

Reading Workshops and Basal Reading Programs

A transcript of remarks by Lucy Calkins Founding Director, Teachers College Reading & Writing Project

Sometimes teachers say to me, “Our school has adopted a basal and we’ve been using a basal for years and years. I love the writing workshop and it’s just been unbelievably powerful for my kids as writers. Could I take the reading workshop and do that alongside of a basal reading program?” And my answer to that is, both yes and no.

Learning involves approximation and involves small steps. It’s entirely possible that you can’t abandon your basal reading program and give yourself over to reading workshop full-fledged, and that you need to figure out how you can keep the basal going in your classroom and begin to develop a lab for you and your kids where you do a miniature version of the reading workshop. Absolutely, people have done that. What I would suggest is that you take that time during your day, which you probably call something like DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time or SSR (Silent Sustained Reading), and you say to yourself, this time is going to become more instructionally rich. We know that kids grow as readers above all from doing a lot of reading. There’s study after study after study (and of course most studies echo common sense) that shows that kids who read a lot do well as readers. That independent reading time is absolutely critical to your kids’ development as readers, but it’s not enough to just sort of turn on the music and say “read.”

Instead, we do need to not only give kids time to read and give them access to the books that will make them into readers, but we also need to explicitly and deliberately teach into the work that they’re doing. My suggestion to you if you’re going to try to rope in a little of your basal reading, so it takes less time than it has been taking, and create a window of time where you’re going to try out the reading workshop, is that you begin by taking the independent reading time and use the Units of Study in Teaching Reading books to help you make that time more instructionally explicit and rich and begin to really teach skills and strategies in that time.

What you’re going to see is that the kids’ growth in reading is really explosive. We’ve had unbelievable results in thousands of schools. As your kids take off as readers, it’s going to be really clear to you that they’re taking off, not just because of your teaching, but because of their reading. All of it will be happening inside of this window of time that you’ve created. The truth of the matter is that you’re going to have the evidence that you need to be able to go to your principal or your administrator and to say, “You know, I am obligated as a professional to maximize what’s working, and I invite you to come into my classroom and see the ways in which the writing workshop and this miniature version of a reading workshop are working in ways that are beyond what we ever dreamt was possible. I need to spend more time with kids, letting them read, and teaching into that reading in ways that are really planful and explicit and deliberate.”