

IMPROVING READING AND WRITING

Independent reading and writing periods increase children's interest in and capacity for reading and writing, says a report from the National Reading Research Center.

Researchers studied second-grade classrooms that used independent reading and writing periods. Children choose with whom they would like to work and the literacy activities they would like to pursue. Teachers act as facilitators and participants.

The materials are stored in literacy centers designed in classrooms and include varied genres of children's literature; comfortable places to read; and literacy materials such as felt boards with story characters, headsets with taped stories, puppets for storytelling, and notebooks and paper for writing.

In further research, a case study of fifth and sixth-graders, explains that students are more motivated when they can select what they read and write about.

"The challenge is to achieve a comfortable balance between choice and structure that takes into account the needs and interests of students, teachers' personal styles, and comfort levels for sharing control and responsibility with students." Teachers begin to share this power and responsibility with students by stating the ground rules. "They make clear what the 'givens' are and what students' options are within those givens." Teachers may ask themselves: Do my students have a voice in setting their own goals and selecting their topics for reading, writing, and inquiry in content areas? Do students have some choice in pacing their learning activities? Do they have some choice about where to study and with whom to study?

After answering such questions, teachers can then identify ways of expanding student choice that are appropriate for their classroom. Inviting students to honestly express themselves, fully listening and responding to them, encouraging them to listen and respond to each other, will support student motivation. (Morrow, Sharkey, Firestone, and Oldfather, University of Georgia)

MORE STUDENT READING

A study by the National Reading Research Center reports that students who read extensively on their own had teachers who gave students time to share ideas from their reading. Allowing time for students to discuss books increased students' enjoyment of reading. Such enjoyment led to further reading, which students often discussed outside of class with family and friends.

Encouraging social interaction was only part of encouraging students to read. Teachers also instructed students in cognitive strategies, including strategies for comprehension and learning.

For example, teachers helped students remember what they knew about a topic before they read, taught students to find the main idea of a text, helped build vocabulary, and guided students' reading comprehension by asking questions.

As with social interaction, instruction in cognitive strategies fostered student reading, assert the researchers. Students got a lot out of reading and gained new confidence in their reading ability. This confidence empowered students to seek out books they were interested in and helped them comprehend what they read. (Guthrie, Schafer, Wang, & Afflerbach, University of Georgia)



ASSESSMENT

Teachers buying-in to the usefulness of assessments that ask students to demonstrate what they know and can do - is crucial if they are to implement these assessments successfully. The good news is that teachers may come to believe in the assessments by implementing them.

Researchers say some 3rd-grade teachers they studied found that performance assessments allowed them to authentically evaluate complex student knowledge and skills, such as problem solving and critical thinking. These teachers deemed it important to teach and assess such knowledge and skills, and consequently implemented the assessments enthusiastically and successfully from the beginning.

But other teachers believed that to reach low-achieving students, it was more important to teach and assess basic skills and memorization than to teach for understanding. In other words, their beliefs were inconsistent with the aims of performance assessment.

These teachers changed their assessment and instruction practices just enough to satisfy the researchers. "The changes those teachers made, even if not profound, may be of the kind that will eventually cause their beliefs to change," say the researchers. They predict that once teachers use performance assessment and focus on higher-order skills, students will learn more. (Flexer & Gerstner, UCLA)

NEW YORK SCHOOL LAW UPDATE

The Governor has signed into law the following bills of interest to schools:

- Hepatitis B has been added to the list of **immunizations required** in order for children to enter school (ch 521, eff generally 7/26/94, amending Pub Health L §2164)
- Under certain circumstances, students may be excused from performing or witnessing the **dissection of animals**; such students are to be offered an alternative project (ch 542, eff 7/1/95, amending Educ L §809)
- School districts may provide **transportation** to students whose residences are located on an established route to a centralized pickup point, provided that there is no increased cost to the district as a result thereof (ch 571, eff 7/1/95, amending Educ L §3635)
- All students in grades K-8 are now to receive instruction which is designed to prevent the **abduction of children** (ch 658, eff generally 9/1/94, adding Educ L §803-a)
- The school records of **missing children** are to be "flagged," and any inquiries regarding such children are to be reported to appropriate agencies (ch 690, eff 8/18/94, amending, inter alia, Educ L §§3212, 3222)

(from the New York School District Law Letter Vol.38, No.22)

FINANCIAL PACKAGING SERVICE

The NYS Energy Office (SEO) has announced a new service designed to assist eligible institutions in selecting and securing financing for energy efficiency projects. This service comes as a result of a team of SEO staff who have identified public and private sources of capital, including but not limited to: non-taxable debt, lease and lease purchasing arrangements, shared savings, and performance-based agreements.

