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The Big White Envelope:
Addressing Anxiety in Young Children through a Story

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The Big White Envelope: Addressing Anxiety in Young Children through a Story

By Emily Bramowitz

ABSTRACT

This independent study examines the role of literature in mitigating anxiety in young children. This paper focuses on school-related anxiety, specifically the worried feelings among many children at the start of a new school. The mission of this project is to both identify sources of anxiety in typical children in pre-K and lower-elementary school, as well as to outline ways in which teachers can help their students cope with their worries. Embedded within the text is the children’s book, The Big White Envelope, which is a tale about a young girl’s anticipation about the start of kindergarten. The teacher’s guide following the story describes how The Big White Envelope can fit into two larger curricula: ‘the start of a new school’ and ‘the post office’. For ‘the start of a new school’ curriculum, there are sample questions that teachers can refer to in preparation for class meetings. There are also descriptions of methods in which teachers can connect with their students prior to the start of school. For ‘the post office’ curriculum, there is an explanation of how teachers can scaffold instruction on the writing of letters. This paper also demonstrates how teachers can bridge these two studies by encouraging students to write letters to children who had been students in their classroom during the previous year.
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*The Big White Envelope is included between pages 9 and 10 of this independent study.
Introduction

I wrote *The Big White Envelope* at the culmination of my children’s literature course at Bank Street in the fall of 2011. At that point in my graduate school career I was a student teacher in a fives classroom. I had already completed my first fieldwork assignment in an inclusive 3s/4s classroom. The prospect of writing my own children’s book seemed daunting at the start of the course, but when it was time to actually do it, I felt pretty relaxed. I knew that I wanted to incorporate some autobiographical elements, having gotten accustomed to sorting through childhood memories for reflections in other courses at Bank Street. Namely, I was always eager to learn who my teacher would be when I was in lower elementary school. I would spend the first part of my summers wondering when the white envelope with my school’s insignia would arrive in the mail. I attended an all-girls independent school so there were only two sections for each grade. I couldn’t wait to find out if my assigned teacher would be the same person for whom I had wished. I also was excited to learn which of my classmates would be in my section. In first and second grades, I believe that my mother might have handed the letter to me late in the summer before school started. By the time that I was a third grader, I started checking the mail box each day starting in August. On the day that the letter actually arrived, I held it up to the light first before I opened it, just like Justin does in the story.

Ultimately, when I wrote *The Big White Envelope*, I wanted to infuse some levity into a serious subject: the start of a new school. I also thought that it would be more meaningful if the story reflected some of my childhood interests like pets and summer camp. Now that I have had more life experience as well as formal training as associate teacher in an independent school, I envision this book being helpful to teachers, children, parents, and siblings as a child prepares for the first day at a new school. Teachers and graduate students in education should begin by
reading the following section entitled, Research, to develop a more global understanding of the sources of anxiety in typical children. The next section is the actual book. Then there is a Teachers’ Guide, followed by an annotated bibliography and list of references, respectively. The best advice that I could give to individuals who choose to incorporate this book into a larger, beginning of school curriculum, is to not expect a book to be a solution to a child’s anxiety about school. Rather, the book allows children to feel comfortable opening up about their concerns by possibly identifying with the main character, as well as by discovering that others might share their anxiety.

Research

*The Big White Envelope* is about a girl coping with the uncertainty that comes with beginning a new school. The questions that she raises throughout the story reveal her concerns about fitting in and finding her way within the community. In order to appreciate fully how this book could be used for didactic purposes by lower elementary school teachers, it is essential to unearth some of the salient causes of anxiety in young children. By understanding how the origin of anxiety relates to typical child development, it would be easier for teachers to broaden the message of the book, making it relatable to more students.

As a first-year teacher in a pre-K classroom, I have had preliminary glimpse into the way in which anxiety manifests itself among typical children. For instance, there was one child who had no fever but vomited because she had had nightmares about airplanes and was wary about the ongoing airplane curriculum. There was another child who reminded me several times to call her nanny to bring her a lunch even after the lunch was delivered later that morning. There have
also been many instances when children were resistant to try another activity during work time because their friends were not at that choice.

Before I set out to research the development of anxiety in children, I knew that my journey could invariably lead to a debate on nature versus nurture. For the purpose of this paper, I will simply state that a child’s biology and environment both influence whether he or she will show signs of anxiety. Anxiety disorders affect one out of five in children in this country, frequently resulting from an interaction between biology and environment, according to Golda S. Ginsburg, an expert on childhood anxiety at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine (Brody, 2012). While I briefly mention some pathological disorders that emerge when anxiety interrupts normal behavior, my research focuses primarily on the causes of anxiety in typical children.

