Ohio Literacy Conference for K-3rd Grade Teachers
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A-1 Creating a Structure for Reading Success (Gr. K-3)

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Guiding Principles for a Readers' Workshop

Time

Choice

Response

Community

Structure

Choice Research

John Guthrie and Nicole Humenick (2004) found that ensuring students had access to an array of interesting texts produced reading achievement gains roughly four times as large as the small effect of producing systematic phonics instruction as reported by the National Panel (2000). In addition, they found that providing students with choices about what to read, where, and with whom produced an impact on reading achievement more than three times as large as the effect size reported for systematic phonics instruction. This doesn't mean that systematic phonics instruction is not supported, just that there are other aspects of research-based reading instruction that are at least as important as phonics lessons. (cited in Schools that Work by Allington and Cummingham)

Predictable Structures for Teaching and Learning

Time for modeling, thinking aloud, demonstration and guided practice

Time for guided and independent practice, discovery, and conferring

Time for reflection and sharing

Fig. 5.2. What's Essential for Literacy Learning

Cognitive Strategies

Surface Structure Systems Sets of skills that help readers/writers identify words and read fluently	**Deep Structure Systems** Sets of skills and strategies that help readers/writers comprehend literally to grasp plot, comprehend deeply to probe ideas, and extend and apply their understanding
Graphophonic System: Letter/sound knowledge, alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness, decoding	**Semantic System:** Understanding word meanings from literal to subtle; discussing or writing about associations related to words; precision and word choice in writing
Lexical System: Visual word recognition based on frequent visual exposure to words; visual memory for *all* words	**Schematic System:** Constructing meaning at the whole-text level (can be literal or inferential understanding of themes, ideas, and concepts); storing and retrieving relevant knowledge; connecting the new to the known
Syntactic System: Understanding (usually auditory) and use of language structures at the word, sentence, paragraph, and whole-text levels (see Figure 2.3d, Text Structures)	**Pragmatic System:** Multiple experiences with ideas we've read or learned; sharing and applying meaning; constructing meaning through oral, written, artistic, and dramatic means; writing for specific purposes and audiences; revising thinking based on interactions with others; adopting the habits and mores of readers and writers

From To Understand by Ellin Keene
Heinemann 2008.

The Rider

By Naomi Shihab Nye

A boy told me
If he rollerskated fast enough
His loneliness couldn't catch up to him,

the best reason I ever heard
for trying to be a champion.

What I wonder tonight
pedaling hard down King William Street
is if it translates to bicycles.

A victory! To leave your loneliness
panting behind you on some street corner
while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,
luminous pink petals that have never felt loneliness,
no matter how slowly they fell.

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The Difference Between Conferring and "Touching Base"

Debbie Miller

Sometimes when I talk with teachers about creating "the luscious feeling of endless time," they look at me like I've lost my mind. They tell me they love the idea, but with all they have to teach and all their kids need to learn, "There's no way," they say. Luscious feeling? Endless time? Come on girlfriend, get real!"

It's true that teachers have never been under more pressure. We're bombarded by demands and directives deemed by others as necessary and non-negotiable. As a result, teachers everywhere are making Herculean efforts to fit everything in. It's no wonder there's talk by some of hurry-up-and-get-it-done.

But when getting done takes precedence over the doing, when finishing becomes more important than the figuring out, we've lost sight of why we became teachers in the first place; we've lost sight of what we know to be true. In our rush to try and get everything in, we've forgotten that children learn by doing. And learning by doing takes time.

When kids are given time to puzzle through something that's challenging (with just enough support from their teacher to be successful) they're not only learning about the task at hand, but they're learning about who they are and how they go about figuring things out. They're developing those can-do, let-me-have-it attitudes that we want so much for them.

It's hard to teach (and learn) with a timer in your head or one in your hand. It's controlling. It's restrictive. It limits mindfulness, understanding and engagement for students and teachers alike. Just like reading fast isn't always about reading well, teaching fast isn't always about teaching well either.

No matter how fast we teach or how hard we try, it's impossible to do all we're being asked to do when teaching for understanding is our goal. So in the end the choice really is ours...

Do we race through the day in a frantic sort of way, or do we slow down, determine what's essential, and teach those things deeply and well? Do we talk and tell and talk and tell and talk and tell some more, or do we show kids how and then give them lots of opportunities across the day for sharing in the responsibility for their learning?

Taking Time to Confer

While I touch base with many children in every reader's workshop, I really confer with only a couple each day. Right about now you might be wondering, "How do you justify spending so much time with one child? What about the twenty four others that need your time and attention, too?"

It's true. In the time I spent conferring with one child, listening to them read, asking questions to make sense of their reading, and puzzling over next steps with them, I could have easily touched base with three, four, five, maybe even six more children. But touching base isn't teaching. Touching base with children is a quick hi and bye with a little something in between.

Touching base is a good thing. That "little something in between" might be encouraging a child to keep at it, reminding a child to get back on track or asking a child if she's remembered what she learned in our conference yesterday to help her with her work today. Touching base is all about responding at the surface level to student behaviors. But we don't want to confuse touching base with conferring.

Conferring is something else entirely. When we confer with students, we're not standing above them or even leaning over, we're sitting right beside them, shoulder to shoulder. We're digging deeper now, working hard to individualize our instruction and support children as they apply what we've taught them in large and small group settings.

Richard Allington's research clearly indicates that our most effective teaching occurs when we work with students one on one. I've learned from him, others, and my own experience that it's not about how many children we confer with in a day, but how deeply we teach and touch those we do. When we work with children, they're more likely to work with us.

You might be thinking, "Okay. But did you really need to listen to children read for more than a minute or so?" For me, the answer is yes. When students read to us, they are sharing their growing skills and sense of themselves as readers. It allows us to acknowledge and revel in that for just a moment. We want to build relationships with the children in our charge; we teach and learn best when we know one another well. And besides, don't we all need a little Shel Silverstein or Kate DiCamillo in our lives now and then?

And what about the rest of the kids? Their day will come. Do you know the picture book **The Three Questions** by Jon Muth? It's a story about a little boy named Nickolai who is seeking the answers to three questions. He wonders:

When is the best time to do things?

Who is the most important one?

What is the right thing to do?

It's Leo, the wise old turtle, who helps Nickolai understand that the answers were inside him all along by saying...

"Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world. This is why we are here."

I spend time with just a couple individual children in each reading workshop because I want to "do good" for them. I know there are twenty-four others, and I will do the same for each of them time and again in the days, weeks, and months to come. We can't reach everyone all in one day, but we can reach one or two or maybe even three. We reach, touch and teach by being present, putting ourselves in the moment and focusing our full attention on the one sitting by our side.

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