

# An Informed Teacher Makes Better Decisions

(My Personal Perspective)

It is critically important for teachers to know their students prior to planning the details of a quality program. Granted, we all have access to cum folders, report cards and standardized test scores, and some of us are fortunate enough to see samples and examples of authentic performance assessment and student portfolios. If we're really lucky, the child's former teacher is a readily accessible colleague at the same school. There are, however, more enlightening and practice strategies that enable teachers to become better acquainted with their students as readers.

Some teachers and/or entire school staffs have elected to involve parents in their efforts. At the beginning of the year, parents and children are invited to participate in "intake" conferences where they share relevant information about the child's interests, hobbies, talents, and reading habits outside of school. This establishes a positive partnership, develops a sense of collaboration, and recognizes the role of each participant in the learning process. A mutual sharing of information, goals and concerns can make the difference in planning an effective program for all students.

Another useful strategy is evaluation through observation. Unfortunately, anything closely related to summer reading is foreign to many of our students, unless, of course, it happens to be the instructions for a new video game, the television/movie schedule, or the freeway signs to the beach. Therefore, it is necessary to allow time for children to readjust to interacting with the printed word before you make any kind of informal or formal assessment to inform your instruction. Collect and display a wide variety of reading materials for independent reading, browsing, and exploration. Your selection should allow for a wide range of expected reading levels, interests and comfort zones.

You may want to include big books, little books, graded basal readers, poetry, picture books, chapter books, library books, magazines, and newspapers.

Begin your informal assessment by asking each child to read a selection from a book of his/her choice as well as one from a grade level reading book. This is an excellent time to initiate anecdotal records or kid watching notes. During and following the oral reading and subsequent discussion and retelling, make notes to yourself on what the child chooses to read, how well he reads, and how he reads. This screening procedure can easily determine a student's general reading ability and overall attitude toward the reading process. It will also inform your curriculum planning and instruction and guide you in your selection of appropriate, leveled reading materials for you program.

There are other benefits of being a detached observer in your classroom. Roger Farr (1989) believes that ". . . your observations can provide you with estimates of how the student feels about school; how the student interacts with peers and adults; how the student approaches problem situations; to what extent the student exhibits qualities of self-confidence, curiosity, enthusiasm, self-directedness, leadership, resourcefulness, and creativity." What else can you expect to learn about your students as readers through informal observation and assessment? You should be able to determine an approximate reading level for each student, the feasibility of implementing paired reading strategies, and the possibilities for cooperative groups. Can they retell a story with supporting details? Do they recognize basic sight vocabulary? Are they using any or all of the cueing systems? Do they self-correct? Do they read with expression? All of these questions and more can be answered when you allow your students to inform you of their strengths, their interests, and their needs.

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