It is busy, sometimes overwhelming, to be a teacher. We have so much coming at us every day. With Common Core State Standards, high-stakes testing, new school initiatives, parent pressures, curriculum changes, and oh yes . . . the kids, we can end up exhausted trying to get to some invisible finish line. We run so fast at times, we forget what we are really about: teaching the students in front of us.

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It is more important than ever that we take time to stop and figure out what our kids really know and not what the standards, curriculum, and testing tell us they should know. Children's self-reflections can be a perfect way to gather this kind of information.

**Using Reading Reflections**

Every few weeks, ask your students to jot down responses to the following questions:

- **What do I do well as reader?**
- **What am I working on as a reader?**
- **What does that look or sound like when I try it out?**

Lay the reflections side by side with your conferring notes and ask if your thinking aligns with the child's thinking. How can you use the child's reflections to inform instruction? Does this child have any misconceptions about how a strategy looks and sounds?

As I discovered by using reflection sheets, my plan for the child didn't always align with what the child was able to do on his or her own. I was able to pinpoint these subtle gaps or misalignments in my teaching. The child may not have been fully comfortable with a skill or strategy, and moving on may have led to problems later.

Reading is a complicated process for beginning readers; they use many different reading systems at once. We need to help each reader know and be able to articulate one goal to focus on. I think of this as "spotlighting" one reading strategy, knowing that the children will be using many others as they work through text.

**Reflections of a First-Grade Reader**

Carmela is a confident, voracious reader who makes a teacher think, “What could I possibly teach her that she doesn't already do well?” Using Carmela's reflection sheet to guide me and taking a little time to reflect on my teaching helped me refine my goals for this reader.

Carmela writes in her reflection that she checks for understanding and asks herself who and what she is reading about. She tells me that she is working on retelling. Carmela knows that good readers stop while they are reading and check to make sure they can remember what they have read. She gets that reading has to have meaning, but does she understand what it means to retell?

Carmela's explanation shows that she focuses on story elements (as you read on, you will discover why!) and that she leaves out one of the most important aspects of recalling text—being able to identify actions that help move the story along. This important step will help her to synthesize later.

Here are some things I record as I confer with Carmela:

- **“Gave her a retelling hand to practice retelling the story across her fingers.”**
- **“Retell the story using character name, setting, problem, and solution.”**

I realize that in my haste to want to make retelling very concrete for Carmela by having her retell the story using story elements, I inadvertently ignored that she was not noticing the actions that move the story along. Carmela is so bright and willing to learn that she internalized exactly what I was teaching her very quickly, but after looking at her reflections, comparing them to my conference notes, I realize that maybe I was nudging her in the wrong direction.

When I think about myself as a reader, I don't describe the text using the story element script. I focus on what the book is about and the details I remember reading. Knowing that Carmela also lacked action in her writing, I decide that all of my nudging toward story elements isn't really helping her become an authentic reader or writer. I need to remind her to stop every so often and ask herself what just happened, thus putting more focus on actions and details. Then, instead of retelling to a story element script, she'll do what good readers do: talk about the text in her own way and in her own words. Doing quick retells as she reads would help her remember what she read and be able to talk about it.

I made this slight adjustment so that Carmela and I were back in alignment. A few conferences later, she knew she was supposed to stop and think about what was happening—the actions in the story—but she wasn't doing it independently yet. I gave her a sticky note with the words “What is happening?” to place every few pages to remind her to stop and do a quick retell. My amazing reader still had some work to do! This subtle but important realization that came from reflecting on my teaching, her reflections, and my own experience as a reader helped me clarify what Carmela needed most.

There are many more examples of the insights that can be gleaned from paying attention to what your students are telling you. They know what they know and no matter what pressures push you from behind to that finish line, you can't forget to grab the hands of the children around you and get them to that finish line too. Take the time to let your students reflect on themselves as readers, make sure you think about what you do as a reader, and then use what you learn to guide your instruction. The students will end up with a solid foundation and a love of reading!

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