

Day-to-Day Assessment in the Reading Workshop

Making Informed Instructional
Decisions in Grades 3–6

Franki Sibberson
and Karen Szymusiak

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Editor: Raymond Coutu

Cover and interior design by Jorge J. Namerow

Photos by Flora Marlatt

Copy editor: Shelley Griffin

ISBN-13: 978-0-439-82132-2

ISBN-10: 0-439-82132-0

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Printed in the U.S.A.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 23 13 12 11 10 09 08

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Foreword	5
Introduction	7
Chapter 1 Assessment-Informed Instruction in the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–6	10
Chapter 2 The First Six Weeks of School	23
Chapter 3 Independent Reading	62
Chapter 4 Read-Aloud	80
Chapter 5 Whole-Class Instruction: Mini-Lessons	107
Chapter 6 Small-Group Instruction	121
Chapter 7 Individual Reading Conferences and Share Time	146
Chapter 8 Reassessing at Key Points in the Year	159
Conclusion	180
Appendix /Reproducible Forms	181
Professional Resources Cited	200
Children’s Publications Cited	201
Index	206

Acknowledgements

“I would be most content if my children grew up to be the kind of people who think decorating consists mostly of building enough bookshelves.”

—Anna Quindlen, *How Reading Changed My Life* (1998)

Imagine if children designed our schools. Would they create grand rooms filled with books from floor to ceiling? Would they create comfortable places to gather with other readers to talk about books they are reading? Would they treasure long blocks of time to dig deeply into the words on the page? Would they uncover layers of meaning between the lines? Would children embrace characters they met in books as though they were long-lost friends who found their way home? We can hope they would.

We are the architects of our classrooms and of the conversations that happen in our learning lives, but we cannot accomplish our best work alone. We must listen to the voices of our students and build upon what we come to know about them. If we sit alongside them in classrooms filled with books, our students inspire us to imagine ways to build thoughtful school communities.

And so it was when we first began to write this book. We listened to our students and we watched their reading lives unfold before us. They are the first ones we thank because we continue to learn so much from them. They give us a reason to imagine the possibilities.

We are fortunate to be a part of the Dublin City Schools. We have grown as professionals because we have worked with thoughtful colleagues throughout our careers. The culture of learning and teaching in Dublin is the foundation for our work with children.

Ray Coutu, our editor at Scholastic, has encouraged us beyond our expectations. He guided us through the vision for this book and helped us learn so much about our own teaching and writing. His patience is quite remarkable. He never wavered in his belief that we could actually do this. Others at Scholastic have also been supportive. A huge thank-you to Lois Bridges, Terry Cooper, Susan Kolwicz, and Jorge Namerow. We’d also like to thank Laura Robb for her encouraging words when we thought we weren’t going to be able to finish.

Our good friends Ralph Fletcher, Mary Lee Hahn, Jen Morgan, Brenda Power, Jill Reinhart, and Josie Stewart listened tirelessly during the writing of this book. We would never have made it past the first draft without Jill Reinhart. She read and responded in ways that helped us bring our thoughts into focus. A special thank-you to Flora Marlatt for taking such amazing photographs for the cover and interior.

Nancie Atwell has inspired us with her dedication to the reading and writing lives of children. We have learned so much from her that has influenced our work. We admire her commitment to authentic reading and writing workshops and are honored by the foreword she has written.

And finally, we would like to thank our families. This book seemed to take over our lives for a little while and they never stopped giving us their support. They understand that learning, teaching, and writing are a part of who we are. Knowing that they believe in our work with children makes it all worthwhile.

Foreword

The idea of teaching reading in a workshop can seem an unnerving prospect: *You mean, you just have them read? That's it?* Of course, reading—and loving—books is the heart of the workshop. But if students are to live as readers, they'll need teachers who do, too—teachers who are intimate with great children's literature, appreciative of it, and knowledgeable about the ways that young readers grow. Good reading workshop teachers know how to observe kids, how to ask questions about their processes and practices, and how to make sense of these data, both to inform their teaching and to describe their students' progress. Franki Sibberson and Karen Szymusiak are outstanding reading workshop teachers.

