I attended my first Bill Martin Jr Symposium today. What a glorious experience! From the moment I arrived, I felt a palpable buzz of excitement. As soon as I registered and picked up my bag of “goodies,” a woman approached me and said, “Have you chosen a session for 8:00? I'm recruiting for a woman who is doing a wonderful presentation and no one is in there yet.” Sure, why not? I thought. I hate for her to present to an empty room. So I walked into the Legacy room with a few other teachers and got an introduction to the Reggio teaching method (Maggie F. Abrego, Aldine ISD), in which everything seemed like an invitation: a writing invitation, an invitation to play, an invitation to tell a story. Working from an assumption of what the child knows, not what they do not know, Reggio is an excellent method for oral language development. It is student-led, with the teacher providing the stimulus and then allowing the child to explore. The teacher who gave the presentation had excellent ideas to share about classroom arrangement and design, ways to encourage student storytelling and methods of documenting and displaying student work. I walked out of that session buoyed with excitement.

The morning keynote by illustrator Floyd Cooper was fantastic. We got to see some of his artistic methods in action - he draws with an eraser! They even gave away the drawing he created in front of us as a door prize, and the entire room sighed, “Awwww” when the number was called. Well, everyone except one person, of course.

The next session I attended was “Culturally Responsive Stories and Math,” with Amy Corp. It was one of the few that specifically mentioned “Math” in the title, which was part of the reason I chose it. Apparently mentioning “Math” in the title scares away attendees, because there were only three of us. No matter, it was a good presentation. It focused on a book called, “Ruth and the Green Book,” illustrated by our keynote speaker. The book spoke to racism and Jim Crow laws, so I got the “culturally responsive” part. But how does this relate to math? I kept asking myself. And then she showed us: the assignment was to map out the route the family took, figuring out how far they could go each day. Depending on the level of the students, this could be taken as far as you would like: calculate miles per gallon, compare gas prices then and now, calculate a budget for the trip, and so on. Instantly, my mind went back to the Martin Luther King, Jr. unit I had done earlier this year and I saw how I could expand it and add a math component to it.

I've been to many conferences before, but as I traversed my day at BMJ, I noticed something special about this one. There was an energy that I had not seen at other events, both in education and in my previous career in business. I believe there are several reasons for this.
First, presentations are given by practicing teachers, not consultants. The presenters are people who are sharing their experiences of what is working for them, right now. They are not paid for presenting, and are sharing for the joy of passing on to others what they have learned.

Second, notably absent was a lot of talk about standardized tests and how to pass them. In place of this kind of talk was discussion on how to awaken wonder in children (or, more importantly, how not to kill it in the first place), how to create spaces for children to explore, how to inspire and bring forth the vitality from within and share it with others.

Finally, children were present and visible at BMJ. This was not a conference where teachers go to get away from children, but rather one where they come to celebrate children. The winners of the “Authors of Class” competition were there to accept their awards, and were briefly included in the keynote speaker's presentation. The lunchtime entertainment was provided by the 8th-grade General Music Class from The Good Shepherd Episcopal School.

More than a mere conference, BMJ is a celebration of us as educators, readers, writers, thinkers, artists, musicians, and creators. It is assumed that we are all of these things. Educators who attend BMJ walk with their heads held high, because they are leaders and professionals, and are recognized as such.

72° Clear
Kaufman, TX, United States