

Shifts in What We Know About Reading in Our Schools

By
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First you have to *capture* them
Next you have to *inspire* them
Then, and only then can you *teach them!*

Stephens Peters (2001)

I have changed this final end of the school year article several times. I so want to provide information that is useful to you when it comes to student learning. I recently attended the 50th Anniversary of Vaughan Elementary School. When asked to speak, I said what I have often said since my semi-retirement..."I had such a good time!" I repeat there is nothing like seeing students learn at high levels! I saw the above Stephens Peters quote in action last week. I attended Occoquan's 5th grade graduation. The only phrase I can think of is that "It was off the hook!" If you have never met Hamish Brewer, you are in for a treat...he is so enthusiastic that it is downright "scary!" What impressed me at that school was how everybody in the room was "Pump up" about learning at high levels. Some of us lament about the Standards of Learning (SOL) test, not them, instead students and Mr. Brewer, while standing on a chair and students and staff jumped up and down yelled, "We took it (SOL math) on and DESTROYED it with a 90 percent pass rate! Take another journey to Gar-Field High School where two sisters were the valedictorian and salutatorian, both with a 4.9+ grade point average. The atmosphere was subdued, not like Occoquan but you could feel the pride. My thoughts were, what will happen next for both classes as they transition to the next level? Will the 5th graders still have that pumped up feeling in 6th grade? What will be the feeling of those seniors in about a month when they are transitioning to the college or the workforce?

I also ran into two of my former students who were now graduates. In fact I ran into one at Woodbridge High School graduation. He said, "I went to Vaughan, starting in kindergarten." I asked him the question many high performing schools ask their graduates "Did I do right by you?" He said, "Yaeh, the teachers taught me how to read! I am in college and doing great!" A few years ago the hostess for a local restaurant chain eyes looked so familiar to me. He said, "Are you the lady who taught reading at Neabsco? I said yes and then said "Bolivar is that you???" He said, "Yes" I. I was shocked that he remembered me. He said, "I don't remember much about that room (The Strawberry Patch Reading Room) I just remember it was "fun!" He followed it with, "I want you to know that I am now a student at George Mason and... that I can read!"

Last summer I introduced you to Jim Trelease, author of the Read Aloud Handbook, and discussed the importance of reading aloud to your children. My

emphasis was on narrative texts and their impact on children. I am back this summer to talk to you about something I have noticed for years as a teacher, supervisor of a reading program and principal, the nose dive students who have limited reading skills take at fourth grade. I love to learn so my relationship with high school students and my concerns about their success in the workforce bring me back to the importance of a different type of literacy skills. Governor McAuliffe tasked the SOL Innovation Committee that I participated on to prepare our students for 21st Century Learning. He is merely echoing what business owners and colleges are telling us. We must do a better job of preparing our students to be successful in a world where literacy of a different kind is required. I love children's literature. The times my girls and I spent reading "Goodnight Moon" can never be replaced, nor should yours. However, we must develop a more balance in our introduction of informational and expository text to our children at the early elementary level if we want them to develop the new literacies that include technology, financial and persuasive texts. Please think of these shifts in our research that I am sharing with as you develop a summer reading program for your family. These findings are from Fisher, Frey, and Unline (English Language Arts In a PLC at Work), and John Hattie the research guru of our times.

We know all we need to know
About how children learn best...we
Just need to find the will to do it...Ron Edmonds (1972)

Shift 1-Focus on Reading and Writing to Inform

For years, I have observed students do what I call "Fall off the cliff" in fourth grade if they had not developed reading skills adequately. Turns out there are such a thing as a "Fourth grade slump" (Jeanne Chall) in reading and now we know what may be one of the major contributors. We are not providing enough reading of informational texts in the early grades.

- Nell Duke found that only 3.6 minutes a day is spent on informational reading and writing at 1st grade.
- One minute at 2nd but that
- it accelerates to 16 minutes at 4th.
- More importantly, 50 percent of the questions on "The" national test, National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) are non-fiction at fourth grade. Yet we were spending more time reading non-fiction in the early grades.
- By 8th grade 55 percent of the NAEP is informational
- By 12th grade a whopping 70 percent is informational

This explains why some so many students spend their first year of college in reading remedial classes.

Shift 2 Text Complexity

There will be a shift in the complexity of text introduced to students so that they are ready to read the type information required in the workforce. This will require us to do some backwards planning in the early grades. We are listening to what employers are telling us. We need to move away from fill in the blanks to problem solving and thinking.

Shift 3- Emphasis on Speaking and Listening

The businesses are telling us that our students need better communication skills. When we read materials and books to our kids we need to ask them to tell us what they have read in “Their own words!” You may be shocked what you find.

Shift 4-Text-based Evidence or Argumentation

I loved visiting one of my fifth grade teacher’s classrooms when I was a principal. The common phrase in her room was “Justify your answer!” Others at the lower grades would say “Prove it...show me the evidence.” The question asked by them was “Where in the text does it say or infer that?”

Shift 5- Academic Vocabulary

Students need to add 5,000 words a year in order to build the 80,000 needed to be successful in college (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002),

We are becoming more aware of the requisite vocabulary needed to be successful in a content area. Students need to know that words have multiple meaning. For example the word “scramble” means one thing when we are talking about eggs but another when we are talking about getting away from an event. I recall having my usual principal’s chat with one of my students following his SOL test. He said, “I understood everything but had trouble with one word...”Allowance...what is an allowance.” When I told him he said in a startled voice, “You mean that there are children “paid’ to do work around the house?” I absolutely dreaded vocabulary tests in high school. When you come from parents who lack literacy skills and academic background knowledge, it takes a while to catch up. The good news is that you can!

So here are my suggestions for summer reading. First and foremost, remember that students lose one month for every month out of school and even more is their reading skills are weak. In addition to reading aloud to them and/or them reading good literature introduced them to informational books. Students of all ages love picture book and short bursts of text. I found these phenomenal books recently called....”13 _____Children Should Know” published by Prestal out of Munich, London and New York. The text is short and the photography and

pictures are beautiful. The covers grab your attention. More importantly, you will enjoy them as adults.

- ❖ 13 Architects Children Should Know by Florian Heine. This will change how you look at buildings forever. Instead of just looking a building it makes you “Wonder” about the mind that designed it. We want our kids to “Wonder!”
- ❖ 13 Buildings Children Should Know by Annette Roeder
- ❖ 13 Photos Children Should Know by Brad Finger. Check out the reflection on the helmet of Neil Armstrong...looks like selfies are not new.
- ❖ 13 Modern Artists Children Should Know by Brad Finger.

Finally, How to Build a House by Gail Gibbons is written in language that most children understand.

So much can be done after reading these books, including writing your own “!3 ___children should know, or collecting photographs of structures you see in your travels. Most importantly you can just enjoy the learning that is taking place!

Send an e-mail to me if you buy these or other informational books. Tell me what you and your family did with them. lgjessie@me.com.

See you in August