

Engaging Students in Meaningful Reading

A Professional Development Journey

Angela Rossow with Carol Hess

Educational reforms continually challenge teachers to grow and change professionally. Some trends have solid research to support their effectiveness, while others are hotly debated. This is the case with reading reforms.

My personal journey through the reading wars began 5 years ago when I accepted my first teaching assignment as a special educator. I vowed to experiment and incorporate authentic literature into my methods of teaching. Other teachers with special education background felt that I would change my mind when I realized the diversity of needs in my students, along with the scheduling problems that occur in special education. Needless to say, it was difficult to cope with the scheduling and the diversity of needs. Worse than scheduling issues was the students' lack of motivation to read. This began my quest to create an effective reading program that would be motivating for special education students, as well as one that would address the students' individualized education programs (IEPs).

Remediation or Real Reading?

Traditionally, special education teachers have focused on remediation of specific skills deficits that are isolated from connected texts and presented in the form of phonics worksheets and sight-word practice (Sears, Carpenter, & Burstein, 1994). Looking back at my own 5 years of working with students with special needs, I found myself guilty of using

repetition of isolated reading skills. Small-group instruction focused on worksheets as the main reading method. My graduate courses in educational theory led me to current research in reading instruction, including the constructivist theory of learning, whole-part-whole methods, and authentic literature. I joined a learning and instruction Listserv (a Listserv is a trade name). These online conversations (AERA-C@ASUVM>ASU>EDU) validated for me the value of trade books when used with special education students. Many participants of the Listserv felt it was difficult to do activities in reading other than a worksheet when each child was working on individual objectives.

Concerns About Student Learning

Unfortunately, in my own classroom, I began to have concerns for my students' progress. First, I noticed a lack of motivation to read in all of my students. In questioning them, I was dismayed to learn that little or no reading took place

outside the classroom or school. Second, my students were not able to generalize, or transfer, skills they had acquired from the special education room to the general education classroom. I decided to observe my students; before long, it was evident the students became comfortable with the format of the worksheet rather than develop, competency of the skill. Hence, if I used another format, scores began to drop until the students familiarized themselves with the new worksheet format.

Research by Au (1997) suggested that when teachers overemphasize skills without providing meaningful activities, students find little value in reading and writing. My concerns for effective reading instruction for students with special needs was what prompted me to return to college to pursue my master's degree. My studies aided me in being able to learn how to effectively design research; more important, they gave me the confidence to realize that research begins in my own classroom. Through research, I became aware of terms such as *constructivism*, *whole language*, *holistic*

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Elementary School Student

"I would tell them to read this book because it is so good. The book is good because Amber Brown has girl problems."

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learning, and literature-based instruction. Many articles contained views from educators like myself, with varying ideas and experiences with the concepts I was studying. Realizing that many teachers wrote about personal discoveries made while in their own classrooms encouraged me to grow and change professionally. Professional growth came through adopting methods that have not only proven to be effective within my own classroom but also addressed my concerns of motivation and generalization.

Addressing Diversity

The school district where I teach is located in a community with a low socioeconomic base. Many of my students have talked about one or both parents' being in prison, of not getting enough to eat at night, of parents fighting late into the night making it difficult to sleep, or having siblings taken from the home and placed with other relatives.

The schools within the district are divided according to grade levels. My building houses approximately 400 fourth- and fifth-grade students. Currently, there are 21 general education teachers and 3 special education teachers with approximately 18 students per classroom. For the purpose of this article, students discussed were taken from general education classrooms and placed in a learning-lab setting to receive reading instruction. In the learning lab, one special education teacher and one instructional assistant are available to my students.

Motivation

Students with reading problems need opportunities to practice reading material on their level with not too much difficulty

in word recognition (Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998). Reading can be frustrating for students who struggle with decoding (Allen, 1998). When reading is difficult, children's attitudes about reading become poor, and they avoid reading activities. Allen further noted that when children do not read books, they are unable to develop fluency and gain additional knowledge to help with further reading experiences.

