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My previous teaching experience was relatively easy. I didn't understand why so many people said *teaching is a thankless job;* I was thanked daily by happy parents who dropped their students off at the classroom door and picked them up after school. My students were successful in nearly all that we did—well over half of them were reading above grade level, and I felt like a wonderful teacher. I must have really been doing something right to have such brilliant students!

Up for a challenge (although I truly had no idea how big of a challenge it would be), I requested a transfer from the affluent, primarily Caucasian school, where I had taught for the past two years, to a school I had heard was difficult. In the same school district, my new school could not have been more different. The students at this school are primarily Hispanic, with a few African-American, East Indian, Asian, and Caucasian students. What nearly all of them have in common is that they live in apartments (a far cry from the near-mansions of my previous students), their families live near or in actual poverty, and they speak a language other than English at home. For more almost three-fourths of my students, English is their second or third language. Here, over half of my students were reading below grade level at the start of the year.

At first, getting these students to read at grade level seemed like an impossible task, but I soon had a change of heart. True, I only have so many hours in the school day to help these kids succeed. But in turn, *I have so many hours* in the school day to help these kids succeed at becoming readers that *think* as well as decode. My challenge was to develop a reading program that maximized the use of my time and maximized student learning.

The reading program I developed is fast-paced and based on reading and comprehending meaningful texts. It takes into account the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students, and has demonstrated success in supporting and strengthening both struggling and competent readers.

Before the Reading Groups Even Begin: Gathering Information

One of the first reading lessons of the year is "how to choose a just-right book," or a book at one's accurate reading level. This is a lesson that takes place at varying degrees of intensity in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and throughout the elementary school experience. By third grade it is my hope that most students will know how to pick just-right books. We talk about what it looks like when a book is too hard (using the five-finger rule or other indications that a text is too difficult). We look at books that are too easy. As a class we come up with what a just-right book is: one that is not too easy and not too hard, about something we are interested in, and it is something we are able to understand. *Able to understand.* That is a very vague and nebulous idea for newer readers who want so badly to read "chapter books," regardless of whether or not they comprehend what they are reading.

The first month of the school year is spent learning how to read just-right books independently. Independent reading is taught explicitly. Independent reading means *reading to yourself.* It means *not disturbing your neighbors.* It means *focusing on our own books.* These expectations are taught, posted, and reviewed. Students assess their own adherence to these expectations. Students learning how to read independently *is* the classroom management factor that makes our guided reading groups work throughout the rest of the year.

As students practiced reading independently, I met with them individually. I asked the students to bring back a just-right book that they were reading. I

conducted semi-formal reading conferences, briefly getting to know about my students' reading behaviors, interests, and levels of comprehension. I asked questions such as:

- Why did you choose this book?
- Have you read any other book by this author?
- Is your book fiction or nonfiction?
- What do you think will happen next?
- Who was your favorite character?
- What was your favorite part?

(cf. Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, and Moore, 163)

These conferences are little more than snapshots into the reading- and thinking-minds of my students. If I have not read the book that they are reading, it can be hard to determine whether or not they have comprehended as much as they claim. Quick running records and miscue analysis helped me to determine specific decoding difficulties certain students had. This was an opportunity to give my students immediate feedback, develop goals, and praise their strengths. Reading conferences are a part of what I use to make choices about what my guided reading groups will look like.

In addition to using the information I gathered in reading conferences, I use data collected from district-mandated reading assessments to determine who needs to work on fluency, rate, phrasing, and comprehension. What any given student needs is not necessarily tied to what level the student is reading at. In addition, with my really struggling readers, I gave oral phonemic awareness assessments. At this point I was ready to form my groups and choose the books we would be reading together.

Forming of Groups and Selecting Books

Yes, my groups are formed mainly based on reading level. The groups are fluid with students moving from one group to the next with each book that we read, thereby lifting the stigma of being in a given group over time. I have found that it works best to meet *individual* needs (not small group needs) if the students are all reading a text at their independent to instructional levels, and that the demands of each student are slightly tweaked within the confines of the group structure.

I am fortunate in that my school has a decent-sized bookroom where teachers can borrow sets of books at all different levels. As I get ready to begin new groups, I visit the bookroom with a list of levels in mind. I think about my students' interests so that they will "buy in" to whatever books I choose. I may have as many as five or six groups that I am planning to start, so I check out book sets to match those levels.

