

# Still Learning to Read

Teaching Students in Grades 3-6

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# Teaching Reading in the Upper Elementary Classroom

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*I've known how to read for almost four years now . . .*

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*Courtney*

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Early one year, we asked fourth graders to think about their growth as readers and to write about their reading lives. We smiled as we read Courtney's words, but they started us thinking. Courtney wrote, "I've known how to read for almost four years now . . ." Courtney was proud of how far she had come as a reader. In those four years, she had moved from being a nonreader to being a very good reader of many texts. However, we know that four years is only the beginning of her life as a reader. Courtney's comment reminds us that students in the upper elementary grades have not been reading for very long. We can't possibly expect them to have learned all that they need to know about understanding complex texts in such a short time.

Teachers in the upper elementary grades face realistic fears about the teaching of reading. First of all, many of us received relatively little training in how to teach reading. We might not feel as capable as primary teachers in this area. The public still believes that in grades K–2 we teach children how to read and in grades 3–6 our students read to learn. The implication is that at the upper elementary levels, time spent teaching children how to read is time not well spent. The assumption is that students in these grades should be focused on learning content—they should already know how to read.

Laura Robb (2002), in an article for *Scholastic Instructor*, questions our past practices and encourages us to rethink the teaching of reading in the

upper elementary grades. “For years,” she writes, “many elementary and middle school teachers have shaped their teaching practices around the deeply rooted myth of ‘Learning to Read and Reading to Learn’ . . . Although the myth and the practices associated with it do not by any means tell the entire reading story, they have influenced reading instruction in many classrooms for years. The problem? The myth and its practices aren’t working. What many researchers have now shown is that for all children, learning to read and reading to learn should be happening simultaneously and continuously, from preschool through middle school—and perhaps beyond” (p. 23).

Our older readers still have much to learn about reading. It makes sense that students in grades 3–6 need more instruction. The texts they are reading are becoming much more complex and sophisticated. As readers, they will be asked to think through complex themes, analyze characters, and respond at higher levels. For these students to grow as readers, they need more instruction. We can’t assume that the skills our students learned in grades K–2 will carry them through their lives as readers. They are ready for new skills and more independence.

As teachers of readers in the upper elementary grades, we have learned that students at this level can really benefit from our teaching skills and strategies they can use on their own as they read, rather than continuing to rely on adults to model and guide them through the reading process, as they have done in earlier grades.

## Meeting New Challenges in Reading

The children who enter our classrooms have had support and instruction that built a foundation for their early reading experiences. They are accustomed to reading books that clearly build success for the reader from the first page on. Here, for example, is the start of *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid Smelly Bus*, a book for early readers, by Barbara Park.

*My name is June B. Jones. The B stands for Beatrice. Except I don't like Beatrice. I just like B. and that's all.*

*I'm almost six years old.*

*Almost six is when you get to go to kindergarten. Kindergarten is where you go to meet new friends and not watch T.V.*

*My kindergarten is the afternoon kind.*

*Today was my first day of school. I'd been to my room before, though. Last week, Mother took me there to meet my teacher. (p. 1)*

It's easy for early readers to understand what they read because the framework for the story is clearly presented on the first page or two. But they meet new challenges in reading as they enter the upper elementary grades. The stories they read unfold more slowly, and readers need persistence and have to be comfortable with some ambiguity until the pieces of the story fit together. New complexities arise in nonfiction as well.

Last year, we worked with a small group of sixth-grade students. These children were having trouble choosing and sticking with books. We watched them, and we realized that they usually chose books by the cover illustration and the title. They didn't seem to know how else to preview a book for selection. So we led them through a preview of *Flying Solo* by Ralph Fletcher. This book is always a favorite with students in the upper elementary grades: it's a book about what sixth graders do on a day when the substitute teacher doesn't show up!