My purpose for change was to motivate students in the area of reading. Past research has linked the frequency of reading with reading achievement and positive reading attitudes (Allen, 1998). In reading Sears et al. (1994), I became aware of the importance of ownership and authentic reading and writing activities. Ownership, as I understood it, means that students would have freedom of choice in reading texts and activities.

I began allowing students to choose books they wanted to read. Initially, the students self-selected books at a higher level than their own reading levels. Through conferencing with each student, I learned that students frequently chose books that were at their frustration level rather than their instructional level. Once I discovered this, I encouraged students to choose a book and

conference with me about the book's level. Together we began to choose books that were at the instructional level for the students. Figure 1 shows examples of books we used.

Imagine giving students the gift to see that they can read when they have the opportunity to read appropriate and motivating books! It was exciting to see my students become interested in reading. When talking with my students about what they liked most about the reading program, students responded with the following comments:

Cooper: I like reading in a group where we get to each be a character.

Jayne: Reading chapter books and meeting as a group.

Katie: Reading with other kids.

Holly: Being able to read books.

One group of three girls chose to read the book, *Amber Brown Is Feeling Blue*, by Paula Danziger (1998). After finishing the book and meeting as a group to discuss it, I heard Lori share her thoughts: "I'm going to the library and check out more Amber books." This was exciting to me because she made a connection with the text—enough to want to independently explore more books. Research confirmed that providing children with choices of books, allowing them time to read, and providing opportunities to discuss books with others creates an environment that encourages children to want to read (Allen, 1998). Students were encouraged to discuss books as a group or with me individually.

Figure 1. Literature Chosen by Students

Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday by Judith Viorst (1978)

Amber Brown Is Feeling Blue by Paula Danziger (1998)

Horrible Harry and the Drop of Doom by Suzy Kline (1998)

Nate the Great and the Stolen Base by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat (1992)

The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg (1985)

Verdi by Janell Cannon (1997)

Addressing Reading Skills on the IEP

Addressing IEP objectives was easier than I had originally expected. To further allow the students ownership and choices, I created folders with a variety of activities that addressed different skills. For example, if a student's IEP contained an objective for sequencing, the student would read and then go to the sequencing folder and choose an activity to do. Activities may include sequencing bags, flip charts, dioramas, or pie charts. Figure 2 shows two examples found in the activity folders. By allowing students to choose books and activities, I felt they were being given an individualized reading program that met their individual needs.

"Doing activities and writing help me remember what I read about."

Elementary School Student

Soon it became clear that instruction addressed many reading skills not listed on the IEP. I asked all students to complete "main idea" posters for each chapter, even if their IEP did not address main-idea skills. We retold stories by making group books, we located story elements from our stories and newspaper articles, and we did a great deal of writing. These activities helped students

maintain previously learned skills. The reading program became one that included many elements of reading and allowed the children to make sense of what they were reading, rather than struggle with pieces of reading with no meaning. "Worksheets that masquerade as reading rob our children of time doing the real thing" (Heymsfeld, 1989, p. 67).

I taught the children skills for decoding using a "whole-part-whole" approach. As Trachtenburg (1990) and Allen (1998) explained, whole-part-whole instruction embeds word-identification instruction in the context of real reading and writing. According to Trachtenburg, "whole instruction" introduces children to good literature that allows them to read, comprehend, and respond to the text. Next, Trachtenburg suggested that teachers select words from the given text and use them for direct skills instruction, which is the "part" to this approach. Finally, the teacher gives additional reading and writing activities to allow students to apply these skills, which brings the student back to the "whole."

This approach was successful with my students. Katie, while working on the diphthongs *ou* and *ow*, chose to make a Venn diagram. She placed the *ou* and *ow* in the middle section and wrote words that contained the long *o* sound (as in *snow*) on the left and words that contained the diphthong sound *ow* (as in *drown*) on the right side. Words from the text were selected and used for spelling lists, put on word walls, or written in personal word books. Other students chose activities where they made bookmarks and wrote words containing specific skills on the bookmarks as they were reading the text. The choices of activities are endless.