The Financial Packaging Service provides an objective analysis of the various financial options available and can assist you in securing financing for your energy-efficient project. You will be given a clear and concise report with the information necessary to enable you to compare a number of financial options to determine rate of return, cash outlay, payback, net present value and cash flow. Advice in evaluation strategies for reviewing bids and proposals, and developing agreements with financial providers is also available.

The Financial Packaging Service is **free** to public and private non-profit K-12 school, hospitals, colleges and universities. If you are interested in hearing more about the service, please call the State Energy Office ☎518-473-0142 and ask to speak to an institutional Services staff member.

NEW COMPACT FOR LEARNING

Each month the nine public television stations in NYS air a one-half hour program entitled New York Learns. Since the current 1994-95 season is devoted to the implementation of the New Compact for Learning you may find this worthwhile viewing. Check your local program guide for the schedule in your area.

AMERICA'S WAR ON POVERTY

A new public television documentary - "America's War on Poverty" will premiere on January 16,17,18, 1995. This documentary can be used to deliberate on the puzzle of poverty in America.



LITERARY DISCUSSIONS LED BY PEERS

Literary discussion about a text helps students construct meaning by exposing them to new ideas and diverse views. When such discussions are led by peers, student responses are significantly more complex and elaborate than when led by teachers. Typically, classroom discussions are dominated by teacher questioning and highly directed conversation. This can limit opportunities for students to acquire meaning through collaborative exchange of ideas.

When students engage in peer-led discussions of literature in which they set the agenda, they are able to express themselves more freely, and have more opportunities to engage in higher-level thought processes. Teachers should consider incorporating more peer-led inquiry into their reading programs.

ATTITUDE ABOVE GRADES

Grades might be important in school, but they don't matter much in the job market, according to a nationwide survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.

According to the *Educational Quality of the Workforce National Employer Survey*, "What is important is how the applicant presents himself or herself - in terms of attitude and communication skills - and whether or not he or she has a successful history of previous work experience."

Of 11 criteria considered important to hiring decisions, attitude and communication skills topped the list. Years of completed schooling ranked 7th, and academic performance came in 9th. Teacher recommendations were least important to the 3,173 employers surveyed.

For educators, the most distressing finding of the survey is that employers don't necessarily prize high academic performance. "What kind of message are we sending out to kids when we say their grades or the quality of their school or their teachers' recommendations are not important?" says Lisa M. Lynch, a Tufts University professor who helped design the study. "It's a very troubling one. When you say to kids they should do well in school, and they say, well, no one cares how they do, in a sense, they're right."

ENCOURAGING HISPANIC PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Doing Our Homework: How Schools Can Engage Hispanic Communities is full of illustrations and advice on how schools can encourage Hispanic parents to become involved with their children's education. It addresses barriers to home-school partnerships; parental roles, strategies, and programs for effective home-school engagement, community-based collaborations; and future directions in parent involvement.

It is available from: **Appalachia Educational Laboratory**, PO Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 (cite order #AL-295-OR, 91 pages, \$12 prepaid).

INNER-CITY SCHOOLS

A new magazine focusing exclusively on inner-city schools is intended to encourage educators in small and large urban schools, according to its editor.

Cityschools is a quarterly publication for "researchers and urban teachers to talk about their innovative and sometimes unorthodox approaches to urban school reform, which too often are overlooked by more mainstream research publications."

Cityschools is published by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Subscriptions are available at no cost to educators, by writing: **Cityschools Subscriptions**, 1900 Spring Rd, Suite 300, Oak Brook, IL 60521-1480.

OUTDATED IDEAS HINDER LEARNING

Richard Allington, a specialist in literacy instruction at the University of Albany-SUNY, says outmoded psychology and school structure impede widespread achievement. The old "bell curve," created at the turn of the century to represent the normal distribution of a wide range of supposedly innate abilities, lives on in attitudes that many children have a limited ability to learn.

"We just do not expect kids who started out behind ever to catch up," he states. Most of the interventions designed to reduce the gap actually lessen learning opportunities for those students, making it even harder for them to reach their potential. Allington suggests that limited ability should more accurately be seen as limited experience. Young children who experience trouble with reading, for example, often have had little exposure to books, stories, and print.

