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## Primary Teachers Involved in Change: A Special Kind of Learning

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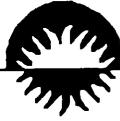
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# Primary Teachers Involved in Change: A Special Kind of Learning

**Kathy Dulaney Barclay**

*I read the first half of the book you suggested and became so excited I went to school on Sunday and worked all afternoon! First, I put away all my kindergarten readiness workbooks. (Diane Fox)*

For the past year, I have been the privileged recipient of a number of responses of this kind, as teachers in our area have begun to create whole literacy environments in their classrooms. In this article, I offer a glimpse into the classrooms of seven teachers, describing, in their words, some of their successes, as well as their struggles, as they attempted to make changes in their classroom environments and their instructional procedures.

The only common bond that these teachers share, other than a positive mind-set and an openness to new ideas, is that they all have taken the same graduate course, under my direction at Western Illinois University, during the past year. *Reading 569: Reading in Early Childhood* is an elective course designed to acquaint teachers of preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades with the planning and design of developmentally appropriate programs aimed at facilitating the acquisition of pre-reading and reading abilities. Emphasis is on how early guidance and instructional

programs can attend to *all* aspects of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### **Facilitating change**

Many change efforts focus on an entire school or school district, rather than on the designation of the teacher as the focus of the change effort. When teaching is the focus of change, Gallagher, Goudvis and Pearson (1988) suggest consideration of two key issues: the voice individual teachers have in determining the course of their own professional development, and the anticipated outcomes of the professional development activities.

In an effort to promote and support changes in beliefs and in teaching practices, the course requirements were flexible, allowing for teacher choice and creativity. The core text used for this course was *When Writers Read* by Jane Hansen (1987). In her book, Hansen discussed how recent approaches in the teaching of writing can be applied in the teaching of reading. She uses authentic examples to demonstrate the essential features of this approach; one which results in students taking responsibility for their own learning.

The introductory information from the study/application guide for *When Writers Read* is included in Figure 1. The directions for this first required reading assignment helped to ease teachers into considering some new ideas and teaching behaviors. Teachers were asked to select from among a list of study/application activities that includes a number of "try this in your classroom" ideas. Figure 2 lists sample study/application activities from *When Writers Read*.

**Figure 1**  
**Study/Application Guide**

**Directions for reading this book:**

Take some time to consider your classroom/school situation. Make a list of what you would like to be able to do differently, and how you might get started.

NOW turn to the beginning of the book and read as quickly as possible through the book ... much as if you were reading a novel... or listening to the author tell you this information in person. Don't allow yourself to get "hung-up" when the author's proposed way of teaching differs from your own methods. Strive to get a global picture of the type of classroom environment and instruction that this author is advocating. This is a resource book for you ... for our class. It will challenge us to THINK... to be OPEN to new ideas about how children learn... and will perhaps MOTIVATE us to try some new methods of teaching in our own classrooms. This is not a HOW-TO book. The author describes to us a philosophy that has been put into action in classrooms. HOW such a philosophy is implemented depends on each individual teacher and,/or administrator.

**The teachers' share**

As can be seen from the study/application activities included in Figure 2, the teachers enrolled in this course were to implement some of the specific teaching ideas that were described in the Hansen text. After trying out a particular strategy, the teachers were to turn in to me, the professor, a description of what they did, how it worked, and what they might continue to do, or do differently in the future.

Three basic ideas weave in and out of most of the communications I received from these seven teachers. The three predominant insights that these teachers gained were: 1) let the children choose their own books, 2) let them write about the books they have chosen, and 3) let them share their books and their writing with others.

## Figure 2 Sample Study/Application Activities

- At least twice a week for two weeks use the Author's Chair idea in your classroom. Write a one to two page description of what you did, how it worked, and what you might continue to do, or do differently in the future.

- Assign your students to use the "writing to learn content" form suggested on page 152 with at least one narrative and one expository book. Write a one to two page description of what you did, how it worked, and what you might continue to do, or do differently in the future.

- For at least two weeks, provide some time every day for your pupils to read books other than the basal. These books should be self-selected by the pupils. Allow time each day for the pupils to respond to what they read during informal share sessions, and/or during free writing periods. Write up the results in a one to two page paper. Include the types of books selected by the pupils (challenge, books requiring help, easy), what they learned during the week that they probably would not have learned if you had not chosen to try this activity, what you will continue to do, or do differently in the future.