We asked the children to look at the title and illustration on the cover. Then we had them look at the blurb on the back of the book, the review excerpts they found there, and the first page of the story. They looked at each of these features one at a time and talked with us about what they learned from each. The students then began to piece together what they knew about the story before they began to read the book. After drawing their attention to each feature, we asked the children whether or not this looked like a book that would be interesting to them. After taking a look at the cover, all of the children decided they were eager to read the book. They remained eager to read the book after reading the blurb. They were even more anxious to read the book after having read the reviews. At this point, we expected that these students would be fighting over the few copies of *Flying Solo* that we had in the classroom.

But then the students read the first page with us. We were shocked: the entire group of children changed their minds and no longer seemed interested in *Flying Solo*. Rebecca suggested a teacher should read the book aloud to them instead and the others agreed. The whole group immediately shut down and was ready to abandon the book.

What had happened? We knew that the text wasn't too difficult and that the children had a good idea of what would happen in the story from the previewing we had done. So we talked for a while about what had changed their minds. After considerable discussion, we realized that the children had expected the substitute to be a no-show on the very first page of the story. When that didn't happen, they lost confidence, knowing that they would have to get past the "setup" in order to get to the "real story." It wasn't until page 26 when the students in *Flying Solo* realized they would be without a teacher for the day. Although the actual text level wasn't too hard for them, the nature of the first few chapters made the book difficult.

For these struggling readers, twenty-six pages was a *lot* of reading—far too much to "get through" before the story became exciting to them. They wanted

to read the book, but they didn't have the stamina to read to page 26 on their own. A few students asked if they could just start reading on page 26. Others begged us to read the first twenty-five pages aloud to them. Because some of the students had not had many successful experiences with reading, they didn't have enough trust in books to know that what they read on the first twenty-six pages would be critical throughout the story. These children were reading the Junie B. Jones books just a few years earlier. Books like the ones in the Junie B. Jones series set up the entire story on the first page. Students who are accustomed to reading books that set up the story on the first page are confused and frustrated when the first page of a book does not do that. They need instruction to learn to read books that are not set up so quickly.

When we think about our own reading, we recall that sometimes stories start out differently from what we'd expected; yet these are often some of the best books we've read. As is the case with *Flying Solo*, we need to get to know the characters and become familiar with other aspects of the story first. We know that the decisions the author has made about the beginning of the story are deliberate. At the beginning of a book, readers begin to piece together information that will help them understand the rest of the story. As experienced readers, we know that there will be parts of a book that don't

move as quickly as others. But we know how to get engaged in a book and how to stick with one once we have picked it. We have also learned that sometimes parts that seem unimportant or slow moving can be critical to the story. We love the beginning of books. We love to figure out how the pieces will fit together and where the author is going with the story. From the start, we come up with questions, predictions, and inferences, and we become fascinated as the story unfolds. Our students don't necessarily have the experience to know how to do these things. We need to support them in their reading until they can sustain interest and understanding on their own.

There are several things we could have done to support the sixth-grade readers in our earlier example. At first, we thought that maybe *Flying Solo* wasn't the right choice for them. But because they were truly interested in the book, we came to realize that they just needed a bit of support. Their suggestions that they skip the first twenty-five pages or that we read the first twenty-five pages to them helped us to see that their enthusiasm for the book was still strong. We knew that if we could help these students

### **Class Chart Brainstormed by Fourth Graders**

#### **When do you know you are hooked on a book?**

- Time goes really fast.
- Can't stop reading.
- Can't put the book down.
- Relaxed—you have a good feeling.
- You are doing a lot of thinking without knowing it.
- You *have* to know what happens next.
- You can see and feel everything that's going on—like you're there.
- You want to buy the book.
- It gets exciting.
- You are trying to figure something out.
- You want to read it again.
- You keep asking yourself questions.

#### **How do you read differently when you are not hooked? (Can be at the beginning of the book or in the middle of the book.)**

- Hope for exciting times/hope that it gets better.
- Work hard to pay attention so you don't think of anything else.
- More predicting—makes you want to keep reading.
- Motivate yourself.
- Read it like it's a hard book (because it is not interesting).
- Remind yourself that a good part is probably coming.
- Trust other people who have read it.