Day-to-Day Assessment in the Reading Workshop is the invaluable account of how Franki embeds assessment in the work and play of her intermediate-level workshop. The grades between 3 and 6 are a critical

but insufficiently studied time of transition for young readers, as they move from the abbreviated, illustrated texts of the primary years to extended chunks of prose—novels and other kinds of chapter books. Franki and Karen's long experience teaching at this level, combined with their smart insights about reading and readers, demonstrate how thoughtful, purposeful choices help transform

beginning readers into fluent, self-aware, *literary* readers. They detail the routines of reading workshop in grades 3 to 6 in the essential context of establishing an intellectual community in which every reader has a role. And, most significantly, they show and tell how effective assessment in a workshop setting is an integral part of the processes of teaching and learning reading.

Nothing that Franki does as a teacher of reading is arbitrary. Through mini-lessons, read-alouds, independent reading, and small-group collaborations, students learn how to pay attention to their choices, habits, responses, confusions, behaviors, and preferences.



The children's self-awareness is a strong foundation for assessment. Because their tastes and intentions are taken seriously, her students easily engage with issues of what makes sense and what's significant, and she easily engages with their ideas, processes, and growth as readers.

Franki and Karen detail a range of evaluative data, from patterns to look for to questions and systems that illuminate a young reader's strengths and challenges. Their approaches invite teachers to recognize and support a student's genuine progress, as opposed to charting the minutiae of a checklist from a prepackaged program. The evidence they gather is specific, objective, and *heartening*: rather than merely prepping kids for the next standardized test, they are building strong, passionate readers for a lifetime.

Franki and Karen conclude that "everyone has a place to grow in the reading workshop." I think that this is the ultimate argument in favor of a workshop approach to teaching reading—and writing, too. The workshop is the best, maybe the only, *truly* differentiated approach to teaching and learning. Here, students act as and are known as individuals. Here, teachers recognize and support the needs and growth of individual students. With clarity and conviction, *Day-to-Day Assessment in the Reading Workshop* shows intermediate-grade teachers how to engage with and reflect on the patterns and the idiosyncrasies in every child's life as a reader.

“ The workshop is the best, maybe the only, *truly* differentiated approach to teaching and learning. Here, students act as and are known as individuals. Here, teachers recognize and support the needs and growth of individual students.”

Nancie Atwell
Center for Teaching and Learning
Edgecomb, Maine

Introduction

“ Let us, with the ancient doctors, vow first to do no harm, and promise to resist measures that deprive children of their natural enthusiasm and exuberance as learners, their impulse to ask questions, to figure things out, to wonder, to express, to investigate, to construct, to imagine. Let us commit to a quiet contemplation of the idea that children are universally passionate learners.”

—Robert L. Fried, *The Passionate Learner* (2002)

In an authentic reading workshop, students live their lives as readers and thinkers. They learn together as a community and share the joy of reading. Each day, students broaden their experiences with texts and develop new skills for understanding. Reading workshop is a place where students can become passionate readers. There's a place for every kind of learner in the reading workshop. So when we launch the reading workshop, we initiate routines that support a variety of learners. Everyone has a place to grow in the reading workshop. Our goal is to support that growth.

Knowing our students is critical to our work in the reading workshop. As teachers we make instructional decisions that support readers because we know these readers well. Assessment is a key to building our knowledge. We gather a variety of evidence, watch for changes in thinking, examine artifacts, and listen carefully to the insights students have about their own reading process.

Assessment has come to the forefront of the political landscape. With new standards, grade-level state tests, and accountability measures, we question whether our priorities are moving in the right direction. Instead of looking at what our students *can* do and scaffolding them as they move forward, standards, tests, and measures are forcing us to use a deficit model of assessment—and we wind up focusing on what kids *can't* do.



We've written this text to turn the tide. What we learn about in the context of reading workshop enables us to match students to the learning experiences they need to be successful. We are always on the lookout for the leaps in learning so we can build on what students *can* do. We uncover the intricate layers of their reading lives, design the level of support they need, and explicitly reach out to them as readers to guide them toward independence.

In the pages that follow, we describe the reading workshop and the consistent routines that we initiate. We explore the many opportunities we have for assessment and how the results of these assessments help us build scaffolds to move students toward independence. We examine how what we learn about students impacts our teaching. We share our conversations with students and how those interactions help students build meaning and become more thoughtful readers.

