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Using reflection to guide literacy instruction in the "multi-level" classroom

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Using Reflection to Guide Literacy Instruction in the “Multi-Level” Classroom

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By

Lori L. Weber

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Running Head: USING REFLECTION TO GUIDE LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Using Reflection to Guide Literacy Instruction in the “Multi-Level” Classroom

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Abstract

The article describes a teacher's use of reflective practice to guide the implementation of the literacy block in her "multi-level" classroom, which included instruction by grade level and by performance level. A reflective journal proved to be a valuable tool as the author struggled with planning for action, problem-solving, decision making, and confronting "living contradictions" (Whitehead, 2000) between theoretical beliefs and instructional practice. The personal reflection process included daily and weekly written reflection and collaborative reflection. Collaborative reflection occurred with colleagues, a mentor, and a university advisor. Schon's (1989, 1995) concepts of reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-for-action were incorporated. The use of The Four Blocks Framework (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999) assisted with the integration of multi-grade (Mason & Burns, 1996) and multi-age (Veenman, 1995, 1996) concepts which resulted in "multi-level" literacy instruction.

Using Reflection to Guide Literacy Instruction in the “Multi-Level” Classroom

“Lori, I would like for you to teach a multi-grade first and second grade class next year.” These words, spoken by our school principal, caused me to approach the following school year with fear and trepidation. During my six years of teaching literacy and math in a second grade self-contained classroom, I prayed that this day would not come. Yet, I knew that it would.

I had taught Science, Social Studies, and Guidance within a multi-grade homeroom of first and second grade students, but I had never been required to teach Language Arts or Math in either the first grade or the multi-grade setting. I had two main concerns. The first was how to find the time to provide Language Arts curriculum for both grade levels. I had twice the curriculum with half the amount of time for each grade level. My second concern was that multi-grade instruction using grade-specific textbooks was in contradiction to my belief that students should be taught at their performance levels .

In response to these challenges I turned to the advice of others and to reflection to develop what I called the “multi-level” classroom. Instruction in the multi-level classroom included instruction both by student performance level and by grade level. Instruction of the entire class occurred at student performance levels using methods and flexible grouping practices whenever possible. At times, it was necessary to present grade-specific instruction based upon curriculum constraints and district standards.

The use of a reflective journal proved to be a valuable tool in navigating the new and uncertain situation in which I had been placed. In this article I will discuss how the use of a reflective journal helped me plan for action, solve problems, make decisions, and

work through my feelings and beliefs regarding teaching and learning in the multi-grade literacy classroom. This is the story of how self-reflection became the compass that guided my way as I navigated the unknown territory of multi-level literacy instruction in the multi-grade classroom.

Why Multi-Grade Classrooms?

Multi-grade classrooms have been used in some schools to alleviate administrative, enrollment, or economic concerns (Mason & Burns, 1996). While the multi-grade classroom may provide a temporary fix for these problems, it creates its own set of challenges for the teacher. Teachers faced with the prospect of teaching a multi-grade classroom are often ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of implementation of two distinct grade level curriculums. The challenge of meeting two sets of benchmarks and mandated curricula for two grade-levels can be daunting.

In recent years a greater emphasis has been placed on increasing student literacy and implementing best practices in literacy instruction. Implementation of best practice for literacy instruction in the elementary classroom is a complex task. My experience has taught me that best practice does not come packaged neatly in teacher's manuals and boxes of textbooks. It requires integration of multiple methods from many sources. It requires teacher education and experience. I relied upon the concepts found in works such as *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Graves, 1983), *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 1993) and *Guided Reading Good First Teaching For All Children* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

While providing effective literacy instruction in the single-grade classroom is difficult, providing effective literacy instruction in the multi-grade classroom is

exceptionally complex. Multi-grade teachers are faced with the reality that they must teach two or more grade levels of students within one classroom. This places an increased amount of stress on the teacher due to already overloaded instructional schedules, increased amount of curricula to be taught, and lack of time to do it all.

