choice:

*'Tailoring the residency in such a way is of course not absolutely essential. Writers and participants can find it equally valuable to work with people they might not otherwise have encountered.'*  
(Arts Council, 1997:5)

Yet as the majority of author events are *not* funded by Arts Council schemes but rather from extremely limited and precious resources, it would seem reasonable to

suggest that working with authors ‘they might not otherwise have encountered’ presents too much of a risk.

#### **4:4 Location: adapting to the environment**

It does not necessarily follow that a school will host an author event to a group of schoolchildren, or that a bookshop will organise a writer’s visit to take place on its own premises. Selecting the appropriate venue can in fact be regarded by certain events co-ordinators as an essential aspect of their organisation.

A representative from the Schools’ Library Service in Sheffield [Teacher 1] firmly believes that the school author visit is far more likely to be successful than the library event, for the simple reason that a group of schoolchildren are an automatically captive audience, thus sparing the organisers the need to carry out any promotion. And in this supposedly captive environment the author is surely more able to have a flexible programme which could be adapted to include, for example, writing workshops where considered appropriate. As Linda Hoy suggests, the library

*‘...does restrict you to the talk...you can’t really run writing workshops...the facilities aren’t there...[there are] too many distractions...[and] traffic noises...’* [Author 11]

But do the participating authors feel the same way? Certainly Michael Hardcastle declares himself to be

*‘...convinced of the great value of working with children, especially in their own environment...’* [Author 7],

and therefore believes that it is often more suitable if the venue for his visits is a school rather than a public library. Theresa Tomlinson, on the other hand, while agreeing with Michael Hardcastle that with the school visit ‘you see more of the environment the children work in’, suggests that the library-based event is

‘perhaps more of a special occasion: the children are taken out of school’, and the librarians quite often participate in the event themselves, so that the day ‘feels like more of a treat for the children.’ [Author 19]

Similarly, a former Sheffield schools Inspector acknowledges the potential benefits of the school location but realises that in the current economic climate the school would face the daunting task of raising the money not only to pay for the author visit, but also to buy the books for the children to prepare for it. It would therefore seem sensible to propose the public library as being a more suitable location.

But surely an event hosted in a library is more than simply a money saving device for schools? To those who appreciate the difficulties faced by many children’s libraries in appealing to the high percentages of potential but non-active members, the library seems to have the ideal opportunity to use its premises as a means of drawing in more members. The author Anne Fine is one who holds such beliefs, having stated that

*‘When you have a library author visit, the child comes through the doors of the library.’* [Author 4]

Linda Hoy develops on this idea when she discusses the use of the author event to open out the library to the community, by offering an open invitation to any interested parties, whether or not they are members of the library.

For Rony Robinson, a Sheffield-based author whose 1988 book ‘The Beano’ was used as the theme for a day of library activities, and so who obviously has experience of the author-centred event, the library visit promotes the library as a social venue, and ‘stops libraries just being places where children borrow books.’ [Author 14]

The bookshop is a further possible location which is often made available to the school or library group when planning their author events. A senior librarian in Sheffield [Librarian 7] who spends a large proportion of her working year organising promotional events stated that bookshops are in fact ‘increasingly

used for venues of author visits.’ When questioned as to the particular benefits of this alternative location, she stated that they provide ‘support in kind: prizes, displays.’ For the *Off The Shelf* promotional fortnight in Sheffield this year, for example, Waterstone’s have formed a temporary partnership with the central City Library in order to loan their premises and thus to potentially appeal to a wider audience.

However, despite having taken the above opinions into account, it must nonetheless be acknowledged that none of the interviewees believe their preferred location to be the only suitable venue. Indeed, the above cited Sheffield librarian claimed that in almost every case, wherever the City Library events have taken *place*,

*‘...the author has adapted to the environment.’* [Librarian 7]

A similar point of view is held by the library bookseller, Morley Books: the majority of the events they organise take place in libraries, they claim, as they are ‘our major customer...they want to have it at their own bases’[Bookseller 3]. At the same time, they feel that the school is an equally suitable venue. In the commercial sector, therefore, location is unimportant, as the client’s desire is priority:

Although certain locations can be problematic to the author who feels, as Linda Hoy suggested, that there can be ‘...*too many distractions...[and]traffic noises...*’, the audience does not necessarily feel the same way. A Lancashire Junior Preparatory Department attends author events at the local bookshop which take place while customers continue to choose and buy books. Their teacher claims that the children remain undisturbed. Essentially, therefore, as she says,

*‘The venue is unimportant...good authors have held the children’s attention.’* [Teacher 3]

#### **4:5 The audience**

**4:5:1 Size of audience: *'Twelve kids who've read all you've ever written'***

There is so little money available today to fund author visits that it is hardly surprising that schools in particular are guilty of making the author available to as many children as are able to fit into one room. The Headteacher of a Chesterfield Junior School will always try to ensure that all two hundred pupils are present at each visit, or at least that the author does two presentations, one to each half of the school. As she reasonably says,

*'Because it costs so much I've got to target a lot of children for this money.'* [Teacher 5]

However, having consulted the authors themselves as to their views concerning their preferred size of audience, the picture looks very different. The American author Lois Duncan rather wryly observes that with a large group of children,

*'You have to put on a dog and pony act to hold their interest.'*  
[Author 2]

And Theresa Tomlinson agrees that additional problems arise as the audience grows: with a larger group, she says,

*'You have to be a little bit more teacherlike to keep control.'*  
[Teacher 19]

So how large would an audience need to be in order to prevent the author feeling obliged to either entertain or discipline the children? Rony Robinson realises that with such extreme financial restrictions in every school, it is understandable that a school will attempt to involve 'as many as possible to get value'[Author 14] out of the author visit. Whilst acknowledging that it is right that 'Every kid that can should get the advantage', however, Robinson feels that the target group is then 'not necessarily right', either in terms of size or age, and the audience can be less than receptive. After having worked with a wide range of group sizes, he has come to the conclusion that the ideal group would consist of *'Twelve kids who've read all you've ever written'*: this would lead, he claims, to 'a different kind of contact altogether.'

Lois Duncan agrees that she *has* participated in successful events on those occasions

*'...when I have spoken to select groups of students from honor classes, who don't think of the event as simply a way to get out of class.'* [Author 2]

So for her it is not only a matter of meeting a *small* group, but of meeting a *select* group, i.e. those pupils who have chosen to be present at her visits. She recounts an experience she had earlier this year in Sitka, Alaska, where students had to 'earn points' to attend the event by reading a number of her books, watching a film version of one of these books, writing a biographical report, and coming prepared with questions pertaining to specific books.

Authors seem to be unanimous in their preference for the smaller audience for their presentations. However, in her notes on 'Planning an author visit' Hazel Townson warns other writers,

*'Do not make unreasonable demands about the size of your audience. Some children's authors limit this to thirty or less. If a librarian is paying you a large fee, (s)he wants value for money by inviting a fair number of people along.'* (YLG, 1996: Point 34)

And certainly, in the case of the bookshop, where the main aim is to entice as many potential customers as possible to the author event, it is only to be expected that in order to ensure a reasonably high attendance,

*'We prefer if we are having a speaker to organise an audience in advance and will therefore invite a school or class in to the shop in preparation...'* [Bookseller 1]

Nonetheless, the smaller audience, although less obviously *cost effective*, is believed to many to be a more inspiring and enjoyable event. As Theresa Tomlinson suggests, the smaller session 'becomes more personal', and 'children

often feel that they can ask more personal questions', and, as Gloria D. Miklowitz states,

*'...there is an opportunity for an exchange of ideas.'* (In: Gallo, 1992: 29)

#### 4:5:2 Audience involvement: *'It's a shared experience.'*

All five librarians who were interviewed for this study discussed the importance of audience interaction at an author event. A member of staff at Sheffield Central Children's Library emphasised the value of 'getting children involved' [Librarian 6], but to what extent do the authors feel the same? In an article she wrote in 1993 Anne Fine writes of the unease she feels regarding the author/reader relationship:

*'When I wrote my first novel, I had no sense of a public, or publishers. Why should I? I'd never met them...I still can't quite believe that particular novel is firmly in the public domain. It still seems very private to me somehow.'* (34)

If library staff invite an author/illustrator (or illustrator) to meet their young readers they expect him/her to be prepared to draw for and with the children. The artist Colin Hawkins, for example, uses his quick illustrations to arouse the children's interest and to encourage them to try illustrating for themselves. One of the more obvious examples of a charismatic author/illustrator is Korky Paul, who has recently visited a number of libraries in the Sheffield area. The Children's Senior Library and Information Assistant at Chapeltown Library described Korky's visit as follows:

*'He read with enthusiasm and gusto encouraging the children to interact. Korky would pause at certain points and ask the children what they think should come next. Every answer was praised and the children given encouragement to embellish their ideas. After reading out the story he spoke of how he drew each character and asked for the children's opinions. At the end he asked for a volunteer, then with great show he drew a caricature of the child. This was greeted with laughter and shouts for me next. Korky tried his best to include everyone.'* [Librarian 4]

Interaction is clearly then crucial to each of Korky Paul's visits, and it would be inappropriate for the events organisers to discourage what can often be lengthy events in favour of the usual *talk plus questions* session.

