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What Kids Taught Us About Reading Instruction: Two Professors Return to the Classroom

**Robert C. Cooter, Jr.
D. Ray Reutzel**

Two years ago we left the insulated environment of the university setting to return to the chaos and excitement of full time teaching in two first-grade classrooms. Our colleagues wondered why we felt this need, and the teachers in the schools where we were going were pleased, but skeptical, about our abilities to cope with the tumult of classroom teaching again. We often asked ourselves why were we embarking upon this bold, new adventure. After some contemplation of the question, we decided there were at least four good reasons for returning. First, we believed that we, like many professors, would benefit from occasionally re-immersing ourselves in the reality of classroom teaching. Second, we realized that our credibility with our preservice and inservice teachers would increase dramatically as a result of our return. (Our students often challenged us to prove our ideas in classrooms!) Third, we were anxious to learn about how children go about solving the reading and writing puzzle. And fourth, we were particularly interested in implementing holistic reading and writing strategies and routines in our classrooms. We felt that

holistic teaching would best facilitate our observations of children struggling to solve the reading-writing puzzle.

We expected to learn a great deal from our experience, but we never dreamed that we could learn so much about reading and writing from these youngsters. After all, we were the ones with doctorates and years of teaching experience in the public school classroom and the university! Some months after completing our year in the classroom and gathering hours of videotapes and field notes, we sat down and tried to make some sense of all that we had learned and experienced. With a good deal of thought and struggle, we developed a list of insights we gained and which we feel summarized our experiences while working shoulder to shoulder and knee to knee with these wonderful child-teachers.

Insights into literacy learning

• Insight 1: Reading and writing are reciprocal processes.

We began writing the first day of school. Looking over the shoulder of students one day, we saw that Nan was busily working away at a new creation. Underneath several pencil arches were the letters "RNBO." As Nan colored each arch a different color it quickly became clear that her story had something to do with a rainbow. Thereafter we referred to the point at which children began to see the relationship between letters, sounds and words as the *rainbow connection*.

Initially some children would say things like "I don't know how to write!" or "I don't know how to make words yet!" These children had already been conditioned to believe they were unable to create and "write" their own stories. With a little reassurance that they *could* compose on

whatever level they felt comfortable (e.g. picture writing, invented spellings) our children were soon producing stories about such topics as "My New Baby Sister," and "The Toledo Zoo."

Children, as writers, became fascinated by new layers of meaning which can be created through written language. They noticed the words and phrases used by favorite authors and the way mental pictures can be created through language. The transfer value from writing to reading in our classrooms was impressive. Children learned to apply what they already knew about story structure as authors. Excitement at discovering just the right word for a story helped improve sight word knowledge. Invented spellings helped the children learn about beginning, medial, and ending sounds in words. Context clues were learned in the natural habitat of language. It became clear that when children develop as writers they likewise develop as readers.

• **Insight 2: Children learn from example.**

It is no secret that some of what we teach in literacy education is very abstract and can be difficult for children to grasp. For instance, classroom discussions related to story grammar elements (e.g. theme, setting, conflict) can be a real "mind burner" for primary students if approached traditionally. Teachers should be living demonstrations of the love of literacy. As an integral part of teaching, children should be able to observe their teachers enjoying the reading and writing process daily.

We adopted a learning from example attitude and spirit in our first-grade classrooms by sharing all sorts of popular children's literature in what we called "Sharing Time." Such titles as *Each Peach Pear Plum* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1985), *More Spaghetti I Say* (Gelman, 1987), *Boss for a*

Week (Handy, 1984), and *Clifford's Family* (Bridwell, 1984) helped us to demonstrate our own enjoyment for books and gave us excellent opportunities to model literacy. We also engaged in a great deal of storytelling, poetry readings, chants and song. Likewise, we felt it important to share examples of our own writing. As children participated in Sustained Silent Writing (SSW), we as teachers also spent at least ten minutes producing our own compositions. Not only did these Sharing Time activities provide us with many opportunities for teacher modeling, they frequently served as natural vehicles for whole group minilessons on the reading/writing processes.

• **Insight 3: Language and instruction must make sense.**

One day in the reading circle, Heather was struggling to understand what the teacher meant by using the context of a passage to deduce the meaning of a word in print. Try as we may, these professors-turned-first-grade teachers could not seem to get the message across. Stephanie, one of Heather's classmates, finally became a bit annoyed with the lack of language precision on the teacher's part and decided to intervene. She tactfully leaned over and whispered, "just think of a word in its place that *makes sense*." Holdaway (1984) writes:

Any procedure which makes a child think that reading does not need to make sense, or even that there is something more important than making sense, will make reading and writing harder for children. Even in learning phonics or other parts of the word-solving process children should never lose sight of the comprehending purpose (pp. 16-17).