We have structured the book around the components of our reading workshop. First, we look closely at ways the routines of a reading workshop



support day-to-day assessment. We share our thinking about the unique learning needs of students in grades 3 to 6. We consider the important work we undertake during the first six weeks of school because we know how critical this time is for our reading workshops to be effective. We look closely at implementing each routine, the assessment opportunities it provides, and examples of how that plays out in our classrooms. We end the book with a chapter on strategies for taking advantage of the natural times for assessment of individual student learning and the growth of the entire class.

Assessment-Informed Instruction in the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–6

“ Every time I talk to the children I am learning about them. I like the words ‘learning about’ much more than I like ‘assessing.’ I learn about my children. I get to know them. I want to know *what* they know. I want to know *how* they know. Isn’t that what assessment is all about—learning what children know? ”

—Jill Ostrow, *A Room With a Different View* (1995)

Good teaching begins with knowing our students. We can teach wisely and well when we have taken the time to understand them, think about what they need, and plan ways to move them toward independence. We need to know them as learners and as human beings. And, of course, as teachers of reading, we also need to know them as readers.

Coming to Know Readers in Grades 3 to 6

In the primary grades, children are easily supported by texts and guided by teachers to move from emergent to early readers. Books for emerging readers offer plenty of support with patterned texts and strong visuals. Primary teachers provide clear introductions to the texts and scaffolds to support understanding. They poise their students for success by modeling and guiding

them through the process of reading. They move from actively contributing to the reading process to gradually providing less support so their students can become more independent. But as children transition into the intermediate grades, they take on new characteristics as readers and learners. They develop interests and gather life experiences that impact their learning. They become more independent in their learning and develop a timeline of reading experiences on their way toward becoming proficient readers of a variety of texts. If they are motivated and engaged, this is a time when they can sharpen their learning styles and develop strategies for problem solving and higher-order thinking. With plenty of encouragement, support, and collaboration, they can develop a strong sense of efficacy that will promote lifelong learning. Children in grades 3 to 6 need to believe that they can be responsible for their own learning, that they can make choices in their learning, and that they can and should reflect on their progress. In every respect, they need to know that they are active and responsible learners, with peers and adults who support them. As Peter Johnston (2004) reminds us, “If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals” (p. 29).

Students in the intermediate grades begin to encounter more complex texts. There are so many components of texts that challenge intermediate readers. They encounter formats that require them to think in new ways. They have to be able to recognize the cues in the text. Often a lapse in time or foreshadowing can confuse them. More than one story line can get in the way of their understanding unless they are able to recognize signal words. Metaphors can confound literal readers. Compared to primary texts, intermediate texts require readers to use much more sophisticated strategies.

Primary Texts

contain strong visual cues
 have simple sentence structure
 are simple and brief
 include few characters
 feature one or two settings
 can be read in one session
 contain a simple format



Intermediate Texts

contain few or no visual cues
 have complex sentence structures
 are information laden
 include many characters
 constantly shift settings
 take days or weeks to read
 have a challenging format

We cannot prepare students in grades 3 to 6 for every challenge they will encounter in the books they read. Our goal shifts from preparing them for *a* text to preparing them for *any* text. That means we need to help students build a repertoire of strategies. And we need to help them recognize when to use which strategies. To do that, we need to understand students well enough to provide support when it is needed and to back off when they are ready to take responsibility for their learning.

So much has been written about literacy development in the primary grades, middle school, and high school. However, literacy in grades 3 to 6 seems to be less popular in professional literature. But if we look at where our students are coming from in grades K to 2 and where they are going in grades 7 to 9, we can see how critical grades 3 to 6 are to literacy development.

Classroom Community for Readers

Intermediate students need a predictable, literate-rich environment just as much as primary students do. They need a classroom community that encourages risk taking, collaboration, independence, and reflection. Being part of such a community prepares them to step out and explore the many texts that are available to them. As teachers, we need to observe, listen, and assess so we understand their learning process and plan instructional routines that support them in their journey toward becoming proficient readers of a variety of texts. In her book *Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence*, Laura Sessions Stepp tells us, “For a child to learn what he loves to do, he first has to find out what is possible. He must be exposed to new places, people, and ideas and encouraged to try new activities he has never tried and to hone newfound skills” (2000, p. 28). So, when we think about our reading workshops in grades 3 to 6, we want our students to see themselves as readers and recognize the possibilities in reading and in books. To make this happen, we establish big, yearlong student goals.

