

The Reading Curriculum in Elementary Schools of Portland

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Having had the good fortune to visit Chicago and Portland, I would like to first express my gratitude to those who made it possible. Thanks to the New Taipei City Government for providing the opportunity; I really learned a lot from this visit. As well, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Chicago and the Jay School Corporation arranged a wonderful schedule of events for us. We were allowed to visit many schools and gained exposure to many different aspects of the

American culture. It must have taken them a lot of time to organize the schedule.

I also would like to thank my host family. Their hospitality gave me the chance to actually experience the American lifestyle. Talking with Jim and Karen gave me a greater appreciation for the American society and helped fill in my understanding on some things I didn't know before, such as the Amish people. I also enjoyed discussing culture shock with Dawn. This opportunity was great since I am not only teaching a foreign language to my students, but also trying to convey a wholly different cultural perspective as well.

Lastly, I would like to express my appreciation to those schools and teachers that allowed us to visit. Their generosity provided me a wonderful opportunity to learn from how they taught their own classes. Observing their teaching methods gave me inspirational ideas and concepts for how to reach my own future students. I can't wait to start applying what I learned in how to help my students better enjoy reading. In short, I would like to say thanks to all of the people who helped make this visit possible, they really provided a valuable adventure.

When I visited the various schools, I especially focused on the various reading curriculums. Presently, English teachers in New Taipei City use picture books as part of their teaching materials. Some researches actually indicate that students can be independent learners if they are successful readers. Therefore, learning how to instruct children to be better readers is important both to them and to me as their teacher. Passing students from "Learning to Read" to "Reading to Learn" is the key to having better grades, better students and for them, better opportunities in life later on.

These reasons were the impetus for my choosing this as my focus. I learned a lot along the way, especially from those teachers and classes in Portland. Based on my observations, I will introduce reading curriculum from three aspects: reading materials, reading activities and reading assessments.

I. Reading materials

Reading material is everywhere. Anything with words gives children a fresh chance to read and to expand their vocabulary. Since reading is a critical part of every day life, what kind of reading materials would best help our students? When I was in class, I discovered that the teachers used two main reading materials, textbooks and books.

i. Textbooks:

The teachers played a large role in choosing which textbooks to use. The contents were varied with some textbooks having articles and general news magazine like stories while others contained stories and various reader theater scripts. According to Ms. Lechlitner, there are also leveled reader books along with the textbook. She said that the leveled reader books and the textbook are a package. All the students would have their own textbooks and every class would have a set of leveled reader books. There are about ninety topics in the leveled reader book series, and there are five copies of each topic. The content of each leveled reader book is keyed back to the textbooks so that the teachers can group students according to their reading levels and choose suitable leveled reader books for each different group. As a result, although students may use the same textbook in class, they can adjust their learning pace through reading the leveled reader books.



The leveled reader books

ii. Books:

Books are also a very useful reading tool. When I visited the fifth grade class in Bloomfield Elementary School, the teachers chose “The Witch of Blackbird Pond” as their reading material.



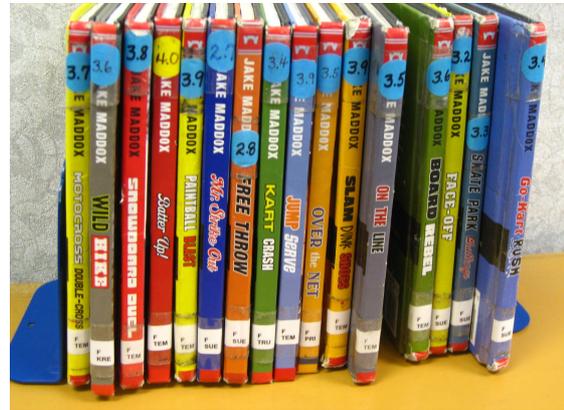
The leveled book library

The teachers regarded the book that they had chosen as simply another kind of textbook. They would choose vocabulary from the book, discuss the plot of the book with the students, and have reading comprehension assessments after each book chosen for the class.