Figure 2. Reading Activities

Main Idea Activity

Book Title	Chapter 1 Illustration Main Idea	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4
Chapter 5	Chapter 6	Chapter 7	Chapter 8	Student Name

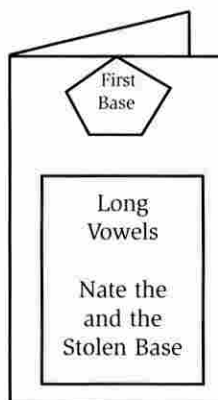
Directions:

1. Fold a piece of paper into the appropriate number of squares.
2. After reading chapter one, write the main idea on your main idea poster.
3. Illustrate the main idea (see chart above for a visual direction).
4. Go on to the next chapter.

Phonics Activity

Directions:

1. Fold a piece of paper to resemble a bookmark.
2. Draw a picture at the top of your bookmark. (Make sure it relates to your book).
3. Locate words in your book that address the skill you are working on.
4. As you find words in your book, write them on the inside of the bookmark.



“It was during online conversations that I learned the value of trade books when used with special education students.”

The use of real text and an array of activities appeared to have a positive effect on my students and their level of motivation toward reading. Au (1997) stated that when students sense the power of literacy in their lives, they develop ownership of literacy and make it a part of their everyday lives at home and at school. Bergeron & Rudenga (1996) felt that choices imply that students are empowered in the classroom interactions and decisions.

Improving Students' Writing Skills

Integrating writing became an important change within my classroom. I wanted students to see the importance of writing. Students did a great deal of writing without realizing it while they did their reading activities. They enjoyed the activity itself enough that they did not realize that writing was a natural part of reading. These activities, found in the activity folder, allowed students the opportunity to express themselves and focus on meaning making, rather than being given a worksheet that required them to choose the correct answer by circling it.

Students were writing their own books with accounts about their lives. Once students finished writing about a time in their lives, I asked them to edit their work and do rewrites. When students were finished with rewrites, they went to the computer to type their stories, print them, and illustrate them. Once the story was complete, the page was laminated. At the end of the year, the students bound the stories into their own books, authored by them. Response to this was positive; students were excited about the final copy.

Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995) hoped that journal writing, or “journaling,” would allow children to

react personally to books and become excited about reading. Students can use journaling to understand characters, predict plot lines, discuss characters' actions, question their own reactions to the story, and relate the book to experiences in their own lives. My students used all these techniques with positive

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responses. Students kept “literature dialogue” journals with another special education class and enjoyed the anonymity that came with this form of writing. While journaling with the other class, students opened up and related their own lives to that of the story char-

acter. Students also responded well in personal journals.

Predicting allowed the student to relate prior knowledge to the reading task at hand. Students then formed ideas or predictions about the text to be read. Prediction was seen in the following journal entries. (I have presented the students' responses in authentic, unedited form.)

Jayme: I think the treet was that he may take Amber to a lovely restuarnt.

Debbie: I think that Amber Brown and Katie Green will be friends because when Amber Brown gave her a get well card Katie said thank you.

Holly: Everbote mite lafe at Molly's teeth.

Understanding the characters demonstrated that the student had comprehended the reading text so as to be able to feel how the character may have felt. As the following quotes demonstrate, the students often seemed to become a part of the text, rather than just being a reader of the text.

Jayme: If I were Amber I wuld fell sad for my mom but I will tell her that it is my decision and I fell good about it.

Debbie: If Amber Brown was sitting right next to me I would ask her what is your favorite thing about your babysitter Brenda?

Lori: Amber Brown is feeling like she misses her dad a lot. She want him to come back to her.

Being able to relate the story to oneself is also a useful indication of comprehension. Students were able to comprehend more easily as they formulated thoughts about the text and related it to

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their own lives. Students related the story to themselves through journaling in the following entries.

