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Lessons Remembered: A commentary on expectations and parent involvement

Michelle Johnston is associate dean of the College of Education and Human Services at Ferris State University where she assisted in the development and implementation of a new standards-based elementary education program. She is well known in Michigan for her work on literacy issues including participating as a member of the Michigan English Language Arts Standards Setting Committee and with the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Strategic Teaching and Reading Program. In addition to her trip to China, Dr. Johnston taught teachers in Okinawa, Japan, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Valbonne, France as well as visiting colleges throughout The Netherlands.

Author's introduction to the reflection

In February 2001, I led a delegation of American educators to visit the Peoples' Republic of China for the People-to-People Ambassadors Program. The delegation members were all International Reading Association members and represented a.) all levels of education, including Reading Recovery, district-level professional development, primary grades, upper elementary, middle school, remedial reading, and community college corrective reading, b.) public, private, and parochial schools, and c.) all regions of the United States, as they were from North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Montana, and California. Our delegation's mission was to find out how the Chinese teach reading by visiting educators throughout China. Specifically, we had 12 professional meetings with Chinese educators in four cities, Shanghai, Souzhou, Nanjing, and Beijing.

Eight of the meetings were in urban elementary, middle, and high schools, and one meeting was in a rural school where the principal invited parents and children to attend the meeting. The other three meetings were at a publishing house, a teacher training institute, and Beijing Normal University with representatives of the Ministry of Education.

After leaving China, we all regrouped in Hong Kong and debriefed. My reflection on the trip emerged from the debriefing and exchanges among the delegation since returning to the United States.

Through the frigid gray dampness of a late February and early March, I led a delegation of American teachers to China for the purpose of studying Chinese reading instructional methodologies. Our travels through China took us to four cities where we visited a publishing house, 11 schools, and two teacher training institutions. Although we learned a great deal about *pinyin*, a Roman-like, phonics-based alphabet that the primary grade students learn in the first month or two of their schooling, eye exercises that corresponded to acupuncture points, and 3,000 Chinese characters with their accompanying radicals that change the meaning of the characters, we also had some subtle reminders of good reading instructional practices that transcended cultures and that we already knew, albeit, probably forgot, took for granted, or lost. Those reminders became the lessons remembered:

- Children respond to our expectations.
- Parents are vital partners in teaching our students to read.

Specifically, when a Chinese principal answered a question about reading instruction at his rural elementary school, he answered by saying: "We are a school of consideration. We consider all children and know that they will read. We work with their parents because parents are the children's first teachers, and an illiterate mother means an illiterate child."

From elementary schools to middle schools and the equivalent of our high schools, we heard the same message. The teachers and principals reported that they worked with all children and engaged the parents in teaching the children. In fact, every school that we visited had a *parents' school*, a room dedicated to teaching parents to read, compute, and help their children.

Historically and contextually, the parents' schools are important for the Chinese because

many parents did not have access to the educational opportunities that their children are experiencing for two reasons. *First*, many parents and grandparents of the contemporary Chinese children grew up during the Cultural Revolution, when schools closed and teachers worked as laborers. *Second*, compulsory schooling through ninth grade did not become law until 1986. Therefore, some parents and grandparents have limited academic skills, and in some families, the children read better than their parents.

Additionally, with the one-child policy, family honor and pride rest on the achievement of the one offspring. Consequently, grandparents and parents alike want the best for their

children and encourage their children by assisting in the teaching of reading, writing, and computation. Nevertheless, the importance of high expectations and parental involvement cannot be understated.

Expectations

At every school, we attended professional meetings through which the American and Chinese teachers engaged in dialogues around the teaching of reading. During those meetings, the American teachers always asked the Chinese teachers to explain their diagnostic and remedial procedures and their strategies for early identification of reading problems. The Chinese teachers always appeared astounded by the questions because, as they reiterated, they taught all of their students to read. After watching this exchange repeat at all of the schools, I decided that the American teachers and the Chinese teachers were operating from two different pedagogical frameworks. The American teachers appeared to be working from a deficit model. They first recognized that not all students could learn to read well and that there should be an identification of those students with problems as well as a plan for correcting the problems, while the Chinese

The American teachers appeared to be working from a deficit model. They first recognized that not all students could learn to read well and that there should be an identification of those students with problems as well as a plan for correcting the problems, while the Chinese teachers expected that all children would learn to read.

teachers expected that all children would learn to read. In fact, when an American teacher purposely formed a Chinese character in reverse to explain reversal problems that prevent some children from reading successfully, the Chinese teachers laughed, and one said, "Impossible!"