Another author who favours the interactive approach when meeting her young readers is Kaye Umansky. At the 1997 Hay Children's Festival she adopted a highly physical reading technique which consisted of sharing a private joke with the children, pointing and laughing at the excluded adult members of the audience. Clearly illustrating the rhythm of poetry, she encouraged the children to click their fingers in time to the lines they 'helped' her to recite. Between each poem or story extract she asked the children questions to keep them interested:

*'Do you ever have bad days like that?'*

*'Well, wouldn't that get on your nerves?'*

Calderdale Children's and Education Unit (1996) produced a series of notes for a storytelling course for library staff, and these made clear the need to appreciate that reading can be 'a shared and interactive experience', and that sharing books and poems in the way favoured by Kaye Umansky is

*'...the most enjoyable way of bringing books and children together...' (Sheet 2)*

If such a technique were to be adopted by teachers preparing their pupils for an author event, surely the interaction between the author and the child would be greater still? Hiatt (1997), herself a teacher, bases her teaching on the idea that her pupils would have far more confidence to pick up and read any book if they were able

*'...to understand the inception of a book, how it works and how ultimately the reader gains a shared ownership of the story.'*  
(13)

A former Schools Inspector, now a local poet, devotes much of the time he spends meeting children to discussing the construction of the poems he has

written. He feels that this may be due to what he calls his ‘teacherly conscience’, but acknowledges that the technique he adopts does encourage the children to contribute, to interact, to express their opinions.

With teachers adopting authorly techniques in their *preparation* for author events and authors adopting educational methods for their *presentations*, participating children would presumably have more of an understanding and an appreciation of the processes of reading and writing.

#### **4:6 The authorly process: ‘a real insight into the way they work.’**

This, according to the Head of the Children’s Library Service in Leeds, is the definition of a good author visit. Certainly, if we look to the authors themselves we can see that this is often reflected in their chosen presentation outline. The American teenage author Gloria D. Miklowitz, for example, believes that each time she meets her readers she should at the very least leave them with some idea as to

*‘...how an author gets ideas, researches, sends a proposal, develops the story and plot, rewrites and rewrites...’* [Author 13]

Audiences may also be interested in the additional aspects of being an author, such as editing, choosing an appropriate dust jacket design, publicising the book and finally, in reading and replying to fan mail.

Receiving this sort of information may not necessarily result in an increased creative output from the children, but it seems to be the view of many authors that children are genuinely interested in hearing the author de-mystify that which Julia Jarman [Author 17] describes as the ‘writing recipe.’ And if there is this level of enthusiasm, then surely it follows that the audience at an author visit are more likely to develop a wider interest in the processes of reading and writing.

#### **4:7 The question and answer session**

*'I liked how she gave us an opportunity to ask our own questions.'*

[Amanda Bursk, Appendix 5c]

Almost without exception, the author event will include a question and answer session of a variable length, which generally follows the speaker's presentation and allows the children to discover, for example, where the idea for a certain story came from, or when the author decided to write a book. It is inevitable that questions will be repeated as authors visit different groups of children with the same presentation, and it would be reasonable to expect that this would eventually become tiresome to the speaker. However, this is not necessarily the case. Visiting the 1997 Hay Children's Festival Anne Fine, having had her question time cut short by the festival organiser, despite the frantically raised hands of children desperate to talk to her, told the children

*'I would love to answer your questions...until your parents dragged you away.'*

Another author who acknowledges the importance of answering the children's questions is Jane Yolen, who thoughtfully says,

*'The questions they ask...rarely surprise me any more...But I answer each question as though it were the first time I had ever heard it because I am reminded of something the great editor Ursula Nordstrom once said: 'The children are new though we are not.'* (Miles, 1990: 137)

To the author Michael Hardcastle his young readers' questions are particularly essential: the larger part of his sessions are devoted to answering these '*in as much detail as possible*', and his reasoning for this is that he tries

*'...to ensure that they have complete access to me as a writer and storyteller...'* [Author 7]

Certainly Kaye Umansky seemed unhappy to be deprived of her question and answer session at the 1997 Hay Children's Festival by what the festival organiser described as 'a tight schedule': instead of being allowed to stay and talk to her

young readers as they sat around her for her presentation, she was ushered out by the publishers' representative to sign the books the children had bought. Observation of this session revealed that the children seemed inhibited by the presence of this representative, and not one of the group - previously so enthusiastic - asked Kaye a question. Whereas this embarrassment could be avoided in a school or library situation, by the teachers having first discussed and rehearsed with the children possible questions to ask the author, the bookshop or literary festival event would rely far more on the astuteness of the organiser.

The booksigning is clearly an important part of many author events from a commercial point of view, but perhaps the organisers ought to exercise a little tact, especially when the audience consists mainly of children. Time should also be set aside for questions to be asked in a less pressurised environment than that of the head of a long queue of impatient fans.

#### **4:8 Writers in Residence**

On the whole this study concentrates on the value of the one-day author visit to a school, library, bookshop or literary festival, but in the light of recent funding cuts as decided by the Arts Council in favour of the *Writers in Residence* scheme, it has been decided not to overlook this longer and more involved version of the author visit.

An interview with a representative from Yorkshire and Humberside Arts [Arts Council 1] revealed that the Arts Council of England - and therefore all its regional divisions - have recently ceased to fund schools' author events. When asked why, the interviewee said that the same handful of schools had been repeatedly submitting applications for funding, even though they tended not to be the schools with particularly severe financial difficulties. The Arts Council were therefore dissatisfied with the validity of the applications, he claimed, and so decided to abort the funding scheme. Furthermore, he claimed that the Arts Council 'largely felt that it was of no value to have authors working for one day', and even suggested that those who believe that they do serve a real purpose hold

‘a rosy-eyed view.’ He acknowledged that they ‘might excite a child, *but what happens afterwards is the most important thing*’, and there needs to be

*‘...much more thinking about how writers and teachers can work together.’* [Arts Council 1]

Two teachers who have spent a great deal of time in fostering this writer/teacher relationship are Nightingale and Norton (1986). They came to the conclusion that although the single isolated visit was ‘valuable enough as a way of popularising literature’ (12), it was also subject to two major problems.

Firstly, they claimed that in such a brief visit the author would be unable to overcome the pupils’ ‘natural shyness’ (12), and would receive only a limited response from children who, given a longer period to become acquainted with the stranger and his/her working technique, would be far more enthusiastic.

Secondly, because of the isolated nature of the one-day visit, what was undoubtedly an enjoyable meeting can soon be forgotten by pupils who have many other subjects to contend with in the course of the school day. As Nightingale and Norton suggest,

*‘...one hour spent with an interesting writer may be stimulating, but sandwiched between Maths and Physics it may well lose any sense of context.’* (13)

The proposed means of overcoming these problems is therefore to invite a writer in residence for a term, or even longer if the funding is available. And to confirm the validity of this suggestion, the National Association of Writers in Education [NAWE] states [Teacher 7] that this longer ‘developmental workshop activity’ has

*‘...the most far-reaching effect, in terms both of individual pupils’ benefit and the working practices imparted to teachers.’*

To these benefits we can add those derived by the writer in residence him/herself. The 1987 novel ‘Tough Luck’ was born out of a writer’s residency Berlie Doherty

took part in with a Comprehensive School in Doncaster in the previous year. For one hour per week of the Spring term Berlie worked with a class of thirteen-fourteen year olds to produce this ‘book about people like themselves’ (Preface: 5). It would clearly be impossible to produce a work of such length or depth as a result of a one-hour visit.

Although there are clearly a number of people who believe the Writers in Residence programme to be enormously beneficial to all participants, a number of authors have expressed opinions to the contrary.

One of the major criticisms of the one-day visit is that in such a short time the pupils could hardly be expected to do an enormous amount of work, and that with an extended period of time spent with the writer, there would be a far larger output. However, when Anne Fine shared a residency with the author Alison Prince at an Edinburgh teacher training college, she found to her surprise that this was not necessarily the case: the participants seemed totally unprepared to prepare for or work in the sessions they held, and she and Prince were unable to find two people who had read two of the twelve books they had requested them to prepare. As she says,

*‘It was a disgrace what was known about children’s literature.’*

[Author 4]

The problem of the writer being regarded as a teacher seems to be exacerbated when the author is not a visiting speaker, a *novelty*, but instead makes regular and frequent appearances at the school.

Rony Robinson, a former teacher, was a writer in residence at a London school, and found the experience to be ‘unexpectedly difficult’, as he was unable to avoid taking on a teacherly rôle. As a result, he believes the programme of work to have been affected, and he *‘felt clumsy about the job.’* [Author 14]

Similarly, Theresa Tomlinson felt that her residency was not particularly successful, and was of no more benefit than a one-day visit. As with Rony Robinson, the main disadvantage she saw to the programme was that ‘very

quickly I slipped back into being an English teacher'[Author 19], and she found that she was spending far more time helping pupils with spelling and grammar than with the actual content of their stories.

In general, therefore, Tomlinson avoids the writer's workshop, the prolonged author visit:

*'I don't feel that I can share my writing in a way that works.'*

A third reason for which many authors prefer the one-day visit to the residency is that they are unable to see a rôle for the writer in the classroom. Julia Jarman, for example [Author 17], is content to pay pupils a brief visit in order to share her writing technique, to discuss the content of her work, but she will not allow her rôle to go any further than being that of a '*catalyst and demystifier*', a source of inspiration for future output. She is unprepared to spend prolonged periods in the classroom, as she feels that this is not where a writer should be.

