

*Focus Project:
The Importance of 'Just-Right' Books During Reading Instruction*

Adopting a new literacy program is often a challenging transition to make in an elementary classroom. This school year, my school district decided to switch to a Reader's Workshop approach for reading instruction and practice. By the 2012-2013 school year, all classrooms in my district are to be using this program. As I begin to alter my reading instruction to match the components of this new program, I have noticed the great importance placed on "just right" books. For my focus project I have decided to address the idea of just right books in my Kindergarten classroom by asking myself, what is the importance of having students read "just right" books during a Reader's Workshop and how do you go about teaching Kindergarten students to select just right books?

Kindergarten readers must practice reading everyday, beginning slowly and gradually building up their stamina throughout the school year, "Teachers must make a commitment to provide regular classroom time for students to read independently" (Worthy, J and Broaddus, K., 2002, pg. 335.) A Reader's Workshop approach does just that, it allows for daily practice. However, why do my students need to be reading at an individualized level during this period of our day? Over the past few weeks I have read material from this course, as well as other literacy courses I have taken through Michigan State's MAED program. I have also consulted Gail Boushey and Joan Moser's book, The Daily 5 and the Oakland County (Michigan) Scope and Sequence of reading. I have come to the conclusion that students in Kindergarten classrooms benefit from reading 'just right' books for three reasons. First of all, Kindergartners come into the classroom with a wide range of skill sets when it comes to reading, by having all students reading books at their individual levels, all students needs are taken into account. Secondly, when children read books that are at their appropriate reading level, comprehension and fluency

rates increase. Finally, allowing students to choose their own just right books increases motivation levels as each student feels confident in their reading ability and they are able to “shop” for books that are interesting to them.

As a second year Kindergarten teacher, one of the largest obstacles I deal with on a daily basis is the difference in background knowledge and school experience that my young students enter my classroom with. Some children have attended full day pre-schools for the past two or three years, while some may have just experienced one year in a half-day program, and a small few might have received little to no prior schooling at all. In order to provide all students with a strong foundation to their schooling career, the abilities of all students must be addressed, “Children who are particularly likely to have difficulty with learning to read in the primary grades are those who begin school with less prior knowledge and skill in relevant domains” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 5.) The beginning months of Kindergarten can be very overwhelming as the teacher works with and evaluates each child to determine his/her greatest strengths and areas of need. In terms of reading development, kindergartners can be all across the board. I generally have some reading above a first grade reading level walking into my classroom on the first day, while others are still working on letter recognition, let alone letter sounds! All these levels require a teacher to differentiate greatly; a Reader’s Workshop approach can do just that.

Students in my classroom, read everyday. In order to successfully read independently, it is important that a teacher provides his or her students with mini-lessons focusing on reading strategies. In addition to mini-lessons, a teacher must provide their students with time to practice their reading daily, “For the greatest benefits to independent reading development, students should read interesting and manageable texts every day, ideally at their independent or easy

reading level” (Worthy, J & Broaddus, K., 2002, pg. 341.) Each child has different criteria for books that interest them and whether or not they are an easy independent reading level.

Assessing students and requiring them to read books that are a good fit for their individual level, provides a young child with the tools to be a successful reader independently, “When readers spend time reading appropriate texts they become more fluent, acquire more words and exponentially increase their skills,” (Giordano, 2011, p. 612.)

My second point, reading ‘just right’ books increases student comprehension and fluency, is the primary argument in my case in favor of ‘just right’ books during Reader’s Workshop. The purpose for reading is to derive meaning from the text. As a young reader starts out, reading for meaning and understanding can be a difficult concept, especially if the words in the text are too difficult, “If children cannot read the text relatively accurately, their comprehension will suffer,” (Stahl & McKenna, 2009, pg. 148.) This is why experts in the field have said that students should be reading with a 95% accuracy rate in order to properly digest the material; more recently, and depending on where you get your information from, many scholars are saying that students should be reading closer to 99% accuracy, “An Independent-level or good-fit book for children is one they can read with 99 percent accuracy,” (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p. 29.) Once a student has been assessed and is aware of his/her reading level, they are to choose books that fit them individually, books that they can successfully read independently. In regards to comprehension, if a child is able to accurately read the words in a given text, their ability to understand the meaning behind the words and make important connections will increase. On the other hand, if a student is reading material that is too difficult for him/her their comprehension and ability to make connections will be negatively affected, “If children cannot read the text relatively accurately, their comprehension will suffer,” (Stahl & McKenna, 2009, pg. 148.) The

ability to recognize or decode 95-99% of the words in a text is not all, students must also read fluently in order to increase their chances for complete comprehension of the book or passage, “If a child reads accurately but has to sound out or stumble over every word, his or her comprehension also will suffer,” (Stahl & McKenna, 2009, pg. 148.)

