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Take Time to Cover Children Through Integrated Literacy Instruction

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It was at the end of a long week of professional development seminars and quite frankly most of us sitting on the hard auditorium seats were ready for this particular seminar to end. After all, what more could be said about literacy education than what we had heard already? Roach Van Allen stood there and in his usual intense way said, "It is not your job to cover the curriculum. It is your job to cover the children." These simple words have haunted me, in my own teaching and as I observe teachers around me.

What did Van Allen mean? Simply put, he meant that the children and their development as readers and writers were more important than any curriculum. It was a call to pay attention to the needs of children and provide instruction based upon those needs, not based upon a curriculum imposed upon the classroom by someone outside of it. It was a call to empower children by giving them the tools for success rather than disabling them by simply covering the grade level materials. It was a call to teach children not only what they need for today, but also what they will need for the world of tomorrow.

Today's teachers and administrators are faced with the demands of No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress. With each new mandate, the curriculum at each grade level has been expanded in an attempt to meet the demands for more achievement, "academic excellence." As the curriculum expands, with more and more materials to teach, less and less time remains for teaching foundations, especially reading and writing. With little time for teachers to observe how children are constructing meaning, responding to texts, processing information, and solving problems, the teachers are forced into the role of task manager rather than facilitator for literacy acquisition. Literacy skills develop over time through practice and intentional instruction based on the particular needs of the individual child.

Sadly, many teachers are feeling the pressure to abandon "best practices" that advocate for children's empowerment for success through the development of literacy skills. In a desperate attempt to cover curriculum, teachers are teaching children to read using grade level materials rather than materials that are aligned with the child's instructional reading level. When children appear to have difficulty understanding the text, teachers treat it as a problem with comprehension without considering underlying factors, such as fluency. Because students struggle to read content area textbooks, teachers read the texts to the students rather than showing them how to negotiate the texts on their own. Everywhere, teachers struggle with the burgeoning demands of "academic excellence" that no longer take into consideration the nature of teaching and learning, that change the focus of teaching and learning from the child to the curriculum.

Helping children develop literacy skills and moving them from novice readers and writers to mature readers and writers takes time. The intentional, purposeful instruction necessary for developing proficient readers and writers takes more time than the usual 60 minutes allotted for language arts instruction in most schools. The children need to encounter reading and writing instruction throughout the school day, in every

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content area. It is through transparent modeling of a variety of literacy strategies in a wide range of subjects that children develop the literacy skills they will need to be successful in the workplace of tomorrow.

No Child Left Behind, Adequate Yearly Progress, and the curricular mandates that flow from these initiatives are not going to go away. Teachers can respond to the mandates without abandoning good instructional practices. An African proverb says, "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for life." So it is with good teaching. When teachers use an instructional model that integrates literacy skill development into content area instruction, they give children tools that will enable them to learn independently. In addition to empowering children, integrated literacy instruction is an efficient use of time within the classroom. It allows for the development of reading and writing proficiencies in real-world contexts, while at the same time developing content area knowledge. Integrated

literacy instruction in the content areas provides opportunities for expanding the breadth and depth of the learning experience and creates an instructional environment that fosters the development of the critical literacy skills necessary to integrate information from across a wide range of informational sources.

In our rush to respond to the "tyranny of time" and the need to "cover the curriculum," our paths sometimes become blurred. Our children need critical literacy skills in order to navigate the volumes of textual and visual information they will encounter on an hourly basis day in and day out. It is not enough to "cover the curriculum," and say we did it. We must "cover the children" as Roach Van Allen reminded us. We can do that by taking the time to provide the best teaching practices in meaningful ways so that children do learn, do become critical thinkers, and are competent readers and writers. If that means rethinking and reusing our time—going beyond covering the curriculum to really teaching children—so be it. That is the job of a teacher!

If I Had Helping Hands

BY PEGGY HART

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If I had a magic wand, I would wish for "Helping Hands." With my Helping Hands, I would be able to reach out to all the schools in Michigan and all the students within these schools. My "Helping Hands" would include community and parent volunteers who would be offering their time, money, resources, or assistance for students' literacy development all across Michigan. No longer would I read in the newspaper that some schools have received an "A" and others a "C" or "D" for their teachers' and students' performances. Instead, I would see all schools receiving an "A" because we would all be working together to address the literacy needs of all students in our state.

How can we label schools with a grade or a score when the grade does not reflect the number of books, computers, papers, pencils, desks, educational materials and supplies, or resources available to these

schools? In their article, Neuman and Celano (2001) cite a lack of equitable funding of resources for schools and libraries in many communities. Others (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Stanovich, West, & Harrison,



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