Anxiety is one of those terms I think is misused because the word has so many negative connotations. The reality is that we all need to experience some degree of anxiety in order to be productive members of society. Without anxiety, no work would be accomplished and we would be more inclined to put ourselves in dangerous situations. However, according to Kathy Eugster, a Child Play Therapist in Vancouver, BC, ‘anxiety is a normal emotional state that we all experience at various times in our lives. It is closely related to fear, which is another normal and necessary emotion that everyone experiences . . . [but] it is usually associated with anticipated fear or something happening in the future’ (Eugster, 2007). When it comes to children, the degree to which anxiety is apparent through behavior is variable. Sometimes it is pretty clear if a child is anxious if he or she is crying or clingy. Yet there are many times when adults cannot tell if children are anxious either because it is too difficult for them to express their
feelings, or they demonstrate their anxiety in the form of anger or defiant behavior (Eugster, 2007).

The three main themes that seemed to be repeated in the literature on sources of childhood anxiety were temperament, developmental causes, and life stressors. Up to fifteen percent of children born today have what is called an anxious temperament and appear anxious in situations very early on in their lives (Eugster, 2007). These are the children that are painfully shy in social situations that they perceive as threatening and might ultimately develop anxiety disorders and depression later in life without intervention (Miller, 2010). In a study of 238 young rhesus monkeys from a family of more than 1500 lab-raised monkeys from documented pedigrees published in *Nature* in August, 2010, researchers found that ‘an anxious temperament was partly heritable, accounting for 36% of the variability in individual monkeys’ responses on the human intruder test (as measured by reduction in movement and vocalization and increase in stress hormone level)’ (Miller, 2010). The researchers were not surprised that the brain regions that demonstrated the strongest response in metabolic activity (via PET scan, or Positron Emission Tomography) were the amygdala and the hippocampus’ (Miller, 2010). What they did learn, however, was that in contrast to the heightened responses in the amygdala, the signals from the hippocampus were heritable (Miller, 2010). The scientists then hypothesized that although the amygdala is best known as the anxiety regulatory center of the brain, the anterior hippocampus is where genetics play a role on the development of an anxious temperament in children (Miller, 2010). What can be gleaned from this study in relation to the focus of this paper is that some children are genetically predisposed to anxiety just on the basis of their temperament.
It is essential to understand that the various developmental sources of anxiety in young children are really fears and worries that represent normal aspects of growth. According to Eugster, ‘Most young children experience fears of the dark, monsters, separation from parents, animals, and strangers. As children grow, these fears gradually change to fears about social acceptance, academic and sports achievements, health, mortality, and family’ (Eugster, 2007). In addition, Jane Brody wrote in her blog for the New York Times in the aftermath of the Newtown, Connecticut shootings that ‘much of what children fear is rooted more in imagination than in reality. Parents may be called upon to ease anxieties about everything from strange noises to water, from spiders in the yard to monsters under the bed’ (Brody, 2012).

Of these developmental causes of anxiety in children, separation anxiety is extremely common especially at the start of the school year for children under the age of 7. When children cannot relinquish their fears about leaving home or being separated from a loved one then they are said to have separation anxiety disorder (WebMD, 2012). In addition to experiencing physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches, these children exhibit some of the following symptoms for at least four weeks: ‘an unrealistic and lasting worry that something bad will happen to the parent or caregiver if the child leaves, refusal to go to school in order to stay with the caregiver, nightmares about being separated, bed wetting, repeated temper tantrums or pleading, and fear of being alone’ (WebMD, 2012). Clearly, if a child gets to the point where he or she is showing multiple symptoms of separation anxiety disorder, it goes beyond what a teacher can do for this child and other professionals including psychologists must need to work alongside the parents to improve the situation for all involved.

Finally, the life stressor that can account for elevated levels of anxiety in young children need not be traumatic events. Depending on how a family grows and changes, a child undergoes
transitions that may or may not be perceptible to parents. Changes in family life that can increase a child’s anxiety include ‘the birth of a sibling, starting school, moving to a new home, death of an elderly grandparent, becoming accepted by a peer group, and mastering tasks in and out of school’ (Eugster, 2010). While some children do not disclose their discomfort regarding some familial changes, it is important for teachers to realize that their students’ anxiety in response to different changes in their home life is usually completely normal behavior.

Typical children struggling with anxiety can experience symptoms in the classroom ranging from poor concentration and procrastination to physical complaints and eating disturbances (Eugster, 2010). Along with parents and caregivers, there are many constructive methods by which teachers can be helpful to children to reduce their anxiety. Even if a child’s anxiety progresses to a level that requires outside counseling and possible medication, a teacher can still play a pivotal role in making the child feel more comfortable at school.

One of the most significant ways in which teachers can reduce anxiety in children is to validate their uneasy feelings (Lee, 2013). Being dismissive to a child who seems to have a silly fear or reaction to an activity is hurtful and unproductive. One clear example that comes to mind is a little girl in my class who is moving to a new apartment next week. Throughout the course of the year, there have been four other students who have moved to new apartments in New York City. While the other teachers and I were aware of these new developments in our students’ home lives, the prospect of moving has been most worrisome to this one child. Her mother has contacted us about her daughter’s nightmares about nap time stories (The children are currently listening to *The Magic Tree House*) and feelings of exclusion regarding the other girls in the class. The other teachers and I have concluded that the child’s anxiety largely has to do with her family’s upcoming move to a new apartment. When the student approached me recently about
the move on couple of occasions, I acknowledged that her worries were perfectly understandable. I told her that I knew what it was like to move to a new home because my family also moved right before I started kindergarten. I made sure that the child was aware of the other children in the class who had already moved and reminded her to keep talking to her family about her concerns. Finally, I asked her about other features of her new apartment to help her focus on what she would ‘gain’ from the move. She told me that she would have a view of the river as well as an indoor pool in her new building. In fact she smiled when she said that her mother would let her have a pool party there for her friends.