We’ve spent time reading *Classics in the Classroom: Designing Accessible Literature Lessons* (Jago, 2004); *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* (Tovani, 2000); *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4–12* (Gallagher, 2004); *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers* (Blau, 2003); and *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher’s Guide to Content-Area Reading* (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). We know that when our students

Our Yearlong Reading Goals for Students in Grades 3 to 6

- ◆ To see themselves as empowered readers
- ◆ To recognize the power of literature to understand life issues
- ◆ To see purposes for different types of reading
- ◆ To build a toolbox of strategies that will support them with any text they encounter
- ◆ To recognize that their thinking changes as they read
- ◆ To think beyond the surface level of texts and uncover a deeper meaning
- ◆ To reflect about their own reading processes
- ◆ To support all of their thinking about texts with evidence
- ◆ To analyze all forms of text to gain understanding
- ◆ To understand an author’s intent in writing

leave us in the intermediate grades and move on to middle school then high school, they will encounter more sophisticated texts. They will be expected to read and understand material in all content areas. They will be asked to pull out information from nonfiction reading and to analyze literary elements in some of the classics. So, as teachers of readers in grades 3 to 6, we want to empower our students to be successful with all texts. We want our classroom community to support our students as they become independent and sophisticated readers of a variety of texts.

Authentic Learning in the Reading Workshop

We want the structure and routines of reading workshop to represent what real readers do. We want children to think about their identities as readers and know that what we ask them to do in



school is as authentic as what readers do outside of school. We want them to be engaged in their reading and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Recently, we read Robert L. Fried's *The Game of School: Why We All Play It, How It Hurts Kids, and What It Will Take to Change It* (2005), and it encouraged us to think hard about the kinds of schools we have created for our students and what we can do to help our children become passionate and independent learners. It confirmed our own thoughts about what schools have become and what we have always hoped school could be. Fried reminds us in *The Passionate Learner: How Teachers and Parents Can Help Children Reclaim the Joy of Discovery* (2002), "Children come to us as passionate learners. It's our charge to help them develop the disposition to sustain, over a lifetime, an openness to things worth knowing" (p. 270).

However, we worry that some students have become disengaged and spend their time doing what they think

the teacher wants. We worry about the authenticity of life at school and about reading experiences that don't feel real. Fried confirmed our suspicion that children enter school with a curiosity and

willingness to learn, but quickly drop it to play by the rules of the game. If they want to do well in school, they figure out what the teacher wants and are rewarded with good grades. As Fried warns us, “While the teacher worries about making sure she covers her curriculum, and students scan the blackboard to determine what material is likely to be on the test, *authentic learning*—defined as *students engaged in ideas, concepts, skills, and activities that mean something to them and that lead both to a deeper understanding and to the ability to put ideas to work*—gets pushed so far into the background that it all but disappears” (2005, p. x). It is sad to think that our children are getting better at the game of school and worse at understanding what it means to be a passionate learner. Without passion for learning, school becomes lifeless and unproductive.

According to Fried, what has become the norm in our schools is “unengaged compliance. Students become game players by reflex and learners only on occasion.” It is frightening to think that children come to school expecting to play a passive role and be fed a steady stream of meaningless assignments and tasks instead of engaging in purposeful learning and discovery.

What are the implications for reading workshops? How can we create authentic reading workshops? What can we do to put the students in charge of their learning so they can become passionate learners? How can we motivate students to become inspired and engaged learners instead of game players? What routines can we establish that will lead to authentic learning?

To a large extent, the answers lie in the big messages embedded within the routines of our reading workshop and in the way we talk with our students. These big messages should reflect how much we value authentic learning, active participation in the learning process, and a sense of discovery. They should recognize and celebrate independent and authentic learning.

In this time of testing and standards, we often sacrifice the most authentic component of a reading workshop: time for reading independently. Because teachers are pressured to fit everything into a school day and have learned the importance of explicit instruction, we wonder if too much reading time is spent talking *at* students rather than *with* students. With the emphasis on guided reading and leveled books, we worry that children are learning to depend on their teacher to choose books for them and that they are not being shown how to choose books or given the opportunity to do so. With all of the packaged and scripted programs available, we worry that teachers rely on the programs instead of what they know about each student’s needs as a reader and a learner.

