Best Practices for Independent Reading

Summary: Teachers have many different ways of using their independent reading blocks. In an article for *The Reading Teacher*, a Illinois State University professor observed a number of master teachers to draw conclusions about broad, research-backed best practices when it comes to independent reading.

Practical Applications

The author drew conclusions about a variety of best practices and gives classroom examples:

- **Student empowerment and teacher support** – These master teachers managed to maintain a balance between giving students choices and still providing guidance.
    - Book choice – the teachers all gave students the chance to choose their own books and follow their interests, but provided instruction on how to choose right-level books
    - Behavior support – the teachers modeled being an effective independent reader (choosing a spot, staying focused, using behaviors that increase reading stamina) but then released the students to choose their own spot, etc.
- **Focus on reading *growth*** – These teachers maintain an outcome for the independent reading time (improved reading skills) while also wanting students to increase their love for reading.
    - Student accountability – the teachers give students some sort of guiding question to consider throughout their reading time ("write a description of a character") and then provide opportunities for students to share with peers or the teacher; other teachers used logs or charts to track progress.
    - Reading instruction – the teachers all found ways to integrate independent reading into their broader reading instruction, whether modeling, conducting small-group lessons, or taking the time to assess student's independent reading skills and provide feedback. Notably, none of the teachers used this time for their own independent reading.
- **Student-based programs** – These teachers were willing to adapt the traditional structures of independent reading to meet the needs of their specific students
    - Oral reading – the teachers were willing to allow whisper-reading, especially for younger students or struggling readers.
    - Although encouraging independent reading as a practice, the teachers were also sometimes willing to allow peer interactions to support each others' reading; at times, the teachers deliberately grouped students so a stronger reader could assist a less strong reader.

Conclusion and Citation

Though each teacher runs independent reading differently, there are certain best practices, backed up by research, which seem to be nearly universal in their effectiveness.

Sanden, S. "Independent Reading: Perspectives and Practices of Highly Effective Teachers." *The Reading Teacher 66.3* (Nov. 2012) pp. 222-231. http://bit.ly/14bWXJU (subscription only).