Debbie: (on making hard decisions) My friend Morgan wanted me to spend the night at her house and my other friend Ashley M. wanted me to spend the night at her house. I wanted to spend the night at Ashley M. house but I forgot the phone number. My friend Morgan had found out her phone number and she got mad. Ashley's mom picked me up.

Lori: I have probelms in my life. I have the same eyes and nose. I have to make decisions in my life.

Jayme: Both of our parntes are divorced and both of our dads are overseas.

Another journal entry asked the students to react to the story. This allowed the students to express their thoughts about the text. Students demonstrated this with the following entries.

Debbie: I recommend because this book is good because it's about girl problems.

Lori: I would tell them to read this book because it is so good. The book is good because Amber Brown has girl problems.

Student Reactions

Overall, the changes I have made in my reading program have had a positive effect on my students. I have observed an increase in their motivation to read. My own observations were important to my decision to continue with this approach to reading; more important, however, I wanted to know what my students were thinking.

When asked how they felt about all the writing we had done, students responded with the following comments:

Katie: Writing helps me remember what I read about in the book.

Cooper: Writing helps me express what's on my mind.

Jayme: I read a chapter and write in my journal because it helps me understand better.

“When teachers overemphasize skills without providing meaningful activities, students find little value in reading and writing.”

Cooper: We write a whole bunch! But it helps me write neat and use capitalization and punctuation.

Children's written responses to text are valuable for discussion sessions, which reveal their understanding of the text (Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995). When asked if they thought that their reading program in the learning lab was helping them in the general education classroom, students commented as follows:

Jayme: Practicing reading every night has helped me read better in the classroom.

Katie: When I take a test in the classroom, I can remember what the chapter was about.

Debbie: Reading has helped me sound out hard words. In science and social studies I try to sound out the words now. I use to let someone else tell me the words.

Holly: I can sound out harder words now.

Shaun: Doing activities and writing help me remember what I read about. These activities have helped me with research in my classroom because you always ask me to write and now I can write about things that I read about . . . like when I do research. I think that I would like to try to do reading in my class now instead of the learning lab. I think I can do it now.

Feedback from classroom teachers stated that these same students were volunteering to read orally in class and becoming active participants in social studies and science projects done in groups. The students used learned skills and generalized them to other areas and, best of all, viewed themselves as

readers in any context. In talking with my students about how they felt about doing worksheets and reading activities, I received the following comments:

Cooper: Can I throw this worksheet away?

Teacher: Don't you want me to put it in your conference folder so that you can share it with your parents at conferences?

Cooper: No, I only want to save the good stuff, like the activities.

Shaun: I don't mind doing worksheets, sometimes. The activities are a lot of work, but I like them. The activities are more fun than worksheets, but harder.

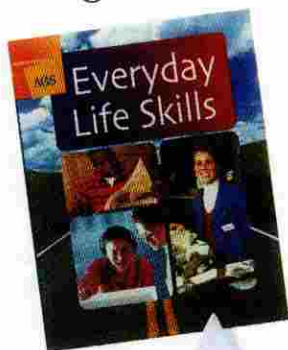
Shaun's response brought agreement from the group. I smiled to myself as it warmed my heart to hear that my students had more fun doing activities even though they considered the activities more difficult than a worksheet.

Reflection

Au (1997) suggested that reading and writing are important for a successful literacy program, especially for students

“Imagine giving students the gift to see that they can read when they have the opportunity to read appropriate and motivating books!”

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**"Ownership, as I understand it, means that
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of diverse backgrounds. She further explained that many of our students face difficult home lives; and, as teachers, we can help some of these students understand the challenges in their lives through the literacy program. Authentic literature has allowed my students to talk about some of their own challenges while allowing them to feel good about themselves as readers. The use of authentic reading and writing tasks has had a positive effect on my students.

My own journey through the reading wars was one of trial and error. I have learned that, ultimately, my comfort level with reading instruction had to come from my students and me. As an educator, I no longer feel the need to respond to the so-called reading wars!

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