We wrote *Beyond Leveled Books: Supporting Transitional Readers in Grades 2–5* (Szymusiak & Sibberson, 2001) because of a concern that leveled books seemed to be taking over our classrooms and our students’ reading time. We certainly know the value of leveled books and were not advocating for their elimination, just for a less dominant presence in our students’ reading lives.

Now we wonder about the quality of reading workshop. We’ve learned so much about the nature of learning, struggling readers, comprehension instruction, and fluency. Based on our new understandings, we have reinvented our reading workshops to effectively meet the needs of our students. It is critical that we protect the time, predictable structure, student ownership, and response in our reading workshop. It’s what gives our students the foothold they need to become lifelong readers.

Launching a Reading Workshop

Franki taught first grade for three years and loved every minute of it. She loved how the children immersed themselves in books, reading, and learning to read. She loved the enthusiasm children brought to books and the excitement they felt when the text made sense to them. She implemented a reading and writing workshop and her students soared. Franki learned so much from these young readers, but she was ready for a new challenge. She wondered what older readers were like so she asked to be moved to a fourth-grade classroom the next fall. As much as she hated to leave those emerging readers, Franki was excited to teach and learn with older students.

That summer Franki was pregnant with her first child and hooked on Doritos. So, during that first week of summer vacation, while her husband was out delivering pizzas for some extra money, she sat on the couch in her apartment with *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning With Adolescents* (Atwell, 1987) in one hand and a bag of Doritos in the other. She read the book in two sittings. Franki was so excited that she immediately called her new fourth-grade colleague, Patty Carpenter, and told her that she needed to read it. That fall they launched a reading workshop that included so much of what they learned from Nancie Atwell, with lots of time for students to read books of their choice, mini-lessons to support them in their reading, and conferences to check in with individual students. The book helped Franki understand that she could immerse her fourth graders in reading just as she had done with her first graders.

It's hard for Franki to believe that it has been nearly 17 years since she implemented that first reading workshop. She's learned so much about reading and learning. In this section, we talk about the critical routines of a reading workshop and how they support young readers.

Flexible, open-ended routines allow all children to enter the workshop at their own level



Our Routines for Reading Workshop

- ◆ Independent Reading
- ◆ Read-Aloud
- ◆ Whole-Class Instruction: Mini-Lessons
- ◆ Small-Group Instruction During Independent Reading
- ◆ Individual Reading Conferences During Independent Reading
- ◆ Share Time

of understanding and skills. With routines, we can use assessments to meet student needs. At the beginning of the year we may not know our students as well as we would like, but we put the routines in place because they will support *all* students, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses as readers. And we know that each routine allows daily, embedded assessment. Each routine serves a different purpose, and the routines work together to help the whole reader. Although all routines are important, we find the level of importance of each

varies from year to year. After initial assessments, we may find that we need to focus more work on independent reading so that we can move kids forward in their reading. Other years, students may be capable of independent reading early in the year but not able to talk comfortably about books, so we focus our work and time in that area. We carry out routines every day all year, but the extent to which a particular routine acts as the anchor for learning changes throughout the year. What we try to do is put many routines in place—activities that students are comfortable with that reflect authentic reading—and we build on those based on the assessments we conduct, both formal and informal.

How Reading Workshop Fits Into Our Day

Our students read and write throughout the school day. But they also have sufficient time to engage in content learning. Below is a typical daily schedule in a self-contained classroom.

8:50 – 9:15 ***Nonfiction Reading Time, Poetry Friday!, Discovery Time (alternating days)***

9:15 – 10:30 ***Math***

10:30 – 11:30 ***Content Areas: Science, Social Studies, Health***

11:30 – 12:15 ***Writing Workshop***

12:15 – 1:00 ***Lunch and Recess***

1:00 – 2:20 ***Reading Workshop:***

Read-Aloud (1:00 – 1:25)

Mini-Lesson (1:25 – 1:35)

Independent Reading, Small-Group Instruction, and Individual Conferences (1:35 – 2:15)

Share Time (2:15 – 2:20)

2:20 – 2:40 ***Content Reading and/or Word Study***

2:40 – 3:30 ***Related Arts: Music, Art, Physical Education***

Benefits of Reading Workshop

In *Teaching the Best Practice Way: Methods That Matter, K–12*, Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar remind us of the value of reading workshop: “In this model, elementary and secondary classrooms are no longer merely locations where information is transmitted. Instead, they become working laboratories or studios, where genuine knowledge is created, real products are made, and authentic inquiry is pursued. The classroom workshop is the pedagogical embodiment of constructivist learning theory” (2004, p. 153). We believe this is true because of what the model affords students: time to read and write, a predictable structure, ownership of learning, and response to reading.

