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The merits of kindergarten readers' workshop

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The merits of kindergarten readers' workshop

Abstract

Literacy is at the very core of our being, and as such a vital component of personal identity, creating an environment conducive to literacy development is an essential element of education. Knowing that attitudes are molded early in life, establishing a strong, meaningful literacy program in early childhood can affect children for a lifetime.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the merits and power of Readers ' Workshop at the kindergarten level. First I will define and discuss components of the workshop format. I then will share what I see as the greatest benefits of the workshop approach at the kindergarten level, and provide actual examples from my own kindergarten classroom.

THE MERITS OF KINDERGARTEN READERS' WORKSHOP

A Graduate Journal Article

Submitted to the

Division of Reading and Language Arts

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

Janet K. Hurley

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This Research Paper by: Janet Hurley

Titled: The Merits of Kindergarten Readers' Workshop

has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the

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August, 2001

The Reading Teacher
International Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road
PO Box 8139
Newark, DE 19714-8139

Dear Editor:

Please find enclosed an IBM disk and five copies of my manuscript entitled *The Merits of Kindergarten Readers' Workshop*. The purpose of the article is to illustrate the merits and power of Readers' Workshop at the kindergarten level. While I have read much about Readers' Workshop in general, I have found very little information targeting a workshop approach at the kindergarten level. I hope you find my article engaging and informative.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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**THE MERITS
OF
KINDERGARTEN
READERS' WORKSHOP**

By

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The Merits of Kindergarten Readers' Workshop

Literacy is a major force in our society. As a literate nation, we base much on the foundation of communicating with one another. For many, literacy learning begins very early in life (Teale & Sulzby, 1989) and continues throughout one's lifetime. Literacy is at the very core of our being, and as such a vital component of personal identity, creating an environment conducive to literacy development is an essential element of education. Knowing that attitudes are molded early in life, establishing a strong, meaningful literacy program in early childhood can affect children for a lifetime. I have found Readers' Workshop (Hansen, 1987) to be an excellent program for stimulating literacy development. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the merits and power of Readers' Workshop at the kindergarten level. First I will define and discuss components of the workshop format. I then will share what I see as the greatest benefits of the workshop approach at the kindergarten level, and provide actual examples from my own kindergarten classroom.

Why Readers' Workshop?

Readers' Workshop is a regular block of time in which students engage in natural reading behaviors of selecting, reading, and discussing books (Hansen, 1987; Beed, 1998). A workshop typically consists of a minilesson, self-selected independent reading, conferencing, and book sharing. The heart of the workshop is the motivation derived from choice and independence.

Teachers and researchers agree motivation is central to literacy development (Sweet & Guthrie, 1996). May (2001) submits the idea that learning to read is much more motivational than cognitive. Readers' Workshop encourages and supports learners at all

levels in a highly motivational context, with real communication as its hallmark (Roller, 1996). Choice and independent reading are vital features of a workshop design (Roller, 1996) and help create intrinsic motivation (Guthrie, 1996; Short, 1999). Roller (1996) states workshops take advantage of children's intrinsic motivation and "harness it for literacy learning." Sweet and Guthrie (1996), conducting studies for the National Reading Research Center, declared intrinsic motivation imperative to lifelong voluntary reading. Choice and independence, as well as additional workshop elements of collaboration, challenge, construction of meaning, and self-perception as an effective reader, greatly influence children's motivation for literacy (Turner & Paris, 1996). These motivational features, which are inherent in the workshop format, are effective in helping children to remain interested and to advance in literacy development. The workshop concept is designed to meet students at their point of development and move them forward as readers.

To the casual observer, a workshop classroom may seem anything but organized; however, while the children are engaged in independent tasks, there is a foundational structure supporting all activity. The workshop environment is kept predictable and simple so students can focus on reading rather than procedures (Calkins, 1994). A workshop takes place within a structured setting with a predictable learning structure, predictable interactions, and predictable expectations, all of which foster independence (Fielding & Roller, 1998).

Is Kindergarten Readers' Workshop Feasible?

Our school district is located in a rural mid-western community serving eleven thousand citizens. Students in our neighborhood elementary school are mainly from

lower middle to middle class families, and fourteen per cent qualify for the free and reduced lunch program.