The claim made by a regional division of the Arts Council of England that it is

*'...largely of no value to have authors working for one day'* [Arts Council 1],

although supported by certain people, is clearly disputed by many others, in particular by those writers who have themselves been writers in residence.

Brownjohn (1976), himself a participant in the *Writers in Schools* scheme, describes the Arts Council's justification of such programmes:

*'...was not the writer, traditionally something of a solitary and a mystery, someone who might be made to seem more natural and comprehensible if he came out of his study to read and discuss his work?'* (34)

But surely this also justifies the value of the one-day visit? Can we not simply say that both short and long author events have their value and have their place? A representative from Morley Books agreed that this is in fact a valid argument, as

*‘Different situations require different events’* [Bookseller 3],

and that all programmes have the potential to be extremely worthwhile, *‘as long as there’s a real reason for what you’re doing.’*

#### **4:9 Bad Practice**

There are clearly many events co-ordinators who take their organisational rôles extremely seriously, preparing for months in advance in order to ensure that the visit - or residency - runs as smoothly as possible. However, there are also unfortunately a number of organisers whose careless or even thoughtless actions can lead to discomfort, embarrassment or even anger on the part of the visiting author.

*‘Today a writer came to school and gave a talk to our class and  
3B. No one was expecting her, that was quite obvious.  
Chopper and I noticed her standing about in the entrance hall,  
waiting for Mrs. McKay to think of someone who might be able to  
take her off her hands.’* (Fine, A. 1991: 7)

Although this is clearly an extract from a fictional account of an author event, it nonetheless reflects the lack of professionalism with which many authors have been treated by the organisation hosting their visits.

Anne Fine herself, invited to a state Comprehensive School in Scotland towards the beginning of her career, describes a generally successful visit she

paid to approximately two hundred fifteen year olds, after which she visited the school library and discovered that despite their being six of her books available in paperback, it only had two on the catalogue. This total lack of preparation on the part of both teacher and librarian 'surprised and irritated' her, and as she asks,

*'So what was the point? The £70 I was paid should have been spent on my books.'* [Author 4]

The following year she was invited back to the same school, and assumed that they would have bought more of her books, but they had not had the courtesy to do so, despite the effort she had put into her presentation on both occasions.

The American author Norma Fox Mazer expresses similar disillusionment in the lack of two-way effort:

*'A great deal of money is spent to bring authors into the schools, but my own experience...has been that a corresponding amount of effort is not expended by the teachers and librarians to prepare the kids for the visit...'* [Author 18]

To list all the interviewed authors who described similar experiences would take too long, but it would also be useful in an examination of bad practice to look at examples of inhospitality.

*'If your author is staying all day, you have an obligation to feed him/her.'* (YLG, Townson: 26)

There is an anecdote currently working its way round what Anne Fine describes as the authors' 'underground network' [Author 4] which tells of an experience Kaye Umansky had in 1996 at a school who failed to provide her with lunch, making her work all through the day without a proper break. At the end of the day, when she had finished signing the last of the children's books, Umansky recounts,

*'...I found myself alone in an empty school! All the staff, apart from the caretaker, had gone home...I shan't be going there again, I can tell you.'* [Author 15]

This is a particularly bad example, but Umansky is not alone in her experience. Adèle Geras adds to the description of inhospitality by defining bad organisation as

*'Not meeting you on time, and making you wait at chilly bus stops, and not making sure there is somebody to look after you in breaks...'* [Author 6]

As we discover in Section 4:4, selecting an appropriate location for an author visit is not necessarily a straightforward process, but in doing so certain events organisers have been known to completely overlook the comfort of their visitors.

*'Where will you be giving your talk? Well, right here. We're open-plan, you see...You won't mind if a few people riffle quietly through the shelves while you're talking to the children. I'll try and remember to turn the video down a bit...'* (Fine, 1990: 3)

Theresa Tomlinson has suffered on a number of occasions from thoughtless classroom booking or timetabling for her presentations, such as being in a room next door to a P.E. lesson, so that throughout the event she was fighting background noise in order to be heard. Or perhaps a group of children have to leave half-way through her visit in order to go to a choir practice. Probably the greatest insult Tomlinson has received was when a short sighted teacher interrupted one of her visits to remove a boy with learning difficulties 'to have help with his reading'!

Finally, of course, there are very few writers who will visit a school or library without expecting to be paid, and although author payment may not seem to be particularly urgent to the flustered events organiser, it could create an

awkward situation if, as Hazel Townson warns,<sup>8</sup> (s)he has forgotten to write the cheque and take into account appropriate travelling expenses. And we can turn to Anne Fine for the following satirical description of the scene which would ensue:

*'Welcome...Come in...I was just looking for the cheque our financial officer made out for you, but it's vanished. Completely vanished. Still, never mind.'* (Fine, 1990:3)

Each of the above examples of bad practice is entirely avoidable, if time is taken to remember that the author is only human, and may be feeling apprehensive. (S)he therefore needs to be greeted, treated throughout the day with hospitality and consideration for his/her comfort, and escorted to the train station or equivalent after being graciously thanked for an enjoyable and enlightening visit.

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<sup>8</sup> Youth Libraries Group (1996) *From Poets to Puppeteers:* 27

**Guidelines for the author event organiser**

 **FORMAT** 

**1. The Basic Format for an author visit [1-1½ hours in length]:**

- ◆ Author's introduction to the children
- ◆ Description of the authorly process
- ◆ Readings from the author's work
- ◆ Question and answer session
- ◆ Booksigning

**2. Four working styles at author events:**

- a. *Looking-over-the-shoulder* approach
- b. *Half-and-half* approach

[Usually adopted at one-day visits]

- c. 100% artist involvement in the pupil's work
- d. Gradually developing awareness of artist/pupil needs and working technique

[Usually adopted for use in residency programmes]

**N.B. Ensure that the programme is adaptable**

 **PREPARATION** 

**1. Minimum valid preparation:**

- ◆ Make the books available to the children in advance

**2. Additional preparation:**

- ◆ **Teacher:** Detailed examination of the author's work, watching/listening to any other relevant material; preparing questions for the children to ask; attending writer's workshops for teachers
- ◆ **School librarian:** Meet the participating classes, exchange information concerning the author and his/her work
- ◆ **Public librarian::** Produce attractive publicity material, displays of the author's books
- ◆ Look at which author's works are soon to be published (publishers may also make free publicity material available)
- ◆ Use of networking - informal information seeking via relevant organisations, colleagues or friends
- ◆ Ideally - try to hear the author speak before booking them for an event

 **LOCATION** 

School:

-  Instantly captive audience
-  Flexible programme possible, due to available resources

Library:

work

-  More of a special occasion
-  Bookstock likely to contain author's

Bookshop:

-  Loan of premises
-  Supply of prizes
-  Up-to-date displays

 **THE AUDIENCE** 

**(i) Size of audience**

- ◆ Financial restrictions mean that too many children are being targeted for an author visit
- ◆ Authors seem to be unanimous in their preference for a smaller audience - more personal questions, more intimate environment
- ◆ But authors must be aware of the need for value for money

#### **(ii) Audience involvement**

- ◆ Interaction between author and audience is generally regarded as crucial
- ◆ Some writers involve their audience more than others, e.g. Kaye Umansky
- ◆ Teachers need to show pupils that reading is a shared experience to derive more benefit from both the author visit and reading/writing generally

### **THE AUTHORLY PROCESS**

- ◆ Audiences enjoy hearing authors describe their writing technique and the publishing process
- ◆ This may not result in greater creativity, but could raise the children's level of enthusiasm in reading and writing

### **QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

- ◆ Generally follows the speaker's presentation - causes frustration if omitted
- ◆ Booksigning is important but should not replace the question & answer session

- ◆ Authors should not tire of answering children's questions - e.g. Michael Hardcastle devotes more time to this section than any other
- ◆ Questions could be prepared in advance to avoid possible embarrassment

### 📖 WRITERS IN RESIDENCE 📖

#### Advantages

- 📖 The residency is believed by many to overcome the problems of the one-day author visit - shyness of children; too brief to make an impact
- 📖 Work can be produced as a result of the Writers in Residence programme, e.g. *Tough Luck* by Berlie Doherty

#### Disadvantages

- 📖 Pupils not always prepared for residency - and then time is wasted
- 📖 The writer is far more likely to be regarded as a teacher if present in a school at regular intervals
- 📖 Some authors are unprepared to spend more than brief periods in the classroom/library - this is not their rôle

- ◆ Both the one-day visit and the residency have their value - provided a reason exists for their selection

### 📖 BAD PRACTICE 📖

- ◆ Teachers being unprepared for the writer's arrival
- ◆ School library/public library not making author's books available

- ◆ Thoughtlessness as to the location of the visit e.g. next to a noisy school hall
- ◆ Disturbances during the author's presentation
- ◆ Inhospitability:
  - Not paying the author on arrival
  - Not being welcomed on time
  - Not ensuring the author is comfortable throughout the day
  - Not escorting him/her to the train station (etc.) after the visit
  - Not thanking him/her for an inspiring day
- ◆ All of these examples of bad practice are totally avoidable if the organiser remembers that the author is only human

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PROVING THE VALUE OF THE AUTHOR VISIT

#### 5:1 The Current Problem

*'For those who have had authors to their schools there's no need to go on about its advantages.'* [Author 13]

Had the current study been undertaken ten years ago, the above statement made by the American children's author Gloria D. Miklowitz would have been far more pertinent: there would have been no real need to include a chapter which attempts to justify the cost of an author visit to the disillusioned organiser or to the funding body: money would have been set aside from the school or library budget to pay for the event, and provided that the participants seemed to enjoy themselves, the visit had been worthwhile. Today, however, the situation is unfortunately very different, and those schools and libraries who can afford the £100 - £200 cost of just a one-day visit are in the minority.