For us that meant doing away with workbook assignments and skill sheets as a means for teaching reading

strategies. Instead of creating instructional dilemmas for us as teachers it was actually very liberating. For example, rather than attempting to teach context clues using a relatively boring skill sheet, we simply took passages from a book like *Leave It To Minnie* (Gelman, 1987) and constructed a modified cloze activity using "post-it" note pad slips to cover selected words. In this and many other ways we were able to teach children to integrate all the reading cues in a whole group format using authentic reading tasks.

• **Insight 4: Using predictable language is effective.**

In our classrooms, children were introduced to reading through the use of predictable books. The writings of Holdaway (1984) and others suggest that highly predictable books (those dealing with familiar concepts and repeated language patterns) are easiest for children to read, but we were eager to discover to what degree this might be so for our first graders. We found that our children embraced predictable literature and learned to read various forms of predictable text quickly. The more stimulating and creative the text, the more quickly it was learned.

Environmental print was extremely useful because of its predictable nature. Logo language from such sources as cereal boxes, candy wrappers, and advertisements for restaurants provided a wealth of reading opportunities. In one activity an alphabet book was constructed by children using logo language examples.

Children also delighted in books like *The Napping House* (Wood, 1984) that featured repeating phrases and ideas. As children began to embrace the reading act through predictable literature we heard many inspiring remarks from parents, such as one from a mother at the September open house who stated how pleased she was

that her daughter, Jennifer, had books she could read and enjoy. "She reads them over and over to anyone who will listen!"

• **Insight 5: Approximating, risk-taking and safety-netting should be stressed.**

In our classrooms only constructive peer criticism was allowed. For example, one day we were reading *Clifford's Family* (Bridwell, 1984) in a small group (mixed ability) setting. One child came to the sentence "Nero was a *rescue* dog at a fire station" but she read "Nero was a *running* dog at a fire station." Instead of criticizing her for not calling the word correctly she was congratulated by her teacher for attempting a new and difficult word. She was also praised for guessing a word that began with the right sound and one that made sense in the sentence. Not only did this type of teacher behavior build confidence and self-esteem in this child, it had a profound effect on the other children who witnessed the episode when they encountered new words themselves. Fear of failure was replaced with eagerness to try new learning experiences.

Early learning in any developmental task is by nature clumsy and unskilled. Not only should this behavior be tolerated in reading instruction, it should be appreciated (Holdaway, 1984). What is expected of novice readers and writers is that they should try their best and see how close they can come to the desired task. In other words, novices should *approximate* the task. Over time and with practice improvement is almost certain.

We know that children take significant risks with their self-esteem whenever attempting new tasks. The spirit of *risk-taking* should be encouraged so that children can begin to approximate adult standards of literacy. Teachers should

do all they can to protect students from peer criticism and competition in the classroom. This protection is a form of *safety-netting*. Children should be praised in reading class for trying, and for approximating the real purposes and strategies of skilled readers. The cost of learning must never become so high as to overshadow the benefits and joy of learning.

• **Insight 6: Self monitoring and correction should be encouraged.**

An ultimate goal of education is to help students become independent learners. One important step toward independence as a reader is learning how to monitor one's own progress and make corrections as necessary. Classrooms should be organized in such a way as to help children assess their own work and feel comfortable in making revisions as necessary so as to produce the best product possible.

This belief was operationalized by adopting the attitude that learning is a process. Not all learning projects were graded, but feedback was always available. Our learning center activities were usually equipped with answer keys or other resources enabling children to check their own work. We helped our students begin to understand how they might rate their own performances as readers (e.g., comprehension of text, decoding abilities) and writers (e.g., topic selection, organization, imagery). In addition to these reflective evaluations, students were encouraged to ask neighbors for opinions when working on a learning project. Frequent conferencing with the teacher regarding writing and reading helped students better understand what needed further development. While the noise level in our classrooms was no doubt higher than the norm, enjoyable and productive encounters with literacy prevailed and

children came to monitor their own reading and writing processes.

• **Insight 7: Collaboration and cooperation should be fostered.**

One morning during the writing workshop period, Shannon was designing a greeting card in the shape of a Valentine. Her face had a bewildered expression that seemed to say “I want to write what’s in my head, but it just won’t come out.” Before her professor/teacher had time to walk over to her desk to make a “house call,” Shannon’s six-year-old classmate, Allison, had also seen her expression and come to her aid. After a few moments of collaboration Shannon was able to complete her draft and both girls (not to mention the teacher) felt great satisfaction.