Other recommendations that Katherine Lee suggests to teachers and parents to help children cope with stress and anxiety include sticking to routines, limiting children’s exposure to upsetting news or stories, offering comfort and distraction (for example spending time outside), and avoiding over-scheduling (Lee, 2013). Aside from listening and validating a child’s specific concerns, it seems the most important thing to keep in mind is to ‘set a calm example’ (Lee, 2013). A child will sense if an adult cannot keep his or her own stress and anxiety in check and will likely exacerbate the situation.

Within the classroom, Alice Boyes, PhD, emphasizes that teachers must manage transitions with predictable routines for kids, help kids cope with making mistakes, teach the value of positive emotions, and respect a child’s innate temperament to minimize anxiety in children (Boyes, 2013). With regard to a child’s temperament, teachers should consider a child’s activity level and passions and interests. Moreover, if a child is more introverted he or she ‘might need alone time after school because school is already more social contact that their preferred level’ (Boyes, 2013). Of course there is the whole cognitive side of coping with stress
and anxiety that might require a teacher to obtain support from child psychologist, parents, administrators, and past teachers to learn how to tailor his or her behavior to a specific child.

The Story (Starts after Page 9)
THE BIG WHITE ENVELOPE
by Emily Bramowitz
I will never forget that special day.
Finally IT had arrived.
The school bus stopped at the corner of Murray Street and Forbes Avenue and Mommy was waiting for me with a grin on her face.

“What is that big white envelope your Mom is holding?” Olivia, my best-friend asked me.

I think I knew what it was.

“YES!” I screamed.

“Girls, it’s time for your stop and please keep your voices down,” Counselor Barb announced to the two of us.
I took a *hop, skip, and two jumps* for good luck toward my Mommy with Olivia following me from behind.

“Guess what?” Mommy said as she bent down and gave me a great big bear hug.

“Is IT really here?” I asked.

“Yes Molly!” she said. “It’s what you’ve been waiting for all summer long. Justin already opened his earlier and he will come with me and Daddy to take you to your first day of school tomorrow!”
“Where’s my envelope?” Olivia asked her mother. “I want to know if Molly is in my class!”

“Well darling,” Olivia’s mom said, “I left it at home, but remember I told you that I already found out a week ago that you are with Mrs. Kendrick in Room 204, just like Sarah was two years ago!”

“Oh yeah, I forgot, but I’m only going to school if Molly is in my class,” Olivia said as she stomped her foot on the ground.

“Well we can find out right now,” Mommy said as she handed the big white envelope to me.
I looked at the envelope. I already know what the first two words said: Molly Simon, because my preschool teacher taught me how to write my first and last names.

Olivia tried to pull the big white envelope out of my hands.

“Olivia!” her mother exclaimed.

“Wait,” I said. “I’m not ready to open it.”

“But I want to know if we are together!” wailed Olivia.

“Mommy, I’m just not ready,” I said.
Molly Simon
24 Peachtree Lane
Pittsburgh, PA
15222
“Molly you’ve waited all this time. . . are you sure?” Mommy asked.

“Yes, I want to do it later,” I said.

“Not fair,” said Olivia.

“Olivia I’m sure Molly will tell you when she is ready. Now it’s time for us to go and take your sister to soccer practice,” Olivia’s mom said.
In the car ride home the *big* white envelope sat next to me.
I wondered, did I have Mrs. Kendrick? Or did I have Miss Harner?
I remembered from my visit last year that Mrs. Kendrick had the cutest guinea pig named Edgar.
Miss Harner only had a goldfish. A goldfish named Goldie.
But didn’t Miss Harner have the loft that had a secret passage? Mrs. Kendrick’s room had a big loft too but no secret passage.
What would it be like if my best friend Olivia was not with me? I wondered.
When I got home with Mommy, my nine-year-old brother Justin was sitting at the breakfast table eating cereal.

“Why haven’t you opened it yet Molly?” he asked as I put the big white envelope on the table.

“I’m not ready yet,” I said.

“Huh?” he asked.

“Well let me show you a trick. It worked for me since second grade!” said Justin.

Justin picked up the envelope and brought it to the light above him.

“Molly, it looks like you have M-,” Justin said.

“Wait, Justin, I don’t want to know yet!”

“It is my letter and I’ll decide to open it on my own,” I said.

“Ok, ok,” he said. “But I almost had it, though!”
I brought the **big** white envelope upstairs and put it on my pink night stand.

Wally, my fluffy orange kitty was lying on my bed. I loved it when he showed his big belly.

“What if I don’t like my teacher, Wally?” I asked.