An additional problem in 1997 is that the Arts Council of England have severely limited the financial support they give to the organisers of author events. Yorkshire and Humberside Arts have totally ceased to fund the shorter visit, whereas for the prolonged series of workshops or residency they are prepared to raise 50% of the costs incurred. The Headteacher of a Chesterfield Junior School suggested that this was an entirely elitist system, as the residency, the only funded programme was

*'...totally out of the realm of ordinary schools...'* [Teacher 5],

and that financial support was being denied where it was needed most.

A senior children's librarian of Leeds Libraries [Author 5] claims that although he personally is in favour of the one-day author visit, he can see why funding bodies would rather support the longer-term event as it is far easier to justify in terms of output produced. The onus is therefore on the teacher or librarian to provide justification for the events they wish to host. But does such

justification exist, and more importantly, are those involved too disillusioned to find it?

## **5:2 Disillusionment: a barrier to funding**

Clearly gaining access to funding is not simply a matter of providing the potential sponsors with good reasons to lend their support, but also of ensuring that all those who would be involved in the events - both organisers and participants - are totally convinced of their value.

Unfortunately, this is not currently the case. Many of the authors involved in this study were unable to find non-commercial reasons for their visits to schools, libraries and bookshops. For example, while Adèle Geras feels that her visits *are* an important part of being a writer, the reasons she provides for their importance is purely commercial:

*'...I always feel I need to do all I can to help the books along.'*

[Author 6]

The situation seems to be no more positive across the Atlantic, where the author Norma Fox Mazer claims that frequently her experience as a visiting author

*'...has been that a corresponding amount of effort is not expended by the teachers and librarians to prepare the kids for the visit and thus to ensure that something real happens.'* [Author 18]

For Lois Duncan, the situation is sufficiently grave that

*'If it's a choice between buying books and importing authors, I would buy books.'* [Author 2]

Similarly, although Gloria D. Miklowitz derives a great deal of pleasure from visiting her young readers, she admits to having often felt that

*'...the high fees and expenses incurred by an author visit were excessive. Think how many books could be bought for the library with that money...'* [Author 13]

The Children's Librarian of the Central Library in Oxford [Librarian 3] claims that librarians today can no longer regard the author visit as a priority in the library programme of events, when resources are so scarce and a set of books could be bought for the price of a speaker.

Is the author visit then a thing of the past, regarded by all as an expensive and unnecessary luxury, or are there sufficient reasons to justify its existence?

### **5:3 Reasons to justify the cost of an author visit**

#### **5:3:1 Increase in library use**

In an attempt to provide such a reason a school librarian in Fort Worth, Texas, told Gloria D. Miklowitz that in her experience

*'...you could buy all the books in the world, but getting kids to read them was another matter. Author visits resulted in a strong increase in demand for books, especially those of the author.'* (In: Gallo, 1992:123)

Returning to Britain, the Children's Senior Library and Information Assistant at a Sheffield district library, whilst acknowledging the difficulty of assessing the cost of author visit, particularly as there can be no standard framework as 'not all authors are as good as each other', nonetheless feels that the encouragement given to the children by authors and themselves

*'...usually means they return to borrow books and are not afraid to talk to us about books...often gets children into the habit of using our service. That after all is what we want.'* [Librarian 4]

Again in Sheffield, a children's library assistant at the Central Library attempts to make a realistic estimate of the number of children this encouragement reaches:

*'Out of each twenty children who come to the events, there will be three or four who carry on using the library that weren't aware of it before.'* [Librarian 6]

This may not be a 100% success rate, but it is certainly a higher percentage than the funding bodies would give libraries credit for, and combined with the potential service promotion carried by word of mouth, it could become considerably more *in the long term*.

### **5:3:2 The focal point**

The same Leeds librarian suggested that author visits could act as focal points: schools are essentially closed communities, and inviting guest speakers can be a good experience for children who are used to constantly seeing the same faces. Similarly, libraries, although far more 'open' environments, can nonetheless benefit from such an event raising their profile, reminding the public where they are and what service they provide. For example, despite the enormous financial restrictions which have been placed on Sheffield City Libraries - such as a total spending freeze on adult fiction - the annual literary festival *Off the Shelf* is nonetheless going ahead. A senior librarian at the Central Library said:

*'Some people have understandably asked, "Why are you spending all this money on a festival?" [But] We've still got to say that we're here, what we're doing. To suspend the festival would be major, we would lose the support of a number of organisations and the public.'* [Librarian 7]

### 5:3:3 Cost in teaching terms

The teachers involved in this study all felt that the cost of the author visit was too high, and that if they were not given financial support then they would be unable to organise such an event. However, they may be reminded at this point that the author's daily honorarium is in fact very little more than the cost of one day's supply teaching. Considered in such terms, is the author visit really such a luxury?

### 5:3:4 Long-term benefits

In an attempt to assess the impact of the author event, it would be wrong simply to consider the immediate effect it has on the participant, without also looking to the future, to the potential long-term benefits. A senior librarian at Sheffield Central Library, responsible for the organisation of many promotional events, including the highly popular literary festival *Off the Shelf*, said that the festival did not have such a large audience over the years. It therefore follows, she claims, that the impact of the author event tends not to be immediate, but can be seen in the 'medium to long-term.' [Librarian 7]

The Manager of The Children's Bookshop in Huddersfield [Bookseller 1] would agree with this suggestion. She measures the success of the author events she hosts in terms of the quantity of books sold, and she says that very often, *'ripples run out, the books are sold over a period of many years.'* Taking as an example the author Anne Youngman, who visited the shop as a new author twenty years ago, *'and more than five years later word of mouth was still operating'* and her books were in regular demand.

But how can the long-term benefits be seen in an educational setting? A representative from the Sheffield Local Education Authority suggested that teachers tend to gauge the success of the event in terms of the 'short time buzz' of

excitement which can be felt in the classroom, but that they should also look to the long term effects, which can be great:

*‘Such outcomes might be general in terms of increased confidence and interest or more specific in the application of structures, vocabulary and ideas to developing writing.’* [Teacher 1]

Indeed, an English teacher from a secondary school in Selby agrees that

*‘People talking enthusiastically about writing has a real effect on children - and children carry this through.’* [Teacher 4]

By way of example, she mentioned former pupils who have returned to the school as much as twenty-five years after she taught them, who told her how they appreciated the contact she organised for them with authors, as it had markedly increased their interest in reading and writing, perhaps even to the extent of becoming writers themselves. A librarian who works for Calderdale Libraries is encouraged to continue organising author visits as she believes that

*‘...for a few children meeting an author could be pivotal to later career decisions’* [Librarian 8],

and an American school librarian [Librarian 10] names the author Karen Hesse as someone for whom this actually happened. As a senior children’s librarian in Leeds suggests,

*‘Sometimes the benefit might be measurable - but years ahead’*  
[Librarian 5].

### 5:3:5 The storytelling session: a cheaper alternative?

So far the study has omitted to mention the librarian or teacher storytelling session, a literary event which takes place within both the school and the library at regular intervals and at no extra charge. The main purpose of storytelling is to encourage generally younger children to read more, by seeing how enjoyable books can be. In times of financial difficulties, therefore, would not storytelling be a suitable replacement for the author visit?

*'The opportunity for children and students to meet a 'real writer' is always an exciting, enjoyable and memorable experience. Such experiences serve to heighten children's response to books, engage their imagination and energise and add excitement to their own writing.'*<sup>9</sup>

These words of the Chief Advisor for the North Yorkshire Advisory Service provide the first clue as to why meeting the author is a more valuable experience than simply listening to a teacher or librarian: an author visit is clearly far more than a storytelling event; it is a means for the children to see at first-hand the authorly processes involved in writing and publishing a book. As a Chesterfield junior school Headteacher argues,

*'Even though the teachers tell them [the children] stories, when the author visits the school we build it up, showing them the craft of the storyteller, the art of the writer.'* [Teacher 5]

When an outside expert is brought into the school, (s)he has the opportunity to state to the pupils that writing is not merely a 'school based chore' [Teacher 1], but an exciting means of earning a living, to which they could all quite reasonably aspire.

For the authors John Agard and Buchi Emecheta, there could be no substitute for the meetings they have with their young readers.

Reading his poetry aloud to a completely silent audience, the Jamaica-born poet John Agard clearly sees the importance of the voice of the native speaker in his work, as his lines reflect the tone of his own voice:

*'Hello, Goodbye and Ta  
Are Good Enough for me.  
One day maybe I'll get around to  
Galleries and even poetry.  
Right now I'm too busy contemplating  
The relationship between birdseed and gravity.'*<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta stresses the importance of the voice for a Black woman. As she said on a visit to a library in the East Midlands,

*'That's one thing we Black people have, especially Black women, is our voices. When you read our books, people don't say Black Women's Literature, they say Black Women's Voices... You who say I think this is happening, I would say My voice, my inner voice tells me this.'*<sup>11</sup>

For these two authors at least, the voice is regarded as far more important than the written word. Their meetings with children, therefore, could not be replaced by the librarian or teacher.