Time

Without time to read, our students cannot become better readers. For us, time for students to read is the most important part of our reading workshop. Our students come to expect that they will have extended blocks of time to read independently and with others. We want them to know that they will have time to think about the books they want to read and that we will support them in making book choices that are just right for them. A just-right book is not necessarily one that is at their appropriate reading level. If reading workshop is a time for students to develop into competent, well-rounded readers, there are many reasons a book may be just right for them.

Predictable Structure

On most days, students can count on time for read-aloud, a brief mini-lesson, independent reading time, and some type of sharing. They can also count on knowing that during independent reading time, we may pull together small groups for a particular purpose or request conferences with individual students. These clear expectations for reading workshop give students time to think about their own lives as readers, to plan for their own reading, and to recognize what they need as readers. The structure encourages them to develop responsibility for the learning that will happen each day.

Ownership of Learning

If students are to be lifelong readers, it is important that they own their learning and that they be given the opportunities in reading workshop to choose books and to plan for future reading. However, ownership means more than a choice of books. Ownership refers to students developing their identities as readers. We don’t consider reading workshop a time to *prepare* them for living a life as a reader. The structure of the reading workshop allows our students to define and redefine themselves as readers.

Response to Reading

Responding is important both for students' growth as readers, and for assessment as well. Students need to give and receive responses to their reading lives. The routines we establish in the reading workshop promote a sense of collaboration as students and the teacher interact in response to the reading. Thinking about the books they are reading, the strategies they are using, and the behaviors they are learning are all part of response. Having places and routines for children to share their reading in authentic ways is a necessary part of the reading workshop. Students confer with the teacher and with one another. During the reading workshop, we gain critical information about students in the ways they respond. We consider what we discover about them and respond with support and explicitly designed instruction.

No matter what new understandings we develop about reading instruction, the foundations of time, predictable structure, ownership, and response never change because they encourage students to recognize their growth as readers. We know that reading workshops may look different from classroom to classroom. However, we strongly believe that for students to be engaged in an authentic reading workshop, these four characteristics cannot be sacrificed.

Assessment in the Reading Workshop

Assessing readers has always been difficult. Until recently, we teachers have often assigned questions, journal entries, or projects at the end of a reading. But that just tested a basic level of understanding. We now know there's more to reading and comprehension, and we cannot continue to carry out assessments as we had. If we give our students end-of-the-book questions, how does that inform our teaching? Does it give our students the message that we don't believe they have read the material unless they can answer the questions? Summative assessments like these don't really help us support our readers. Why wait until the end of the reading to assess, when listening, observing, and asking questions along the way will give us so much more information about our readers and inform our instruction? We need to establish routines that afford us opportunities to assess in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences. If we watch and learn from our students while they are in the process of reading, we can use that information to plan instruction more effectively.



Gathering Data About Students

We are learning about our students every minute of every school day. We observe behaviors, listen in on conversations, pay attention to responses to whole-class lessons, look closely at reading notebooks, and more. Using the information we gain, we are able to add to the profile we have of each student. No assessment we use is better than another, and none of them is strong enough to stand alone. Below are some of the assessments that we will be discussing throughout the book. We will mention them briefly here and will discuss them more thoroughly in subsequent chapters.

- ◆ Listening to conversations
- ◆ Observing
- ◆ Individual conferences
- ◆ Casual conversations throughout the day
- ◆ Reading interviews
- ◆ Reading logs
- ◆ Status of the class
- ◆ Read-aloud notebooks

Listening and Observing

We cannot easily separate assessment from teaching. We walk around the room listening in on conversations and glancing over students' shoulders so we can assess their learning. When we really listen to children, we learn so much about them and discover many opportunities to teach. The more we learn about them, the easier we can make our instructional decisions. Every conversation becomes a window into their learning.