When placed in this challenging position I turned to reflection. I found reflection to be an effective tool for improving instructional practice and for guiding instructional decision making. Guilfoyle (1995) states that "Teaching is a life-long learning process . . . one doesn't eventually become a teacher, but instead moves in understanding teaching/learning through his or her active involvement in the process" (p. 18). Reflection guided me through the process of developing multi-level instruction. Reflection led to improved instructional decision-making and resulted in ongoing personal and professional growth.

Our Multi-Level Classroom

The students and I called our multi-level classroom Class 2A. Instruction in Class 2A fell somewhere along a continuum between multi-grade instruction (two-grade levels taught using two separate grade-level curricula) (Mason & Burns, 1996) and multi-age instruction (two-grade levels taught at performance levels using one cohesive curriculum) (Veenman, 1995, 1996). While I was assigned to teach a grade 1 and 2 multi-grade classroom, actually referred to as a "split" classroom in my school, I knew that I did not want to teach Class 2A with a "split" mentality. I knew from experience that the abilities of the first and second graders were not divided neatly by grade level distinctions. I wanted Class 2A to be one cohesive class of students rather than a class that contained two separate groups of students.

My previous experience with teaching a multi-grade homeroom taught me that first and second graders were capable of working from the same curricula for Science, Social Studies, and Guidance. These subject areas were taught either by cycling grade-specific curricula, or they were taught using curricula that was created for use with both first and second grade students. Multi-grade instruction was successful for these subject areas, but would it be effective for literacy instruction as well?

I wanted to integrate multi-age concepts (Veenman, 1995, 1996) using a variety of curricula and instructional methods, which would allow for differentiation of instruction based on student performance levels rather than grade levels. I was committed to integrating two grades of students and to using flexible grouping for instruction. I knew that this would be no easy task. I wondered if perhaps the process of reflection would guide the implementation of the literacy block in my multi-level classroom.

The Development of Reflective Practice

Whitehead (2000) suggests that “I” can be seen as a living contradiction and that “living theories” (p. 92) illuminate the question: “How do I improve my instructional practice?” Dewey (1906/2002) states “It is a definite problem, a scientific problem to discover what the nature of the individual is and what his best growth calls for” (p. 37). I began my journey into reflective practice when the “problematic situation” of teaching in a multi-grade classroom arose. This problematic situation led to reflection, self-study, and growth.

I was forced to face a definite “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 2000) between the mode of education I valued and the mode of education I was required to undertake. I firmly believed that multi-grade instruction was not of greatest benefit to either the

educator, or the students. The term “split classroom” used in my school implies that the instructional time is divided in order to teach two grade level language arts and math curricula. I initially believed that students in multi-grade classrooms received half of the direct instructional time as students in grade-level classrooms.

This living contradiction regarding my beliefs surrounding best practice led to the use of reflective practice to create an environment which I felt best met the needs of both educator and students. I researched multi-grade instruction and learned about the multi-age concept. I found that the multi-age classroom need not be confined by grade level texts; rather the teacher may utilize a variety of methods, curricula, and grouping practices to integrate students and to differentiate instruction based on student performance levels (Veenman, 1995,1996). By choosing to use multi-age instruction, when possible, I was able to teach all of my students in a manner that did not require a “split” instruction mentality.

My beliefs regarding classroom instruction were often contradicted by my actual practice in this new situation. Contradiction between values and practice is the essential nature of reflective practice (Johns & Whitehead, 2000). These living contradictions caused me to develop a personal reflection process to assist with problem-solving, decision-making, and creating change.

Personal Reflection Process

The majority of my reflection took place using an electronic journal. I wrote daily entries to capture the events of the day, to troubleshoot, and to make decisions regarding future instruction. I used weekly journal entries to focus on questions that arose during the week regarding planning, curriculum, instruction, management, and assessment.

Following the initial semester, I substituted monthly journal entries to reflect upon my use of reflective practice to guide literacy instruction in the multi-grade classroom. I relied upon collaborative reflection and feedback by regularly consulting with a respected mentor throughout the implementation process.

