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# Getting Children In2Books:

## ENGAGEMENT IN AUTHENTIC READING, WRITING, AND THINKING

Getting children excited about — “in2” — reading and writing is the first step in developing high-level literacy. An innovative program based on this premise is producing excellent results with urban elementary students who had struggled with language arts. The authors suggest this program shows that there are better approaches than focusing merely on phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition.

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**BY WILLIAM H. TEALE, NINA ZOLT, JUNKO YOKOTA, KATHRYN GLASSWELL, AND LINDA GAMBRELL**

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**L**ITERACY reigns in U.S. elementary schools. Because of recent federal and state policies, more instructional emphasis than ever before has been placed on reading and writing. Such a development should bode well for raising the reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and critical-thinking skills of children in the U.S., which, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have been basically static for the past 30 years. Moreover, according to such international assessments as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),

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these are areas in which U.S. children lag behind children in a number of other developed nations.<sup>1</sup> However, there are signs that the current emphasis may be doing the very thing recent federal legislation was designed to avoid: leaving U.S. students, especially children from our poorest neighborhoods, even further behind in what really counts when it comes to literacy — comprehension and critical thinking.

*If children are to excel in reading, writing, and critical thinking, they need to learn how to read different types of texts deeply and critically and how to write different types of texts in ways that clearly and powerfully communicate ideas.*

How could this possibly happen? Because K-3 reading instruction in many schools has focused so heavily on phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition that comprehension, vocabulary, and writing have been given short shrift. Because so much emphasis has been placed on K-3 reading that literacy instruction at higher grade levels has not been given the attention that it requires. Because the results on standardized reading tests have served as the sole criterion of literacy progress and consequently elementary school literacy programs have become mechanized and test-driven rather than content- and meaning-driven. Because instruction focused on reading skills has ended up reducing the teaching of science and social studies in the elementary schools to a minimum and in some cases has even crowded these subjects out of the school day altogether.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, developments such as these have occurred largely in response to state and federal mandates intended to *raise* the quality and level of literacy instruction.

We applaud the idea of giving literacy the primary emphasis in the instructional day in U.S. elementary schools. But we also have observed that, unless fundamental principles of good literacy curriculum and instruction are kept firmly at the forefront of daily teaching in all subjects, the new emphasis may have little effect at best and at worst may negatively affect student literacy. If children are to excel in reading, writing, and critical thinking, they need to learn how to read different types of texts deeply and critically and how to write different types of texts in ways that clearly and powerfully communicate ideas. If the children who are not faring well in literacy learning in our schools are to succeed, they need teaching that both accelerates their learning and goes beyond what are commonly regarded as the “basics” of literacy. Instruction must promote children’s engage-

ment with text while also developing their skill at understanding and creating texts for a variety of purposes and across a range of subjects.

For the past few years we have worked in urban public elementary schools to implement literacy instruction that emphasizes higher-level reading, writing, and thinking while also maintaining instructional focus on the skills of decoding, word recognition, and fluency. Our aim has been to help

students learn what they really need to learn in order to become engaged and accomplished readers and writers — literate beings capable of interpreting text; developing connections between themselves and texts; critically analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing; critiquing the usefulness of information in a text; writing on a variety of topics and for many different audiences; revising and editing ideas and forms of expression; and carrying out other higher-level processing that is involved in reading and writing.<sup>3</sup>

### **ENGAGING CHILDREN IN AUTHENTIC READING, WRITING, AND THINKING**

Our efforts have involved implementing an initiative called In2Books. During the past five years, we have worked with more than 6,000 urban children and their teachers in grades 2 through 5 in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Over 80% of the children attended Title I schools, and most of them were struggling readers and writers. In2Books is a program that was developed to motivate children to engage in authentic literacy activities across the curriculum while also teaching them higher-level thinking, composing, and comprehension skills. It centers on a pen-pal exchange, with adult volunteers and students writing to one another about a common set of children’s books they have read. The program is designed to create a context in which students are motivated to read books and to comprehend them deeply because they will write about the books to an adult who engages them in dialogue about what they have both read. In the students’ classrooms, teachers use a range of instructional activities — from discussion and questioning to process writing and vocabulary and fluency activities — in order to develop children’s literacy skills and content-area knowledge

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and so enable them to write good letters to their pen pals and apply their reading and writing strategies effectively in a variety of contexts.

During a school year, In2Books students receive five grade-level books in different genres: fiction, folklore, biography, and informational nonfiction (social studies and science). For each genre cycle, students can choose one of three books of varying difficulty. The books are then the students' to keep. All the books align with the content standards at each grade level and are selected by a committee of nationally recognized experts in children's literature. They are chosen to be age appropriate, compelling, and diverse, and they demonstrate successful problem solving, resilience, and the importance of interpersonal and family relationships. In addition to these core books, there is a set of related books the teacher reads aloud in conjunction with each genre.