Wally opened his eyes and stretched his feet.

“Meow,” he said.

I rested my body next to him and petted him on his favorite spot: under his neck.
Mommy came into my bedroom holding some of my laundry.

“Molly, it’s ok to wait to open the letter, but we need to start getting ready for school tomorrow.”

“Is something wrong?” Mommy asked me.

“Well,” I said still hugging Wally.

“Mommy, I think I’m scared,” I said.

“What are you scared of, you have been in the school before many times with your brother. You were in pre-school and-”

“Mommy. I’m scared,” I said with a lump in my throat. I couldn’t help it. The tears began to roll out of my eyes.
Mommy laid down next to me and Wally. She began to move her fingers through my hair. “Molly, honey, it’s ok to be scared. But, what exactly are you scared of?” she asked.

“Um. . . I am. . . um scared that the teacher won’t like me. . . and maybe I’ll get lost,” I said between sobs.

“Molly,” she said, “sit up and look at me.”

“Remember that I will be there the first day and that every little girl and boy feels this way before starting at a new school, especially kindergarten.”

“Uh-huh,” I said drying my tears with my hand. “And Justin will be just one floor above you!” she said with a smile.
“Are you sure it’ll be ok?” I asked.
“Yes, but I know what will make you stop being scared,” Mommy said.
“What?” I blurted as she picked up the big white envelope.
“Let’s open up the envelope together,” Mommy said.
“Can Wally open it with us?” I asked.
Mommy laughed. “Sure he can.”
I grabbed Wally’s paw on my end of the envelope.
“On the count of three, let’s open it,” she said.
“Ok, I really can’t believe I’m going to know!” I said.
“One...two...three!” Mommy and I said together.
The letter landed on my side of the bed and Mommy picked it up and said,

“Molly, you have Mrs. Kendrick!”

“I do?” I asked.

“Yes,” Mommy said.

“Now it is time to go to the store to get you a new backpack and supplies!” Mommy said.

I felt so much better already.
THE END
Teacher’s Guide

I quickly realized while I was researching books to be included in my annotated bibliography that the subject of the start of a new school is quite popular. The range of emotions experienced by students, caregivers, and teachers alike when children reach this milestone can be captured from so many different angles. To be frank, I was not aware of the popularity of this genre in children’s literature because when I wrote the book I was still in my first year at Bank Street, having not yet taken a curriculum course. Now that I have read through a number of similar stories, I believe that *The Big White Envelope* would fit in just fine for a read-aloud in the larger context of a curriculum on the start of a new school.

The overarching theme in this book is that children typically exhibit anxiety about the beginning of school. This anxiety is a normal response to uncertainty about new routines, surroundings, people, and expectations. Molly is transitioning from pre-K to kindergarten. While she is fortunate that she is already familiar with the building because her brother already attends the same school, and knows at least one classmate, the anticipation she has about this upcoming life change causes her to put off opening the envelope that tells her who her kindergarten teacher will be. It is true that some children might be more confident like Justin or Olivia: ‘some 4- and 5-year-olds march in full of confidence and behave as if they naturally belong in the room . . . the first day of school may be the culmination of a summer of anticipation or the reality of a longed-for adventure, shared originally, perhaps, with an older sibling’ (Balaban, 2006, 2). Irrespective of a child’s temperament, I feel that *The Big White Envelope* sends messages that would resonate with lower elementary school teachers. While the target age range is 4.5-6, I think that slightly older children could still benefit from reading this book. Kindergarten was not that long ago for them, and many children in this age group might
have younger siblings who could be going through the transition of starting a new school. It doesn’t hurt for a 7- or 8-year old to become reacquainted with the angst that he or she most likely experienced a new student.

There are some fundamental strategies that teachers can implement to help ease their students’ transitions to a new school. For the purpose of this teachers’ guide, I am going to tailor my suggestions to primarily address kindergarten teachers. Pre-K and other lower elementary school teachers can equally benefit from some of my ideas because each new grade evokes uncertainty from students, especially when children enter an unfamiliar school.

According to Nancy Balaban in *Everyday Goodbyes* (2006), ‘children need to size up the human environment as well as the physical environment when they enter a new classroom or group setting’ (Balaban, 2006, 3). Depending upon the type of school where one works, there might be some restrictions on how much an individual teacher can do to welcome new students to school. For instance, many independent schools have phase-in programs during the first two to three weeks of the school year for the youngest children. Phase-in reduces the chance that children will become overwhelmed by their new environment because fewer students are present in the classroom (some spend the morning, while others attend school in the afternoon), and the teacher can more easily connect with each child. There are some schools that allow parents and caregivers to stay for a portion of the program during phase-in, but this generally only happens with the youngest children. I think that phase-in is definitely a worthwhile way to make the beginning of school more enjoyable for children. For teachers who do not have such a plan already in place, I would encourage them to advocate for a phase-in for at least one or two weeks since the long term benefits largely outweigh any time lost in school.
While many students might find out who their teacher is in the same manner as Molly, I think that it could be helpful if teachers reached out to their students in the summer prior to the start of school. When a class list is available, teachers can write a letter addressed to the new students, describing themselves, the classrooms, and some of the plans for the first couple of days of school. Since the children are still in the here and now in terms of their development, it would not be wise to make the letter too long. Handwritten by the teacher, the letter should be geared for pre-literate children with pictures and simple language. Separate correspondence can be sent to parents, as the teacher has little control over how much caregivers and adult family members disseminate information to children. Perhaps the teacher can include a child-friendly map of the new classroom and school to accompany the letter.