Daily Reflection

For the first nine weeks I wrote a narrative account of each day's events during the literacy block. I reflected upon events, scheduling, interruptions, perceived effectiveness of instruction, and use of resources. As I wrote about each day, I found myself making plans for future implementation, troubleshooting, and pondering how things could be better. Daily reflection included not only reflecting-on action, but also reflecting-for future action (Schon, 1989, 1995; Killion & Todnem, 1991).

Reflection resulted in still more questions. Canning (1991) found that teachers reported learning to ask questions for themselves, with reflection taking the form of an internal dialogue. The questioning process became a natural, almost unconscious process that occurred throughout the day.

Engagement in critical reflection allows the practitioner to examine the assumptions that underlie methods and classroom practices (Smyth, 1989). I was forced to look at myself and to examine my practice and its effect upon the students and the environment. I learned that the only change I truly have power over is change within myself.

Weekly Reflection

At the conclusion of each school week during the first semester I wrote a weekly reflection which focused on research questions that were emerging as a result of my daily

reflection and problem solving. My overall research focus question was: *How can I organize and utilize instructional time, the teacher's associate, and available resources to implement the grade 1 and 2 literacy block?* This question guided my reflection and was considered to be the umbrella that encompassed all other research questions. I then considered questions regarding problems and areas for growth in the categories of planning, instruction, management, and assessment. Focus questions varied depending upon weekly needs. They were altered to meet my changing perceptions or were deleted when the problem or issue had been solved to my satisfaction.

Collaborative Reflection and Feedback

Collaborative reflection was an important part of my reflective practice. I utilized my mentor, my advisor, and my colleagues for collaborative reflection and feedback. Collaborative reflection is a mode of reflecting-on action and reflecting-for action (Schon, 1989). Collaborative reflection allowed me to view the world and my teaching from multiple perspectives.

My mentor taught first grade or a grade 1 and 2 multi-grade classroom for many years. She helped me develop and define my beliefs and practices regarding literacy. I chose her as a resource because I respect her opinion and value her advice. I consulted her especially when evaluating assessment results and making decisions regarding the most effective instructional methods for achieving desired results.

My university advisor provided feedback on my weekly journal reflections. She offered suggestions that were grounded in current research for specific situations regarding my struggles with implementation of the multi-age literacy block. Her experience, guidance, and support helped me to further define my beliefs regarding

literacy instruction. The aspect of accountability involved in reporting to another professional each week was an essential element to the consistency of my reflective practice.

Colleagues were a frequent source of assistance with day-to-day problem-solving and decision-making. They were invaluable resources in discussions regarding management, curriculum, and scheduling issues. They also provided support and feedback as I struggled with the frustration of learning for myself how to implement the multi-level literacy block.

Perhaps the most valuable resource was the teacher's associate who assisted in my classroom each day during the literacy block. I say this not because she was an extra adult in the room to assist with instruction and management, but because she was an extra set of eyes and ears in the classroom. She sometimes saw things that I missed. Her perceptions of situations and events were often different from my perceptions. She provided continual on-the-spot feedback. I could ask her opinion and instantly use it to alter my beliefs, actions, or decisions. This "reflection-in-action" (Schon, 1989) often changed the course of a lesson. We became a collaborative team of co-teachers due to the process of frequent collaborative reflection.

Periodic Ongoing Reflection

I reflected periodically about my use of the reflection process through written accounts, which were shared with my advisor. This process of meta-reflection, reflection upon reflection, helped prove that reflection was having a great impact upon my teaching and my personal belief system. My action was planned, evaluated, and guided by my reflective practice.

Use of Reflection for Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

My reflective practice progressed from being scattered and reactionary to being a deliberately planned process. This process proved to be a valuable tool for problem-solving and decision-making in the multi-level classroom. I used reflection to create an effective environment and management system, to choose literacy curricula, to guide instruction, to assess the effectiveness of instruction, and to monitor student learning.

Environment & Management

The use of reflection to implement the multi-level literacy block began long before I was aware that I was using the process of reflection. It began with brainstorming for ways to effectively manage the multi-grade classroom. This “reflection-for-action” (Schon, 1989) occurred as I first pondered how I would teach in a multi-grade classroom.