Readers' Workshop worked effectively as a major part of my curriculum when I taught sixth grade. When I transferred to a kindergarten teaching position, I wanted to adapt Readers' Workshop, but was unsure if it would be feasible for children in early emergent stages of literacy development. I questioned whether I would be able to get twenty or more five-year-old students to engage in individual, meaningful reading ventures all at the same time. How would I stimulate their interests and motivate them? Would students develop internal motivation so the workshop could be sustained and worthwhile? Would they be able to learn and move forward in this setting? After four years of using Readers' Workshop in my kindergarten classroom, my convictions regarding its merits at the kindergarten level are stronger than ever.

Kindergarten Readers' Workshop Structure

The kindergarten Readers' Workshop begins with a minilesson, followed by independent, self-selected reading, and culminates with a time of sharing books read. During independent reading, I also conduct conferences with individual students. The basic structure is the same for a workshop at any grade, but I will focus on how that structure looks at the kindergarten level.

Minilessons

At the beginning of the year the minilessons, which rarely consume more than five minutes, cover logistics. We model, discuss, and practice how workshop routines function; what a workshop should look like and sound like; how to make the choice to read alone or with a partner; how and when it's okay to decline an invitation to be a

partner; and how to select books. Explicit minilessons then move on to topics such as concepts about print (Clay, 1993), strategies (e.g., using picture cues, making sense, using beginning sounds, and using voice to print match), and other lessons created from observed student needs. I design my minilessons to introduce new concepts and to reinforce known concepts. Calkins (1994) says while the minilesson will only pertain to what several students are doing that day, one should think of the lessons as a way of adding information to the class bank. When students learn new information, they use it to help other students in times of need. My lessons are focused on moving forward but, in addition, I briefly touch on ideas that reconfirm what all class members know about print. This helps build in success for every student while presenting challenge for those ready to learn more. For the students most advanced on the literacy development continuum, the lessons serve to challenge and move them forward. Students in the middle of the continuum listen and may be able to use some of the information to advance their understandings, or they might benefit from further instruction when they are more ready for it. Students with the least literacy development are exposed to new concepts and reconfirm ones they are experimenting with at their own developmental level. All students are able to benefit from some part of our minilesson time.

Book Selection

After the short minilesson, students begin selecting their books. This is a very important process for the children and can be a big part of the workshop as they seek to find just the right books. Students need time to browse and get comfortable with their choices. Since the vast majority of students are not word readers when they enter kindergarten, it is difficult to have them differentiate among vacation (can read alone),

just-right (can read with some assistance), and challenge (cannot read yet) books (Ohlhausen & Jepsen, 1992). My first concern lies in getting interesting, engaging books into the students' hands. We talk about the different ways we can read, and students are reminded of this as they select their books. Through shared readings (Holdaway, 1979), I introduce many emergent texts such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin, Jr., 1970) and *Mrs. Wishy Washy* (Cowley, 1999). From these readings I help children realize predictability, show them how to use highly supportive illustrations, and demonstrate voice to print match (which we call touch reading). After this initial exposure, most students are able to read these books independently or with a partner. As the year progresses, we discuss selecting the three different levels of text (vacation, just-right, and challenge), and the value each level brings to a student's development. I typically do this during individual conferences when I notice students are ready for new, more challenging texts. While rereading is so valuable for emergent readers in building confidence and fluency, I also encourage them to choose something new they would like to learn how to read. We discuss becoming an even better reader by learning how to read more books. Both rereading favorite books and reading new books assist children in moving forward (Ohlhausen & Jepsen, 1992).

Theme books are placed strategically throughout the room and we have a great selection of books in our classroom library. Big books are consistently popular picks since we have used those repeatedly for shared readings. Our selection of song books is a frequently visited tub because these books, which include words to songs most of the children know (e.g., *Wheels on the Bus*, 1988), guarantee a high success rate. We have tubs where we store our favorite read-alouds (as voted on by the students), allowing for

easy access. Additional tubs hold nature books, alphabet books, number books, rhyming books, author series books, emergent reader texts, and books the class and individuals have authored. Students also have the option of using listening tapes with their books, which is yet another highly popular choice. The listening tapes provide models of fluent, expressive reading while allowing children to start noticing text.

