

Learning to Read

How can I help my students take the leap from being familiar with book handling to reading, understanding and engaging in books?

by Annie LeClere

Where was I?

My placement was in a kindergarten/first grade classroom at IPS 60: Butler University Lab School. This school is a Reggio Emilia- inspired school. I was in Marielle Slagel's classroom: a first-year teacher that graduated from Butler University. My focal child is a kindergartener.

There are 26 students in our class, four are African-American, one is Asian-American, and one is Latino-American. We also have three students with IEPs, one defined as "severe-profound".

The philosophy of the classroom is very independent. Students are expected to carry out the tasks that are asked of them. The workshop-style approach is very commonly used in this classroom. Over the course of the semester, they've done a lot of project work with cicadas: connecting literature, math and the arts with cicadas.



CREATE: Students can design their own cicadas through various materials.

The Journey to the Question

I noticed that there were gaps in the skill levels of students in my class. Most kindergarteners couldn't read basic sight words while almost all first graders seemed to be reading light chapter books. I wanted to explore how readers can make that jump over the course of a grade: the steps they take from one level to the next.

This question is really important to me because I want to be sure that each student in my future class is getting the attention and experiences that they need while still being challenged to succeed independently.



LABEL: Most of the signs in the room are written by students.

When [students] can "read" signs and symbols in our world they are becoming literate, as those signs and symbols give meaning.

Marty Legge,
Kindergarten Teacher
[Midland, MI]

What does Ms. Slagel's class have to say about reading?

Why do readers read?

"We read so we can understand." -Max
"We read because it is good." -Phoenix
"To learn new things which help you."
-Adelaide
"You could learn a new language from reading." -Nathaniel
"You read to learn words." -Ingrid
"We read to make us happy." -Piper

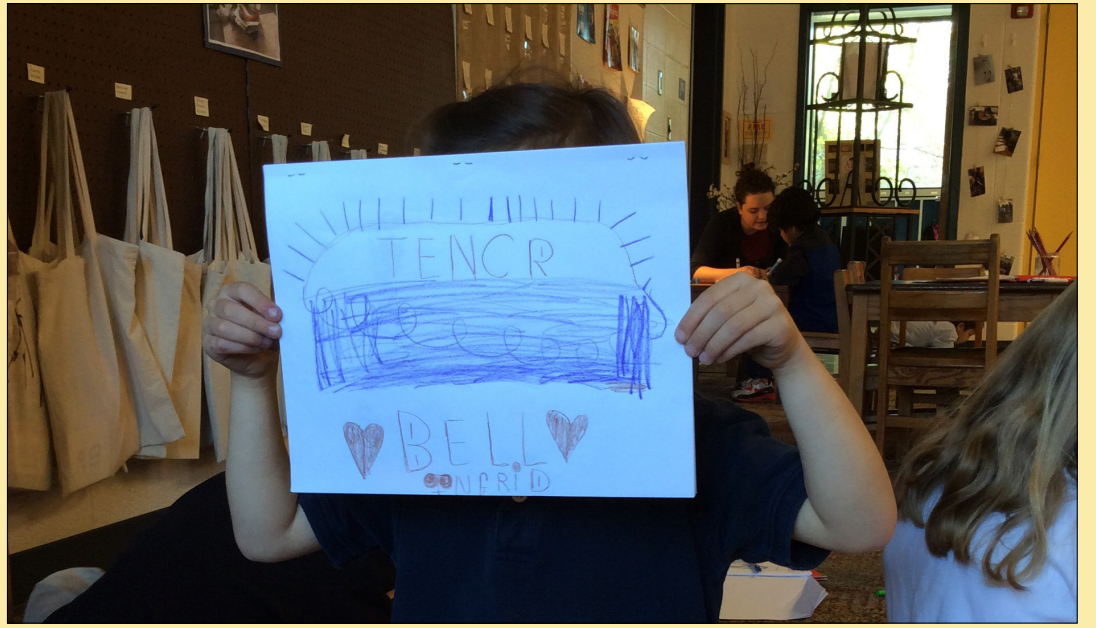
What are our reading goals?

"To read dinosaur books."
"We want to build our stamina."
"To grow as readers."
"To be able to read chapter books!"
"To stretch out words in our books."

My initial question read:

"How can I help my students take the leap from being familiar with book handling to reading and understanding books?"

I didn't originally include the question of how students can engage in text as well.



CONSTRUCT: Students write and illustrate their own books in writer's workshop.

A map of my intervention looked like this...

I found through my initial reading assessment that my focal child was comfortable handling books and recognizing where/when she reads. From this, I determined the next step was learning to read words.

Along with being able to physically read the words in a book, another goal I held for my focal child was that she would be able to understand what she was reading. I could tell that it was hard for her to connect to books.

I made a plan to teach my focal child...

- writing on sticky notes words she doesn't recognize
- using the entirety of a word to help decipher tricky words
- phonetic awareness through digraphs (sh/th/ch)

- a mini lesson to teach acting out books while reading using punctuation.
- noticing illustrations in books to help tell the story.

Reading

Understanding



I found that using sticky notes wasn't effective because she wasn't yet recognizing most words on the page, and adding to her unknown word list wouldn't be helpful.

Using the entirety of a word helped, but I recognized that I needed to read *with* her.

