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Reading Workshop Conferences: Review of the Literature

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RUNNING HEAD: Reading Workshop Conferences: Review of the Literature

Abstract

Reading workshop is a way to structure a literacy block during the school day that allows for differentiation and a high level of student engagement in the process of learning to read. During reading workshop, students read independently and with partners at their independent reading levels while the teacher confers with students and leads small groups. During conferences, the teacher differentiates instruction and tailors lessons to individual student needs. Research shows that implementing reading workshop leads to positive growth in students' reading ability and attitudes towards reading and provides time for teachers to differentiate instruction.

Keywords: Reading workshop, conferences

Lucy Calkins and her colleagues were instrumental in the development of reading workshop. Calkins and her mentor, Donald Graves, first created writing workshop, where students are taught to plan, draft, write, and revise the way adult authors do. This method of teaching writing came from a lack of instruction in the craft of writing within American schools. Calkins took her work with writing workshop to the Teachers College, where she and her colleagues developed reading workshop as a complement to writing workshop. The faculty members at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project have been instrumental in implementing reading and writing workshop in schools throughout the country and have written K-5 curriculum for use in classrooms.

Reading Workshop: Procedures and Implementation

Reading workshop is an instructional method in which students spend a large portion of the literacy block reading at their independent reading levels while the teacher leads small groups and confers with individuals. Dade and Storey (2011) describe reading workshop as an approach

involving “long periods of independent reading time, scholarly discussion between students and teachers, and students who read books of their choosing at appropriate levels” (p. 5). Reading workshop usually follows a predictable structure. To begin, teachers lead a whole-class mini-lesson where they instruct students on a skill or strategy. Students then read independently, which, according to Calkins (2001), “is when we confer, lead guided reading groups, and do strategy lessons” (p. 66). Students often have time to read with a partner during reading workshop as well, and the block typically closes with some type of share or link to the learning. This structure is typically used in both reading and writing workshops.

The mini-lesson is a whole-group lesson where a skill is explicitly taught and practiced. Students then read independently at their independent reading levels while the teacher confers with students and leads small group lessons. The independent reading time, according to Calkins,

...is the most important part of the reading workshop. When we teach reading, we are teaching children to do something. Children can't learn to swim without swimming, to write without writing, to sing without singing, or to read without reading. If all we did in the independent reading workshop was to create a structure to ensure that every child spent extended time engaged in reading appropriate texts, we would have supported readers more efficiently and more effectively than we could through any elaborate plan, beautiful ditto sheet, or brilliant lecture (p. 68).

Reading workshop procedures can be contained within a Daily 5 model, which is a way to structure the language arts block in an elementary classroom where students are engaged in meaningful reading and writing activities and teachers can differentiate instruction to meet the

needs of small groups or individuals. Bouchey and Moser (2012), the creators of the Daily 5 model, suggest that during the language arts block teachers “deliver two or three whole-group lessons, teach two or three small groups daily, and confer with 6-12 individual students daily” (p. 172). The Daily 5 structure includes whole-group instruction for short periods of time, about 10 minutes, followed by periods of student choice. Students choose the order in which they read independently, read with a partner, listen to reading, write, or complete word work. According to the authors, “Because students are motivated, engaged, and highly independent with their Daily 5 choice, the teacher in turn uses the entire block of time to assess, lead a small-group lesson consisting of two or three students, or conduct individual conferences” (p. 173).

Both the traditional reading workshop model and the Daily 5 model rely on students working independently during the language arts block to allow the teacher time to meet with groups and individuals. In the early stages of the school year, teachers must provide direct instruction in the desired behaviors of the literacy block, and provide time for students to see these behaviors modeled and practice them as well. Teachers also must provide time for students to build their reading and writing stamina at the beginning of the year so they can sustain their focus and continue to be engaged while the teacher does the essential work of conferring and meeting with groups. Both Daily 5 and reading workshop allow time for teachers to confer and teach small groups, and provide time for students to become stronger readers, writers, and spellers.