Although the storytelling session is undoubtedly a valuable means of raising children's interest in reading, ultimately the author visit offers a different experience to the audience, and as a librarian from Calderdale Libraries suggests,

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<sup>9</sup> North Yorkshire Advisory Service (1996) *Writers in Schools*: no page number

<sup>10</sup> East Midlands Arts Board (1996) *Speaking in many tongues - words and voices from the East Midlands*

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*

*'...ideally children need exposure to both these experiences of storytelling and authors talking.'* [Librarian 8]

### **5:3:6 The value of enlightenment**

Schools and libraries have been forced to some extent to fall in with the trend whereby every project undertaken is regarded in terms of targets reached and total quality management. However, in doing so are they not losing sight of that which one librarian describes as the 'sheer enlightenment' [Librarian 5] which children experience when they meet an author?

If something defies quantitative measurement does that mean that it has no value? If events are planned carefully and followed up thoughtfully in order to maximise their impact, then surely the cost is low for potentially great benefits?

In order to reap such benefits, therefore, the author visit should not become an annual - or even biennial - event, but should be regarded as a necessary factor in the children's education.

The National Curriculum English Document (1995) states that at Key Stage 2, children

*'...should be given opportunities to listen and respond to a wide range of people.'*<sup>12</sup>

To refuse funding is therefore to act against National Curriculum requirements: the author visit is *not* a luxury, and teachers must use all the reasons they can find to prove to all potential funding bodies that they are worthy of sponsorship. And although Challis (1986) wrote the following words at a time when far more funding was available, they are nonetheless valid as a reminder to all those who wish to organise author visits that there is a reason to keep up the fight;

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<sup>12</sup> In: Evans, J. (1997) 'The storytime session - a dying art worthy of revival', *Language Learning*, February: 29-31

*'Arts funding is ever in crisis and advantage must be taken where it can be found: if money set aside for the visiting writer's budget is not used it will be cut the following year. Use the scheme or it will disappear.'* (22)

If sufficient well-reasoned applications are submitted to the Arts Council, then perhaps it may be persuaded to reinstate former schemes, particularly if these applications contain such convincing arguments as the following example given by an English teacher at a school in Selby:

*'Every time we have an author event we think we won't do it again [for financial reasons] but for a week or two we do get such an impact. Who else is going to enthuse about books, about writing, about the effect it has on your lives?'* [Teacher 4]

## CHAPTER SIX

### EVALUATION: RE-INVENTING THE WHEEL

Even the briefest examination of the current situation regarding the author visit will reveal almost a total lack of detailed evaluation thereof, and that that which exists is rarely diffused throughout the system to reach all participants. There is clearly dissatisfaction on the part of many of those involved: teachers because they feel that they are not being given sufficient time to review or comment upon events after they had ended, as pressure is immediately being put upon them to move onto the next project; authors because they are not being told of the impact of their visits, and would welcome some sort of feedback, such as positive criticism to help them improve and develop their presentation technique. Gillian Cross, for example, would like there to be more

*'...feedback (to teachers and authors) about the kinds of visit that work particularly well.'* [Author 16]

Artists can also feel that their contribution to the children's education is neither appreciated or acknowledged. In their examination of the Artists in Schools project, Sharpe and Dust (1990) found that there was frequently a sense among participants that projects were constantly 're-inventing the wheel' (19), and that school and artist alike could have benefited from reading reports on similar projects which had been previously undertaken.

#### 6:1 The difficulty of evaluation

*'There is no way I know of by which the value of an author visit may be weighed or measured.'* [Author 8]

These words written by the author Bob Swindells voice the opinion of many people regarding the issue of the evaluation of author events. How do you evaluate that which Hill (1973) describes as 'intangible' (82) particularly if you are attempting to do so as an outsider? A representative from Yorkshire and

Humberside Arts suggested that someone who is unused to the existing system within the organisation hosting the event does not have

*'...any idea of how it relates to anything else they [i.e. the organisation] have done before.'* [Arts Council 1]

The poet John Agard agrees with this view, stating that

*'...it's very difficult, as a visiting writer, to evaluate what the children get from the experience...'*<sup>13</sup>

It would also seem reasonable to suggest that the evaluation of children's author events is even more problematic than the adult event, as children can hardly be expected to analyse the educational or long term benefit they derive from what they regard simply as 'very enjoyable.'<sup>14</sup> The author Anne Fine (1991) acknowledges this difficulty in *The Book of the Banshee*, where after an author visit to his school, the main character fails to describe the reason for his appreciation of the event:

*'I don't know what it was that interested me so much.'* (17)

## **6:2 Evaluating the intangible**

A representative from the Schools' Library Service in Sheffield talked of the difficulty of evaluation, because how could 'the elusive feel-good factor' [Librarian 2] be analysed? A second representative went on to elaborate:

*'If you're enjoying anything, you'll get something out of it. You see that a real person wrote the book, and may even think I could write a book when I'm older...'* [Librarian 2]

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<sup>13</sup> *In*: Rosen & Burrige, 1993:8

<sup>14</sup> From a pupil questionnaire: see Appendix 5c

Both referred to the difficulty of quantifying the success of an event, but agreed that the event co-ordinator should be able to see for him/herself whether or not the participants have enjoyed themselves. But how can this be achieved? In her examination of the art and technique of storytelling, Greene (1996) gives the following comprehensive response to the question:

*'When children are enjoying a story their faces express interest, curiosity, delight. Sometimes they express their pleasure by listening quietly with little or no expression on their faces. A deep sigh and a faraway look seen on a face at the end of the story usually mean that you have reached that child. Some children do not seem to be paying attention at all; yet these same children will ask you for the story several weeks after you have told it.'*  
(91)

'Asking for the story' is indeed one of the means available to artists when analysing the success of their visit. John Agard recalls feeling 'flattered and excited' when a teacher informed him that one of the children who had attended his presentation had said that

*'...instead of hearing the usual bedtime story that night, she would ask her mum to read her a bedtime poem.'*<sup>15</sup>

If evaluation of the author visit is based on analysing emotion, on considering that which Brownjohn (1976) describes as 'variables and imponderables' (33), is it then naïve to believe that successful evaluation of the author event can take place? Although teachers Nightingale and Morton (1986) acknowledge that it is

*'...largely impossible, especially given the belief that constantly introducing new stimulus is an essential prerequisite if children are to learn effectively'* (18),

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<sup>15</sup> In : Rosen & BurrIDGE, 1993: 8

they nonetheless believe that *'there are useful indicators'* (18).

### **6:3 Useful indicators: possible means of evaluation**

#### **6:3:1 Monitoring attendance**

Probably the most obvious evaluative technique is the quantitative measure. The events organiser could consider the number of children attending the author visit, and at its most simple, a high attendance level suggests that the meeting was successful. Furthermore, as Esson & Tyerman (1991) suggest, keeping such a record would be useful in the future planning of events:

*'Monitoring attendance will help to identify those sections of the community not being reached by activities and to distinguish whether particular types of event appeal to particular groups.'*  
(14)

Yet this enumerative approach is hardly likely to determine the quality of each participant's experience after having attended an author event. A far more detailed examination would undoubtedly be required.

#### **6:3:2 Report writing**

The Arts Council of England (1997) suggests that monitoring a writer in residence programme should be a dual exercise undertaken by both the writer and the organisation (usually a school) involved, whereby each party should write a detailed report

*'...indicating the successes and failures of the residency from both points of view.'* (12)

This approach was adopted to an extent by the Sdr-jydske Landsbibliotek in Aabenraa, Denmark: following four author visits from Danish authors as part of

a wider project, *'Laesekufferten'* ('The Flying Suitcase'), the Children's Librarian [Librarian 9] consulted all her colleagues who had been involved in the programme of events, and then wrote a report which detailed the planning, project period itself, the results and the staff conclusions.

But this report will not be allowed to languish in the library repository: at the annual IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) conference, held this year in Copenhagen, Denmark, the results of the project, including the children's work and the librarian's report, will be displayed - and translated - for many hundreds of people to see. This is an exceptional example of a library having produced very obvious results of the success of their author events.

### **6:3:3 Holding a review meeting**

*'Soon after the week is over, hold a review meeting to form the basis for planning your next Book Week!'* (35)

This advice from the Northern Children's Book Festival (1990), although clearly intended for the organiser of the Book Week, can nonetheless be applied to the co-ordinator of the single, isolated author event. Holding a review meeting provides an excellent opportunity for all colleagues involved in the event to discuss what they believe to have been the successes and failures of the programme, and to make suggestions as to what improvements could be made in the future. In order that events do not become distorted in the minds of those involved, it would be wise to hold this meeting as soon as possible after the day of the visit.

### **6:3:4 Official means of evaluation**

It is not always straightforward to discover the exact extent to which evaluation of author events is carried out. A representative from the Schools' Library Service in Sheffield [Librarian 2] claimed that publishers and teachers in

the region always receive evaluation sheets to fill in from Yorkshire and Humberside Arts. However, a representative from that regional arts council claimed only a month later [Arts Council 1] that no such measurement existed. Certainly, conversations with local teachers have revealed that they have not participated in any official evaluative process.