Although she said it was a "just-right" game, learning digraphs wasn't transferring into her reading because she wasn't at the level to read on her own yet.

PLAY: She sorts sh/ch/th digraphs.



I found that it was important to lap read before I set her off to read on her own. I had to model reading with emotions through punctuation in our stories.

Likewise, when lap reading, point to the words that you're reading to being recognition of sight vocabulary.

Sight words were key, and needed to be acquired, in order to gain a foundation of what the story is about. (I used Mo Willems books)

POINT: She uses her "magic finger".



BUILD: Learning to read is much like using blocks to create a building.

In order to become fluent in reading, there are many areas of literature one must be exposed to: phonetic/phonemic awareness, rhyming patterns, the structure of language, use of illustration, language and word structure, proper book handling and practice through sight words. As a teacher, you must assess the skills and define where you'll support the reader. These components are like blocks of a building: all must be present in order for it to stand.

What can they already do, and what skills would benefit from additional support? After this is determined, interventions are designed and implemented.

Amy Burks,
Kindergarten Teacher
[Midland, MI]

"Ours is a college that continually changes because learning is a transformational experience."

Butler COE Vision Statement

What did she learn?

I initially gave my focal child assessments on book-handling and learned about her familiarity with stories because she wasn't yet reading running text. She was very familiar with those and was strong in her phonetic awareness: she sounded out individual letters when reading a word (even simple words like "bed").

About halfway through the semester, we went into reading workshop and all of a sudden, she was reading. I think that had a lot to do with daily practice in the classroom, but also I think it had a lot to do with her

confidence. We also spent a lot of time together working on sounding out words and looking at pictures, which also helped her. She's only reading very low level books with lots of patterns now, but I believe that by the end of the year, she will be at the level that I saw a lot of the first graders: reading full texts and comprehending and engaging with those texts.

She's still spending a lot of time sounding out individual letters, and that's a goal that I have for her in the future.

What's next?

If I had more time with my focal child, I would want to study the acquisition of sight words. Sight words are something I realized were very primary in the process of learning, and I didn't spend time learning those with my child. I saw that I focused so much on her learning phonics and rules of spelling, and had I continued to do that, I could have actually stunted her learning as a reader. It's difficult to ask

that she learn and remember so many rules of the English language- especially when there are so many exceptions!

She becomes so focused on structure of language and spelling that she's not immersing herself in the stories, which results in no way for her to understand what she's reading. What's the point of reading if we don't understand it?

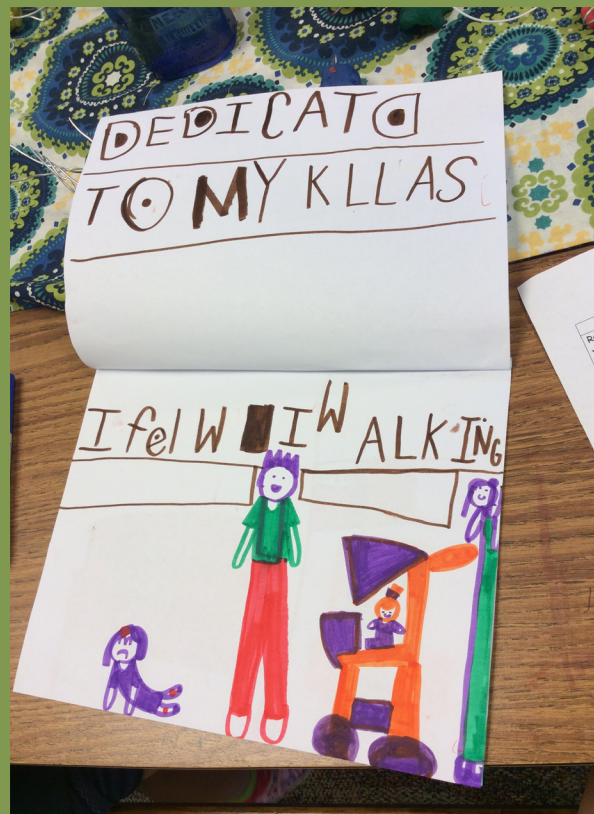
What should you take away?

The main thing that I learned through this research was that learning to read is all a process. It's not something that happens over night and there's not a special formula to create a reader. We are all readers at different levels, but it's the foundational skills we need that help us become fluent.

Though I chose to study the growth of a reader, I was hoping that my research could relate to other school-related subjects. I truly believe that what I learned can also be true for mathematicians. In math, it's not the memorization of facts that creates a strong mathematician. It's truly recognizing patterns and genuinely exploring numbers. It's about all of the little experiences you have

with numbers, word problems, and the manipulation of objects that creates a round mathematician. Through my research on reading, I can apply this discovery of authentic materials (picture books with real stories, word problems students are able to connect with, and practice writing about true experiences) in all subject areas in my future classroom.

Finally, I realized how important it is to provide your students with authentic experiences that give them the opportunities to discover. To discover words, sentences, rhyming, and make their own connections. This discovery is going to also build their confidence as readers, which will improve their fluency.



EXPERIMENT: Children are able to take risks with their spelling based on the things they already know. (above)

PARTICIPATE: Children interact with read-alouds, a great way to practice the reading process through a whole-group approach. (left)

Every person in this room and on this earth makes something a little random

Nathaniel
Kindergartener
Ms. Slagel's class

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