The most critical element to compensate for deficits is access to high-quality instruction. Reemphasizing the importance of the classroom teacher tops a list of recommendations for how schools must change to foster higher proficiency for all students. (National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning)

The May 1995 issue of *Kappan* features a special section "Youth and Caring". One of its articles found that most students have little opportunity to practice caring or to be rewarded for doing so.

What a contrast, then, to see 2 front page photos in the Albany *TIMES UNION* for the week of April 23. The first on Tuesday, April 25 showed first grade teacher Debbie Mancini leading her students at Schenectady's Mount Carmel School in prayer for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. The second on Saturday, April 29 showed the students of Blessed Sacrament School, Albany with Father John Bradley, their pastor, blessing a tree they had just planted as a memorial to those who died in Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

How blessed we are to be able to care and to have rituals to symbolize our caring!

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

The Committee for Women and Girls in Independent Schools has compiled a list of over 70 fiction and nonfiction books about girls from all over the world and from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The selections, for ages 10 to 14, were chosen for educators who wish to present a culturally balanced view of young women's lives.

The list is available, while supplies last, to teachers and librarians from all schools. To obtain a copy, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: **Many Girls' Voices, N.A.I.S.**, 1620 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-5605.

CURRICULUM

Elementary teachers overwhelmingly support hands-on approaches to teaching as advocated in proposed national standards for science education, but most do not feel qualified to teach science, a new survey has found.

Parents, too, fear they have little ability to engage their children's interest in science, the report, "The Bayer Facts of Science Education," says. The Bayer Corporation questioned 1,000 parents and an equal number of elementary school teachers in conducting the survey.

Although nearly 70% of the teachers surveyed said they believe schools should increase their emphasis on science and 80% support hands-on teaching, only 36% consider themselves "science literate." "No wonder 50% of all children get turned off science by 3rd grade," said Richard L. White, Bayer's executive vice president. "Unless we reach out to these kids now, while they are ripe for reaching out to, then we may never get them back."

The results mirror a similar survey of teacher attitudes toward standards-based science and mathematics reform released last month at the National Science Teachers Association. That survey, conducted by Horizon Research Inc. of Chapel Hill, NC found that elementary schools are comparatively open to reform when compared to high schools. Most high school teachers, the survey found, are by and large convinced that they do an adequate job teaching science and math. This survey found that 96% of parents said they would like to help their children more with science education in the home. Only 32%, however, consider themselves "science literate," compared with 36% of teachers.

"Given that nearly every one of the parents wants to help their kids learn science in the home, then we must begin to show them how," Mr. White said.

To help parents, Bayer is making available to them copies of its "Making Science Make Sense Parent's Survival Kit." Free copies may be ordered from the Bayer Corp, One Mellon Center, 500 Grant St., Pittsburgh, PA 15219-2507.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING/MIXED-ABILITY

By combining cooperative learning with mixed-ability grouping, educators can significantly increase student achievement, according to researchers at the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students. That's what happened when a junior high school in Connecticut randomly assigned half their 7th-grade students to mixed-ability classrooms rather than to traditional homogeneous, ability-grouped classes. Teachers were trained in Student Team Learning, a method of instruction in which students work together to learn and are responsible for their groupmates' learning as well as their own.

Students in the mixed-ability classrooms achieved higher test scores - especially on end-of-year departmental exams and research projects - and higher course grades than did students who remained in classes homogeneously - grouped by high and low ability. In addition, students were more likely to value what they were learning, and reported higher perceptions of their own academic ability and effort in those classes.

This study differs from previous ones because it combines mixed-ability grouping and cooperative learning. Students showed the greatest jump in achievement in language arts and science. In the Student Team Learning system, developed by Robert Slavin, the teacher presents material to the whole class and then students learn the material together, working in small teams. The teacher tests students individually on the material, grades students on their improvement, and builds team incentives through rewards and other recognition.

The researchers comment that greater increases in student achievement may occur in the 2nd year of this approach as teachers become more experienced in using cooperative learning. (*Johns Hopkins University*)

HELPING TEENS WITH HOMEWORK

Even in the high school years, parents are keen to help their children with schoolwork. Parents just feel they need more information from the school to be effective - information on such topics as how to help their teenagers plan for the future, how to work together to improve grades, and how to help teens improve their homework.