Independent Reading

Independent reading time allows students to select books and read alone or with a partner. They choose a comfortable spot in the room and spend time reading their self-selected book choices. Kindergarten reading may include looking at pictures, talking about pictures, rereading memorized texts, or word reading. It may also include the sharing of personal stories prompted by what a child sees when reading a book or looking at illustrations. Students experiment with new concepts and solidify current reading abilities. They reread their “comfortable as old shoes” selections and work on new texts. We use the terms “expert” and “challenge” with great zeal in our room. Both words create enthusiasm and are motivational for the students. At the beginning of every reading session, students are encouraged to select books they can read as an expert and at least one book that will provide a new challenge for them. They love it when they decide they can move a challenge book into their expert repertoire! While the time is not quiet, it is easy to hear sounds that confirm students are engaged in motivating reading activities.

Individual Instruction During Readers' Workshop

During independent, self-selected reading, I circulate among the students, listening in on each one briefly before I spend several minutes conferencing with two or three targeted students. I conference with each student at least once every two weeks, allowing

time for on-the-spot explicit instruction based on a student's current text selection and identified needs. Explicit instruction is an essential, integral component of a workshop that is prompted by a student's needs, with the focus on the child rather than on the reading materials (Roller, 1996). The goal should be to move the child to greater independence as a reader, as identified by the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding, based on Vygotsky's work, is a procedure for gradually reducing the initially heavy social support of learning and increasing the student's independent performance (Beed, Hawkins, & Roller, 1991).

Individual conferences allow vital one-on-one time with a student that is difficult to provide in an active kindergarten classroom. Because it is another predictable aspect of our daily workshop routine, students do learn how to operate independently and come to respect the individual attention someone else gets. During this time a student and I might talk about how a book was selected, what is happening in the book, the illustrations, or what connections the child is making. The focus may then turn to explicit instruction, targeting the current needs of the student. Those needs might be something a child is questioning at the moment or may stem from other recent observations. Conferences are guided by what I know about a child's current literacy development, and allow me to take advantage of teachable moments.

Book Sharing

At the conclusion of independent reading time, the class assembles at the rug for book sharing. Initially, only a few brave souls were interested in sharing with the class. *It did not take long for the sharing list to become so extensive we could not accommodate everyone.* Sometimes we would split into two groups, with an adult in each group. This

was accomplished by enlisting the help of an associate or parent volunteer. We also tried splitting into smaller groups, each with a peer facilitator. We split into groups of two so everyone could share with someone. Try as we might to give everyone sharing time at the conclusion of each workshop, it always came back to the fact that students preferred sharing with the entire community rather than with smaller factions of it. What we worked so hard to build as *community* now posed a challenge for book sharing!

The children finally settled on the idea that they would rather limit the number of students sharing each day so they could spend more time in our whole-class community setting. Together we devised a plan that met the desires of the students and the demands of our schedule. Interested students signed up to share, and everyone got the opportunity to share once before someone could share again. Our basic goal was for everyone to share at least once a week. When our time was running short, we could decide to call on a limited number of students for responses. The students created a plan they felt was fair, and their ownership of it made it easier to honor that plan.

When sharing, students might choose a favorite page to read or discuss, they might choose to read several pages, or they might read the entire book. Once the student is done sharing, he or she asks for questions, comments, or compliments from the audience. I might become one of the individuals responding, sometimes modeling questions or comments, sometimes doing explicit instruction, and sometimes responding personally with no instructional motive (Beed, 1998). Hansen (1987) suggests using a predictable pattern that students can internalize and use when responding to each other, and that predictability helps facilitate this portion of the workshop as well.

Roller (1996) contends connections between sharing, understanding, and motivation make sharing essential. Sharing empowers children with strategies, interest, and confidence to participate in other literate activities. It provides experiences in peer discussion, opportunities for explicit instruction, and supportive context for struggling readers (Beed, 1998; Roller & Beed, 1994).

Book sharing is a major workshop component for my students and they never seem to get enough of it. Children are indeed social beings who need time to share with one another for understanding, affirmation, encouragement, and continued success.