At the Kindergarten level, much importance is placed on students reading at their individualized reading level. During independent reading time, my students have a selection of six books to read inside their own book baggie. As our daily reading period proceeds, students may re-read their books if time allows, they also remain with the same set of six books for a couple days, so they will read them again and again. I have found that re-reading texts is a very important component of a Kindergarten reading program too, “One of the by-products of reading the same text repeatedly is that eventually they can read it fluently and accurately, allowing them to consider the meaning of the passage without the burden of decoding,” (Ivey, 2002, p. 239.) During this independent reading time, it is important for the teacher to be holding students accountable and ensure that they are reading during the whole period of time. This can be another challenge of working with five and six year old students who have a hard time staying focused on any task independently. When students are successful in their independent reading and are accurately reading the words in their individualized books, students tend to stay on task more often. When accuracy errors occur and comprehension declines, students tend to lose interest in the task at hand, “Higher levels of oral reading error rate were linked to significant increases in off-task behavior” (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p. 29.) Keeping students on task and productively reading is a great goal for any Kindergarten Reader’s Workshop!

The final reason behind the importance of having students read ‘just right’ books is that as they choose, or ‘shop,’ for their own selections at an appropriate level, motivation to read

independently increases. Just right books require students to be reading books with a particular reading level attached them; however, control of ultimate choice of text is relinquished to each individual learning in the classroom. Each week as students ‘shop’ in the classroom library for books at their just right level, they are able to choose titles and topics that are of interest to them. Gone are the days of whole-class novels read in the upper grades or basal readers in the lower grades, reading instruction that incorporates just right books accommodates student differences in reading ability and interest. Taking students’ interests in mind when selecting books to read makes for more engaged readers, “When students are given a choice they expend more effort towards learning and understanding,” (Turner & Paris, 1995, p. 664.) If students are encouraged to read books that are a good fit for them, book features such as illustrations, word choice, sentence length, vocabulary, and size of text are appropriate for their personalized reading abilities. If a student finds a particular text too difficult for them, they can easily become disappointed and frustrated, “Frustration level reading does not improve oral reading fluency and can lead to negative feelings about reading,” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002, pg. 335.) Since the foundation for reading is set in the kindergarten classroom, it is important that students feel confident in their reading abilities and that they understand the joy that reading brings.

It is important that educators understand the power behind harnessing student motivation in this way and teaching their students to properly choose just right books that are manageable and of interest to the individual learner. In the next few pages, you will find a separate lesson plan with the purpose of teaching and practicing the skills needed to select books that are ‘just right’ for each child to read independently. This lesson should be done a few months into the Kindergarten year, as students are beginning to ‘shop’ for their own leveled-books.

Choosing “Just Right” Books for Independent Reading	
Date:	Ms. Zens, Kerby Elementary School
Common Core Standards:	K.RF.1 Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.
Objective:	Students will understand the qualifications for and will successfully differentiate between books that are too easy, too hard, and “just right” for their individual reading level.
Materials & Supplies:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Three different sized shoes- one that is too small for my foot, one that is too big, and one that is my size. 2. Easel with chart paper, markers 3. Book that is too easy, (a board book) such as: <u>My First Colors Board Book</u> by DK Publishing 4. Book that is too hard for Kindergarten students, such as: 5. Pile of 5 books- Two at a reading level of L or above, two board books (with just labels, no words, etc...) and one ‘Just Right book (approximate level = C.) 6. Individual student book baggies, used prior to this
Procedure: <i>Explanation/Hook</i>	<p>“Boys and girls, today I am going to model some shoes for you!” (Hold up all 3 shoes to shoe students.)</p> <p>“Watch what happens when I put on these three shoes! (Put on small one.) Hmmmmm! This one won’t go on, what is the problem here?” (Students respond that it is too small. Then try on the large one.)</p> <p>Wow! This one doesn’t fit me either! Why doesn’t this one fit Ms. Zens?” (Students respond that it is too big for me. Try on the perfect size.) “YES! I have finally found a shoe that is perfect for ME! It feels ‘JUST RIGHT!’” (Turn and write the words “Just Right” on the easel. I will also use the visual cue of two thumbs up to emphasize the words.) “Today we are going to work on finding books that are ‘just right’ (use double thumbs up) for each of us!”</p>
Procedure: <i>Modeling with Examples</i>	<p>- “Thank you so much for helping me find MY “Just Right” shoe. Now let’s take a look at some books that I have here in my book baggie this week.” (Hold up book baggie and pull out the easy board book.) “Here the book, <u>Colors</u>. As I flip through this book, I don’t even need to look at the words to read this book, I know all of these colors. This book is too easy for me. Why wouldn’t you want to always read books that are too easy for you? Please turn to your partner and talk to them.” (Call on one or two students to respond with whole group.) “Exactly! Reading books that are too easy for you</p>

