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Focus Project: Kindergarten Reading Curriculum

One of the most practical applications of this focus project I could think of was to fill a major hole in my curriculum by creating an outline of Reading Workshop minilessons for kindergarten. At the last two schools I have worked in, there has been no specific curriculum for kindergarten reading; only standards and benchmarks for what students are expected to learn during the course of the year. I think this is particularly difficult because of the limbo in kindergarten where students are just beginning to read, and teachers are being pushed to be “more academic” in their classrooms, but still developmentally appropriate at the same time. I have been able to use Lucy Calkins’ *Units of Study for Primary Writing* as a wonderful resource of ideas for minilessons in writing, and I wanted to have something similar for reading that would give me a good sequence of lessons based on appropriate learning objectives for kindergarteners during the course of the year. This led me to the question: How can I design an appropriate and effective workshop-model reading curriculum for a kindergarten classroom that adheres to kindergarten learning standards?

One very important piece to this project is to first understand that I do not solely use Reading Workshop to teach reading, but it is the heart of reading in my classroom. As we have learned from the assortment of modules during this course, there are many important components to reading that are taught in a variety of ways in the primary classroom. For example, students may be working on reading

comprehension via a teacher read aloud, discovering spelling patterns during a word work lesson, increasing phonemic awareness with word play, improving fluency through shared reading, and learning about conventions of print during shared writing, all in one day! All of these activities contribute to a child's ability to read. However, as Kathy Collins stated, "The other components of balanced literacy...work in service of independent reading time; they are not ends in and of themselves," (2004, p.36). Reading Workshop is a way to teach students the skills and habits of good readers through real reading experiences with "just right" books, which brings together and allows students to use everything they are learning about reading through a balanced literacy program. Of course, there are also opportunities to teach all these components through the minilessons, which is reflected in the teaching points I chose, and also in small group or individual work. Looking at the variety of teaching points, one will see elements we studied during the course that make up effective reading instruction, including comprehension, motivation, fluency, vocabulary, spelling and phonics. Assessment is also a critical part of reading instruction and Reading Workshop, however I did not include a guide to assessment in the document since it was made to be a quick reference for units and teaching points.

In order to put together a sequence of kindergarten Reading Workshop lessons, I had to first ask the question: What do good readers do, and therefore, what do we want our kindergarteners to be able to do as they begin their growth as readers? Answering this question led me to the units I created and the teaching points for each minilesson. I relied heavily on Hong Kong International School's

Reading Standards and Benchmarks for guidance. This is the school at which I most recently taught kindergarten and for whom I now do occasional substitute teaching. I chose to use these Standards and Benchmarks because I have seen the work and research that went into their recent update in order to ensure that they are developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, and research-based. These Standards and Benchmarks are a backbone of the curriculum I created; all minilessons correspond to the Standards and Benchmarks, and all Standards and Benchmarks are taught through the minilessons. Though it sounds like common sense, we must teach what we want students to know, rather than teaching what we want and then hoping we have covered it all.

Two other very important resources I used to research kindergarten reading curriculum is *Growing Readers* (2004) by Kathy Collins and *Reading with Meaning* (2002) by Debbie Miller. Both of these books came back to a similar theme that guided the creation of all my minilessons: Good readers construct meaning out of what they are reading. Everything we are teaching children about the reading process leads to the ultimate goal of them being able to construct meaning from a text. This gets back to the previous point of activities such as word sorts not being the end in and of themselves. Rather, we do word sorts so students will recognize spelling patterns in words and gain automaticity in their reading, which will help them to better comprehend text and gain more meaning from it (Raskinski & Samuels, 2011). Collins' and Miller's books gave me a better understanding of the overall purpose of Reading Workshop, but they were also helpful in designing the specific units and minilessons. Both books provided practical explanations of

possible teaching points that I incorporated into the curriculum, such as making connections with the text or using particular strategies to read “tricky” words.

A final but crucial resource I used for planning the curriculum is teacher input. I spoke with several other kindergarten teachers in an attempt to gain insight into their experiences with Reading Workshop, common needs they saw in their students as readers, and practical aspects of teaching 5 and 6-year-olds to read. A universal insight I gained from all the teachers, which was consistent with my own experience, is that kindergarteners need quite a bit of training in the beginning of the year to successfully participate in (and therefore learn from) Reader’s Workshop for the rest of the year, because it is likely their very first experience with anything of the sort. They need to know everything from the basics of what to do with a book to what to do if the teacher is working with another student and they need help. Teachers repeatedly pointed out the importance of building a foundation for reading in kindergarten, which includes not only academic skills, but also behavioral habits. Though these concepts are expressed throughout my units, they are of main focus in the first, very extensive unit of Launching Reading Workshop.

This focus project has led to the creation of a product I am truly excited to have when I return to the classroom. I anticipate that this will be a living document that I will continue to revise and rework as I gain experience and understanding as an educator and teacher of reading. I look forward having an appropriate and effective curriculum for Reading Workshop in place that is consistent with kindergarten learning standards, and I cannot wait to see where it leads my students on their journey to becoming great readers.

References

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