Powerful Workshop Benefits in Kindergarten

I believe strongly in the merits of Kindergarten Readers' Workshop. It definitely is a greatly anticipated highlight of our day, and while rarely outranking recess, it usually runs a close second! Many students choose to read and write during center time or free choice time, which speaks of their developing, intrinsic love of literacy. The workshop experience is a vital part of our kindergarten program and valuable in so many ways. Some of the most powerful benefits I have observed include: seeing herself or himself as a reader; creating a caring, responsive community celebrating all readers; fostering a high motivational level through choice and independence; and stimulating participation through sharing.

Seeing Themselves as Readers

Perhaps one of the most crucial elements of literacy is for all children to see themselves as readers, and this seems especially vital in kindergarten. Children need to believe in themselves as literate individuals from the very earliest time possible. Since the vast majority of students entering kindergarten cannot read text yet, it is important to

validate what they *can* do and help them feel good about that. Just as young children need much practice speaking before they are able to speak conventionally, so do they need much practice experimenting with text before they read conventionally.

Readers' Workshop fosters the concept that all students are readers. The very first minilesson we do, on the very first day of school, is to celebrate the fact that everyone is a reader. We discuss the various types of readers there are in kindergarten. I model pretend reading, picture reading, word reading, and combinations of these. Pretend reading is when a child flips through a book and tells a story based on what that child has seen other readers do, without relating the story to the pictures or words in the book. The child knows the basic idea that books are for stories, but does not know the text and pictures hold the story. Picture reading is when a story is created by looking at the pictures. Word reading in kindergarten is often strongly supported by the accompanying illustrations.

Our initial lesson continues until every student realizes that he or she, as well as everyone in the class, is a reader. It is a lesson we revisit many times at the beginning of the year and often throughout the year, so all students really come to understand the concept and believe in themselves as competent readers. I never give students the chance to say they are not readers. We start immediately with the fact that we are all readers and we can read in different ways. Initially they might hear it and believe it because they are moldable, compliant young children and it must be true because the teacher said it is so (a delightful perk, yet an awesome responsibility, of being a kindergarten teacher!). However, we verbalize the idea over and over so each child will, at some point, internalize the information and believe it on its own merit rather than because someone

believes it for them. This happens at different times for each student, and we are always celebrating our community of readers. We do cheers, we take hand counts to see how many readers we have in our room, and we let everyone who will listen know we are all readers!

David came to school with very little knowledge of print and how it works. He was the oldest of three children, had no prior daycare or preschool experiences, and turned five just two weeks before the school entry cut-off date. It was obvious he came to school with a very modest amount of literacy experiences. He could not recognize his own name, did not know how to hold a book or what to do with it, and could not identify a single letter of the alphabet. Initially hesitant and withdrawn, David began seizing opportunities to be read to by anyone. Readers' Workshop provided a nurturing environment for him to listen to stories and observe reading behaviors. He eventually learned to select books with pride, confidence, and the satisfaction that came from knowing he was a reader. He began selecting books to read during free choice time. Eventually David became eager to share his favorite page or the entire book for our book sharing grand finale of readers' workshop. He started memorizing text, could recognize several personally meaningful words (including his name and those of his classmates), and could pretend read and picture read. Toward the end of the year he started to touch read a few easy texts, making his spoken words match the print. The very first book he read by noticing words was *Good Night, Gorilla* (Rathmann, 1994). He would touch read the book and use his voice to take command of the text. He beamed each time he reread his eternally treasured book. All of his classmates were ecstatic, telling David he had become the *Good Night, Gorilla* expert! With just a few weeks left of school, he started

asking to take his reading success “on the road” (something I encourage to provide meaningful practice). He read to the media associate, parent volunteers, principal, secretary, school nurse, and anyone else needing the enriching companionship of one confident reader! He moved from not possessing a single concept about print to gaining ten of twenty-four concepts as identified by Marie Clay (1993). More importantly, he began seeing himself as a reader and as an expert. Readers' Workshop helped David find his place as a capable reader in our classroom. Seeing himself as a reader was a major step that affected his self-perception in many areas.