There is a great deal of pressure placed on many students to perform well on standardized tests, which can leave teachers feeling that there is not enough time during the day to provide independent reading time. Miller and Higgins (2008) assert that in many cases, students spend little to no time reading at school, though it is known that “to become proficient readers, students

must read every day” (p. 125). Ivey (as cited in Miller & Higgins, 2008) explains that “Giving all students, especially those experiencing difficulty, more time to read in school is the most certain way to help all students become more skilled and engaged, and even to be more prepared to achieve on standardized tests” (p. 125). Students who engage in reading activities during the school day perform better on standardized tests than students who do not, so teachers looking to improve students’ reading test scores would do well to increase the amount of time students spend reading during the school day.

Reading workshop has been shown to improve student reading ability in students from kindergarten through high school, and is one way to support adolescent students who are emergent or struggling readers. Taylor and Nesheim (2000) discuss the difficulty of being a secondary student who struggles with reading. One way to support these emergent readers, according to the authors, is to implement reading workshop. Reading workshop provides a way for students to read books at their independent reading levels during the school day and have lessons that are specifically tailored towards their needs taught to them either individually or in small groups. The authors recommend a focus on children’s literature, in which students practice reading children’s books aloud in preparation for reading to young children, such as siblings or students at a nearby elementary school. This gives the students a reason to focus on revisiting “kid’s books,” while honoring students’ current reading levels. This can also help emergent readers make connections to texts and revisit their early memories of reading.

Taylor and Nesheim recommend instituting reading workshop in secondary classrooms because struggling readers “must learn strategies and have significant amounts of time to practice these strategies with self-selected materials” (p. 48). The combination of direct, focused lessons on reading strategies plus time to practice reading books at an appropriate reading level

can help improve not only students' reading ability, but also students' attitudes about reading in general.

Gulla (2012) reported on an ethnographic study in which she described a ninth grade literacy classroom where reading workshop was utilized to improve students' reading ability. Reading workshop allowed this secondary teacher to spark her students' interest in reading and support them as beginning or struggling readers. Conferences can be used in secondary classrooms as well to set goals with students and explain clearly what students need to do to improve as readers.

Lausé (2004) reported on her experience creating a reading and writing workshop curriculum in her ninth and tenth grade high school classes in New Orleans. She conducted a survey at the beginning of the year where students recorded their favorite books, and then she recommended books based on their interests. Lausé asserts that her students' growth throughout the school year was evident by their reading rate and reading comprehension, and, most importantly, in their attitudes about reading and about themselves as readers.

Mounla, Bahous, and Nabhani (2011) report on their study of students in a first grade classroom in Beirut, Lebanon, that uses an American curriculum. The study examined the effect of reading workshop on reading comprehension skills and reading levels. All three focus students highlighted in the study made great progress in reading by the end of the year. Student A went from reading at an A level to a K level, below benchmark to meeting standards, student B went from D to N, at grade level to exceeding standards, and student C went from Q to U, exceeding standards. All three students learned to successfully use a variety of reading strategies throughout the year. The study found that students' reading levels and comprehension improved from the use of reading workshop, and they credit the students' growth to the use of differentiated

instruction tailored to each student's individual learning needs.

Conferring

Conferring is one way teachers differentiate instruction during reading workshop. Conferring, according to Dade and Storey, (2011) "allows teachers the opportunity to work with students and to reach each child's individual needs. Only in individual conferences are teachers able to specifically identify the needs of a student, thus assisting the student in becoming more independent" (p. 8). During conferences, teachers listen to students as they read and assess whether they are using strategies taught in previous lessons or conferences, and then explicitly teach a skill or strategy. The teacher creates a record of each conference in order to note what each student was taught and to track student progress over time. Boushey and Moser (2012) find that short, direct conferences help students to make "strong progress in becoming more proficient readers" (p. 177).

Conferences typically take place while students are reading independently. Conferences may include lessons around a topic studied by the class, such as reading informational text or participating in book talks, or can be based on data collected about a student. The advantage of individual conferences is that teachers are able to meet students' needs and address their areas of concern. According to Allen, (2009) "Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder provides a perfect situation for delving into a reader's thinking and helping him describe his metacognitive stance. Looking into a reader's eyes and listening can provide the most intensive, yet unobtrusive, way to uncover specific characteristics of the reader's process" (p. 15).