Yet the situation is not necessarily as bleak in all local authorities. In her examination of 'The Problems and Possibilities of Writers in Schools', Holmes (1990), herself a children's author, discusses West Midlands Arts' policy which is that schools who are reclaiming costs after an author visit are invited to comment on the claim form as to their opinion of the value of these sessions. These evaluations form a useful record of the views of the host organisation.

However, when Holmes herself went to West Midlands Arts to examine these evaluation sheets for herself, she found

*'...the documents haphazardly preserved and filed, and not in any chronological order...The implication was that the body of information was not readily available for systematic reference...'*

(46)

She also suggested that the comments made on the evaluation sheets did not consider the real value of the author visit, but as a rule listed factual statements concerning, for example, the number of hours or sessions a writer had worked at the school.

It would therefore seem that even in those authorities who claim to have a method of evaluating author visits, such a process is hardly regarded as a priority.

Of course, it has already been mentioned that one-day events are not currently funded by the Arts Council, so why should schools be interested in evaluating the author visits they are having to pay for themselves? In short, because they have to persuade funding bodies that they deserve sponsorship by providing them with the information they want to receive. A representative from Yorkshire and Humberside Arts [Arts Council 1] expressed dissatisfaction at

schools' evaluation of the author visit, and when asked to suggest how improvement could be made, suggested that '*You have to ask the question "How has the children's writing developed?" in terms of:*

- *Content*
- *Ambition*
- *The child's knowledge of what it means to enter the writing industry*
- *Whether the child keeps a notebook/reflective journal in which they keep a record of their writing'*

Would it not then be in everybody's best interests if schools were to inform their regional arts councils of rigorous evaluative processes of this kind which they had carried out on their own initiative?

### **6:3:5 Hearing from the children**

Another means of assessing the results of an author event is to listen to the children themselves, clearly the most important - yet frequently overlooked factor in the equation. Certainly, there are individuals such as Bob Bibby,<sup>16</sup> English Advisor for Dudley Local Education Authority in 1987 and then Chairman of the National Association for the Teaching of English, who believes that the rôle of the adult is to 'say what we think the younger than you in the community needs', and that '*We have to do the interpretation for them.*' Yet Holmes (1990) suggests instead that '*...the triangulation of pupil, teacher and writer as participants in classroom interaction is a valuable aspect of qualitative research...*' (57)

Furthermore, the authors' opinions seem on the whole to support Holmes' view: although Bob Swindells claims to be unaware of any current means of evaluating

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<sup>16</sup> In: Holmes, 1990:42

his meetings with children, he nonetheless acknowledges that if certain things occur as a result he feels that his visit was a success:

- **Letters from the teachers** - telling how the children were: using the school library more; buying books from the Book Club; producing art, writing and drama based on his books and/or visit
- **Letters from the children** - asking him questions; wanting to become correspondents

A second author, Trevor Dickinson, uses the same method for evaluation. Taking as examples of letters he received as a result of the visits he made to the same High School in Selby in November 1993 and February 1997, it is clear to see how these letters encourage him to continue making visits, despite the obvious inconvenience. As he said, *'If all goes well and I receive letters it feels like being stroked.'* [Author 1]

- *'You always underestimate the impact of your words on other people; your interest, and your ability to make poems and stories come alive for young people...'* (Teacher, 08/11/93)
- *'Thank-you very much for coming to our school and talking to us, it helped me to enjoy poems a lot more.'* (Girl, 13: 25/02/97)
- *'Thank-you very much for your talk. It was very inspiring and has given me many ideas for poems.'* (Boy, 13: 25/02/97)

N.B. See Appendix Six for full examples of children's letters to Trevor Dickinson

Although these letters are clearly valuable in their own right, perhaps there is the danger that their content may have been affected by certain inhibiting factors, such as a desire to please the teacher or to conform to the norm. Letters sent on children's own initiative - from their home address - are more likely to be unaffected by these factors, but for the most proof of the value of an author visit to a child we can probably look to the two-way correspondence which

can take place between the author and the child following the writer's visit to the school or library. For example a pupil from a preparatory department in Bury wrote to the author Terry Deary following his visit to her school, and told him that his work had inspired her to write for herself. There then followed a lengthy correspondence between the two, one of the results of which was the following prize-winning poem, 'Racism', published in Young Writer journal:

For heaven's sake, don't live in the past,  
Racism just can't last!  
If you're racist you aren't cool,  
In fact, you're the opposite - you're a fool.  
What's the difference between black and white?  
Nothing at all, not even a slight  
Difference. So there, now you know -  
Racism isn't good - it has to go!!!  
Leri Price (10) Rochdale

Following the visits she has made to pupils from one particular Lancashire school at a bookshop in Manchester, Anne Fine has been sent examples of the work which the children have done as a result. She regards this as extremely good - and rare - practice, as she appreciates being given the opportunity to see if her work has been proved to be worthwhile, so that she can assess the impact of the visit for herself.

Theresa Tomlinson has also received similar packages from schools she has visited on a few occasions. '*If you receive feedback*', says Tomlinson, '*you are confident that it was a good visit.*' [Author 19]

A third author, Hazel Townson, makes a particular effort to actively encourage the children and their teachers to send her the work they have done after her visit, so that she can reply to them by offering comments. As she suggests,

*'This is vastly more beneficial than simply reading the books without any personal contact.'* [Author 12]

### **6:3:6 The concrete proof of success**

It is rarely possible to adopt the fifth and final stage in the evaluative process for one-day author visits, as it is generally applicable only to the writer's workshop or writer in residence programme. However, it is being included in this study with the intention of providing an ideal to which organisers can aspire and which funding bodies can encourage.

In 1995, several North Yorkshire schools took part in a Writers in Schools project, which consisted of a series of visits by storytellers, writers and poets. When the visits were over, pupils' work was collected, and a selection grouped together to form an anthology. As Dolan and Phinn<sup>17</sup> write in their report of the project,

*'...the anthology shows something of the satisfaction of making, in your own writing, something worth creating.'*

Not only anthologies have been produced as a result of pupil and author interaction: Berlie Doherty wrote *'Tough Luck'* (1987) as a result of a writer's residency she participated in at a secondary school in Doncaster in 1986. Each member of a class gave his or her contribution to the story, all of which she took into account when writing the final copy:

*'We worked in small groups and chapter by chapter I consulted the whole class for their approval and suggestions.'* (5)

The following are examples of work produced as a result of a one-day author event, although it must be taken into account that they are in a minority.

In 1988, shortly after his book *'The Beano'* was published, the Sheffield-based author Rony Robinson was asked by Sheffield City Libraries to allow his

book to be used as the central theme in a day of seaside-related events at the Central Library. On the same day, a journalist from the Yorkshire Arts Circus interviewed people - including many children - in the library about outings they had been on which may or may not have been similar to that which is described in 'The Beano'. These interviews were then recorded in a celebratory book, a compilation of local people's stories. As Rony said,

*'The event helped the library to write another book.'* [Author 14]

For the second example we can look to an American poet, Carol Burns, whose visits to schools and libraries consist of teaching the children to write poetry using what may be described as alternative methods, such as cassettes of 'new-age music.' Although her technique is described as *'simplistic and facile'*, the author of the article is forced to acknowledge that *'the results Burns yields are the proof of the pudding.'* And Burns has her own means of quantifying the results of her visits:

*'It's all about getting them to respond. If they react to a piece of music or a bit of cotton by writing, if they can choose words to create a picture, I feel they've accomplished something.'*

(Klein, 1990: R11)

Perhaps the most notable result of an author visit which has emerged during the course of this study is to be found at a Junior Preparatory Department in Bury. Encouraged by a particularly enjoyable and inspiring visit from the author Hazel Townson, one particular class decided that they too would write a book. Although these children are only eight or nine years old, they have nonetheless succeeded in convincing a publisher to publish their work, award it an ISBN 'number' and even choose his/her favourite of the children's designs for the front cover. Every child in the class has been given one page in the book entitled 'We're in Print', on which to write a short story of their own on subjects which include My family, My hobbies or Funny stories, and special paper will be

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<sup>17</sup> North Yorkshire Advisory Service, 1996: *Introductory Thoughts*

used in order that their actual handwriting appears in the published edition. As the enthusiastic teacher says,

*'This has come directly from our contact with authors.'* [Teacher 3]

#### **6:4 Summary**

*'Where resources are scarce, there is little point in carrying out an activity if the impact and effectiveness of it are not monitored.'*  
(159)

Although these words by Rogan (1996) refer to storytelling activities in libraries, they can nonetheless be applied to the author visit which suffers from a similar lack of financial aid. There are clearly a number of means of evaluating these events, but unfortunately the most straightforward of these are not regarded as particularly successful. McGuigan (1981) claims that

*'Enumeration is easier than evaluation, but in itself would hardly provide a vantage point for assessing the results of a scheme for assisting artistic creation...'* (1)

The librarian Janet Hill (1973) is similarly against using the quantitative approach for evaluation of an activity which seems to defy quantifying:

*'Sometimes I am asked whether our summer storytelling programme has resulted in a marked increase in the use of libraries. I always reply that I neither know nor care. To think in such terms shows the questioner has completely failed to understand our purpose.'* (99)

Attempts made to analyse a creative project in quantitative terms are clearly frowned upon by many people, yet those same people are generally unable to produce any clear framework of a qualitative nature. Whatever method of evaluation is adopted, however, all parties would benefit from a clear outline of

the aims and objectives of the project at the outset. When all events are completed, therefore, a simple but effective evaluative process would be to consider how many of these aims and objectives were achieved. If the results are good, then it would follow that the event itself was a success.