The Chinese teachers agreed that not all children learned to read with the same facility, at the same speed, or in the same way; however, they knew that all children learn to read. When they taught a child who needed encouragement and help, they just did it, regardless of the number of children in their classes, even if it meant working during their lunch period or after school. Granted, part of the expectation is the teachers' accountability to the national and municipal governments and school administrators that also expected them to teach all children to read. However, if a teacher works from the framework of high expectations for learning, rather than from a view that children have deficits, students benefit. The Chinese students receive the message that they can succeed, not that they are problems and cannot realize success.

Many years ago, I heard the venerable Dr. Roach Van Allen, a literacy pioneer and early proponent of the language experience approach, invite teachers in his audience to know their students first as readers and writers, not first as problems and failures. I never forgot his message, and the discussions with the Chinese teacher reminded me of Dr. Van Allen. The Chinese teachers first learned about their students, as communicators, while the American teachers in my group seemed to learn about their students as problems.

Parents

Parents are the early literacy models, who children first follow and imitate. They are the people with whom children practice reading and from whom the students receive encouragement

to speak, write, read, and reflect. Essentially, parents can be the teachers' strongest allies in teaching reading, and they need nurturing as much as their children. Too often, parents are not invited to participate in the literacy development of their children. For example, an American parent of a fifth-grader who has reading difficulties told me that she never helped her son read, read to him, or listened to him read because the teachers told her that by helping her son she would only interfere with the work of the school.

Sadly, sometimes when teachers do invite the parents to participate in their children's journey to literacy, they do not know how to accept the invitation. For example I spent two days observing children in a rural Michigan school where the second-graders were distressed because their

teacher asked them to read to an adult at home as a means of practicing their new reading capabilities. Unfortunately, most of the second-graders had no one to whom they could read. The adults in their lives had priorities other than listening to a seven-year-old read. They need to learn about their importance in influencing their children's success.

The Chinese recognize the importance of a parent's role in a child's pathway to literacy, not only with their parents' schools, but publishers are reinforcing the push for parental involvement. They are now publishing periodicals for parents. The periodicals focus on the children's literacy, language, and numeracy needs at various age ranges such as birth to 3 and 3 to 7. Within the periodicals, there are age-appropriate reading and counting activities for the parents to do with their children, including telling imaginative stories, playing games, and reading traditional literature. Although these are not new concepts for Americans, such family and child-oriented periodicals are relatively new for the Chinese. However, periodicals became reminders for the Americans in my delegation that too often they left the parents out of the reading acquisition equation.

(P)arents can be the teachers' strongest allies in teaching reading, and they need nurturing as much as their children. Too often, parents are not invited to participate in the literacy development of their children.

When I returned to the United States, I told a principal about the Chinese parents' schools and recognition by the Chinese educators of the parents' roles in teaching children to read. His comment to me was, "No way." In an environment of national accountability, we have to work with everyone to ensure that students achieve success and the first people with whom we should work are the parents.

I told a (U.S.) principal about the Chinese parents' schools and recognition by the Chinese educators of the parents' roles in teaching children to read. His comment to me was, "No way."

Implications

As a teacher educator, my trip to China and the discourse with the Chinese teachers reminded me that I must emphasize the importance of having high expectations for children and engaging the parents as partners in teaching the children to read because the principal in China is correct. Parents are the first teachers, and when parents cannot read, their children struggle. Too often in my own past teaching, I forgot those basic constructs and dwelled on the student deficits and not strengths, and, perhaps, I even erroneously suggested that the teachers were the sole providers in the enterprise of reading instruction. This trip reminded me of important lessons that I lost along the way. Now as I work with the teacher candidates at my university, I will tell them about my trip to China and the lessons that I had to relearn there.