Apart from the book chosen for all students to read, some teachers would then choose other leveled books for more certain students. In Judge Haynes Elementary School, there is a leveled book library. Multiple copies of each leveled book are kept in a zippered bags which

are then classified by their levels. The teachers can borrow these leveled book bags to meet their teaching needs. In Mrs. Oswalt's class, she would use these leveled books when she held guided reading sections with a group of students. She would help students focus on certain reading skills by reading the leveled books.

Apart from the books read in class, the students are also encouraged to borrow books from the library. Before the students go to the library though, they have reading assessments so that they will know their own reading levels. Thus, when students go to the library, they already know which books are suitable for them to read because of this reading assessment and they can borrow books according to their own levels.



Books are leveled in the library.

To summarize, one of the key elements of reading materials usage is in personalization. The teachers tried to use different reading materials for different students, often within the same class. Therefore, a student's weakness will be enhanced and each student is challenged to further learning through personalization. In Taiwan, the learning gap between higher level and lower level students is always an issue. For teachers, it is hard to find a balance in reading material that will appeal and be useful to the entire class. In my opinion, using different reading materials to fit each student's learning needs is a way to benefit both the individual student and the entire class collectively.

II. Reading Activities

Having a variety of reading materials is not enough. How to make good use of these reading materials is also important for a successful reading curriculum. I would like to introduce guided reading activities, group reading activities, silent reading activities, reading strategy instruction and a reading program to my teaching program here in Taiwan.

i. Guided Reading Activities

When I was in Bloomfield Elementary School, I observed some guided reading activities in third and fifth grade classes. The students were given chaptered books to read in class. The teacher would have the students read aloud from the current chapter and any mispronounced words would be corrected immediately. The teacher would also ask clarifying questions to make sure the students understand the words and story. After reading the book, the teacher would arrange several activities. Ms. Badders used the game "Jeopardy" in reviewing the books. She chose four parts to review and put them in four columns: Characters, settings, plot and vocabulary. There were five questions to each column, and each question had a different point value depending on the difficulty of the

question. Students were divided into two groups and were to choose a question and attempt to answer it correctly. Points were awarded for a correct answer.

Beyond the whole class activity, the teacher would also design some worksheets for the students. The worksheets would deal with various aspects of the book, such as the characters, the sequence of events, the main plot, etc. The Students would have a chance to review the book by working through the worksheet. The Teacher would also ask the students to create a “mini-book” covering only the main plot of the book. Besides all of this, the students would also have a reading comprehension test after they finished the book.

ii. Group Reading Activities

When I was with Ms. Wellman’s class, she chose a science article for her students to read. She divided her class into several groups of no more than 2 – 3 people each. After giving the articles to every student, the groups separated to different parts of the classroom so as to have a quiet enough space to read aloud the article among their group. The object was for each student in each group to read through the article several times in order that the group would have enough time to concentrate on learning whatever new or difficult words in the article.



Group reading activity

While the groups were reading, Ms. Wellman would pull few students to sit with her that she might give them further instructions. She would have an opportunity to focus on certain students individually that she thought needed extra attention. Overall, this activity helps the students learn from each other, and gives the teacher time to focus on those few students that need the extra help. Though the students were only first graders, all of them worked hard with their group members, making this group reading activity both collectively and individually useful. I would like to include this sort of activity in my own classrooms as a regular routine for just the benefits I described above.

iii. Silent Reading Activities

Teachers would arrange a silent reading period during the day to allow students time to read books. Students could choose books according to their reading levels. This time was brief --- usually only 15 to 20 minutes --- but gave the teacher time to approach students individually to listen for pronunciation and check their personal comprehension of what they were reading. Ms. Scott, the kindergarten teacher, would often walk around the room spot checking individual children who needed a bit of help. She would help them hone their phonic and pronunciation skills without

the embarrassment of having to make mistakes openly in front of that students' classmates. Higher grade students were encouraged to read silently on their own during this period of the day. However, some students still needed to read their books aloud. In order not to disturb the class, Mrs. Oswalt showed me a tool for those who needed to hear themselves read.