In addition, teachers and administrators could invite children to visit their new classroom with their parents before the start of school. In some schools that have a pre-K, the children will visit their new classroom in the spring before kindergarten. My current school invited the four new students to visit the classroom to see the layout and meet the other new children. I think that it can be equally helpful to expand this idea to incorporate an entire class (most likely in shifts) provided the teachers have enough support from the administration. While scheduling a home visit for every student in some kindergarten classes might be unrealistic for one teacher, the home visit is usually the first time a child encounters a new teacher. A home visit followed up by a visit of the classroom would be ideal so that children can reconnect with their teachers before the official program begins.

There is a whole social dimension of the community that teachers are not always privy to, but should be in my opinion. While it is still more common in independent schools, children have the opportunity to interact with their new classmates through the efforts of a parents’
association and/or class parents. Granted, some of these events can become costly or even exclusionary (one of my current students is going with his dad to a father-son retreat before the start of his all boys school), but the venue is less of an issue than the act of getting together. Without appearing intrusive, I think it is important for teachers to be aware of these events. Children might speak about a class picnic or party in a meeting later on at school or refer to these events in their written work. If teachers are informed about class social events that occur prior to the start of the school year, they would be better at responding to the children in these circumstances.

In some cases, it might be a good idea for teachers attend out of school class events in the summer. The purpose of faculty attending an out-of-school class event in the summer would serve as an opportunity for teachers to informally interact with children and families, as well as to observe some of the kids interacting with one another. My co-teachers and I learned during a parent-teacher conference that a student was very playful with other children during the summer picnic, and was even acknowledged by his father as ‘the ringleader’ of the play. We were shocked to hear this news because this boy, who was new to all of us, was withdrawn on the roof since the start of school and didn’t make efforts to engage in social contact with his peers. Therefore, ongoing communication between teachers, parents, and administrators about social events/community activities that take place before the start of school would assist everyone in making the transition as seamless as possible for the children.

*The Big White Envelope* helps teachers to keep in check the various things that they do to make the classroom more inviting to new students. Julie Diamond writes in *Welcome to the Aquarium* (2008), ‘. . . routines are imposed by the teacher and by the environment that the teacher creates. . .to provide children with a sense of comfort and familiarity in a strange new
place’ (Diamond, 2008, 17-18). She continues describing that once students feel ownership of their classroom from their routines and rituals, it is much easier for them to separate from parents and caregivers in the beginning weeks of school (Diamond, 2008, 18).

Since my fieldwork and first year teaching have been in largely progressive schools, my frame of reference reflects that in terms of the ways in which I envision making a classroom more accessible to children. For instance, the Reggio-inspired pre-K classroom in which I work has a project area where various materials (scissors, paper, crayons, pencils, and tape) are within reach of students. There is also a writing center with empty, homemade journals and a meeting area with manipulatives and puzzles on low shelves nearby. Making materials easily obtainable to children is just one way to quickly ignite students’ connection to the new classroom. Additionally, teachers should consider including pictures with all plan-of-the-day cards, names highly visible on bins, mailboxes, job charts, and labels that include pictures (either photographs or homemade drawings).

An activity that I think is important to implement at the start of the school year would be a weekly class newspaper. Since some of the anxiety that children experience as new students is a side effect of having nervous parents, the newspaper would allow for parents to have a greater idea of what is going on in the classroom if their child does not share the information. In my current classroom, the children are assigned notecards to draw something that they did in school during the past week. Then the teacher writes children’s words next to the notecards, keeping track of which students write from week to week. The purpose is to get everyone in the class involved so that children contribute at least once every three weeks. Children and parents alike look forward to looking over the newspaper together over the weekend. Oftentimes, students mention the other children with whom they play so that parents have a better notion of
whom to ask about play dates. Parents who have older children formerly in the same classroom cannot wait for the newspaper to begin.

A class newspaper is one of the simplest ways in which kindergarten-age children can help build a sense of community from within the classroom. As the year progresses, parents and teachers can track children’s social/emotional development as well as burgeoning literacy skills. For slightly older children, they would be more responsible for drawing, writing, and possibly the technical side of publishing the newspaper. Teachers should understand, however, that a class newspaper is not a replacement for regular communication between teachers and parents, either via traditional newsletters or e-mail.