At the beginning of the school year my reflection lacked focus and was unstructured due to fear of the unknown and fear of failure. As exemplified by early journal entries, I struggled especially with time management and trying to do it all.

August 25: We ended up spending more time than expected and had to run over into another subject area. ... This lesson ran a bit long, but we still had time to begin the grade level Spelling lessons. ... We ran out of time due to recess. ... Since the first grade had completed their lesson, we moved on to Word Study after recess. I will need to figure out how to plan so both groups have time to finish and also so that each group has productive activities if they finish early.

August 25: Unfortunately, we did not have our Writing block today. School dismissed early due to the heat, so we had to alter the schedule. I will alter my future plans to include today's lesson.

August 25: I can see that over-planning and estimation of time for completion of activities will be hindrances to the implementation of the literacy block.

As I shared my reflective process with others, it seemed to become more grounded and cohesive. The processes of writing, speaking, and listening allowed me to harness my reflective energy. I learned that I could grow and change the outcome of my situation as I participated in deliberate, active reflection.

Reflection was especially helpful in deciding how to use the teacher's associate effectively during the literacy block. At first, I questioned my role as I began to relinquish control. By September 1st, I was feeling more secure with my decision to redefine my role as an educator.

August 25: Decision-making as to which groups will meet with me for which activities is very difficult. I am unsure what I should expect an associate to do, while I am confident in her abilities. Once again, the feeling that I am expecting her to do my job overwhelms me.

August 25: Maybe I need to redefine my job as being responsible for ensuring that students receive instruction and experiences to enable them to learn. If I define it this way my focus is not on how I can do it all, but how I can ensure that it all gets done using all available resources.

August 27: Today confirmed that I can do it. We can do it. The lessons were effective, the students were engaged, and the teacher's associate and I spent our time helping everyone learn.

September 1: I alternate which days and activities she [the associate] works with the students and which ones I facilitate. It has been difficult for me to give up control, but she has proved to be effective.

The classroom environment reflected my commitment to work toward a multi-level concept even before my instruction reflected the use of the concept. Reflection-for-action (Schon, 1989) began before school began with the problem of classroom environment, organization, and management. The students were integrated regardless of grade level and were seated in collaborative groups. Areas were created for large group instruction, small group instruction, and grade specific instruction. While at times it was necessary to teach students in grade-specific groups, the majority of instruction was carried out in heterogeneous groupings.

Literacy Curriculum and Instruction

I began the school year using grade-level Reading and Spelling texts, as well as The Four Blocks Framework (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999) to create a balanced approach to teaching all students at their own levels. The blocks of guided reading, writing, word study, and self-selected reading provided a flexible framework within which all literacy curricula were incorporated. While I was striving to teach using multi-age concepts, I began the year teaching two separate basal curriculums. The teacher's associate met with one grade level group as I met with the other group. This was yet another contradiction to what I believed about effective instruction.

Through the use of daily written reflections I was able to return to the events of the day and reflect upon what happened, what didn't happen, how I felt, and possible actions to create change. Gradually, I was able to increase the amount of multi-age

instruction and decrease the amount of grade-level instruction through the use of alternative instructional methods, which were more compatible with the multi-age concept. The following excerpts document the change from the use of grade-specific texts to the use of curriculum materials in a way that allowed for multi-age instruction.

September 8: This format of working in small group with half of a grade level while the other half of that grade level is doing something else is helping to prepare us all for guided reading. Each day I meet with one grade level in small groups while the other grade level works with [the associate]. So far this is working, but I feel a bit guilty because they are separated by grade level.

September 17: After recess we completed our first Making Words lesson. ... We used the first grade short a lesson this week. Next week we will use the second grade level long a/short a lesson to build on our decoding workshop lessons to date.

September 20: It is time to include guided reading using leveled guided reading texts into the literacy block. To date we have practiced small group reading instruction using a guided reading format, but using texts that were part of the basal reader.

September 24: We read the second grade big book as a large group. Our lesson focused on sequence, clues the author/illustrator gave in the text and pictures, and beginning, middle, and end. Following the shared reading the second graders remained with me to discuss sequence of events further. ... [The associate] helped the first graders complete a sequence worksheet.