A sense of community or “belonging” in the classroom supports children as they attempt new complex learning tasks. Teacher-led activities such as shared book experiences (Routman, 1988), lively unison readings, and storytelling help to draw children into the classroom community and make them active participants. Equally valuable are collaborative experiences, such as the encounter between Shannon and Allison, in which children help each other to succeed. Such activities as paired or assisted reading, teacherless writing groups, and other “buddy systems” helped us reduce unnecessary competition and promote the learning process as children grew toward adult standards of literacy.

• **Insight 8: Favorite literature leads to “read it again.”**

One of the greatest compliments we received as teachers was the light-under-the-sheets phenomenon. Several times as parents were picking up their children at

the end of the school day they would make such remarks as “Yes, David is reading *all* the time... In fact, we keep having to take away his flashlight to keep him from reading after bedtime when the lights are out!” Another parent reported that her son, Curt, “...needed new cereal boxes for breakfast. He didn’t have enough to read at breakfast!”

After sharing an especially exciting story in our classes, like “Jack and the Bean Tree” (Chase, 1948), children would ask to hear the same selection over and over again. All children seem to develop a need for books which they loved to hear repeatedly. This “read-it-again” phenomenon produced for every child a body of cherished literature.

The most popular books in our classrooms offered a great deal of predictability and security for the children. Whenever possible, copies of trade books, student-made books, and teacher-made books were checked out of the classroom library for children to take home for multiple readings. We discovered that the massive practice that arises from the read-it-again process carries with it a sense of security, familiarity, and affection for different texts.

• **Insight 9: Free agency and self-selection are important.**

Our children were introduced to literacy through immersion in trade books and writing experiences. In using teacher-made and commercial books, a great deal of freedom or *free agency* was allowed students through *Self-Selected Reading* or SSR. We chose to rename this popular technique, changing from the usual *Sustained Silent Reading* because the children reminded us that when readers are engaged and engrossed in a good book they may sometimes want to stop and tell a peer about an

exciting part. Thus SSR is sometimes neither silent nor sustained in a healthy reading environment.

We structured learning situations so that children were free to self-select activities and materials within given limits. Practices such as individualized reading, themed literature units, Self-Selected Reading (SSR), and Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) allowed students to choose topics they find interesting and pleasurable.

The basal also found a useful niche in our classrooms. Instead of dominating our curriculum, basal stories were used as a jumping-off point for other literacy experiences. For instance, stories in one of the preprimers were constructed about the circus. Books were selected from the school library for Self-Selected Reading (SSR), and other reading/writing activities relating to the circus themes were generated. Children would spend only about twenty minutes a day reading in the basal, but another two and one half hours would be spent in related literacy events. In this way the district-mandated basal skills were developed without slowing the initial momentum created earlier in the year. The overall result of combining whole language and limited basal experiences might be termed "spontaneous reading combustion!" At the heart of this program success was the students' ability to exercise free agency in the classroom.

• **Insight 10: Direct or explicit instruction is needed.**

Several times each week we conducted whole class *minilessons* in reading and writing. These were teacher-directed sessions targeting needed literacy strategies (e.g., getting the sequence from a story, editing compositions). Direct instruction is often very useful in helping students understand thinking processes (Baumann, 1986). Teacher

modeling of strategic reading behaviors such as predicting, responding, self-correcting, and selecting cues helped children in our classes discover different ways of approaching literacy challenges. It is much like a carpenter who demonstrates skills for an apprentice. By watching the master woodworker the apprentice learns how carpentry skills are applied to create something beautiful out of raw lumber. Similarly, children in our elementary classrooms needed to have opportunities to observe their teacher and others as they applied literacy strategies to make sense out of books.

• **Insight 11: Assessment supports learning.**

We used *naturalistic assessment* (e.g., student work samples, observation checklists, writing journals) as well as *traditional assessment* (e.g., standardized reading achievement tests) to document our students' growth. This perspective allowed us to satisfy the political realities of state mandated assessment, and also provided insights for parents and ourselves as teachers into the growth and development of literacy abilities in each child.

Classroom assessment should examine both the child's literacy products and processes. Our goal was to support and encourage the learner, not simply to document scores for the educational bureaucracy.

• **Insight 12: Parents and community resources should be involved in the reading program.**

We found a great deal of success in holding parent meetings prior to the beginning of school and once during the year to educate parents on their all-important role in helping their children with literacy learning. When home tasks are kept simple and parents know what to do, successful home-school partnerships can emerge.

Schools cannot encourage literacy alone, nor should they be expected to do so. Parents must become active participants and supporters in creating and maintaining homes which stimulate interest in reading and writing. Learning is a three-way partnership between parents, children, and teachers. Without full participation from each, literacy learning is seriously compromised.

