



Going beyond round-robin reading strategies

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I volunteer in my kindergartener's school, and I'm perplexed about how they teach reading. When I learned, we took turns in a group. It worked for me! These teachers neither do that nor do they use textbooks. Students read children's books instead. Plus, every now and then, teachers stop the class for "reading break." Kids read silently. They can even read magazines or comic books. Seems like a waste of time. Do these practices work?

Answer:

Much has changed when it comes to reading instruction. While you may have relished round-robin, or group, reading, many students did not. Today, we expect that all children will learn to read with a high degree of proficiency. No one can succeed in today's workforce, or be an informed citizen, without strong literacy skills, so educators, scholars and policymakers look for methods that are "evidence-based." In other words, there's got to be proof they work.

Elaine Garan, associate professor at California State University, answers these questions frequently. Garan, one of the nation's top reading experts and author of "Smart Answers to Tough Questions" (Scholastic 2007), says large federal studies show that round-robin reading is counterproductive, wastes time and kids find it boring.

"The only student paying attention is the one reading," says Garan. "The others are either thinking about being called on or have tuned out because they've had their turn. Round-robin reading forces struggling readers to perform in front of peers. Kids won't learn to love to read if they're squirming with dread."

Round-robin reading fails to give students what Garan calls essential time for "eyes on text." Evidence from The National Reading Panel shows that in classes where the method is prevalent, students read for only six minutes a day on average. Low-achieving readers often read fewer than two minutes a day. Kids need much more practice than that.

There are more productive and engaging ways to get "eyes on text" for much longer periods, says Garan. One of them relates to your second observation that the students are learning to read using children's books, not textbooks. There's ample data that reading scores in states that mandate the use of textbooks are lower than in those that don't require the use of texts. Research also shows that great children's books can draw students deeply

into topics and promote related discussions and activities that help make the reading "stick." Garan says, "Textbooks flit from topic to topic, and stories reprinted in them are often abridged. They've lost their flavor and much of the rich language and nuance that made them great in the first place."

Today, many teachers use a research-based method called assisted-guided reading. "Students are placed in small groups based on ongoing assessments. Each group is assigned a book that the children can read with 90 percent to 95 percent accuracy so that students have some challenge but not so much they are discouraged," says Garan. "We start each book with a 'book walk,' talking about the story and how it connects to children's own lives. As we skim it, I ask them to put their fingers on words they don't know. We list those and discuss them in context. After we've skimmed the book together, they read it on their own in soft voices. I monitor them to analyze errors and work on specific skills. After they've read the story, we discuss it and engage in oral and written activities such as 'book reviews' for classmates. These give them opportunities to use the new words and extend their understanding of what they've read." This method, used with several books over the course of a school year, yields a lot more "eyes on text" time than round-robin.

What about the reading breaks? They're called sustained silent reading (SSR) in many schools, and data shows they encourage kids to develop the habit of reading. What's more, the latest scientific research shows that SSR improves vocabulary and all aspects of reading ability. "Like a sport, the more you practice reading, the better reader you become," says Garan. "We want children to become absorbed in whatever interests them. Only then will they grow as readers. When it's time for SSR, teachers grab their books, too, to model the joy of becoming a lifelong reader! This time isn't wasted if it hooks students on the intrinsic value of reading."

Do you have a question about your child's education? E-mail it to Leanna@aplusadvice.com. Leanna Landsmann is an education writer who began her career as a classroom teacher. She has served on education commissions, visited classrooms in 49 states to observe best practices, and founded Principal for a Day in New York City.

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