- Try teaching reading without the basal or basal workbooks for one week. Make daily "What we learned today in reading" lists with your students. In a one to two page paper summarize what you did, how it worked, and what you will continue to do, or do differently in the future.

- For one week do not use any worksheets, skillsheets, or workbook pages; instead assign writing and drawing as a means for students to demonstrate their decoding and comprehension skills. In a one to two page paper tell what you did, how the pupils responded, what they learned, what you will continue to do, or do differently in the future.

- Try the book choice idea for at least one week. Help each pupil choose a Challenge book, a book that they will need some help with, and at least one easy book. As much as possible, encourage the pupils to help each other learn to read these books. Use the teacher conferences and "response sessions" to help you evaluate what pupils are learning. Discuss the results of this activity in a one to two page paper telling what you did, how it worked, what the pupils learned, and what you will continue to do, or do differently in the future.

**Let children choose their own books.** Sue Bensch is a first grade teacher with twenty students. She

recently started providing some time for her students to read books of their choice. Here are some of her comments concerning this idea:

*I was used to a quiet working group of students. This was a big change for me! At first the kids were very chatty. They liked their new freedom, but weren't sure what to do with it. A few thought this was a good time to talk about anything. I would have to guide them back into reading and talking about books.*

*In the beginning, some of the children chose books that were very difficult for them, while others chose books that were too simple. Most of the children judged the books not by their covers, but by their pictures! During another time of the day, we would talk about how to choose a book. They decided it was all right to get help from their friends if there were some words they didn't know.*

*Animals are a favorite topic with first graders. The children devoured books about baby animals, dinosaurs, and make-believe animals. Joke and riddle books are also popular.*

As can be seen from Sue's comments, she managed to work through some initial problems, and is feeling encouraged by the response of her students to this new "freedom of choice" book selection policy.

A second grade teacher, Aleta Sunley, also decided to let her students self-select some of their own reading materials. She shared with me a description of what took place the first day she implemented this new procedure.

*On the first day, I took my class to the library and told them to pick several books that they would like to read. I explained that the books could be easy or challenging. I wasn't going to monitor their selection as I usually did. I told the class we would be reading the books during our reading class. The*

*students chose books from just about every section of the Dewey Decimal system!*

**Let children write about the books they have chosen.** Donetta Bruner, a Chapter I teacher, made some changes in the way she asks students to respond to literature. In the past, her students were required to answer five detail questions from each book they selected to read. She discovered that in order for children to learn to read, they *must* write.

*After students select a book, I ask them to write a prediction, or what they think will be included in the book. Sometimes I write some added thoughts to their predictions. After they read the book, they are to write a response to their prediction and anything else they want to tell about the book.*

*Individual conferences with each child are very important. They usually read what they have written – that's when they discover omissions, or corrections that need to be made. We also discuss the content of the book or written work, and we may discuss some mechanics in writing. I have also begun to write notes about what we talked about on the inside of their folders. This should be a big help during parent-conference time.*

Since Donetta also works with first grade students, she shared the following information about what happened when she began to encourage these youngsters to respond to their books in writing.

*In first grade, I tried to keep students together. We would read a book and then we would all write our thoughts. But I wasn't sure what to do with the ones who finished early. I decided to take a risk and set my first graders free to choose what they wanted to read and how they wanted to respond to it in writing.*

*The first day they were happy about the change, and worked well. The second day, it was hard for them to get*

*started again at the point where they had stopped the day before. I found it difficult to explain things to the whole group as they acted uninterested. I was beginning to wonder if I had made the right decision. I gave up on the group discussions and told them to read. By the third session, I was beginning to see it take shape. They began to write responses to their reading. As each one began to write I tried to be available to discuss with that child how to go about it. That worked better.*

*When Vinnie finished reading he told me he had to now do the pencil work for his book. What a lovely way of putting it!*

Charleen Johnson, a third grade teacher, decided to omit the use of worksheets, skillsheets, and workbook pages from her classroom for one week. She voiced a concern that the students would not “pick up the necessary skills to pass the Unit tests in our regular basal series.” When she talked to her principal about what she was trying, he asked her to report back to him at the end of the week.

This is a portion of what Charleen shared at the end of that week:

*The children worked with a reading partner. One day I listed several questions on the board and asked the children to select one question to answer. They read all of the questions. There was discussion between children as to which question each student would answer. Not one set of reading partners answered the same question. Where were the students that looked across their neighbor's desk to fill in the blanks on the worksheets?*

*This experiment really made me evaluate the large amount of time that we spend on worksheets, and the validity or non-validity of these worksheets. After the week was up, I discussed the project with my principal. He asked me if I would be willing to teach the remainder of the year without worksheets. I have not given him an answer yet, but I would really like to try it. It appears that I have relied too heavily on worksheets in the past. I hope I will be more selective with the*

*use of this type of activity in the future, and will teach for concepts and ideas – not for activities.*

As can be seen from their comments, these teachers are gradually moving away from worksheets and isolated drill exercises toward more open-ended writing experiences for their students.