Students are matched with adult pen pals, recruited from various businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies in the area. The adults are coached through Pen Pal Place<sup>®</sup>, a rich website environment that helps them learn how to write effective letters about the books in language the children will understand and to pose thought-provoking questions. Pen pals submit their letters electronically, and the letters are screened, printed out, and then delivered to the children in an envelope.

In class, on an appointed delivery day, each student receives the "hard copy" of his or her pen pal's letter. This is always a time of great excitement for the children. They read and reread their letters, and then, over a number of days, they complete the culminating activity for each cycle — writing letters about the books in response to those from their pen pals.

During each cycle, the children not only study the genre and especially the core book, but they also branch out to other print and electronic texts on similar topics or with similar text features. The varied activities that surround the genre study create a context for deeper understanding and higher-level discussions and writing.

For support in establishing and maintaining this rich learning environment in their classrooms, teachers participate in one of three distinct yearlong professional development sequences (determined by the number of years the teacher has implemented In2Books). Each sequence has different content, but all of the sequences focus on core principles: 1) improving literacy through strategic reading of books, 2) writing to a real pen pal in response to literature, and 3) using informal data (i.e., the letters the students write) as the basis for teachers' instructional decisions. The professional development sessions are highly participatory and designed to support teachers in using the core books, the related read-aloud books, and a range of other instruction-

al and assessment activities that are detailed in cycle-related curriculum guides.

## **EFFECTS OF IN2BOOKS**

What has happened to students' literacy as a result of implementing In2Books? We do not yet have a full answer, but one large-scale study conducted to date provides important indications. During the 2003-04 school year, an evaluation was conducted in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) to help determine how participation in In2Books related to student literacy achievement patterns. The analysis compared the SAT-9 reading test scores of over 2,000 DCPS students in grades 2 through 4 who were in In2Books classrooms with the scores of approximately 8,500 students in comparison classrooms who had not participated in In2Books. As two of the authors have reported elsewhere, at all three grade levels, students in the classrooms of veteran In2Books teachers (teachers who had used the program for more than one year) scored statistically significantly higher in reading than the control students.<sup>4</sup> Performance comparisons also showed that students in first-year In2Books classrooms scored significantly higher in grades 3 and 4 than students in non-In2Books classrooms, while scores were statistically equivalent across groups for grade-2 students.

Overall, these results indicated that students who experienced In2Books as part of their instructional program were significantly more likely to have higher levels of achievement in reading than students not in the program. Furthermore, it is worth noting that In2Books students managed to score significantly higher on this high-stakes, standardized reading test than non-In2Books students while having a curriculum that deliberately avoided didactic test-preparation exercises in favor of authentic, challenging literacy instruction. This outcome strongly suggests that a focus on authentic instruction can work as well in traditionally low-achieving schools as in any other type of school.

## **WHAT IS AT WORK IN SUCH AN APPROACH?**

The test results, a review of two years of questionnaire responses from classroom teachers, periodic observations of In2Books classrooms, and the assessment of hundreds of letters written by the children and their pen pals have led us to conclude that devoting classroom time to emphasizing higher-level reading, writing, and thinking skills in conjunction with core instruction on the technical basics of reading and writing can develop elementary school children's decoding and word-recognition skills at least as

well as a core program that concentrates mainly on the technical basics. The bonus for children in In2Books classrooms is that they have many more opportunities to read and write for authentic purposes across content areas. What exactly makes such an experience possible? We identified four interrelated factors that seemed to matter.

- *An active and supportive learning community.* Children, teachers, and pen pals worked together to create a classroom community that emphasized learning from one another and the benefits of a cooperative approach. The attitude promoted in In2Books classrooms is one of participation: each person's contributions are expected, respected, and built on by a group engaged in inquiry together. In order to support teachers in establishing such an environment in their classrooms, the professional development sequences stressed the notion of the classroom and the pen pals as a learning community. In addition, the concept was an important feature of the training of pen pals through Pen Pal Place®. The aim from the beginning was to establish a community of children, teachers, and other adults who read, talk, and write together in ways that enhance their understanding of the world they share. Such a focus helped all participants feel that they were contributing and valuable members of the overall community.

The role of pen pals in the program proved to be a very powerful one because it demonstrated that the learning community did not stop at the walls of the classroom or the school. We often hear about the importance of community involvement, but what distinguished this case of involvement was that the community, in essence, became personalized for each child in the form of the one-on-one relationship with a pen pal. This relationship with someone who responded in an individualized and caring way sparked a genuine desire among the children to communicate.

- *Engagement in authentic, purposeful, and challenging work that promotes critical thinking.* Closely related to the role that the learning community played was the idea of having an ac-

tual person to write to. This made children's work in literacy authentic and purposeful and encouraged them to talk in substantive ways about themselves, the books they read, and their everyday worlds.