	<p>don't help you become a better reader because we are here to practice our reading. Easy books do not teach us anything new.</p> <p>- Now take a look at this other book in my book baggie.” (Pull out and show <u>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone</u>, open to page 17.)</p> <p>“As I open this book, I notice that the words are very tiny and there are lots of them! Let me read to you here... (pg. 17 reading phonetically) “A /b-r-e-z/ /r-u-f-l-e-d/ the /n-e-a-t/ /h-e-d-g-e-s/” (Stop and look confused) “What did that say? That didn’t make sense! I cannot recognize those words and they are too tricky to sound out on my own. This book is way too hard for me! Why do you think it is bad to read books that are too hard for you? Please turn and talk about it with your partner.” (Call on one or two students to respond with whole group.) “Right! Reading book that are too hard for you make me frustrated and mad! I cannot understand what this book is about and I am having a hard time reading the words on my own.”</p> <p>- “Okay, so far in my book baggie I have one book that is too easy (hold up) and one book that is too hard (hold up) I am still searching for a book that is _____ (have students fill in the blank by yelling out the words “Just Right!)</p>
<p>Procedure: Guided Practice</p>	<p>- “Now that we have seen examples of books that are too easy, too hard, and just right, I need someone to help me sort this pile of books. (Draw one student’s name out of the can of names and have him/her come up to the front of our group.) “Alight (<i>student name</i>) are you ready to shop for books that are ‘JUST RIGHT’ for you? Here is a pile of books, can you pick up one book and look through it?” Assist student as they decide whether the book is too easy/hard or just right for them to read. Continue with the same child for all 5 books (two that are too easy, two that are too hard, and he/she will be left with one ‘Just Right’ book.) “Thank you (<i>student name</i>) for your help! Boys and girls, today before you start reading I’d like for you to look through your book baggie to see if there are any books that are way too easy or too hard for you to read in there, we want to make sure that we are able to read the book all by ourselves and understand what the book is about.”</p> <p>- “We are doing such a great job sorting books together, I’d like for you to help me make a list of tips for book shopping. You all are getting so good at shopping for your own books to read.” Begin with chart paper and write the title ‘Tips for Book Shopping’ Have students develop a list of things they consider when shopping for a book. Examples should include... “Make sure the book you choose is not too easy” and “Look at the cover to see if it looks interesting to you.” Once the poster is complete, remind students to think of these things on their next “shopping” day, it is very important to find the right books that are interesting to you!</p>

Procedure: <i>Independent Practice/ Informal Assessment</i>	- During independent reading time, teacher will begin by reminding students to look through their book baggie and see if there are any books that are way too easy or hard for them to read in there. During this time, teacher will monitor students' work and evaluation choices. As each reading group shops for books later in the day or week, once again monitor the criteria they are using when shopping. Be present to ask specific questions like, "Does that book look a little too hard for you?" or "Are you able to figure out all the words in that book?" or "What type of book are you looking for, what are you interested in reading today?" These guiding questions will allow for evaluation of each students progress in choosing just right books independently.
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Giving students practice and instruction in choosing books that are of interest and a good fit for them academically is a strategy that they will use for the rest of their lives, "Students need to gain a sense of suitable book choices," (Giordano, 2011, p. 613.) Often times with Kindergarten aged students it is difficult for them to choose books that are a good-fit for their reading ability, I find my students choosing books based solely on the cover, pictures, or topic. These books tend to be too difficult for them to read or too easy and not enough of a challenge, which is why the concept of shopping for a 'just right' book are so important!

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