

Professional Voices/Classroom Portrait

STRATEGIC PLANNING: RECOGNIZING PATTERNS FOR READING INSTRUCTION

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As I look around my room, I see young readers laying on their stomachs or sitting with their backs pressed against the wall, while others are sitting cross-legged under tables reading. Each of these students is holding a book, a book chosen by them, a just-right book that is not too hard and not too easy. These books have been selected (not assigned) by the children from my extensive classroom library, the school/public library, or from their own collections at home. These are authentic literature books, trade books written by popular authors, their pages filled with gorgeous illustrations and extraordinary language. This selection of reading materials may seem like a small thing, but it has taken a great amount of teacher and student reflection to get to the point where my students and I both feel confident that students know how to appropriately choose a book.

There is much discussion about teaching reading these days. Teachers have many different choices of reading programs that suggest different ways to organize and level books, group children, and design instruction. One of the primary concerns with many of these reading programs is the process of matching readers and texts. Many reading programs solve this dilemma by creating extensive lists of books, leveled according to some specific formula, that are to be used by teachers to allocate the correct resources for each reader. In many of these programs, teachers make the decisions concerning what children should read so that every child has the appropriate book to read. Unfortunately, children are frequently left out of the selection process.

Today's emphasis on matching books to readers and utilizing guided reading groups that focus on reading strategies and decoding skills has led teachers down a different path. We have moved from using basal readers and teaching whole or small groups the same lesson to separating our students into reading levels and trying to systematically follow a reading program based on sets of leveled books. The problem with this type of guided reading program is that there is little difference between using a prescribed basal program and using a leveled book program. Both of these approaches rely primarily on large manuals for teachers that prescribe particular lessons in a particular order. The component missing in both the basal program and the guided reading program is the teacher as the reflective practitioner. When a reading program prescribes what should be taught and when it should be taught, teachers cease to question their practice and rely solely on the reading program to guide their teaching.

During the past few years, I have been reflecting on my use of a reading program that revolves around a leveled series of books, guided reading groups, and the teaching of reading strategies. This reflection has become a key factor in determining what direction my own practice has taken. By reflecting on my practice and my beliefs about the reading process and instruction, I have found that not only was it important for me as the teacher to reflect, it was critical that I teach my students how to be reflective readers as well. My goal is to develop readers in my classroom who:

- are able to choose appropriate books,
- relate reading to their lives and experiences,
- respond to their reading in a variety of formats,
- make use of the three cueing systems to make sense of texts,
- are able to talk about the books they read,
- demonstrate the use of various reading strategies as they read for meaning.

My Reading Workshop

Every day, my reading workshop includes shared reading, reading aloud to children, small-group strategy lessons, and literature circles. Reading to students, with students, and by students form the basic structure of the workshop and are essential, I believe, to developing lifelong readers (Mooney, 1990). The primary focus of my reading workshop is helping children spend an extensive amount of quality time engaged in reading authentic literature. During the workshop, I circulate throughout the room with a clipboard, observing reading behaviors, questioning children's choices, and discussing reading behaviors with my students. I'm not simply looking for what my kids are doing while they are reading, I also want to understand the thinking that occurs while they are reading.

During the reading workshop each day, I pull together a small group of readers for a reading strategy lesson or book talk. I make my decisions about these groups based on which readers I feel are

ready for specific strategies and which readers need my help the most. My students are expected to practice the reading strategies and skills that I model during these strategy lessons. I only work with one group per day because when all my time is taken up working with a number of small groups, I miss out on the important learning opportunities that are happening in other parts of the reading workshop.

Guided Reading

When I began teaching elementary school, I knew that I did not want to use a basal reading program. I felt that students should be treated as individuals with particular needs, and that as their teacher, I must meet them at their point of need or zone of proximal development in order to scaffold future learning experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). These beliefs brought me to investigate the instructional method commonly referred to as guided reading.

I read books by Gay Su Pinnell, Irene Fountas, Patricia Cunningham, and Lucy Calkins. I designed activity centers to keep my students busy while I worked with my scheduled guided reading groups. I assigned students to groups based on the information I collected through running records of particular benchmark books. I worked hard to match books to readers within 95% accuracy for their independent reading and 91%–94% for their instructional reading level. I used the lists provided by many commercial publishers to create a series of leveled books in my guided reading library, and I conducted the guided reading groups according to the

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ideas presented in the professional reading I had been doing. I began to realize, however, that I was not accomplishing my goal of creating reflective readers. The leveled books I had chosen did not seem to be supporting the use of all three cueing systems; rather, these books seemed to focus the reader only on the visual cueing system.

As I began reflecting on the observations I made during my guided reading lessons, I decided to analyze the qualities of the books in the leveled series provided by the guided reading publisher. Although these books helped support emergent readers by providing predictable text, simple vocabulary, and strong picture clues, they didn't allow many opportunities for students to think about the meaning or the structure of the language of the book.

An excellent example of this is a book that uses words like *clang*, *zing*, and *stamp* with pictures of different objects making these noises. The dominant cueing system that readers rely on to read these books is the visual cueing system. There is little or no meaning or structure in this book. If I asked my students to think about what would make sense when they were stuck on a word, there was no sense to be made. It was a silly group of pictures and words that had no meaning and a structure that did not support their reading strategies.