Creating a Caring, Responsive Community of Readers

Creating a caring, responsive community of readers is another excellent outcome of Readers' Workshop. While it does take some work and persistence, creating a caring family atmosphere is well worth the effort. Certainly at the beginning of the year, I question if we will ever attain the bond of community. On various occasions throughout the year, I continue to question whether the community we are building is simply my own idealistic perception and one not internalized by my students. Yet, when I compare the concept to that of any family, I realize there will be setbacks and bumps along the way.

In our classroom, everyone is recognized as an expert about something. If students come to me for help, I try to direct them to other students who can answer their questions or provide the type of support they need. The standard routine is for me to ask if they have tried to solve the problem for themselves. If they have tried (and can demonstrate they have tried), they need to ask three other students for help before coming back to me. This progression attempts to help them be as independent as possible, while conveying the idea that there are many valuable experts in our room. Students learn this predictable

pattern, value what others have to offer, and come to rely on one another before seeking me out.

Through minilessons, including modeling, students come to value the stage and progress of each classmate. We model and practice appropriate ways to respond to a reader. Some children need further explicit instruction during independent reading. Appropriate interactions need to be nurtured and need time to develop. Children learn to provide invaluable support for one another as they sit side by side with new and familiar books, elated by discoveries and confirmations of literacy treasures. Circulating about the classroom during Readers' Workshop, I could hear comments such as "good job!", "look, that word starts with the same letter as this word!", "what do you think will happen next?", "what was your favorite part?", "let's read that again!", and "let's read it to Mrs. H!". Students know who the word readers are, and they are excited for them rather than being intimidated or feeling inferior to them. When individuals or reading partners struggle with a word but are adamant about deciphering it, they readily seek help from the word readers. The word readers often do their best to provide hints, suggestions, and clues to help the budding reader discover the word first. This type of peer coaching can be seen frequently, and all participants celebrate the successful experience. Of course this accurate word reading is not a necessary component of our workshop, but happens with students on the verge of becoming more fluent word readers. At times they are content with approximations, but sometimes they become almost obsessed with finding out the exact words. Their drive for learning those words is internally motivated and creates an insatiable hunger for discovery.

Perhaps no one can help build community more effectively than a very capable reader demonstrating a high regard for diversity among readers. Staci came from a home brimming with literacy experiences. It immediately was evident that her family placed a high priority on literacy, and Staci was the fortunate recipient of that environment. She learned to read words shortly after entering kindergarten and took off like wildfire. She liked to read chapter books and other picture books with elaborate text, and her greatest progress was in fluency, expressive reading, and comprehension. Out of curiosity I administered an informal assessment at the end of our first trimester and found Staci could identify words in isolation at the sixth grade level. Even though it was easily evident she could word read, which everyone saw as an ultimately desirable method of reading, Staci unassumingly saw herself as an equal member of our reading community. One day, James, a picture reader wanting so desperately to be a word reader, was becoming frustrated trying to unlock the mystery of his text. He headed right for Staci, lamenting his dire situation that he couldn't read. Staci looked James right in the eyes and reminded him very seriously, yet reassuringly, "Of course you can read! Remember, everybody's a reader!" She gently told him to sit beside her, and the next thing I knew the two were engrossed, content and confident, in his text. Staci's consistent, humble actions provided the leadership that prompted the building of our community, and the others readily followed her quiet lead.

Staci, the most developed reader in our class, and David, the least developed reader in our class, illustrate the power of a caring, responsive community created through Readers' Workshop. They are representative of both ends of the learning continuum,

while James represents those in the middle. Their literacy diversity is great, yet their value as literate community members remains equal.

Motivation Through Choice And Independence

The level of motivation displayed through Readers' Workshop is one of the greatest highlights for me as an educator. Perhaps the greatest motivating factors are those of choice and independence, two of the core dimensions of Readers' Workshop (Roller, 1996). The independence in making choices and in the entire workshop experience is highly motivational for children (Roller, 1996). I view helping students develop a love of reading as perhaps my greatest responsibility as a teacher. Creating a love of reading is the foundation for my classroom environment. When that passion is internalized, students seek out whatever they need to accomplish the task of making reading make sense. Choice and independence allow a student to make reading personally meaningful while nurturing the love of literacy.