Allen recommends breaking conferences into three sections, the first including a review section, where the teacher examines what a student is doing well and what he or she can work on. Allen recommends asking open-ended questions of the reader at this time, such as, "What are

you working on today?” During this time the teacher can also review previous goals with the student and check in with their progress towards goals. During the first portion of the conference the teacher may ask the student to read aloud for a few pages to give the teacher a little insight into the student’s reading. This first part of the conference, according to Allen, is “a way of easing into a conversation. It is a means to discover what the reader is thinking, pondering, or discovering. I want to discover what is going on in the reader’s process. I also want to get a flavor for how he or she uses a strategy or skill that we have discussed in either a whole-group crafting session, a small-group setting, or during a previous conference” (p. 99).

The second portion of the conference is the instruction portion, where the teacher explicitly teaches a skill or strategy based on the research that took place in the first part of the conference. Allen recommends teachers keep a record of the instruction that takes place at this point in the conference to use as a reference for future conferences.

The final section of the conference involves the teacher and/or student creating a learning goal for the student to focus on. These plans “will gradually move the reader forward until our next conference” (p. 102).

Calkins (2001) describes several different types of conferences that can take place during reading workshop. The first is a “research, decide, teach” style conference, where the teacher first listens to the student read to determine a strategy to teach, then decides what to teach and then teaches “in a way that can influence what that child does on another day with another book” (p. 102). During these conferences, the teacher listens as the student reads, explicitly teaches a skill or strategy, then listens again as the student attempts to implement it. Calkins recommends teachers record notes during conferences so the teacher can refer to them the next time he or she meets with the student and can monitor student progress.

The next type of conference Calkins recommends is a coaching conference. Coaching conferences begin with an observation of a reader, but it can be an observation made in a previous conference. These conferences can be used as check-ins from a previous meeting to see how a student is faring using a new strategy or tool. “In coaching, we intervene as lightly as we can while readers continue to move through the text ... always the goal is to intervene just enough to scaffold the reading work we hope will happen” (p. 112). The goal of coaching is to “help readers develop unconscious habits” (p. 112).

The third type of conference is a proficient partner conference. Proficient partner conferences involve the teacher modeling good reading habits and behaviors right alongside the student. According to Calkins, “In the back and forth of our work with this child, we shift between demonstrating the kind of reading we hope this child is stretching toward, allowing her to join us at this level, then again showing her the sort of reading we hope she is stretching toward, and then again allowing her to participate” (p. 116). The goal of these conferences is to scaffold and provide instruction in order to “raise the level of what that child would do alone” (p. 115).

Record Keeping and Assessment

When assessing students, Boushey and Moser (2012) determine students’ strengths and areas of need using a diagnostic assessment tool (a specific tool is not suggested by the authors). The findings are shared with the student, and strengths are celebrated and areas of need are communicated. The student and teacher together create a goal and discuss strategies that will help the student meet the goal. These assessments can be used to guide small group or individual instruction.

Allen (2009) recommends keeping records of conferences, and states that “Effective

reading conferences can provide specific and anecdotal documentation of a reader's strengths and growth areas. Our records serve as a source of how well a reader is responding to interventions we may provide" (p. 16). Allen uses conferencing notes to track student progress, and states that "conferencing notes are as useful and powerful as more formal assessments in documenting specific growth in reading. If we use conferencing notes wisely, we have strong and worthy evidence of how a reader changes over time and becomes more proficient" (p. 112).

Differentiation of Instruction

Differentiation is a way to address student needs on an individualized basis.

Differentiation is necessary in the elementary classroom because all students vary greatly in their abilities. The key element of differentiated instruction, according to Watts-Taffe et al (2012), is knowing one's students, and matching students to teaching and practices that meet their needs. Differentiated instruction is also a way to honor the diversity of the classroom – the learning styles of students of all abilities and from all walks of life are honored. Differentiation saw an increase in popularity after the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the introduction of Response to Intervention (RTI). According to the authors, "Because every child learns differently, and every child *is* different, the most effective instruction is designed to fit each learner" (p. 305).