I can see *The Big White Envelope* as being an instrumental component of a ‘start of a new school’ curriculum. Simultaneously, I think that a larger post office curriculum could definitely become a follow-up unit. If this book were used in a read-aloud, there should be other related books in the class library because of the emotions and questions *The Big White Envelope* can elicit from students. It is apparent in the actual story that the anxiety that children exhibit in relation to the start of a new school, and namely, kindergarten, starts much earlier than a week or so before. Therefore, I think it would be wise for teachers to give parents a list of picture books on this topic early on in the summer to foster discussion at home. It would be wonderful if some of the books on the list were also present in the class library at the beginning of the year because children generally feel a sense of relief when they spot a book they already know. They can also feel empowered by their familiarity with a book and thereby, share it with a new classmate who would probably benefit from the story.

After teachers read *The Big White Envelope* to a class during story time, one approach to initiating a discussion is to see what the children have to say about the book, and then follow
their lead for further dialogue. This is typically how stories are presented in my current classroom. Yet I am the kind of person who still feels that it is important to have some questions prepared ahead of time. In some classrooms, teachers might feel comfortable guiding the discussion by asking questions. A third scenario would be for teachers to first let the kids respond, but then be ready to interject prepared questions to focus on particular elements of the story, introduce a follow-up activity, or to just keep the discussion going, since more children might feel uncomfortable participating at the beginning of the year.

The biggest mystery in the story is what is contained in the envelope. I think it is fair to ask the children even while reading: what do you think is in the envelope? The purpose would not be to have a prolonged discussion. Rather, it would be an opportunity for children to make predictions that they can reconnect with at the end of the story. At the conclusion of the book, then teachers can ask: were you surprised by what was in the envelope? Then teachers can hone in on the experiences of the children: Did they know any other children who would be in the class? What was it like to know someone? What was it like not to know someone? Are there children that they know who are at the same school but are not in their classroom? Do they have siblings at the school, and if so, how does it feel to go to the same school?

One question that teachers could ask to both determine comprehension and to stimulate a general discussion is why is Molly worried? Follow-up questions would include: How have your grown-ups helped you feel better when you get worried? Did they take the worry away? Do you have pets like Wally to help you when you feel worried or scared? Do you think Justin was helping Molly or making her worried feelings worse? Why wasn’t she ready to open the envelope with Justin?
Teachers could follow-up the initial class discussion of the book with a meeting on the question: What did you hope would be in the classroom or in the new school? What was the same from what you expected, and what was different? What is your favorite part of the classroom now? What is your least favorite part? Then there could be a more general discussion about worries. Just by coincidence, my two co-teachers introduced an activity called ‘the worry pot’ two weeks ago. They have used it in the past at different points in the school year, and decided to bring the worry pot out recently because parents reported that several children were having nightmares about various things both inside and outside of school (sources of anxiety included recorded stories played during rest, the airplane curriculum, and an upcoming move to a new apartment for one student).

The way that the ‘worry pot’ works is that a teacher writes down what each child says is a worry of theirs. In my class, the worries were recorded after kids stated them aloud so there was no anonymity. Then in subsequent meetings, a piece of paper with a worry is pulled out of the pot, stimulating a discussion. Depending on the time allotted for the meeting and size of the class, teachers and classmates can address the concerns of their peers. Especially at the beginning of the school year, it could be reassuring to children to see that many of their classmates might share some of their concerns whether at home or at school. It would be more of a bonding experience for children at this stage of development when everyone knows which worry belongs to which person. While I am not officially recommending it, teachers might also put a worry in the pot to start the discussion.

*The Big White Envelope* could bridge the gap between ‘the start of a new school’ curriculum and a possible ‘post office’ curriculum. At a meeting teachers could hold the page of the book that has the stamped envelope with Molly Simon’s name on it in bold letters. Teacher-
directed questions could include: have you ever received a letter addressed to you? What did it feel like? If you ever received an envelope addressed to you, what did you do when you got it in the mail? Have you ever sent a letter to someone else? Did the letter have a stamp?

The next step would be to target the question: what do you know about writing and sending letters in the mail? Obviously, the post office curriculum that could emerge from this discussion could take many different forms. In the school where I will be teaching at next year, City and Country, there is already a post office in place. In the kindergarten each day it is one child’s job to put the completed attendance sheet in an envelope, place a ‘stamp’ (sticker with a design made by the older children who operate the post office), address it with the help of the associate teacher, and then deposit the letter in the mailbox outside of the classroom, where it will be promptly picked up by other children. In the majority of schools that do not have a pre-existing post office, the first activity could be writing letters. The letters would have to have a purpose though. Again, as pure coincidence, my students will be writing to children who were in the class last year to ask them what kindergarten will be like. This is a tradition in my classroom, even though kids generally write to students who will not be at the same school in the fall. Parents of the alumni are notified so that their children write back to the students in my class before the end of the year. When the letters arrive, they will be read aloud and hung on the wall to be shared with others.

This idea could be extended to children at the start of kindergarten. They could write and illustrate letters to children in first grade at the same school. Teachers could help write words, encouraging children to ask some of the following questions: what was it like to be a student in their classroom? What was their favorite part of kindergarten? What were they worried about at the start of the year? Teachers could scaffold what is involved in addressing an envelope by
asking kids to name the parts of an envelope during a meeting, and then creating a model envelope out of chart paper.