As I watched my students become frustrated with these types of stories, I began to realize that these leveled books were not accomplishing what I wanted them to accomplish, namely, to develop reflective readers that strategically used all three cueing systems to make meaning during the act of reading. I knew at this point that I could not continue to use these books just because they were designed to fit a specific reading level. I needed to really read and reflect on these books as if I were an emergent reader. I began to ask myself the following questions:

- Can readers use multiple cueing

systems and, therefore, multiple reading strategies to decode this text?

- Does this story make sense or is it a repetitive pattern of words with little or no meaning?
- Does this book support my readers in using the reading strategies that we are working on in our classroom?
- Does the structure of these books support the structure and meaning cueing systems, as well as the visual cueing system?

Developing Reflective Readers

Because of my observations and my reflections concerning the types of readers that were being supported by these texts, I began to focus on my definition of a reader, especially the kind of reflective reader I hoped to create in my classroom. I wanted more than simply a reader that could correctly decode unfamiliar words; I wanted to develop readers that make meaning from text by applying it to their own reading lives. In other words, I wanted to move the reader from the word level to the story level. I knew that reflective readers are readers that continually predict or anticipate upcoming events during their reading. Reflective readers think and ask questions about why characters or authors do or write what they do. Reflective readers also think about how events affect other events in the story. I knew that I needed to focus my whole-group and small-group reading sessions on strengthening this type of reflection in my young readers.

I started to promote reflection in my young readers by creating a chart during our group discussions entitled "What is a reader?" Some of the ideas we included in this chart are as follows:

- A reader is someone who thinks when they are reading.
- A reader is someone who writes.

- A reader talks about books.
- A reader is someone who concentrates.
- A reader tries different strategies to figure out tricky words.

The purpose behind this activity was to help my students define what a reflective reader is and what a reflective reader does. I want my readers to think of reading as more than just decoding the words on a page. I want them to know the joy of talking about books and sharing different kinds of books with their friends. By creating this chart together, I was able to help my students form a concrete picture of what they should do as reflective readers.

Choosing Appropriate Books

Next, I want to help my students pick books that are just right for their individual reading level and interests. I have instructed my



students on how to use the Five Finger Method to find a book on their independent reading level. To use this method, the students first choose a book that seems interesting to them, either by looking at the cover pictures and title or by leafing through the book. Then they choose a page somewhere in the book and begin reading. Every time they come to a word that they can't understand, even using their reading strategies, they hold up one finger. If they are holding up five fingers or more by the end of that page, the book is too difficult for them to read independently. I do not discourage them from ever reading that particular book, but it would be better suited for a read aloud than for independent reading.

The purpose behind teaching my students to choose just the right books is that I want them to really read and understand the books they choose, not just to pretend to read. I tell my students that reading is just like any other talent or skill: you must practice at your level in order to improve. If these young readers continually struggle with a book that is too difficult for them, they will concentrate solely on decoding and not on meaning. Since reading for meaning is what reflective readers do, it is pointless to read a book that is too difficult. By teaching my students to reflect on the type of reading material they choose to read, I allow my students to grow at their own pace and by their own decisions. I do not want to be responsible for choosing books for my students, nor do I feel that my choosing for them helps develop independent, reflective readers. I must help students develop strategies that enable them to make appropriate choices on their own.

Our Reading Rubric

A reading rubric is posted in our room so that my students can reflect on their own reading behaviors. This reading rubric was developed by Lucy Calkins in *The Art of*

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Teaching Reading. In the rubric, there are four different categories. A big smiley face denotes the first category. It characterizes behavior displayed by serious readers. The criteria include choosing a just-right book, no pretending to read, reading for the entire independent reading time, staying in one reading spot, and thinking about what you are reading so that you are able to share ideas with your reading partner.

The second category is represented by a smaller smiley face. It includes the same criteria as the first category but uses the words "most of the time" rather than "all of the time." These two categories are the most desirable reading behaviors.

The third category is a half smile/half frown face. If the students' reading behavior falls in this category, they generally change reading spots several times, choose books that are too hard or too easy, and only read some of the time.

The last category is a frowning face. Students in this category waste valuable reading time, hardly read at all, and may stop others from reading. Although the idea for this rubric came from Lucy Calkins, I adapted the rubric to fit in with our discussions of what it meant to be a reflective reader.

As we began making our version of the rubric, we discussed desirable and undesirable reading behaviors. Many of my students wanted a tangible way to record their reading behavior, so we developed a weekly log sheet based on the class-generated rubric in which the students would reflect on their reading and circle the face that best described their reading behavior that day. By reflecting on the rubric each day, my students benefited from this daily reminder of what good readers do.