**Let children share their books and their writing with others.** Learning is a social process. For this reason, teachers want to provide many opportunities for students to interact with each other – to talk about what they are reading, writing, and learning. All of the teachers mentioned in this article have come to this same realization, and are attempting to provide more pupil-to-pupil interaction time in their classrooms.

When Sue Bensch started providing time for her students to self-select books, she also began to encourage them to talk to each other about what they were reading.

*I encouraged them to share the books with others in the room, and they did. Now I am delighted to see the children helping each other read new words. Instead of running to me, they will ask a classmate for help. If the classmate doesn't know the answer, the two of them usually go ask a third child. Seldom do they ask me!*

After Sue's students demonstrated their ability to share their books with a small group of peers, Sue wanted to try whole class conferences.

*At first it was difficult to get the children to share with the whole class. They didn't know how to ask questions. Instead they wanted to share with just two or three classmates or with me. I would walk around the room, sit down with a group, and listen. We still haven't mastered the whole group sharing*

*sessions yet. I need to learn more about conducting big group conferences for sharing reading and writing.*

Sue's experiences resembled those of Debra Bonmarito, a fellow first grade teacher, and Judith Sterns, a second grade teacher. Both Debra and Judith describe their experiences in implementing the Author's Chair (Graves and Hansen, 1983) as a way of encouraging the students to share their books and their writing with one another. Debra tried the Author's Chair concept in her first grade classroom for three weeks. The students in her classroom had been sharing some of their own writing with each other, but Debra had not promoted an interaction between the writer and the audience. She shared what happened when she began to encourage this particular type of sharing.

*Author's Chair started off a little slowly in my classroom of first graders. Most were a little shy about getting in front of others to share. When some did use the Author's Chair, the audience really did not know how to respond to them. I did a lot of modeling during the first two weeks. The comments I made or the questions I asked were said in order to give the other students an idea of how to respond to the author.*

*In addition to being hard for the students, it was difficult for me. I was used to taking charge of the discussions in my room. I wanted the students to take control of this and to fade myself out. I had to caution myself to listen attentively to the students and to let them determine the direction the discussion was going to take – even if it was not the direction I would have chosen.*

*During the second week, I had an average of four students a day using the Author's Chair. The students discovered that they loved sitting in the chair and reading something they wrote to the class. Some of the students read what they had written in one day, while others read what had taken them three days to write. Some of the students shared a favorite part out of a book they had read. I really enjoyed this*

*because I noticed that the books that were shared were taken from our classroom library more often.*

*By the end of the third week, the students were becoming better at voicing their comments to the "author." They were talking about the writing piece and were starting to ask more specific questions. I was pleased to see this progress in only three weeks.*

Like Debra, Judith found as the weeks went by that more and more of the students participated in the Author's Chair. In Judith's second grade classroom, the students prepared during the week in order to have a good presentation for their classmates on Friday. Judith shared with me some reasons why she found the Author's Chair to be a very helpful activity in her primary classroom.

*After several weeks of using this activity, the students began to accept and support other students that might be struggling with reading aloud or writing something for the week. The class started to work like a real team.*

*Better listening emerged with the use of this idea. Children learned to associate certain types of writing with certain authors, such as the child who wrote scary stories, or the child who wrote funny experiences that happened at home. Each Friday they would listen for a new scary story from the child who was finding success with this type of writing. As better listening skills developed, better responses were made.*

Judith mentioned that she had begun to "look at the children as authors and teachers all day long." She concluded her comments about the Author's Chair with this statement: "Using this chair, I learned a very humbling fact: when a teacher steps back, a special kind of learning takes place."

## **Not the end... but the beginning**

These seven teachers were challenged. They were challenged to think, to open themselves to new ideas about how children learn, and to try some new methods of teaching. They accepted the challenge.

Each of these teachers opened themselves, as well as their classrooms, to changes in both philosophy and classroom practice — and they have only just begun. In the words of Charleen Johnson, “This is a letting go, a restructuring process that leaves the teacher feeling helpless at times, but the gains are so great that the teacher never desires to go back.”

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