

Confessions of a Kindergarten Teacher

By Trish Prentice

Week 3

Tuesday

Okay, it's a new week. I'm relaxed, smiling and anxious to get started. Over the long weekend, I tried to get some rest. But in those quiet moments, I found my thoughts drifting back to my students and all the experiences we've shared the past two weeks. Without realizing it, I'm brainstorming a different way to relate to this student or figuring out a new process that may solve that problem. Just a little bit of distance gives me a new perspective that can make all the difference.

The goal for the week, in my mind, is clear. I want Word Work to be completely up and running. I'm choosing to add Word Work instead of Work on Writing because the students' stamina for writing isn't long enough yet to last an entire rotation time. I want to avoid having children sitting at their table saying, "I'm finished" before the chimes even ring.

Last week we had a "get to know the word tools" session. Yet, I feel the need to have another practice session with the tools AND the folder of words they will be using. At this point, everyone gets the same "heart words," mandated by our district, plus a list of class names. I have assessed the children on the sight words and a few children can already read them. Yet, most of those children are not using them in their writing journals. So for now, the lists are the same.

Today I also changed all the books the children have to read in their suitcases. This is a chore! I can't wait to turn that over to the children. Next week we'll start that process. As I suspected, the student's stamina was high because they were so engaged with all their new books.

Ah, I'm glad to see that behavior, as a whole, is settling down again. What a difference a weekend can make. It finally quit raining so we're off to recess. I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

I'm sure that teachers in other grade levels get tired of hearing how hard it is to teach Kindergarten. We K-teachers love to say how teaching little ones is "different." But truly, it is. Everything is so brand new to them and to their parents too. We have to talk about so much, like aiming for the water in the toilet, not the floor or it's time to get a tissue and blow. You may not believe this, but every year on the first chilly day some child hands me their jacket because they have never, not one time, put their coat on by themselves! My hubby says that to teach Kindergarten successfully, it has to be a calling. I think he's right. So smile at a Kindergarten teacher in the hallway. Give her a piece of chocolate after school. It's the little things that count. And Kindergarten teachers love little things, especially little people.

Wednesday

Word Work, here we come! We did a great job of writing our I-Chart together. It seems like once you make one I-Chart, the others practically write themselves! Now it's time for two rotations. Yay! The children get to choose what they do first. About half of the children do Read to Self while the other half do Work Work. Then we'll switch.

Let's begin. I am so excited to use my newly decorated clipboard, with a fresh check-in sheet, that I forgot to have someone model word work!!! Oops. Boy was that a mistake. Not one person remembered to get their word folder before they got their word work tools. Let's back up and try this again. Much better next time, about half remembered. ☺ I guess we still need a lot more practice.

During a mini-lesson today we sang a fun jazzy version of the ABC song focusing on letter sounds. I know from experience that many children come to Kindergarten saying the letter sounds wrong. They often add an "uh" to the end of the consonant sound. For example /t/ becomes "tuh," /s/ becomes "suh," /b/ becomes "buh" and on and on. I teach the children the importance of using the pure sound. We make a chopping motion as we say the sound without the "uh." The children love that part.

Time to introduce two more sight words, "is" and "it". We compare how they are alike and different. I'm moving pretty quickly on adding sight words to our word wall. I know some children will absorb them and some won't. But when the words pop up in our poem of the week, it seems logical to focus on them in context and add them to our wall. I can always slow down and revisit words for the children who need extra practice.

Here's a great tip I stumbled upon by accident. I have letter stamps in each word work toolbox. Last year I went to an office supply store and bought black stamp pads. I found that many times the children's fingers were covered with ink all day even after washing. This year I decided to get new washable stamp pads from my local craft store. They are made especially for children and it shows. The ink really comes off! When I purchased the pads, the store only had ones with blue and green ink. This ended up being a lucky thing because my carpet has green and blue flecks. When the children accidentally get a little ink on the carpet from the stamps, it blends in. So look for stamp pad colors that match your room.

Thursday

One of my favorite times of Daily 5 is the picture book and accompanying comprehension lesson that begins our language block. When I teach CAFÉ strategies, I know that I'm sharing something the children can use for years to come. Today I wanted to introduce Connect to the Story. Lately, I've been working on adding hand movements to each strategy, similar to Flip the Sound. For Connect to the Story, we made fists with our hands and moved them together until they touched. The children caught on very quickly and were excited to do the movement with me. It's another way to reach various learning styles. Now I wish I knew sign language.

I would love to start pulling groups but I'm resisting the urge. I want the children's Daily 5 work habits to be so deeply ingrained that I could walk out into the hallway momentarily to speak to another adult and the children would not even know. When the focus on their work is that intense, then I can meet with individuals and groups. I'll be able to give my full attention to the children I'm working with because the rest of the class is on task.

Mr. Noisy is still noisy this week, but he's happy to sit in the art center, facing the wall. That helps a bit. We're finding that his talking to himself is becoming white noise. We all ignore it. Funny thing is, he's doing exactly what he's supposed to be doing, he's just describing out loud as he goes. I hear him retelling stories and spelling heart words. He talks about the pictures in the book and says letter names and sounds. Actually, I think this must be part of his learning style. In my heart, I know he's doing the best he can.

I met with several teachers who are new to Daily 5 this year after school. They are experiencing some anxiety about how it's all going to work. I know it can be uncomfortable to try something new. If you are used to jumping right in to guided reading groups, it's easy to feel a step behind at this moment. I assure them that we're going slowly now, so we can go fast later. But here's one trick I use when I'm feeling overwhelmed, I teach a new reading strategy. It is so powerful to see the children talking about their thinking. You can sometimes literally see the wheels turning in their heads. It reminds me why CAFÉ is the best path for my students and also for me.

Friday

One goal I have for myself this year is to take better notes in my lesson plan book about how things are progressing. I'm okay at getting the lesson plans on paper, but I'm not so good at adding the changes I make at the last minute. I write down what I'm going to do, not what I actually did. I know it would be helpful to write down the children's reaction to a book or an activity as well. I'm sure that many teachers do this instinctively. I wish I did, but I don't. I'm always looking for what needs to be done next, not looking backwards. My sense of urgency is always stuck on high, so I'm scrambling to get ready for the next thing. But I'm finding that relying on my memory, from year to year, is getting to be unreliable at best. Maybe a fancy new clipboard would help...my new answer to all problems.

Ben update: Cheryl (my Daily 5 teaching buddy) told me she asked Ben (her son, who is in my class) what his favorite thing about school is. He immediately answered recess. I know 99 out of 100 little boys would say that. I'm not offended; I like recess too. But she then asked, "What's your favorite learning time?" He said, "Read to Self because I LOVE to read books." Ben is an emergent reader. He believes he's a reader because he is reading the pictures and some of the heart words. Thank you 3 Ways to Read a Book! I love his confidence; it will serve him well.

I'm thrilled to have introduced choice in the mix this week. It makes all the difference to the children. Even if it's just one choice, this or that, it's still sharing control and the children respond. I'm also impatient and want to get moving on Work on Writing, but I know we still need more practice on Word Work, so we'll stay the course on that for another week. Patience, patience, patience.