• **Insight 13: A curriculum should be rich in culturally relevant content.**

We found a wealth of books in our school libraries which present useful and non-stereotypic insights about many of America's great natural resources, her peoples' cultural and ethnic communities. Hirsch (1987), in arguing for cultural literacy, states:

In the best of worlds, all Americans would be multiliterate...surely the first step in that direction must be for all of us to become literate in our own national language and culture (p. 93).

Children should enjoy opportunities for reading and responding to the great literature, thoughts, and issues of our time. Within the bounds of good taste, we decided that we should not avoid content in an attempt to avoid controversy. Reading is language. Reading is the transmission of ideas.

• **Insight 14: Teaching should draw upon students' prior knowledge and language experience.**

Children in our classes were able to make the best use of print when we called to the mind of each reader past language and experiences related to the text or story. This was a critical role for us as teachers and was accomplished through the rereading of favorite books, storytelling, audio-visual presentations, guest speakers, group discussion, and

other means of stimulating the retrieval of *schemata* or memory structures. To the extent we were successful in helping children retrieve past experiences, reading was meaningful, personal, and successful. When we fell short, the going was tough for the children. It was just that simple — and that difficult.

• **Insight 15: Literacy is to be shared.**

Our desire was to immerse children daily in stimulating literacy events. These immersion tactics in our classrooms included such experiences as reading aloud exciting poems (e.g., Prelutsky's *The New Kid on the Block*; Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and the Ahlbergs' *The Jolly Postman*), entertaining songs (e.g., Bonne's *I Know an Old Lady*), and stories which created vivid pictures in the child's mind (e.g., McKissack's *Flossie and the Fox*, and Chase's *Grandfather Tales*).

We felt it important as teachers to share examples of books we were reading and our own compositions. Teacher Sharing Time gave us the opportunity to model the writing process and our joy of reading. Sharing Time also served as a natural catalyst for encouraging children to participate in Student Sharing Time.

One of the natural drives that emerged in our young readers and writers was a desire to share. When children enthusiastically labored over a writing project about their beagle puppy or a ride they took in grandma's new corvette, they were anxious to share their stories. Similarly, a child who had just discovered the *Curious George* books was eager to tell friends. Two vehicles used for student sharing of reading and writing were *Author's Chair* and *Reader's Stage*. As compositions were completed each child could sign up for the Author's Chair. They would read aloud their

compositions and answer questions from the class. Reader's Stage was similar in that after students participated in an individual conference with the teacher they could share an excerpt with the class. Both Author's Chair and Reader's Stage concluded with positive comments from the teacher for a job well-done and applause from their peers.

Problem solving was also a very important part of sharing literacy. A kind of dramatic tension was created when a truly challenging problem for youngsters was posed for which there was no easy answer. These problems gave students a legitimate and burning desire to find answers through books, peer interactions, and stimulating discussion with the teacher.

- **A final insight: Teachers, like students, make classroom transitions.**

One of the great insights we gained from our experiences was the realization that attempting to teach from a more holistic perspective takes a great deal of time. To paraphrase Judith Newman (1985, p. 185), the transition toward more holistic forms of teaching comes not in graceful gazelle-like leaps, but in small increments. One of the frustrations we encountered as we attempted to implement new holistic strategies in our classrooms was the feeling that it must all happen at once (Mosenthal, 1989). We discovered that just as children go through various stages of learning or "approximations," teachers go through similar stages or *transitions* when implementing new classroom strategies. Regie Routman (1988), in her book *Transitions*, describes her struggle to modify both her beliefs and practices to reflect a whole language perspective in this way:

At this point in time I am comfortable integrating the four language modes – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. While much of what I [do] encompasses whole language concepts and while many would say I am a whole language teacher, I am personally uncomfortable with the pureness that the term “whole language” implies for me. I don’t always use thematic units, I occasionally teach from part to whole; I am still struggling hard to integrate more areas of curriculum with language arts – an ideal that is very difficult to attain. I anticipate that this struggle will go on for years. I am also concerned about the possible misuse of the term “whole language” as a new catch phrase that opportunists will exploit to their advantage (p. 26).

The notion of *transitions* finds further support in the writings of Goodman and his colleagues (1987):

Teachers and schools wanting to adopt a whole-language approach to reading may find it most feasible to use the basal as a point of departure and adapt its use so that it ceases to be the focal point of the program and becomes one resource among many in the classroom (p. 264).

Finally, teachers should not be criticized by colleagues for using intermediate steps or *transition* programs since they represent a logical and prudent stage of curricular modification. We, like our students, take significant risks and need to feel the calming assurance of a professional “safety net” while doing so. We learned, as so many spirited and innovative classroom teachers have in recent years, that important insights into reading instruction can be gained at the feet of children.

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