When choosing a book for guided reading I consider some key points: Does the layout of the book support my students in learning about text features or in navigating the print? For my struggling readers: Are there patterns in language, pictures that support the text, pronounceable words and repeated common words? Will my students be familiar with the content, concepts, and vocabulary? Does this book support the development of reading comprehension? Will the students have a good time reading the text? (cf. Routman 155)

I strongly believe that this next step *cannot* be skipped in this process: *I take home the books and read them.* While reading, I develop questions to accompany the text. The questions that I develop are written with the students in the group in mind. What kind of questions would push them to the next level in comprehension? What types of answers would demonstrate that the students comprehend what they are reading? In creating the comprehension questions, I am sure to vary the levels of intellectual demand–I include many question types (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Author and You ← **In Your Head** → On Your Own
Right There ← **In the Text** → Think and Search

In addition to developing comprehension questions, I consider what my students will need *before* and *during* reading. I pull out words to pre-teach if I believe that my students won't know them, or if I think we will need to discuss particular word meanings—often vocabulary is taught more in the moment as I am never completely sure of what my ELL students know. Occasionally we will work on developing contextual and conceptual understanding (for example: creating a graphic web and engaging in conversation, e.g., Leigh Botts writes in a diary in *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. What is a diary? Why would someone write

in a diary? What do you know about diaries?).

As I pull out vocabulary to pre-teach and choose appropriate and challenging questions to ask along the way, I make note of words that may be difficult for the students to decode. This is especially the case when planning groups for my lower readers–although this would be a valid and important step in the planning process at lower grades in general. Upon looking at the words, I determine whether or not a specific word study lesson can or should come from these words. *Is this a time to explicitly teach that –ed on the end of words implies past tense? Should I give additional examples of a word ending with –tion? Have I noticed that these kids are still struggling with prefixes and how they affect word meaning?* Table 1 shows a sample of the questions I consider when deciding how far to go with the word work.

Table 1
Horrible Harry and the Dungeon
Level 24

James and Diane (students in this group)

Chapter 1 The Dungeon
suspension, intercom, supervise, executioner
1. What is the dungeon? What happens down there?
2. What amazing thing happened in Harry's class?

This is an example of what my plans look like for a given book (including only the first day–the plans continue in a similar manner for the other chapters). You can see that I have chosen words to pre-teach (in italics), and questions for students to answer after reading. The bottom line is that while I prepare for my groups, I consider each student and his or her strengths and areas for growth. I plan the whole book around them–as a group and as individuals. Once this work is done, it is time to begin meeting.

Guided Reading Groups

At our first meeting of the year we discuss how our groups will work (logistically), as well as my expectations for their academic and behavioral work. Because grouping can potentially lead to negative self-identification on the part of my students, I let them know that they may or may not be in a group with the same people for each book we read. I tell them, "You never know about me. Sometimes I just like to mix things up." I don't want my students feeling worried about being stuck in the "low" group, nor do I want them to feel that they are above their classmates by being in the "high" group. I make it clear that we *all* have a lot to work on, and to grow, I expect that they will each participate in book discussions, read carefully, and answer questions thoughtfully.

Each student is given a spiral notebook as their Reading Response Book for the year. On the inside cover I have them attach a small piece of paper to guide them in keeping their books organized and their answers easy to decipher and share at our next meeting (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
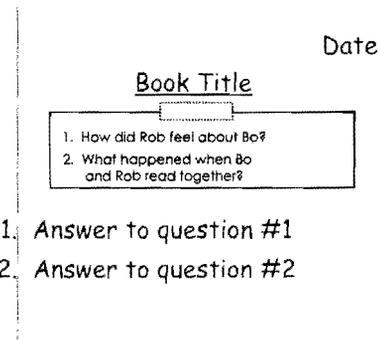
When introducing a new book, we take time to look at the cover, the blurb on the back, and any pertinent text features. When I am introducing an easy reader with pictures, we do a picture walk to elicit discussion about prior knowledge, predictions, etc. At this time I introduce ideas as they relate to the book (perhaps we discuss what we know about the subject matter); we examine vocabulary words that I think they will need to know before reading the first chapter; and we look at specific words which may be difficult for my students to decode. This is the most powerful time for me to pull in my English Language Learners–*before* I send them off to read, and *before* they feel like they do not have any connection to the text.