Differentiation can be achieved by adapting four different elements: differing the content, process, products, and/or learning environment. Differentiating content can include providing content at a variety of reading levels, giving students access to materials on tape, and meeting with small groups to reteach or reinforce skills. Differentiating the process includes providing choice for learners, so students are exploring a topic through a lens that interests them, and

varying the amount of time students have to complete a task. Differentiation of products includes giving students options for presenting their knowledge such as writing a paper, creating a presentation, and so on. Differentiation of the learning environment includes providing different spaces for students to choose from to work within the classroom such as sitting, standing, or reclining.

According to Tomlinson (2000), “There is no recipe for differentiation. Rather, it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual and can be translated into classroom practice in many ways” (p. 4). To best serve students through differentiation, teachers should: use ongoing assessments to inform teaching; provide interesting, meaningful work for all students, regardless of skill level; and allow for flexible groupings so all students work with a variety of peers, including both students at similar and different levels of performance. Tomlinson asserts that teachers should view differentiation as an ongoing process that can always be changed and made better. Teachers should develop routines that allow students to work in flexible groups while the teacher provides one-on-one or small group instruction. Teachers should also monitor and assess students on a very regular basis to be sure each student is served appropriately.

Campbell (2009) advocates for a To-With-By model of differentiation, where the teacher explicitly teaches a skill, students and the teacher practice it together, then students practice it on their own. According to Campbell, “The *To-With-By* approach provides the necessary scaffolding for both young children learning to read and older students working with more difficult text so they can all be successful learners who understand what they read” (p. 9). Using a model such as the To-With-By model allows teachers to differentiate the curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment for their students as needed.

Guided reading is one way teachers can differentiate reading instruction. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) assert that the practice of guided reading “provides the small-group instruction that allows for a closer tailoring to individual strengths and needs” (p. 281). Typically, guided reading is taught to a small group of students and involves students reading a book and then discussing it with the teacher. The teacher provides explicit instruction to small groups depending on what they need. Guided reading lessons usually involve texts that are slightly more difficult than what students can read on their own, because, according to the authors, “it is vital to support students in taking on more challenging texts so that they can grow as readers” (p. 269).

To successfully implement guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell recommend teachers have a large variety of books that are leveled according to ability; provide time for students to work independently in order to give teachers the opportunity to meet with small groups; administer assessments to determine students’ reading levels; and focus on comprehension as a major goal of reading ability. Fountas and Pinnell advocate for small-group teaching, as it allows teachers to get to know the needs and abilities of each student and tailor teaching for each student.

The authors recommend that teachers use flexible groupings based on student progress. This requires that teachers be constantly assessing their students to learn where they are making mistakes and where they need support. To take on this challenge teachers should use running records as a way to track student performance.

In a study conducted by Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Giuliani, Luck, Underwood, Bayraktar, Crowe, and Schatschneider, (2011), the research team examined why more than 70% of students “reach fourth grade unable to read and comprehend text at or above proficient levels”

(p. 189). The research team conducted a field experiment in which students and teachers were selected randomly to participate in one of two interventions, one using differentiated reading instruction, and the other using a vocabulary intervention program that was not differentiated. The researchers decided to examine comprehension and vocabulary because “The link between vocabulary and reading comprehension has been documented for over two decades, and correlational studies have shown a positive association between students’ vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension outcomes” (p. 192).

The researchers found that “Across the conditions, students generally made grade-appropriate gains in reading comprehension from fall to spring” (p. 201), however students who received instruction in the individualized student instruction group demonstrated significantly greater gains on the reading comprehension assessment. Additionally, teachers who had received professional development on implementing differentiated groups during the literacy block were more likely than the teachers in the vocabulary group to provide small-group individualized instruction.

Reading workshop is an effective method of supporting students in their reading development. Implementing reading workshop may lead to positive results on students’ reading abilities and attitudes towards reading, as suggested by the research literature. Differentiated instruction is an effective method for meeting the needs of all students, because each student needs something different. Differentiation of instruction has positive effects on students’ reading ability. Teachers who differentiate are able to assess students on a regular basis and have a deep knowledge of their students’ abilities and gaps in learning.

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