September 26: We had our first guided reading session today. ... I met with the two higher groups (which include 9 second graders and one first grader). That first grader was absent today, so I did not have to deal with explaining why she was reading with second graders.

September 29: I met with all four guided reading groups today. Today was the day that I had to explain why there was a first grader reading in a group with second graders. I explained that in guided reading our groups are not picked by our grade level but by our reading level. They seemed to accept that.

Following these experiences, I decreased the use of the basal text and increased the use of multi-age literacy instruction using The Four Blocks Framework (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). The ability to use one curriculum alleviated a great deal of my fear that I was not meeting the needs of all my students.

As the curriculum in my classroom changed, so did my instructional practice. My perceived instructional ideal of the multi-age classroom was much different from the initial outcome. Despite my years of teaching experience I clung to the basal curricula and methods as I learned to survive in the multi-grade setting. As I reflected, my instruction gradually became closer to my perceived ideal.

Weekly written reflections specifically addressed problem-solving and decision-making. They were used to define what was working well, to determine needs for improvement, to seek answers to questions, and to plan strategies. My initial weekly reflections discussed my dissatisfaction with instructional practice.

September 20: There is simply not enough time. I wish that I could throw out the basal readers, but they are also acting as a bit of a security blanket as I learn the

first grade curriculum. ... I would like to move towards a more multi-age approach for literacy instruction, yet I am bound by the basal curriculum.

September 20: I feel that I am teaching more of a split concept than a multi-age concept. I do not believe in the “split classroom” concept, yet I feel that is what my circumstances are forcing me to implement when it comes to using the basal program.

My frustration with this “living contradiction” between my beliefs and practice led to a change in my instructional pattern. I revisited this contradiction daily and brainstormed possible solutions to creating an instructional framework that would be more beneficial to the students’ educational development and that would bring my practice closer to my ideal.

September 26: I began Guided Reading on Friday of this week by altering the literacy block schedule. Instead of scheduling the associate and myself to work with two separate grade levels, I scheduled rotations for the Guided Reading groups just as I did with a second grade classroom.

September 26: As I move more towards a multi-age curriculum, I will rely more heavily on guided reading and shared reading experiences. I will provide shared reading experiences to the entire class, yet differentiate instruction and activities to meet the needs of multiple levels of students.

Assessment

When assessing students I focused on the level of development of my students, rather than their grade levels. Each student’s progress was measured by charting his/her

personal growth over time. Progress was also reported as compared to a grade level norm for each student.

Assessment measures included: sight word recognition, monthly oral reading fluency probes, two different early literacy assessments, reading text level assessment, and writing rubric data. Regular, ongoing assessment allowed me to measure the effectiveness of my instructional practice in a concrete way. Following data collection, I evaluated what was going well and what needed to improve. The following excerpts document my reflection upon the use of running records for assessment during guided reading.

December 7: On November 24th I decreased the amount of running records that I was doing during guided reading groups because my groups were not progressing and I felt that it was best to focus solely on strategy instruction and coaching during guided reading lessons for awhile.

January 12: At the time of my December 7th reflection, my students were not increasing their text levels as I had anticipated. This was the most regular running records assessment that I had ever implemented. I could not believe my students were not progressing. Could it be that the assessment was getting in the way of student learning?

January 27: During the weeks of January 5th and 12th, the learning center specialist and I assessed student text levels. I knew that my students were progressing under the new routine, but I was not prepared for the results. My students progressed at a rate that was much greater than they had previously.

January 27: This experience helped me to realize that I need to keep assessment in perspective. While it is crucial to administer timely, meaningful assessment, it should not hinder instruction and learning.

These entries demonstrate how my overuse of assessment impacted my students' progress. While my intention was in the best interest of the students, the outcome was to the detriment of their progress. My reflection led to a change in my instructional practice. The change in my practice positively impacted the progress of my students.