Depending on the level of the group and the difficulty of the text, I may or may not listen to them read each time we meet. With my struggling readers I will listen to them read the whole first chapter (taking turns). I might then send them off to partner read. Finally I would ask them to come back (individually or in a group) to read the chapter again with greater fluency and accuracy. I may ask my middle groups to

read just a part of the chapter to me, and then I would send them off to read the rest. With my higher groups, I may not need to hear them read at all. I can get the information I need about their reading through hearing their answers to the comprehension questions and through other reading opportunities in class.

As each short meeting with each group concludes, I hand group members a slip of paper that has on it the words we have practiced and the questions I want them to answer. They know to tape that slip of paper on the next blank page in their Reading Response Books and to get working. The expectation for students' independent reading time is that they do the work for me or our group first, then independently read *just right* books of their choosing. When they have finished answering the comprehension questions I have given them, they write their name on the board under the title of their book. This way I do not have to ask who is ready to meet again—I can quickly check just by looking.

Because of the early emphasis on developing norms for independent reading, I do not have to spend much time redirecting students. In addition, students who are working independently know that when I am with a group, I *will not* answer questions or be interrupted—unless it is a true emergency, which has yet to happen.

When I see that an entire group has finished their work for me, I call them to the kidney-shaped table to begin our brief discussion. We begin by answering the questions that they were given. I expect that their answers will be written in complete sentences (something I have explicitly taught and reinforced). Each student answers *every* question aloud. Even if their answers are the same, they still feel that it is the first time such thoughts about the book have ever been revealed. They take pride in their answers, as the answers are reflections of their thinking, reading, and understanding.

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modeling the act of "looking back" for answers and clarification. It doesn't take long for the students to begin "looking back" to support their points or to disprove their peers' answers. We discuss any ideas that they are not clear about, have strong feelings about, or that connect to their lives in particular ways. This is the prime opportunity to allow students from all cultures and backgrounds to interact with literature and their peers. When we feel complete with the previous chapter, we move on to the next.

Once the comprehension questions and discussion of the last chapter are complete, our meetings begin to appear quite different depending on the group. For some groups (e.g., struggling readers, groups reading particularly complex books, ELL readers with limited vocabulary), I will introduce words that they will see in the following chapter (for decoding and/or vocabulary purposes). With some of my groups, I skip this part. Next, some of the groups might read out loud. Some of the groups do not read to me—I already know that they are good readers; I just want to concentrate on their comprehension. Some of the groups are simply handed the next chapter's question and sent on their way.

Here is a sample of an average day in my class—independent reading lasts about forty–forty-five minutes:

- 5 min.: students settle in, get out their books/notebooks
- 8 min.: medium to high group, answer questions (read from their notebooks), discuss previous chapter, present new questions
- 6 min.: high group, answer questions (read from their notebooks), present new questions
- 12 min.: lower group (reading one year below grade level), answer questions (read from their notebooks), read the next chapter together, present new questions
- 15 min.: lowest group (reading one-and-a-half to two years below grade level), answer questions (read from their notebooks), introduce new vocabulary, decode new words/work on decoding strategies, read the next chapter together, send them off to partner read the chapter again the next day (increase fluency)

The secret to being able to meet with at least four groups in one day is to keep it simple! We don't do too much each time

we meet. Yes, adding other activities might increase students' skill in one area of comprehension, but having them read, read, read seems to be the best method for keeping them interested *while* increasing comprehension. It is how *I* stay interested as well.

If I hadn't done it myself, I might not believe that English Language Learners and struggling students could be so successful in such a model; however, the accomplishment they achieve motivates them to continue to work hard. The tasks assigned to them have been scaffolded to meet their needs, and they are able to complete the reading and written responses assigned to them (whether that means they have worked with a partner, or copied a line right out of the book in response to a "right there" question–*please note that we discuss plagiarism at length*). Students of all levels develop the capacity for metacognition, or the ability to monitor their own current level of understanding, and decide when that understanding is not adequate (Bransford 47). In addition, the work that I give the students to do sets them up for success. I design the structure of how we will read and respond to the books based on the reality of my students' strengths, with the intention of pushing them forward.