Sharpe and Dust (1990) suggest that these aims and objectives be turned into a project brief, which would be open to negotiation between the writer and the school/library/bookshop, but which would be approximately structured around the following questions:

1. *What is the main purpose of the project?*
2. *Which art form(s) would be involved?*
3. *What kind of involvement would an artist or company have?*
4. *Which members of (school) staff would be involved?*
5. *Which pupils would be involved? (Age-group and approximate numbers)*
6. *When would the project take place?*
7. *How much time would the artist spend in the school?*

(Sharpe and Dust, 1990: 39)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

This conclusion is an attempt to offer an account of the results which have developed in the course of this study. Although further research could be carried out in this subject area, the following recommendations can be made with some confidence, as it can be acknowledged that reasonable progress has been made within the time constraints.

In the early stages of this project it seemed from the emerging data that it would be impossible to prove the value of the author visit. Both the available literature and the first interviewees claimed that qualitative data was impossible to analyse, and the concern was that the sole outcome of this project would be to prove the truth of that claim. Indeed, a major difficulty of any research which attempts to evaluate a creative process is that there are few obvious *results*.

However, after considering the views of a wide range of people who have been or are involved in the organisation of or participation in author events, a number of recommendations can be made in order to improve the current situation.

Perhaps the most obvious recommendation to be made is that all who are involved - or potentially involved - in author events should be able to prove their importance:

#### **7:1 Maximising the impact of the author visit**

##### **7:1:1 Creating a context**

This study has illustrated [Section 4:8] that there are critics of the one-day author visit who believe that it would have a very limited impact in the school because of its brevity, and would therefore not be a worthwhile exercise.

Certainly, this argument is valid if the visit is seen as an isolated event, and no thought is made as to how it could be used throughout the school. A context must therefore be created in order to develop a plan by which a short-term visit can have a long-term impact.

The first stage should be for the teacher(s) involved in the future visit to consider the author's work and to explore its cross-curricular potential apart, that is, from the obvious creative language work which can be carried out to become familiar with the author's work before meeting him/her. A plan can then be constructed to develop ideas within the various subject areas, including, for example:

- **Drama** - re-enactment of scenes from the author's books
- **Computer work** - word-processing stories based on the books
- **Creative activities** - making character/objects to re-construct scenes from the stories
- **Information skills** - using the school library to find out as much as possible about writing, publishing and, where possible, about the author him/herself, to construct a biographical and career profile

Library preparation for an author visit is more straightforward but no less necessary. An attractive display should be organised for the children to see - and use - for at least a fortnight prior to the event. In addition to the author's work, there could be a display of *related* books. Taking as an example the author Michael Hardcastle, who writes sporting adventure stories, an astute librarian could display his books with other adventure books and non-fiction sporting guides. As with the school-based event, this would create a context for the writer's visit, and make it seem more worthwhile and more appealing to the young library users.

### **7:1:2 After the event: following up a visit**

Just as preparation is crucial, it is equally important to make the most of the results of an author visit.

- ◆ **Display work:** All work carried out with the author should be displayed for the entire school/library user population to see, including reports of the event.
- ◆ **Recording the visit:** If such resources are available, everyone could benefit from a video or audio recording of the event for future use, but if not, photographs could be displayed as a reminder to all of an enjoyable day.
- ◆ **Letter writing:** Letters to thank the author should always be sent after a visit, and not simply by the teacher.
- ◆ **Group work:** Groups of children could work together to tell a story based on or inspired by the visit and/or the author's work.
- ◆ **Drama:** The visit could easily be incorporated into the school's drama and movement programme, for example with a performance poetry event written by the children.

## 7:2 The alternative author visit

If the school or library is completely unable to raise sufficient funds for an author event then there are less expensive alternatives to consider. The suggestion is not that these necessarily replace the visit, merely that they could be useful in order to ensure that financial difficulties do not prevent any child from having the opportunity of interacting with his/her favourite author.

It is generally assumed that famous authors are invited to schools or libraries because they will be experienced both at writing and at giving presentations. However, in each local community there will almost certainly be a little-known poet or author - perhaps even a parent or grandparent of one of the pupils - who would be delighted to talk to the children about the craft of

writing, at little or no cost to the school or library. And even if no author or poet could be found, then a good alternative would be to invite someone of cultural interest, such as a person practising the Jewish faith who could tell the children about his/her culture and then recount Jewish folk tales.

If the teacher is determined that his/her class should meet a particular author, then (s)he could join the mailing list at all local bookshops, most of which host regular events, frequently at no cost to the audience. If transport would need to be arranged in order to go, perhaps the children could be asked to pay a minimal amount to contribute to the travelling costs.

### **7:2:1 Adapting the traditional format**

#### **◆ Letters**

The simplest and most inexpensive way to interact with authors is to write letter. This can quite easily be made into a class project, and many authors are happy to correspond with children who express an interest in their work. Some would even read and comment upon work which pupils send, thus providing a substitute for the writer's workshop.

#### **◆ Electronic mail**

If a school cannot afford to pay for an author visit, then it may seem strange to suggest that they might instead have access to computer equipment. However, computing is clearly a priority in the National Curriculum, and as long as the class teacher is capable of using computers - or is at least prepared to learn how to use them - then electronic correspondence with the author is a feasible alternative approach. It is an extremely immediate form of communication, usually far more informal in tone than letters and therefore perhaps more approachable for children to use.

In order to obtain addresses there are a number of helpful Internet sites. For example, *Heinemann Library Online*<sup>18</sup> is an online service which is intended in particular to support the school librarians and to show children how to make the most of their school library, but which includes an *Author Forum* through which children can contact authors:



For the purposes of this study Jean Ure was contacted (28/05/97), and sent a written reply in a week (04/06/97). And using a similar site based in the United States<sup>19</sup>, Lois Duncan e-mailed her lengthy reply within an hour!

◆ **The recorded visit**

If distance and/or cost stand in the way of inviting a preferred author to speak, schools could send a cassette to the writer on which have been recorded questions which the pupils would like him/her to answer (for ease of reply, the teacher could type out the questions as an accompanying sheet). In this way both pupils and author are able to hear each other's live voices, although not simultaneously, and a similar level of communication can be achieved as with the author visit itself.

◆ **The telephone visit**

The telephone is used quite regularly in the United States as a means of contacting authors without having to pay for expensive internal flights. Via an easily obtainable telephone amplifier, the author can read from his/her books, talk

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<sup>18</sup> Reviewed in: Library Association Record (1997:38) "Online Book Culture". London: Library Association

<sup>19</sup> Brown, D.K. (July 1997) *Authors and illustrators: children's authors and illustrators, and their books*. [<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/authors.html#series>] Site visited at: 18/08/97

about the craft of writing and even answer pupils' question, all in the same spontaneous manner as the face-to-face meeting.

### **7:3 Developing good communication channels**

Many of the reasons for dissatisfactions expressed by those involved in this study stemmed from poor communication in the current system. The following are recommendations to all parties which should alleviate the problem.

#### **7:3:1 Authors**

Instead of complaining that they are not given enough feedback from the teachers whose classes they have visited, the authors should actively encourage teachers to send pupils' letters or even work for them to mark and comment upon. The author is thus made aware of how successful his/her presentation was, and good relationships are maintained with the school.

Before visiting the school/library, the author should clearly stipulate the format (s)he expects his/her visit to take concerning, for example:

- the preferred size/age of the group, and how many presentations will be made during the visit
- the preferred location
- the teacher/librarian's preparation with the children to ensure that they are an interested and knowledgeable audience
- the need for a teacher to be present throughout the visit

Furthermore, it has been illustrated [Section 4:8] that authors are frequently concerned that they are regarded more as a teacher than an artist, and that this can affect the creative relationship they share with the pupils. Yet there is a way to overcome this problem.

The author will automatically be regarded as a figure of authority simply because (s)he is an adult. (S)he could therefore introduce him/herself to the children by using his/her first name. This will automatically arouse the interest of pupils who are used to a more formal approach when meeting an adult. Furthermore, (s)he should be prepared to answer fairly personal questions, for example regarding his/her salary or age, which a teacher would clearly not be expected to.

This straightforward approach will result in the author being set apart as the friendly visitor, and in the teacher rôle being negated.

### **7:3:2 Teachers**

Rather than claiming that the *wealthier* schools have greater access to funding, schools in financial difficulties should make a particular effort to obtain information from funding bodies concerning the available financial support.

But perhaps more importantly, teachers should advertise the author/book-related work they have done with their pupils in the past in order to prove to Arts Councils and other funding bodies that one-day events *are* worthy of sponsorship.

### **7:3:3 Librarians**

In general, library staff seem to be unaware of author events which are taking place in local schools, and are therefore unprepared for the arrival of an entire class of children desperate to read books by the author they have just met. An obvious recommendation would therefore be to improve the communication which takes place between the library and the school, in order that the former is prepared for a sudden increased interest in a certain author's work, and could even create attractive subject or author-related displays to attract children to a wider range of books.