The process of reflection was highly beneficial following assessment measures. Assessment data were used to group students flexibly based on need, to document student progress, and to determine special individual needs. The most important use of assessment data was to guide instructional decision-making.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Reflection was influential in my implementation of the literacy block in my multi-age classroom because it helped me set up the environment, select curriculum, monitor assessment, create and alter schedules, manage students, and utilize resources. Writing a journal entry at the end of each day helped me to see what was accomplished and assisted with making decisions regarding lessons and scheduling.

Being a successful educator in the multi-level classroom required much personal and professional growth. To be successful I reflected for success, used living contradictions for growth, planned to solve problems, and learned from personal experience. This required me to get real, swallow my pride, and seek help from respected resources. All of these actions led me to allow student need to drive instruction, to

prioritize my use of instructional time, and to facilitate instruction. The use of these processes developed over time through experience, continued reflection, and problem-solving.

Reflect For Success

The processes of on-the-spot reflection, written reflection, and collaborative reflection were vital to my success in the multi-level classroom. Through experience I became much more adept at reflecting before, during, and after instructional practice. Daily and weekly written reflection helped me to clarify questions and concerns and to develop solutions for problems. Listing possible solutions and actions helped me take decisive action, rather than react to situations and events without thought or planning. I was more likely to take action on the issues upon which I had taken time to reflect.

Living Contradictions Promote Growth

I learned the most about my beliefs and instructional practice in the face of actions that were in contradiction with my intellectual beliefs. The process of reflecting upon actions that were in opposition to my stated beliefs caused me to admit that I still have a lot to learn about teaching and learning. These contradictions determined the focus of my reflection.

Plan To Solve Problems

My experience with reflection has solidified my belief that people learn best from experiences that cause us to struggle and actively problem-solve. Reflection on my experience led to a plan for problem solving, which involved a cycle of reflection, action, assessment, and continued reflection. This process involves brainstorming solutions, taking action, redefinition of the problem, continued action, and eventual resolution. I

have become a more adept problem-solver, who now views challenges as chances to grow both personally and professionally.

Let Experience Be Your Teacher

I truly believe that experience is my best teacher. I believed that experience is the best teacher for my students' learning, but I thought it was somehow different for me. I am educated. I believe I understand educational theory and best practice. Yet, until I was forced to grapple with hard issues relating to my instructional practice and to learn through thoughtful trial and error, I did not truly know what I believed. Now, I know that I can maintain the integrity of my beliefs as I do whatever it takes to help students learn in the context of any difficult situation.

Get Real

I learned to do my best given the reality of my teaching situation, rather than dwelling on what I believed to be best practice. Keeping a journal helped me work through many issues regarding my role as an educator. I had to reconcile my stated theoretical beliefs with the reality of my present situation. While my beliefs regarding best practice were always with me, there were times when I found myself acting in opposition to my beliefs. These "living contradictions" led to further reflection and problem solving.

I had to work through issues regarding my disbelief in the concept of the "split" classroom. While I believed it would be best to implement a multi-age concept, I found myself bound by certain curricular constraints. It was necessary to teach some subject areas by grade levels versus using multi-age groupings. However, for the most part I was successful in redesigning two grade level curriculums into one multi-level curriculum.

Swallow Your Pride

Another major issue that I dealt with was the reality of not being able to do it all myself. I struggled with guilt as I delegated certain instructional responsibilities to the teacher's associate under my supervision. I was blessed with the ability to work with her assistance during most of the literacy block. I knew that it was not an effective use of resources to implement all of the instructional activities myself, leaving the associate to supervise students and check papers. I knew that the associate was capable and eager to work with the students, but I still felt guilty as I allowed her to implement lessons and learning activities while I worked with other students.

As I wrote about my frustrations I began to see that it was unreasonable for me to try to do it all, let alone for me to do it all perfectly. I saw through my reflection that my perfectionism and pride were getting in the way of what was best for the students.

September 26: The biggest conclusion that I came to this week was in finally admitting that I can't do everything. I realized the need to choose the most effective instructional activities for my students. This required me to redesign my routine and to seek advice about how to assess progress and permission to redesign the curriculum. In the long run this decision will probably be pivotal to the success of my students.

As I wrote each day I was able to see that I needed to change my thinking regarding my role as a teacher. I came to believe that it is not my job to teach, it is my job to help students learn. It is my responsibility to do whatever it takes to help children learn.