Individual Conferences and Casual Conversations

We used to believe that what counted most were the teacher-student reading conferences. We used to rely on these conferences as checkpoints to judge whether the child had actually read and understood the book. Although these conferences gave us some information, we were actually more focused on the book than on the reader. We've changed our thinking about individual conferences.

We recognize the importance of the conferences, but we have come to see that the conversations we have with students throughout the day are also critical. We take notes during the reading workshop and listen to our students' responses in our conversations throughout the day. Each time we talk to a student, we gather new information. We rely on conversation—short and long, formal and informal—as a critical part of assessment.

Reading Interviews

Asking students questions about their lives as readers is a great way to create reader profiles, especially at the beginning of the school year. We prepare by thinking about what we want to know about our students. We also think about the messages our questions will send to students. The questions we ask must show them that we are interested in their lives as readers. We also want students to learn something about themselves and to begin to think about the questions we pose.

Reading Logs and Status of the Class

Our students keep track of their daily reading by maintaining reading logs. Students can also use the log for self-reflection as they look back to think about what they have been reading and look for patterns in their reading behaviors, and we can do the same.

We use the status of the class to quickly check at the beginning of the reading workshop what each child plans to do in reading each day. It gives us a view of each student's reading practices and provides opportunities for us to have brief conversations with students or plan for individual conferences during the reading workshop.

Read-Aloud Notebooks

We want our students to have a place to write and collect their thinking during our daily read-aloud. Each child has a spiral read-aloud notebook. We often stop during read-aloud and invite students to jot their thinking in their notebooks. The notebooks give us insight into the ways our students are thinking about their reading. We use information from them to help us guide conversations and plan future mini-lessons. An easy and nonthreatening way to assess notebooks is to sit alongside different students during the read-aloud time each day. We can then glance at their notebooks and see how they are using them.

Assessing the Whole Reader

Under the pressure of standardized testing, it is all too easy to look only at the numbers. But, if we really want to use what we know about our students to help them move forward, we need to look at all of the information that we have—qualitative and quantitative. By looking only at test scores, we ignore other important data. If we rely on a narrow perspective of assessment, we do a major disservice to children. Throughout this book we will share what we notice about our students and how we use these insights to plan instruction.

Every minute, every lesson, and every conversation can inform our teaching. We rarely give assignments for the sole purpose of assessing. Instead, we invite students to try a new strategy or a new way of thinking and watch them apply it. We think about how students can demonstrate what they know. Then we observe and assess them to determine their level of success.

Standards and Standards-Based Assessments

In our state, we have clearly defined standards for literacy development. In reading workshop, we include authentic ways for students to gain knowledge of the content, strategies, and skills in the reading standards. We create opportunities to measure the progress of students toward meeting the standards. However, many of the opportunities to assess within the reading workshop go far beyond what is expected in the standards. If we pay close attention to the children, they will show us much more about their lives as readers and learners. We observe the reading process in action and intervene at the most opportune times to encourage independence. So much of what we learn about the students helps us make moment-to-moment instructional decisions and respond in meaningful ways.

We have found that knowing the standards well is our best tool. We keep copies of our state standards handy and refer to them often. But instead of writing lessons so we can check off what standard we taught, we want to make sure to include much of that content into real conversations about books. We know that conversations are often the best and most authentic way to begin thinking about many of the standards. By knowing the state standards well, we can introduce words such as *theme* and *plot* in read-aloud discussions. We can create reflection sheets that help students become aware of the strategies they are using. We can introduce new ways of thinking about books that reflect the language of the standards. When we know the standards well, we can embed our standards teaching into the authentic work of students who are reading books and talking about their reading every day.

We administer some assignments, such as a survey or a two-column chart, at intervals throughout the school year. This periodic assessment allows us to see how the students approach the same type of assignment as the year progresses. We want to know that at each interval the students are using more sophisticated levels of thinking.

Concluding Thoughts

In the next chapter, we look at how we launch a reading workshop and introduce the routines that provide opportunities to assess students from moment to moment and day to day. Our most critical goal during the first six weeks is to get to know all that we can about our students. The routines we implement during the first six weeks provide us with many opportunities to identify what our students can do. When we start with what they know and can do, we unleash their potential to be sophisticated and independent readers.