Many of my students share their self-assessments with me, and I find they are very honest about their reading behaviors. For example, a student approached me one day to tell me that he had been in the frowning face during reading. When I asked him

why he gave himself that assessment, he replied, "Well, James had a new watch that did all kinds of different stuff. He wanted to show it to me, so we looked at it during our reading time." I was glad to see such honest reflection. Who wouldn't be distracted by someone's fancy new watch? Through the use of our classroom reading rubric, he was able to tell me that he knew that he had wasted his reading time. This admission led to his realization that he didn't want to waste his valuable reading time anymore. When I asked him how he would solve this problem if it happened again, he responded, "I think it is better to look at a new watch during recess. I had really wanted to read that new chocolate girl book you showed us this morning (*Chocolatina*) but I didn't get to because I was playing with the watch. Tomorrow I will be a smiley face and read that book." How exciting to see young readers not only reflecting on their choices, but also planning new choices for the next reading workshop!

Reading Strategies

To further promote reflection in my young readers, I expect my students to share how they use their reading strategies when they come to tricky parts in a text. This serves to highlight the strategies I have taught to the entire class and reinforced during our small-group strategy sessions. This practice resulted from several years of completing reading surveys with my students.

At the beginning of each school year, I ask my students to respond to a reading survey; their answers to this series of questions help me understand how they think about reading. When I ask, "What do you think good readers do when they come to a tricky word?" the usual response is, "sound it out." This seems to be the strategy that every student relies on, but in many instances, it isn't very helpful since it focuses the reader's attention only on the visual cueing system. I knew that I needed

to teach my students many different strategies explicitly and show them how to articulate their use of each strategy; otherwise, they would continue to rely primarily on “sound it out” when coping with unfamiliar words.

To reinforce the use of reading strategies that take advantage of all three cueing systems, I began to give my students sticky notes. Every day, for the first several months of school, I would have my students write down three different strategies that they used when they came to a tricky word. This tactic emphasized the three questions that students must ask themselves when decoding unfamiliar words:

- Does it look right?
- Does it sound right?
- Does it make sense?

The students then meet with their reading partner to discuss the three different strategies that they used, why they picked those strategies, and which ones helped them to decode the tricky words.

Responding to Literature

Later on in the year, when I feel that the majority of my students are using multiple reading strategies, I begin to teach them how to discuss their thinking about a particular piece of literature. Using sticky notes again, readers work in pairs to mark places in their books that they want to question or bring to the attention of the group. As a class, we begin to chart the types of questions that readers have about what they are reading. For example:

- How is this story related to your life?
- What was the author trying to tell us about the world?
- Who might like this story and why?
- Why did the author write this story?
- What makes this story similar or different from other stories?

- What important points was this story trying to make?

These questions help my individual readers to focus on the types of questions reflective readers ask when they are reading, and to dig deeper into the literature they themselves are reading and sharing. By exchanging ideas during our group discussions, my students begin to reflect on the meanings they are making, the strategies they are using to make sense of text, and the way they are responding to their readings. The charts we develop and the discussions we have concerning what reflective readers do help move my young readers from literal interpretations of the stories they read to deeper explorations of the connections and possibilities in quality pieces of literature.

My Own Reflections

Finally, in order to promote reflective reading, I defined what I wanted my students to be able to do as readers. I knew that I wanted them to use multiple reading strategies and all three cueing systems. I knew that I wanted them to be able to sustain their own independent reading for longer and longer periods of time, choosing books that were just right for them. I knew that I wanted them to be able to make sense of what they read by applying it to their own lives and by questioning why or how things occur in text.

Because of this, I stopped assigning students to reading groups, and I began to use a flexible system of grouping that helped me target students’ specific needs. I found that students on different reading levels often had similar needs in terms of how they reflected on text. As my groupings changed, so did my definition of guided reading. I began to think of this time as more of a strategy lesson than guided reading. I started grouping students according to which learning strategy would benefit them most rather than by reading

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level. Thus, choosing a text that would require use of the featured strategy, students would develop an understanding of it, not only during the lesson, but also when reading independently.

By grouping my students by needs rather than level, I emphasize to them that they are individual learners with individual needs. They understand that their own reflections about their reading strategies are instrumental in my assessment as well. We become partners in taking responsibility for their reading lives. Now when I meet with small groups and announce our focus strategy, I often have one or two other students join the group voluntarily because they have reflected on their reading behavior and feel that they would benefit from further instruction.

As I continue on my own reflective journey, I try to stay focused on what I have learned so far. Most important, I have learned that even beginning readers can become highly reflective learners when given guidance and the power to take responsibility for their own learning. Also, when it comes to choosing a resource, whether it is for guided reading, strategy lessons, or an addition to my classroom library, it is important to scrutinize the text to make sure that it will accomplish my objectives. Third, it is important for me as

the teacher to take control of what is taught in my classroom. By allowing my practice to be driven by a publisher's manual rather than my own professional knowledge and assessment/evaluation of my students, I lessen the opportunities to really help my students become reflective, lifelong learners. After all, if the teacher is unable to be reflective about her own learning, how can the students learn to be reflective of theirs? And finally, I have learned how difficult being a reflective teacher can be. No one likes to face the mistakes that they have made along the way; it's easier to allow a publisher to take responsibility for students' learning. However, in the big picture, it is much more rewarding to know that all my hard work, planning, and dedication to my students has enabled them to become successful, reflective, lifelong lovers of reading and learning.

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