Seek Help From Respected Resources

Early in the semester, I realized that I needed help because I had never taught in a multi-grade classroom before and I had to admit that maybe I didn't know what was best. It was through this humble admission of powerlessness that I was able to ask for help.

I used collaborative reflection when seeking advice regarding curriculum and instruction from my mentor and my university advisor. I consulted with the associate and my colleagues regularly. I discussed my progress with the school administrator, who approved the development of a curriculum that would meet the learning goals for both grade levels while minimizing the use of the basal texts for grade-specific instruction. The creation of an alternate multi-level curriculum was vital to the success of my students and the effectiveness of my instruction. All of these actions resulted from the question and answer process used during my daily reflection.

Focus On Student Needs

Prioritization of instruction based on assessment results has been essential to my students' success. Through reflection I have become aware of the need to prioritize and to discern what is best for my students. My focus has shifted from what I need to teach my students to what my students need to learn.

Be Wise, Prioritize

Reflection has increased my awareness that time is a precious commodity and that I must use care when planning and implementing curriculum. I have become increasingly aware of the impact that my instructional decision-making makes on the quality of the education my students receive. I am careful when planning instructional activities to be sure that they are effective and worthwhile. I prioritize instructional activities and content

based on the needs of my students and the goals of my district. I do not have the luxury of letting a textbook manufacturer define my curriculum.

Previous to my experiences with reflection I tried to cram every possible instructional activity that I could into the weekly schedule. I would run out of time and end up with partially completed lessons and many lessons that were not implemented. I have learned that I must plan the most important activities and eliminate those activities that do not meet the needs of my students.

Be A Facilitator

Intellectually, I knew that I should facilitate learning rather than teach content. However, I still felt that I was the only one who should deliver instruction to the students in my class. I believe that I am coming to a deeper understanding of my role as an educator. I now believe that it is my responsibility to ensure that the students are learning. I can either facilitate instructional activities or supervise the implementation of those activities.

Why Reflect?

Reflection uncovers the "broader principles that are informing . . . classroom action" (Smyth, 1989, p. 6). The educator benefits from gaining new insights and from revisiting and reworking teaching strategies (Anzul and Ely, 1988). Reflective practice led me to focus on myself more than external factors. My interaction with my environment and the participants was altered through personal growth and change.

Reflection is a vehicle for change. To improve my instructional practice I must reflect. Reflection helps teachers "move beyond the intellectualizing of the issues to

concrete action for change” (Smyth, 1989, p. 6). Using reflection, the practitioner learns, grows, and changes through thoughtful trial and error.

My advice to those facing a professional situation about which they are uncertain is simple. Know what you believe. Reflect. Be willing to change as your beliefs evolve. Examine living contradictions that arise. Actively solve problems. Seek help. Let experience be your best teacher. Most importantly, place student needs above everything else. While this sounds simple, it is not always easy. The processes of reflection can help bring order to what appears to be chaos.

When considering changes to my experiences with reflection in the multi-level classroom, I have concluded that none are required. Each experience and problem that arose forced me to learn and to grow. Reflection helped me reconcile what I believed regarding best practice with what I was required to do. It led to the creation of the multi-level concept. This allowed me to teach my class as a whole with each student working at his or her performance level, yet also to teach those subjects required to be taught by grade level. Multi-level instruction gave me freedom to teach students while meeting my professional obligations.

No experience is without worth if it is responsible for learning. My instructional practice has changed, I continue to grow, and I will alter my future practice based upon lessons learned. I am a better teacher today because I struggled, reflected, and created a “space for change” (Anzul & Ely, 1988).

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August 19, 2005

Editors, *The Reading Teacher*
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Dear Editors:

I would like to submit a manuscript entitled "Using Reflection to Guide Literacy Instruction in the 'Multi-Level' Classroom" for consideration for publication in *The Reading Teacher*. This manuscript documents my use of reflective practice to guide literacy instruction in a multi-grade classroom of first and second grade students. This manuscript has not been submitted to any other journal for publication. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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