The written responses serve multiple purposes. First, I can check for comprehension. In addition, we can work on answering questions completely, reading directions carefully, and basic conventions of writing. The written element of this program is multi-tiered.

The act of comprehension happens during reading (Gibbons 71) and must be taught during reading. As readers ourselves, much of our own comprehension happens unconsciously. I want my students to understand what they are reading *while* they are reading; one way to get them there is to activate their conscious awareness of (making) meaning while reading. In the process of reading one book, students may be asked to comprehend at any point on the Unconscious to Conscious Acts of Reading continuum (Fountas & Pinnell 346) (see Figure 3).

While I may word my questions differently than how they are stated above, the general ideas stay the same. If all of the tasks my students were asked to complete came from the far right column, they would be denied the opportunity to simply enjoy reading. If they only read for the fun of it, I would not be able to help them to better comprehend, especially as the books they read grow more difficult and complex. Students learn comprehension skills through experiences across this continuum. In order to increase students' vocabulary and vocabulary building skills, I also include questions that require them to make guesses about words based on contextual clues.

The Bottom Line

Research has shown that ethnically diverse students' academic achievement will improve when they are presented the opportunity to practice learning through their own cultures and experiential filters (Gay 106). I can look to my students to help me know how their lives connect to the characters in a book or to the author who wrote the book. I choose books that *I* think reflect cross cultural boundaries, and I provide support in helping my students cross those boundaries when I present a book that is outside of their cultural experiences and knowledge.

The magic of reading is in finding connections and expanding one's thinking about their own life. What a gift to help children (who are already aware of their struggles and challenges) connect with literature, to find a friend in a character, to see a new way of approaching a situation through an author's words. This gift is available to children from all cultural backgrounds, and our job as teachers is to ensure that *all* students are presented with high expectations and the support to help them achieve.

What happens in my classroom is not necessarily reinforced at home. My students may not be reading books that are as complex or advanced as many third graders at other schools. But the fact is, they often make *huge* advances in what matters most as readers: they understand what they read and they can interact with the literature. Even my most struggling students have advanced more than one grade level in a school year. These achievements are only partially because of what I do; their success is more about *their* excitement to devour literature. Indeed, when I reassess my students' reading at the end of the year, their decoding, rate, fluency, and comprehension has improved. Nevertheless, the greatest proof I have that these reading groups are working to get *all* students interested in reading is the question they ask me at the end of each book: "What do we *get* to read next?"

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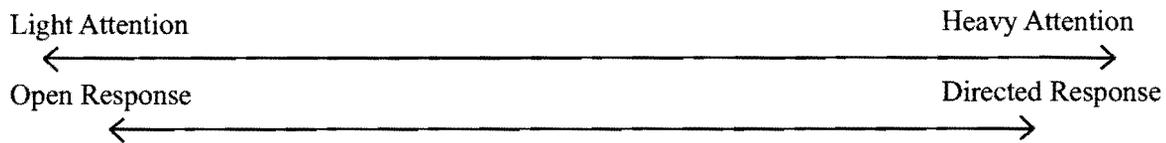
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About the Author

Amelia A. Walker (walkera@bsd405.org) received her Masters in Teaching from the University of Washington, Seattle. She has taught second through fourth grades. Her main focus in the classroom is teaching students who have not had early literacy experiences to read and comprehend at grade level.

Figure 3: *From Unconscious to Unconscious Acts in Reading*

Light Attention   Heavy Attention

←————————————————————————————→

Open Response   Directed Response

←————————————————————→

Experience and enjoy the book	• Read the book and share something about it afterwards. • We'll talk about this book after we read it. • Write a letter in your reader's notebook to share your thinking.	• As you read, be thinking about _____. • Stop and think about _____.	• Stop at the end of each section and make notes on _____. • Mark one or two places to show how the author _____. • Highlight phrases where the author _____. • Jot down phrases that show _____. • Reread and mark places where the author _____. • Include one paragraph in your letter (in your notebook) that discusses _____.	• Place a code or mark on the text every place that _____. • Think about the things a writer does and mark examples throughout the text. • Make marginal notes where you find _____ of information. • Mark all the places in the text that show _____. • Write a letter in your reader's notebook about _____. • Take note of new language and new words you find. • Identify your thought processes and place marks in text when you have them.