Writing a good letter about a book was a challenging task for the children, most of whom had struggled in language arts. However, because the work was personally meaningful, they were motivated to do their best in writing their letters. This highly motivating context for literacy instruction increased student engagement. And greater engagement meant that children were more likely, for example, to read their books more than once so that they could re-



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spond to the questions about the overall theme or specific details that pen pals posed in their letters. Questions from pen pals and teachers encouraged children to evaluate what they had read, to connect to it, and to respond thoughtfully through discussion and writing. To accomplish this, children had to listen carefully and participate in classroom discussions that helped them think critically about their reading. In speaking, listening, reading, and writing, then, children were asked to link ideas, to analyze, and to express their thinking in personally relevant ways.

Teacher reports and our classroom observations show that children approached the task of writing with more enthusiasm than usual. For children who typically struggle in language arts, this was both unusual and encouraging. Focusing on authentic, purposeful reading and writing activities helped create extended, cumulative conversations that kept children involved and learning, despite the fact that the cognitive demands on them increased over time. Ultimately, because of their participation in the higher-level reading, writing, and thinking involved in these cumulative conversations, many children were able to make unexpected progress.

Among the keys to achieving such high levels of student engagement and learning were the instructional routines employed to support children's development. Over the course of the program, children engaged many times in a variety of social practices related to literacy: read and reread a book, discuss it, write a letter about it. But each time the same social practice was somewhat different: different books, different content, different questions, different expectations for their performance, and so on. Thus, while there were routines, they were not routinized to the point that they became merely exercises practiced over and over. In addition, the program's integrated assessment that focused on the letters the students wrote helped teachers target children's developing needs and adjust teaching routines to meet those needs.<sup>5</sup>

- *Contextualized literacy skills work.* Unlike many programs and approaches advocated since NCLB began to affect practices in underachieving schools, In2Books maintained a higher-level focus and gave authentic purpose to the learning of literacy skills. For example, surface features such as sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and punctuation were taught in the context of purposeful reading and writing tasks. Even when immediate attention was focused on the smaller parts of the task or on skills, the overall context was one of communicating in written language for personal, meaningful purposes.

- *Teacher empowerment through professional growth.* Over the course of their implementation of In2Books, teachers changed their beliefs, attitudes, and practices as a re-

sult of participating in a professional learning community. They became empowered to make learning more meaningful to their students and to act as reflective practitioners who were skilled in assessing student work in order to make better instructional decisions. They came to understand how they themselves could learn in this context and embraced the value of ongoing professional development that helped them work in productive and effective ways in their classrooms. A key factor was increasing teachers' professional communication — getting teachers to talk more with one another about teaching, both within and across school buildings. They recognized the importance of decision making in daily instruction and connected to what others were doing in this respect. They increasingly centered their practices on making literacy learning and instruction meaningful to students, and they trusted that they and their students deserved more than a stripped-down focus on the technical basics of reading and writing.

We should always keep in mind that deep and thoughtful reading, effective and purposeful writing, and critical thinking are every bit as basic to high-quality literacy instruction in U.S. elementary schools as phonemic awareness, phonics, and word recognition. We have discussed In2Books not as *the* way to conduct literacy instruction but as a program whose principles are worth considering. It stands as one successful example of how literacy instruction in the classroom lives of urban children can focus on rich, intellectual reading and writing experiences that are meaningful and engaging. In2Books blended the community with classroom literacy and subject-matter study to make learning "authentic" and to motivate students to hone their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

We read a great deal about what our children will need for life in the 21st century. But we believe that among the most important skills they can possess is to be critically, not merely functionally, literate. And our experience with In2Books argues strongly that reading and writing instruction that engages children for authentic purposes can help achieve this end.

1. *First Results from PISA 2003: Executive Summary* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004).

2. Sam Dillon, "Schools Cut Back Subjects to Push Reading and Math," *New York Times*, 26 March 2006, p. 1.

3. The NAEP reading and writing frameworks are available at [www.nagb.org/pubs/r\\_framework\\_05/761507-ReadingFramework.pdf](http://www.nagb.org/pubs/r_framework_05/761507-ReadingFramework.pdf) and <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/writing/whatmeasure.asp>.

4. William H. Teale and Linda Gambrell, "Raising Urban Students' Literacy Achievement by Engaging in Authentic, Challenging Work," *Reading Teacher*, in press.

5. Kathryn Glasswell and William H. Teale, "Authentic Assessment of Authentic Student Work in Urban Classrooms," in Jeanne R. Paratore and Rachel L. McCormack, eds., *Classroom Literacy Assessment: Making Sense of What Students Know and Do* (New York: Guilford, forthcoming). ■

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