Once the letters and envelopes have been completed, the students can bring them to the school post office to be delivered. There should be communication between kindergarten and first grade teachers to ensure that the children receive responses within a week or two. When the letters arrive, the children could share them at a meeting and they can be hung on a classroom wall too. Since the children in this scenario attend the same school, the letter could ignite a long-term relationship among children. Maybe more letters could follow throughout the year. Another variation would be for the first graders to write to third or fourth graders. Then a reading-buddy time could result from their written communication. The children could meet on a regular basis, taking turns reading to one another as part of class time.

Depending on the level of interest from the students and the philosophy of the school, a more global post office curriculum could follow. The curriculum could be based on the student inquiries. There could still be certain activities that could enhance the unit: a visit from a postal worker, a trip to a post office, and the creation of an actual post office in the classroom. Children could also look for books about the post office or stamps. Some families might even have access to unique envelopes from around the world. Altogether, I think that a curriculum is most meaningful when it is inclusive and largely represents the ideas of the children involved. The emotions that emerge from *The Big White Envelope* should resonate with the kids to facilitate fruitful discussions. Teachers should be prepared to help children, if other curricula emerge from student inquiry after reading this book.

**Annotated Bibliography**
This book begins with Billy, the protagonist, who is about to begin kindergarten. While he is excited about the prospect of starting school, he feels ‘a little funny inside’ (Anholt & Anholt, 1997, 1). He doesn’t want to eat breakfast and wishes he could stay at home with his mother, who tells him he is ‘just like a little bird who doesn’t want to leave his nest’ (Anholt & Anholt, 1997, 3). Billy has a fascination with birds so goes outside to study and draw them. He told the birds that he was worried he would get lost, have trouble tying his shoes, or start to cry at school. One of the birds cannot fly well so Billy decides to take it inside to put it in a box with cotton balls for it to heal. The next day it was time for Billy to go to school but before he leaves, he opens the window and tells the bird to fly away since the bird appears to be better. At school Billy’s teacher, Mrs. Berry, orients him around the classroom and he meets many new children. At the morning meeting Mrs. Berry asks the children if anyone has a pet. When it is Billy’s turn he tells the class about his story about helping the bird. The entire class claps at the end of his story. Then, a few days later, Billy and one of his new friends from school have a play date and picnic in the park. A sparrow that looks very familiar to the bird that Billy had helped comes over looking for crumbs. In Billy’s eyes, he isn’t sure if it was the same bird in spite of the obvious physical resemblance, because this sparrow is ‘braver…happier…and [has] lots of friends just like Billy’ (Anholt & Anholt 1997, 27-8).

Just like Molly, Billy has specific fears about the start of the new school. What I like about this book is that Billy is not paralyzed by his anxiety. He is very much a self-starter and doesn’t rely too much on adults to transition into this new stage of his life. The knowledge and confidence that he derives from helping the sparrow allow him to connect better to his peers. I
think that children can learn that the hobbies and interests that they pursue outside of school can help them make valuable contributions in the classroom too.


This is a story about a little girl who wakes up one morning and tells her cat, Puddy, she is in big trouble since kindergarten starts in ten days and she does not know how to tie her shoes by herself. She is also worried that she is not allowed to bring any stuffed animals. However, she does know how to count from ten backwards. The story is from the girl’s perspective so the audience never knows her name. As the start of kindergarten gets closer, she becomes more and more worried about tying her shoes. She looks at pictures of bows, asks her Dad to help her tie her shoes, and even hides her shoelaces in the garbage (until her Dad finds them). She believes that she cannot even ask adults in school to help her with tying her shoes at school. Two days before the big day, she is fearful that she will have to hold up a sign that says ‘velcro girl’ if she can’t wear shoes with ties. Finally, when the first day of kindergarten arrives, the little girl finds out that her classmates also need grown-ups to help them tie their shoes. Her teacher writes on the chalkboard that on Monday, that they will learn shoe tying (with the teacher helping), on Tuesday it will be Stuffed Animal Day, and Wednesday the class will review counting backwards from ten.

I really like this book because the author introduces some levity into this serious subject. There are cartoon-like captions for the dialogue and the girl creates silly scenarios in her head about what to do with her shoelaces. This child is clearly worried and misguided about what will be expected of her at the start of kindergarten. It isn’t really until the first day of school arrives
that her fears are abated. Like Billy in *Billy and the Big New School*, this girl confides in her pet about her anxiety about the start of school. In addition, there is the introduction of counting backwards from ten. The tales begin ten days from the start of school, and then every day the little girl tries to do something else to help her cope with the idea of tying her shoes.


This book begins with the protagonist, Dexter Dugan, saying that he knows everything about kindergarten and will begin his a week. He brings his stuffed dog, Rufus, around with him wherever he goes, and whenever Dexter has a question about his new school, he always says that Rufus is the one that wants to know the answer (for example, he says that Rufus is scared that Dexter will get lost on the way to school). Dexter directs most of his questions to his sister, Jessie, who is in third grade at the same school. When Dexter goes to the first day of school, he sees one of his classmates from pre-school in his classroom. He really enjoys the activities and the people he meets. He gets so busy that he cannot remember where his stuff dog Rufus is. His teacher lets him get his big sister to help him retrace his steps and look for Rufus throughout the school. But ultimately he finds Rufus in his classroom and he is excited to return to school the next day.