The power of choice and independence can be illustrated quite eloquently through Amy's eyes. Amy started the year as a picture reader. She came from an enriched literacy environment and could tell a story with great artistic flair and thought, *if* she was ready to devote that much attention to such a task. She and I share a love of nature, and I have an extensive selection of non-fiction books on a vast variety of nature topics. Once I discovered her interests and read a few related emergent texts with her, she couldn't get enough of them. She especially liked emergent texts such as *Nests, Nests, Nests* (Canizares and Reid, 1998) and *Birds* (Canizares and Chanko, 1998) because she readily discovered how successful she could be reading the actual words. Amy had her own agenda during Readers' Workshop as she searched for books about animals. She quickly

learned how to make meaningful book choices to advance her new understandings about serious, purposeful communication. After reading several books about the care and needs of various animals, Amy went to the writing table and gathered supplies to make a book. Although I had no books about goats, Amy did some serious problem solving, figuring out how she could meet her own needs. Her book, one sentence per page with supportive illustrations as modeled in her emergent texts, read as follows:

A got neds watr. A got neds fod. A got neds shltr. But mast of ol a got neds love!

(A goat needs water. A goat needs food. A goat needs shelter. But most of all a goat needs love!)

This was even more impressive to me because I knew Amy was a perfectionist, coupled with the fact she had a difficult time making choices. Allowing her message to take precedence over her form and making solid choices were indeed breakthroughs for Amy! She demonstrated such a high degree of intrinsic motivation, making her own independent decisions while simultaneously setting aside the conventional form in favor of her desired message. Amy read her book to me before taking it home. She planned to share it with her parents, in hopes of persuading them to let her get the goat she had wanted all year. She asked me if I thought her plan would work. She was so sincere, intent, and compellingly persuasive, *I* wanted to get a goat for her, or at least call her parents and plead on her behalf! The family compromised after she read the book to them. She can get a goat when she is ten, and I am sure she will remember that! The combination of interest in her chosen topics and independence in making related decisions made Readers' Workshop intrinsically motivational for Amy time and again all year.

Meaningful Participation Through Book Sharing

While reading is the “cake” of readers’ workshop, book sharing is the icing on that cake! Certainly, no Kindergarten Readers’ Workshop would be complete, nor as sweet, without that icing. Book sharing is where the students really get to shine and show-off their competence as literate individuals. They are afforded the opportunity to be the expert on a particular piece of literature. As Sharers (Beed, 1998), they reveal what they would like their audience to know, and accept input from the Responders (Beed, 1998) which reaffirms their wealth of knowledge.

As a Responder, a student is able to participate at any level and be a valued community member. I do teach the students to elaborate on the most basic comments with at least one supportive reason (“I liked the way you read that page *because...*”). Even though some comments don’t seem to indicate much deep thought, interacting with another person about that individual’s reading is meaningful to the participants. Children participate at a personal level, making connections relevant to their own lives, and asking questions with which they can be successful (Roller & Beed, 1996). This allows all students to formulate questions or comments based on their own understandings. Even the least developed student can mirror a more generic question and participate honorably in the sharing experience. The most developed student can request information or make comments that require more inference or critical thinking on the part of the Sharer and the Responder.

At one book sharing meeting, Michael and Timothy sat in front of the class together since they had engaged in partner reading during that particular workshop session. They felt it was important to let students see the text from two different

perspectives, and indicated that as a part of their presentation. First one would share a highlight of the text, and the other would then present his interpretation of the same portion, explaining differences and similarities in their thinking. Michael began the sharing by stating, “Actually, I think you will find these facts very interesting!” (He did have an advanced vocabulary and grammatical structure compared to others in my classroom!) He shared pictures of deer, stating they were herbivores, they put their tails up to let others know of danger, and their only predators were wolves and people. He continued, “Let’s see if we can find some more interesting facts!” He then turned the book toward his partner, signaling Timothy’s turn. Timothy reiterated the fact that deer were herbivores, and then added his own interpretation that deer lay eggs and he had found some once. He was using his prior knowledge because he does live in a wooded area populated with deer, but he decided to embellish just a bit with the added insight about the deer eggs! He seemed to be trying to relate deer facts to what we had just studied about eagles laying eggs. We do spend time trying to make connections among things we learn, and Timothy was eager to do just that! Grace interjected with a helpful reminder that a deer was a mammal, and mammals have live babies, so she was wondering if the eggs might belong to some other animal. Timothy’s little thought-train started running, evidenced by the look on his face. Initially he did not seem too sure about revising his belief, but then agreed with Grace and thought the eggs probably belonged to an eagle or some other big bird. Since we had studied deer, wolves, and eagles in the months prior to this particular workshop, the conversation was aided by the students’ background knowledge, providing opportunities to make some connections to this particular book. Book sharing affords students opportunities to make connections on

