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Writing Reminders

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Tools, Tips, and Techniques

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Consider the Traits of Effective Literacy Instruction

RATIONALE

Literacy instruction includes more than reading, of course; writing is at the heart of being literate, as is language. Richard Allington (1999) identifies ten core principles for effective literacy instruction in reading and language arts:

A student should not be taught more than he can think about.

ALFRED NORTH
WHITEHEAD

Much has been learned in the past decade about classroom instruction that effectively develops the reading and writing of all children. The following ten principles provide a brief summary.

1. *Nothing is better than reading and writing to develop children's reading and writing.* Do kids read for at least one hour each day? Do kids write for at least one-half hour each day?
2. *Most reading should be easy reading (high accuracy/good comprehension). An 80/20 ratio (of easy to harder) seems about right.* Do all children have texts of appropriate complexity? Do they choose some of their books?
3. *Children do not develop comprehension strategies by answering questions after reading.* Are active comprehension strategies explicitly modeled on a daily basis? In content subjects as well as reading sessions? Do children write daily to demonstrate understanding?
4. *Children do not develop composing strategies from red ink corrections (nor from just writing).* Are composing strategies explicitly modeled in front of children on a regular basis?
5. *Children do not develop decoding strategies from drills or dittoes (nor from just reading).* Are useful decoding strategies explicitly modeled for children on a regular basis? Is decoding instruction linked to spelling/composing? Are decoding lessons focused on word structure?
6. *Children benefit from an integrated, content-oriented reading/language arts curriculum.* Are the interrelationships between the language arts obvious in the curriculum children experience



each day, each week, each year? For instance, is the decoding strand linked to the spelling/composing strand? The composition strand to the comprehension strand? Do each day's instructional activities exhibit linkages? Do children learn from reading?

7. *Some children need access to larger amounts of more intensive instructional support and enhanced opportunities to read and write with instructional support.* Do lower-achieving students (e.g. Title I, learning disabled) participate in instructional support efforts that substantially increase the amount of reading and language arts time they have and is personalized instruction provided? Do they actually read and write more daily?
8. *Thoughtful literacy is the new general goal for reading and language arts instruction. Basic literacy/minimum competence will no longer suffice.* A wealth of school tasks emphasizing summarizing, organizing, synthesizing, comparing, analyzing, creating, and presenting texts is evidence of thoughtful instruction K–12.
9. *Developing independent readers and writers is critical to developing thoughtful, lifelong learners. Easy access to books is critical support for fostering independent reading activity.* Do classrooms have large and enticing supplies of books and magazines nicely displayed and available to read at school and home? Is the school library open weekends and summers?
10. *Access to consistently high quality classroom instruction is more important than which parents children have or which special programs they attend.* Good classroom instruction is absolutely central to student achievement. Do not expect either parents or special programs to solve children's literacy learning problems.

Effective literacy programs balance but include the following needs or traits:

They have cohesion. Allington's guiding principles offer the benefit of his wisdom and research; still others have different ideas we might use to reflect on what makes for effective literacy instruction. Carol Jago, for example, says that lack of effective writing is not always the students' fault. She says, "Our methods of teaching lack cohesion. Within the same English Department, one teacher's writing program may consist entirely of personal journals while down the hall another assigns five-paragraph essays. No wonder students are confused (2002a, 7)."

Goals and directions are clearly and completely articulated. Teachers take time to identify the concepts, skills, and content they are trying to teach.

This means not only instructing students in the conventions that govern the particular type of writing but providing coherent directions for doing the work. When possible and appropriate, such directions will be aligned with the standards students must learn during their time in that course.



Assignments and instructional techniques are culturally sensitive. Writing is a personal act. The topics we create and assignments we design include a range of complex cultural aspects. The simple concept of an argument is dangerous to students from some cultures. Effective writing instruction must anticipate and prepare students from all cultures to develop the academic and intellectual literacies they need to succeed in this one.

Writing workshops, when used, are run by a teacher who:

- Expects that every student will write, read, and find satisfaction in literacy
- Organizes a predictable environment
- Makes regular, sustained time in class for writing and reading
- Allows choices from day one of topic, genre, pacing, and audience
- Works with whole pieces of writing and whole pieces of literature, not paragraphs or excerpts or chapters
- Offers response while individuals are engaged in the acts of writing and reading and moves among the students
- Publishes students' writing and helps writers find real audiences
- Helps readers find real audiences for their reading
- Serves as an editor of final drafts
- Teaches skills, conventions, and strategies to individuals in context
- Keeps records of students' growth and helps students keep their own records
- Evaluates writing and reading for growth over time, in collaboration with students
- Uses minilessons or some other forum as an opportunity to create a frame of reference for students to think together about writing and reading, to create a group "lore" about literacy
- Reads literature for himself or herself and shares it
- Writes literature for himself or herself and shares it
- And acts like a joyful reader and writer to whom students would wish to apprentice themselves (Atwell 1991, 140)

While it is important to consider what effective writing looks like within a classroom, Jago's comments about cohesive writing instruction



emphasize the importance of thinking schoolwide when it comes to effective writing instruction, for students write reports in science classes, essays in other classes, and speeches and research papers in still other classes.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

Langer, Judith. 2002. *Effective Literacy Instruction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.