The curved piece of PVC water piping

In her class, Mrs. Oswalt used a curved piece of PVC water piping. The student could speak into one end of the pipe silently enough not to disturb other students, but the pipe would echo the child's voice around to his own ear so that he could focus on hearing his own mistakes and making necessary corrections. This is a very useful tool for students to use. I think that not only the silent reading period would be beneficial to our students, but the curved piping would actually help the students be more aware of their speaking habits after having heard themselves more

clearly.

iv. Reading Strategy Instruction

Mrs. Oswalt used different colored highlighters to help her students read. She asked the students to use a green highlighter to mark the introduction to what they were reading. A yellow highlighter was used for details within the story. The ending of the story was highlighted in red. Students would thus learn to find main ideas within the story and do so more quickly. The teacher would also be able to quickly see if the student had grabbed the main points of the story properly.

Further benefit of this approach comes in having the students use the same highlighter technique on their own papers and articles as they have to write them in higher grades. It teaches the child to grab topics, themes, subjects and main points and helps students understand if their papers get their points across. It would serve to help them find inadequacies within their papers before they would need to turn them in for a grade.

v. Reading Program

When I visited the schools in Indiana, I found that many schools used a computer system to help children read. The computer system is called "Accelerated Reader"(AR). It is a computer database that allows the student to have tests about their reading comprehension after they finish reading books. In this case, almost all of the books in the library are in the database and are leveled accordingly. Students gain AR points after they pass through the reading comprehension questions which then help assign what reading level the child personally has access to.

In the first semester, the students are given a STAR test geared towards evaluating each student's present reading level. From this test each child will know their reading "Zone of proximal development" (ZPD). The ZPD is a range of numbers that sets the child's reading level accordingly. The children will have access to a certain level of books. If they improve along the way, they can access more and more difficult books to challenge them.



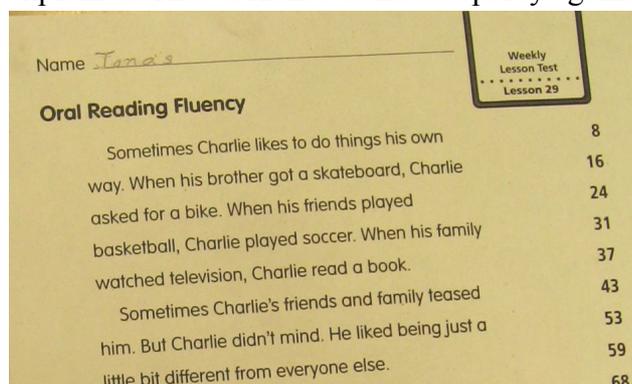
Students who have high AR points will be awarded.

When children finish a borrowed book, they log into the Accelerated Reader system to do the testing. This system actually allows the students to instantly know their progress or points of needed development, keeping accurate record of the child's growth. Teachers benefit by this system in knowing exactly where each child's strengths in reading lay. The system also allows teachers to assign a certain level of "AR points" for their children to complete.

This system is very helpful, instantly allowing students to know which books are suitable for them and allowing teachers to accurately know their students reading levels. The system also makes reading into a somewhat competitive sport among the children, as friends strive to work through the various books and texts and improve themselves.

III. Reading Assessments

Assessment is a tool for students and teachers to know whether they've achieved their goals or not. One of the reading assessment tools is the "Accelerated Reader" System which I just previously explained. The worksheets and "Jeopardy" game assessment tools are also useful assessments.



The oral reading fluency assessment

Besides those mentioned, there is an oral reading fluency assessment. Students are required to read an article in one minute and from that the teacher gauges how many words the student has read. This gives the teacher knowledge of students' ability of reading fluency.

These oral reading fluency tests are previously set up so that the exact number of words per sentence is calculated and thus the

teacher can merely time the reading and process the child as having been tested by exactly how many words he was able to get through. The student's reading ability is shown for exactly as it is during this test.

In conclusion, the core value of the reading curriculum is personalization tailored to each student individually. I discovered some skills on dealing with the class as a whole, but the main thrust of American education which seems to work well is individualization --- getting the student to recognize his own strengths and weaknesses and challenging them to strive to do better from that knowledge. Having had the chance to see teachers demonstrate their teaching methods gave me the potential of working those skills into my own teaching habits from this point forward. I know I have already said "Thank you" at the beginning of this paper, but I really feel I need to say again "Thanks one and all for the opportunity to learn through this. Because of this program, I now know how to better help my students reach their greatest potential."