Secondly, librarians should learn to manipulate their computer systems in order to analyse issue figures and prove to funding bodies that author visits result in increased use of the library. Four Sheffield libraries staff were asked in the course of this study if such manipulations were possible, and none of them were able to provide an answer. All librarians should be made aware of the need to use all available resources in order to promote the service they provide.

#### **7:3:4 Publishers**

The most valuable publications concerning author events are undoubtedly those which have been informally published by individual groups, such as the Youth Libraries Group (1996), the North Yorkshire Advisory Service (1996) or the Northern Children's Book Festival (1990). These are difficult to obtain if not based in the region in question. An obvious recommendation would therefore be for all groups interested in the author event to agree on a format and to communicate amongst themselves in order to produce a document which would be useful to all involved, including examples of successful visits which would provide all who read it with ideas for their own region.

There are clearly a number of excellent visits taking place throughout the country, and the results of these should be shared in order to demonstrate to the potential funding bodies that it would be in their best interests to ensure that they continue.

#### **7:3:5 The Arts Council**

The Arts Council should advertise their funding schemes far more widely so that schools are aware of the possibility of submitting an application.

They should also have a clear evaluation system so that events organisers are aware of the most appropriate authors to choose for a particular event and that authors know which schools or libraries will be most hospitable. Although this would cause additional administrative expenditure, such a system would avoid many unsuccessful visits and, in the long-term, would encourage hosts to be more thorough in their preparation and organisations.

The Arts Council should also maintain some kind of contact with grant recipients. This would not necessarily involve *checking up* on whether schools are using their money properly, but would personalise relationships between the funding body and the recipient in order to provide information for continual re-evaluation of the system, so that both are more likely to be satisfied with the situation.

#### **7:4 In conclusion**

The current situation regarding author events is clearly far from ideal. Whatever their location, all events organisers would benefit from further liaison with 'rival venues' in order to maximise not only the audience size but more importantly the *impact* of the author visit. Reluctant funding bodies need to be informed of the projects which are continuing in order to be persuaded that their support would in the short-term not be wasted, and in the long-term have a great effect on the children of the community and their ability and interest in reading and writing.

In conclusion, therefore, this study has attempted to illustrate that proving the value of the author visit is far more than simply listing the benefits which people have claimed to derive from them: that they are enjoyable was never in dispute, but in these times of financial hardship, where the extra curricular activity is regarded as an expensive luxury, *all parties* must be convinced of their educational and inspirational value. And it is only in making changes to the current situation that this can be achieved.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

#### **8:1 Insufficient time**

The main limitation which has been in place throughout the course of this study is that of time. More time would undoubtedly have been useful to explore certain issues in greater depth, and to do so in particular by attending author visits at schools, libraries, bookshops or literary festivals: 1997 has been a year of particular financial difficulty for Sheffield libraries, and although this reinforces the need to carefully evaluate any literary event, it is nonetheless difficult to do so without sufficient examples to observe. Furthermore, the recent decision by Yorkshire and Humberside Arts to revoke all funding for one-day author visits has had the obvious result of severely reducing the number which take place in the region.

If further research into this subject area were to take place, it would undoubtedly prove extremely useful to visit those venues where author events are continuing to take place, in order to discover in more depth how financial restrictions *can* be overcome. It would also be of interest to interview representatives from other regional arts councils in order to see how - and therefore why - their policy was more favourable towards the one-day author event.

#### **8:2 Teacher responses**

One of the most frustrating aspects of this study has been the fact that only non-Sheffield based teachers seemed convinced of the value of this research and were therefore prepared to co-operate by providing not only their responses to the issues being raised but also those of their pupils.

The feelings among teachers in Sheffield, however, unfortunately seems to be that as there is no funding available at the present time, it is ridiculous to believe that there would be in the future.

It would therefore be useful to develop the present list of less expensive, *alternative* author visits [Section 6:3:6] and to distribute the findings to teachers in order to convince them that such events are not only possible but *necessary*.

### **8:3 Pupil responses**

The number of completed pupil questionnaires was disappointing. Yet upon reading the enthusiastic responses of those that were returned it became clear that the problem was not a lack of willingness on the pupils' part: only two of the teachers who promised to distribute the 25 questionnaires to their pupils did so. The solution seems therefore to be to visit the schools in person to ask the children to write their responses. One class in particular has invited BKT to visit their Lancashire school in September when various writers and poets will be present at the event to celebrate the publication of their book, *We're in print!* [See Section 6:3:6], and this would certainly have been a useful source of information for this study.

### **8:4 Literary festivals**

The author was able to attend the *Hay-on-Wye Children's Festival* in May 1997, which not only provided a great deal of the material used in this study but also established a network of contacts for future correspondence and interviews via in particular the authors Kaye Umansky and Anne Fine. Unfortunately, however, other events which would potentially be as useful take place after this study will have been completed, such as the *Sheffield Children's Book Award* ceremony and the *Northern Children's Book Festival* in Newcastle upon Tyne, both of which take place in Autumn 1997.

### **8:5 Scope for further correspondence**

A number of persons interviewed for this study expressed particular interest in the subject area and would have been prepared to have been interviewed a second time. As more questions emerged in the course of the research, this would certainly have proved beneficial. For example, a number of librarians, authors and educationalists asked if they could read and discuss at a later stage the recommendations for alternative or less expensive author events, but there was unfortunately insufficient time to do so.

Similarly, the majority of letters received were left at the first reply, whereas the correspondents were in fact returning questions and ideas of their own which could have been explored.

There is clearly a great deal of scope for further research to be carried out in the area of author/child interaction. The present brief study has not been able to examine the situation in sufficient depth to persuade the disillusioned teacher, librarian and author of the value of and indeed the *need for* children to interact with authors and poets.

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**APPENDIX ONE**

**KEY TO CITED INTERVIEWS AND CORRESPONDANCE**

-  **Electronic mail**                       **Letter**  
 **Interview**                                       **Telephone interview**

<b>Means of Contact</b>	<b>Reference Term</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Name of person contacted</b>
	<b>Arts Council 1</b>	23/06/97	S. Dearden, Yorkshire and Humberside Arts, Dewsbury
	<b>Author 1</b>	02/06/97	Trevor Dickinson/John Kitching, Sheffield poet
	<b>Author 2</b>	04/06/97	Lois Duncan, US teenage suspense author
	<b>Author 3</b>	07/06/97	Anne Fine, prizewinning British author
	<b>Author 4</b>	07/06/97	Berlie Doherty, author, Sheffield
	<b>Author 5</b>	10/06/97	Ian McMillan, poet
	<b>Author 6</b>	10/06/97	Adèle Geras, author, Manchester
	<b>Author 7</b>	18/06/97	Jean Ure, author, Croydon
	<b>Author 8</b>	19/06/97	Linda Hoy, author, Sheffield
	<b>Author 9</b>	20/06/97	Gloria D. Miklowitz, U.S. teenage author
	<b>Author 10</b>	25/06/97	Rony Robinson, author, Sheffield
	<b>Author 11</b>	27/06/97	Kaye Umansky, young children's author
	<b>Author 12</b>	03/06/97	Gillian Cross, author, Coventry
	<b>Author 13</b>	14/07/97	Julia Jarman, GB author
	<b>Author 14</b>	15/07/97	Norma Fox Mazer, US author, Jamesville, New York
	<b>Author 15</b>	22/07/97	Theresa Tomlinson, historical author, Sheffield

✉	<b>Bookseller 1</b>	02/06/97	C. Jackson, Blackwell's Children's Bookshop, Oxford
☎	<b>Bookseller 2</b>	19/06/97	S. Benster, Manager, The Children's Bookshop, Huddersfield
☎	<b>Bookseller 3</b>	07/07/97	K. Bannerman, Morley Books
😊	<b>Librarian 1</b>	25/01/97	S. Cowlshaw, Children's Librarian, Westgate Central Library, Oxford
😊	<b>Librarian 2</b>	14/05/97	A. Milroy, J. Wilson, K. Burkinshaw, Schools Library Service, Sheffield
✉	<b>Librarian 3</b>	05/06/97	S. Cowlshaw, as above
✉	<b>Librarian 4</b>	13/06/97	S. Wilson, Children's Senior Librarian, Chapeltown Library, Sheffield
☎	<b>Librarian 5</b>	18/06/97	A. Williams, Head of Children's Library Service, Leeds
😊	<b>Librarian 6</b>	20/06/97	N. Hann, K. Navratil, Central Children's Library
☎	<b>Librarian 7</b>	25/06/97	J. Adam, Sheffield Central Library
✉	<b>Librarian 8</b>	30/06/97	M. Stone, Asst. Director, Calderdale
📖	<b>Librarian 9</b>	11/07/97	S. Christensen, Sdy-jydske Landbibliotek, Denmark
✉	<b>Librarian 10</b>	17/07/97	C.K.Ward, School Librarian, Broad Brook, Connecticut, US.
✉	<b>Teacher 1</b>	03/06/97	I. Enters, Sheffield LEA
✉	<b>Teacher 2</b>	08/06/97	G. Phinn, HM Schools Inspector, Yorks
☎	<b>Teacher 3</b>	12/06/97	J. Taylor, Bury Preparatory School
☎	<b>Teacher 4</b>	13/06/97	J. Hertrich, Selby High School
😊	<b>Teacher 5</b>	24/06/97	E. Tunnard, Headteacher, Staveley County Junior School, Chesterfield

✉	<b>Teacher 6</b>	09/07/97	P. Munden, NAWÉ, York
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