

# Response: Mistakes Teachers Make in Reading Instruction

By Regie Routman (Originally published for *Education Week*, October 3, 2017)

I believe the biggest mistake regarding reading instruction is that teachers focus on teaching reading rather than focusing on teaching a reader. The same premise holds true for writing.

Always, we need to remember we are teaching a unique learner and that effective, joyful teaching and learning depend on utilizing each learner's strengths, interests, culture, and background—as well as addressing shortfalls. Therefore, any reading program, curriculum, or framework is at best a guide that needs to be moderated and adjusted for the actual students in front of us.

## Ten ways to keep our focus on the reader

### **1. Get to know your students.**

Knowing our students makes it easier to teach them. Slow down now so you can "hurry up" later. Take the time you need through interviews, surveys, and conferences—oral or written—to find out not just your students' reading histories but also what their passions and interests are and what their hopes are for learning in your class. Knowing the reader first as an interesting person pays big dividends for knowing how to personalize our reading instruction.

### **2. Focus on students' reading strengths before addressing needs.**

Hold a positive mindset that recognizes and validates strengths before deficits—no matter how small those strengths may appear to us. Only then can we gain the trust of the learner to effectively teach what s/he needs to move forward.

### **3. Respect the reader's intelligence.**

Read aloud daily outstanding literature without over worrying about concept load and levels. Students can understand much of content they are not yet able to read on their own, and immersing them in literary language develops vocabulary, background information, and concepts. Teach whole-part-whole—beginning with a whole text or big idea and embedding needed skills into a meaningful context. Teaching skills in isolation as a major reading approach is both inefficient and demeaning to students' intellect. Raise important questions; supply necessary background knowledge, concepts, and vocabulary for understanding content. Employ flexibility and common sense to decision making regarding grouping, special needs, and pull-outs based on test results—especially important for our English language learners and underperforming students.

#### **4. Have students spend most of reading time reading self-chosen books.**

Use guided reading, shared reading, and teacher-directed lessons as a means to an end—proficient, happy, self-determining readers. Observe the 20-80 percent rule where about one-fifth of our time is spent on explicit instruction, including shared and guided experiences, and the vast majority of time is allocated to deliberate, intentional practice by students where students read. Quantity matters! You can't become a good reader if you don't read.

#### **5. Establish with students a rich, diverse, accessible classroom library.**

Honor students' preferences and requests for authors, genres, and diverse texts. Organize the library with students—design, layout, categories, sign-out procedures. Prioritize purchasing books, before new programs and technology. Teach students how to choose books they can read and understand, and ensure the school and classroom collections have extensive, readable choices for all students.

#### **6. Rely on one-on-one reading conferences for authentic assessments.**

Beware of results that we have not confirmed ourselves. Sit side-by-side with a student to get a true assessment that includes checking for deep understanding. Mandated, one-size-fits-all progress monitoring, assessment and data analysis, and moving

through levels can yield superficial results that do not lead to improved instruction and results.

### **7. Capitalize on the reading-writing connection.**

Use writing-to-reading to turn students into readers. For emerging readers at any age, using their own language and stories on topics of interest that we write together, are the easiest texts for them to read. Word work and word study in the meaningful context of such texts is easier for students to grasp. At middle and high school levels, having students who struggle as readers write more—especially in response to a personal, supportive, handwritten note from their teacher—has been shown to positively impact reading comprehension.

### **8. Encourage student-directed talk.**

Value and guide conversations as students take the lead. It's been well documented that we teachers and leaders talk too much. Use book talks, book clubs, peer talk, small group work, and partner collaboration to model, practice, and promote high level, student-led literature conversations.

### **9. Put oral reading in perspective.**

While oral reading is important early on for fluency and automaticity with words, overemphasis can be detrimental for comprehension for older readers who struggle and/or for young readers who read with understanding but do not test well—and are often penalized—when "reading" is detached from meaning and isolated to decoding words out of context.

### **10. Ensure students experience reading as an act of pleasure, passion, and love.**

Do whatever is necessary to make reading joyful. That may mean giving more choice, doing more reading aloud and shared reading, focusing on students' passions, writing texts together. Share stories of famous people who were severely disabled as readers and learned to read because of their relentless passion to know about a chosen subject. Physicist Albert Einstein is but one standout example.

Finally, we must go beyond teaching children how to read. We must develop in each of them the dispositions of a reader, that is, finding joy in reading and delving into reading for respite, curiosity, information, pleasure, and the sheer wonder of connecting with an author's gifts to the reader—gorgeous language, storytelling, and fascinating ideas. Otherwise, we have denied students' their rightful promise from us educators to become lifelong, inquiring readers.

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Teacher**