Eighty-two percent of ninth graders surveyed felt they needed to have their parents involved in their schoolwork. Fifty percent wanted their parents to be more involved than they are. If teachers designed assignments to involve parents, at least 75% of the students said they would be willing to: ask parents for help in studying for a test; ask a parent to listen to something they had written; or work with parents to improve or keep up grades.

Parents surveyed say they are already trying to do what teachers rate as most important for families to do - check homework, talk with their children about school, tell teens the importance of school, and help teens balance their activities.

While parents are looking to teachers for guidance in how to best be involved in their teens' education, 2/3rds of the teachers surveyed said they need more training in how to provide such guidance for parents (*Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning*)

NEW TEACHER HIRING

The first year in the classroom is a crucial one. School administrators should play a role in preserving the positive attitudes first-year teachers usually bring to the job. When those attitudes turn negative, they undermine our mission as educators. But it doesn't have to be that way. You can detect and correct negative attitudes; better yet, you can prevent them.

To understand how to prevent negative attitudes, it helps first to understand three stages new teachers might pass through in their attitudes; conviction, conversion, and confrontation.

In the first stage, **conviction**, a newly hired teacher is eager and ready to give commitment to the school and to you, the one responsible for hiring. After all, you reviewed numerous applications, interviewed several candidates, and, in the end, selected this teacher. The teacher has a reason to be loyal to you. From the minute you hire a new teacher, you are seen as the "player" in the new teacher's professional life.

Those sentiments can change, though, in stage two, **conversion**. Suppose new teachers report for work and find empty classrooms, no materials, no textbooks, and no one expecting their arrival. These teachers feel betrayed, tricked into thinking they were welcome here, angry you've left them alone to flounder. The consequence: *They're ripe for conversion from your ally to your adversary*. That's when stage three - **confrontation** - can kick in. New teachers - feeling neglected or even mistreated by the administration - cement a relationship with the "anti-administration forces".

You can break the cycle of conviction, conversion, and confrontation by simple measures. The process begins by creating a network of people who will work with the new teacher throughout the year. The principal stands at the center of this connection, responsible for providing an initial orientation and for coordinating the process. Other participants:

- 1) **A teacher sponsor**: someone, preferably in the same department or grade level as the new teacher, who will communicate often with the teacher and serve as a "buddy" through the first weeks or months.
- 2) **Support staff**: people who will see to it the building is ready for the new teacher e.g. textbooks, and materials, name on the classroom door and mailbox. These simple measures help the teacher feel welcome and important.
- 3) **Members of a teacher or new colleagues' support group**: such a group might be set up for each school or for neighboring schools. This group provides one more assurance that new teachers will have a means of connecting with others during their first year. As the hiring administrator, you should attend and show interest in this group. Hold monthly meetings at a minimum, in which you talk over new teachers' concerns.

Around the beginning of November, send new teachers a confidential questionnaire asking how welcome they were made to feel and whether the school has lived up to their expectations. Then act on the results.

Consider continuing the induction program for a second year. Don't kick out the props under your new teachers too soon.

Remember: The single most important thing you can do in administration is to hire good teachers; the second most important thing is to find ways to keep them.

(Michael E. Tomlin, EXECUTIVE EDUCATOR)

HOW DO YOU HANDLE AUTHORITY?

In a recent column, Rev. Richard McBrien posed the above question, and suggests some more questions that should be answered by administrators who wield authority on a day-to-day basis. We thought it a good idea if Catholic school administrators gave some thought to these questions, now that a new school year is upon us.

1. How do you yourself understand authority's purpose; is it primarily to help people grow and mature, to become better human beings?
2. How have you dealt with resistance to your authority and violations of rules?
3. Have you found the threat or imposition of punishment to be an effective means of exacting conformity from those under your authority? Why or why not?
4. If the threat or imposition of punishment have not proven to be effective, what has?
5. In your experience, what role, if any, has the example of your own behavior played in the effective exercise of authority?
6. Has your own lack of truthfulness ever compromised your authority in any way? If so, how?
7. Have you ever been accused of unfairness? How have you handled it?
8. Are you personally accessible to those subject to your authority?
9. Have you ever made loyalty to yourself a litmus test of your authority?
10. Have you ever admitted that those who have violated your rules had a legitimate reason for doing so?
11. Have you ever been critical of those who exercise authority over you?
12. Do you think there is a crisis of authority in today's institutions?
13. How would you assess the current crisis in authority in the Church at large?