Teachers' Ideas

Teachers, please share with your colleagues ideas that have worked for you, that have helped your students be successful, and that can be used by other teachers. We will collect your ideas and share them with others in upcoming MR Journal editions.

Name: _____

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Superintendent: _____

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Content Area Bookmarks

Please enjoy the bookmarks included on this page and the following pages. They are meant to be cut out and put in your teacher's edition as a reminder to you of the strategies to enhance effective content area reading. The two strategies included here are Double Entry Notes and Herringbone Technique. If you are interested in an entire set of bookmarks, please refer to the publications order form on page 32. These bookmarks are from the Content Area Bookmarks II.

The bookmarks are designed to illustrate for teachers how to put current research into instructional practice. The goal is to move students to independent selection of the strategy or strategies that work best for each student. Each of these strategies can be used across all content areas.

DOUBLE ENTRY NOTES

WHAT IS IT?

Double Entry Notes is a note-taking strategy that promotes efficient note-taking for both reading and lecture. It gives the student the opportunity to react to and ask questions about the material.

WHY USE IT?

- Helps students to record their ideas.
- Becomes a reference for review of learning.
- Promotes student thinking beyond the rote learning level.

HOW TO DO IT

- Divide paper vertically into two sections.
- Label the columns **SUMMARY** and **REACTION**. An alternate form could be labeled **SUMMARY** and **QUESTIONS ANSWERED**.
- Students make notes on the reading in the summary section, **USING THEIR OWN WORDS** — this could include main ideas and supporting details, interesting or important information.
- In the second column, students write reactions to what was read, questions they have, or questions they answered in their reading.
- Summary section becomes review material for test and quizzes.
- Reaction or Questions sections become the basis for writing.

DOUBLE ENTRY NOTES

EXAMPLES

Summary	Reaction

Summary	Questions

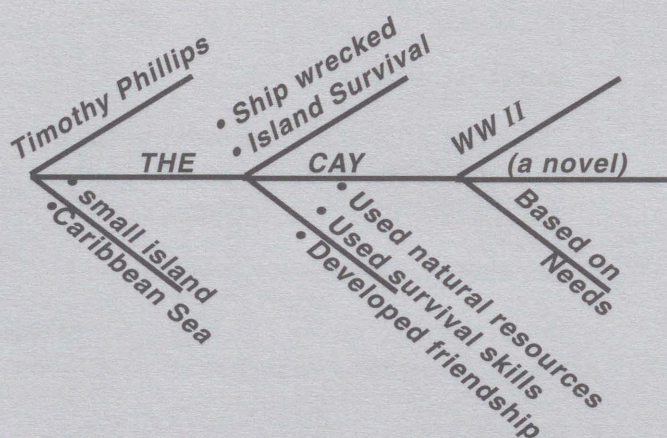
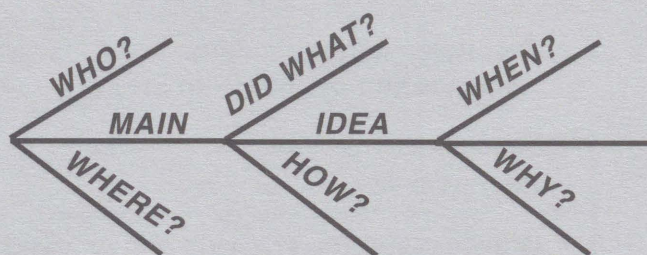
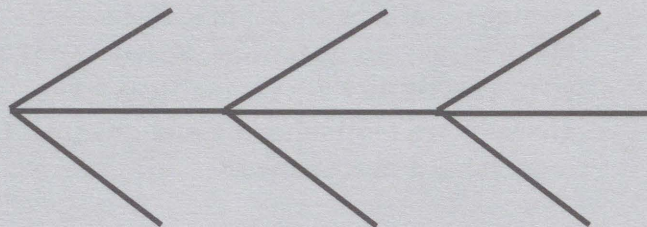
* Note-taking is rarely taught in secondary schools and colleges. It is merely assumed.

* If students are to become effective note-takers, the skill **MUST** be taught.

Tierney, Readence, & Dishner. (1990) Reading Strategies and Practices.

HERRINGBONE NOTES

EXAMPLES



Walker, B.J. (1992) Diagnostic Teaching of Reading.