multiple levels and to varying degrees. Michael and Timothy, who felt it was imperative to let the class know two readers could get different things out of the same text, devised partner book shares. It proved to be a valuable minilesson in itself. It fit right into the whole concept of reading making sense, and the students were very engaged because they orchestrated the teaching.

For the most developed students, sharing is yet another avenue to practice building literacy skills, and to think critically about what they choose to share. For the middle students, sharing gives additional practice interacting with text, while allowing students to experiment with different facets of the sharing process. The less developed students seem to derive the greatest benefit because they have a non-threatening environment in which to practice their literacy skills. In other settings, they may not readily respond, but the workshop sharing session creates such a comfortable environment for them, and they can be successful at whatever level they choose. Those well-worn yet comfortable questions, such as asking about a favorite part, make it easy for these students to be a valued part of the literate community.

Concluding Thoughts

In the context of kindergarten Readers' Workshop, students progress as literate individuals. This is evident from the student with the fewest understandings about print to the student with the greatest literacy understandings. All students are immersed in a philosophy that celebrates the individual and creates an environment conducive to personal learning and development. In a collaborative atmosphere, students take control over what they read and learn, and the teacher is a knowledgeable evaluator and facilitator of that literacy acquisition. Every year, with Readers' Workshop as the heart of

my kindergarten program, each student has made progress on his or her own literacy journey. The motivational aspects of the workshop engulf students, irresistibly drawing them into literacy activities with great intensity. The gains made at each individual's level continue to impress me, and the greatest satisfaction comes from fostering a love of reading. I believe it is this love of reading that drives the acquisition of literacy. Watching students voluntarily choose to read is evidence of the intrinsic motivation, and from that develops the drive to unlock the mysteries of reading.

While there were no word readers at the beginning of this school year, half of the students could be classified as word readers by the end of the year. The middle students were strong picture readers and were successful with emergent, predictable texts containing highly supportive illustrations. My five fledgling early emergent readers, the least developed in the class, were engaged in texts, confident in their ability to create meaning and enjoy books, while gathering concepts about print. They were just as eager as the word readers to participate in what kindergarten Readers' Workshop had to offer. All students thought of themselves as capable, confident readers.

Summary

My initial concerns and questions regarding kindergarten Readers' Workshop have been answered through the development I have seen in my students. The workshop model is extremely relevant to early emergent readers. They become deeply engaged in reading because they make personally meaningful choices. They develop into a caring community of learners, and their collaboration is encouraging, supportive, and beneficial. Their motivation is high, spilling over to create a dynamic classroom environment ripe for learning.

The students in my classroom are immersed in literacy activities and a general pervasive attitude about the importance, enjoyment, and power of reading. Everything we do is born from my personal philosophy of literacy acquisition. I believe it is that overriding philosophy that naturally elevates Readers' Workshop as a vital priority in my classroom. It is a philosophy dictating active engagement and fostering a love for reading. It necessitates a caring community embracing diversity among readers, demands student choice and independence, thrives on sharing, and celebrates development of every community member. Readers' Workshop is the heart of the literacy program in my classroom, and although it is impossible to separate definitively the innumerable factors contributing to literacy acquisition, I remain steadfastly confident in the power of kindergarten Readers' Workshop. It is worthy of the time and energy invested, even with the setbacks and bumps along the way. It is an effective, efficient use of learning time and the results are exciting and gratifying. After four years of using Readers' Workshop in my classroom, my convictions regarding its merits at the kindergarten level are stronger than ever!

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