One of the parallels that this story has to my book is that there is an older sibling present who tries to help the protagonist adjust to being in kindergarten. The older siblings want to be helpful rather than antagonistic, because they can relate to the anxiety that the younger children are experiencing. I thought it was interesting that while Dexter appears to be ready to tackle the uncertainty of a new school, he still expresses some fears through his stuffed dog. This story has a happy ending but even at the conclusion, Dexter still has some questions about kindergarten (mostly having to do his wondering if the next day will be similar to the first day of school). I think that even a successful first day of both attending school and going to and from school on
the school bus does not mean any child won’t be anxious about the next couple of days. Since children at this stage of development are so fixated on ‘the here and now’, it really won’t be until a fixed plan is in place that most typical children’s anxiety about the start of school will abate. Finally, it is thoughtful how the teacher allows Dexter search the school with his older sister. It is important for teachers to remember which students have older siblings also attending the school because they can be very useful in the phase-in process (and beyond too).


The characters in this book are all cats. The main character, Enrico, talks about all of the things that he can do now that he is five like writing a bike without training wheels, sneaking up on his amazing wind-up mouse, and making really tasty sardine in lobster-jelly sandwich. He has a younger brother Chico who he likes to play with even though Chico still needs training wheels on his bicycle. On the first day of school all of the cats on the playground look bigger to Enrico and he has no idea how to make friends. He is too shy to raise his hand to answer questions in class and when he offers the other cats a bite of his sandwich, they eat all of it. Enrico gets the help of his younger brother to make roller skates to skate with the other cats at school but he doesn’t know how to stop and falls in front of the other students. Chico then tells Enrico to be himself, and that advice really works. Enrico starts to feel comfortable raising his hand in school and doesn’t feel awkward playing by alone sometimes. On one occasion when he is playing paddleball on his own, another student named Pepe taps him on the shoulder and the two cats start playing together. The story ends with Enrico and Pepe having a play date where they find out that Pepe has a younger brother named Miguel who is Chico’s age. The four cats finally end up playing together and enjoying sardine in lobster-jelly sandwiches.
While this book doesn’t describe Enrico’s anticipation about the start of school like some of the other stories, I feel that children can be inspired by his desire to be included in the group. He doesn’t stop trying to fit in, but finally realizes that he doesn’t have to change himself to do that. He also realizes that his younger brother, although unable to do certain things yet like riding a bike without training wheels, can be very helpful to him in other ways. Many books describe older siblings who the protagonists look up to of course, but we mustn’t forget the impressionable younger siblings who also experiencing changes in their environment (for example, the kindergartener will probably be away more often from home and less available for the younger sibling to play with). Lastly, I like that the author/illustrator incorporated gave the characters Spanish names and incorporated a few Spanish words into the text. The foreign language component makes this story attractive to many teachers who work in diverse settings, or at least demonstrates to students from many different backgrounds are experiencing the same feelings about the start of a new school.


This story takes place in a southern rural area where the characters speak in the local dialect. The little boy Little Cliff is about to begin his first day of school. He lives with his great-grandparents, Mama Pearl and Papa Joe. The illustrations by EB Lewis in this book are absolutely exquisite watercolor paintings. It appears that Little Cliff will attend school in a small schoolhouse. He is very anxious about attending school, taking time to get dressed in his new fall clothes and saying goodbye to his toys at home, ‘I can’t play with y’all no more. I gotta go to Miss Maxey’s school way down the road, a million miles from here. I know you gonna miss me, ‘cause I miss y’all already’ (Taulbert, 8). He tells his great grandfather that he is scared.
Even though Papa Joe reassures him, Little Cliff observes him and his Mama Pearl shaking ‘their heads as if they didn’t know what to do’ (Taulbert, 9). Little Cliff ends up hiding under the house but finally Mama Pearl persuades him to come with her to school. When Cliff arrives in the schoolyard, he recognizes so many children already familiar to him playing games. He suddenly realizes that school is not all about work but can be fun too. Cliff meets his teacher but then when he says goodbye to Mama Pearl, he notices that she is crying. He asks if she wants to go to school. Mama Pearl laughs and says that she is happy. Little Cliff joins his friends. He sees that Mama Pearl stands there watching him for a while before she leaves, holding onto his green cap.

This book demonstrates that the start of school is a bittersweet time for parents and caregivers too. While children need adults to shield them from their own anxiety for the most part, I think this story could still be a solid addition to a class library. This way kids will know that it is okay for adults to be emotional while they are making this transition to a new stage of their life. This story could evoke a discussion among students about how they and their family members feel about them starting kindergarten. In addition, I think that this book provides an alternative perspective of what it would be like to go to school in a small town. While this family is an African-American from a southern rural area, the messages about beginning kindergarten are pretty universal.

References


