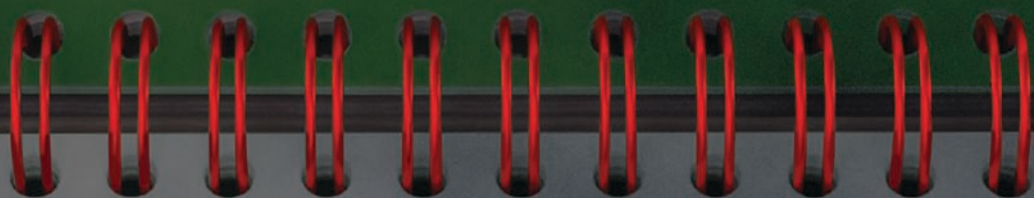




Notebook Connections

Strategies for the Reader's Notebook

Buckner



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Routledge

Aimee Buckner

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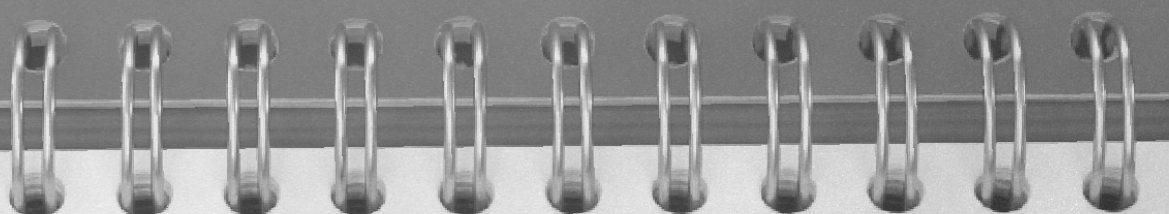
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For the teachers and staff
at Brookwood Elementary School
(1997-2008)





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Chapter 1

Reading, Writing, and Harvesting Hope

It was the middle of the school year, and my class and I had grown quite comfortable with each other—sharing stories and ideas in reading and writing workshops. The class had come together as a community of caring students—with one or two glitches along the way. But it was the time of year that real conversations were happening about what we were reading and writing.

I had just finished reading *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* by Kathleen Krull (2003), a picture book biography of Chavez and how he led a statewide, peaceful protest in California to gain rights for migrant workers. It is a beautifully written story of his life, one that I knew was a life my middle-class, southern students would not have experienced.

The children were writing on sticky notes, collecting facts, questions, and responses from the story (Harvey 1998). I gave the children time to post their notes on a class chart before we began our conversation. The fact column went routinely without much ado. It was when we got to the questions and responses that I started to fall under the spell that teachers feel when things go way beyond the planned lesson.

Questions included the following:

How did they live without a bathroom in their hut?

How can you share a bathroom with so many people?

What kind of work did the children do?

How does a family live off of five dollars a week?

Were they hungry?

Were they scared?

Why couldn't they speak Spanish in school?

Did he know Martin Luther King, Jr.?

These questions went beyond simple comprehension. My students were trying to grapple with this story in which they had no schema to pull from. They were trying to connect their own life to the story, but the connections were lost in the gap between their life and that of Cesar Chavez.

As we discussed the possible answers to these questions, our understanding of the difference between our lifestyle and Chavez's deepened, allowing for a deeper understanding of the story as well. On further reflection, though, I realized that these were not just readers' questions, but questions of writers. We could research the answers to these questions and write a report or an information guide for the text. We could also put these questions in our writer's notebooks and allow ourselves to wonder how they might be answered, imagining how these things would look in our life today: What would it be like to share a bathroom with everyone in our family? Or, What would it be like to have my very own bathroom and not have to share with anyone?

When our discussion moved to the response column, there were "typical" student responses like, "That is sad he couldn't speak Spanish in school," or, "I wouldn't want to share the bathroom with other families." But sprinkled in these responses were thoughts that revealed deeper thinking.

- * *I felt sad when the teacher hung the sign on his neck that said, "I am a clown. I speak Spanish." It was like when the teacher put the red sweater on the girl's desk in "Eleven."*
- *This story is like the article we read about children picking bananas. Is this story from today or a long time ago? Is this still happening?*

- *Cesar Chavez reminds me of Martin Luther King, Jr. He is a smart man who believes in peace, not violence. Why aren't there white people like that?*
- *I don't know what it is like to be poor. I'm lucky, I guess.*
- *This story makes me want to cry and laugh. I can't believe it is really true.*
- *This is like that article we read about the children who have to work picking bananas instead of going to school.*

These are fourth-grader responses? I couldn't believe it. I hadn't planned on this type of deeper thinking or the connections the children were making between texts. But what does a teacher do with this kind of reading comprehension? The children obviously understood the story and were synthesizing the information to create new understanding. But when they came to write, I was disappointed by their responses.

Today we read, Harvesting Hope by Kathleen Krull. It was really good. It was about a boy who was living in Mexico and had to move to the United States. Then he had to go to work picking grapes. His family didn't have a home anymore. They moved from farm to farm to work for a little money. Then he grew up and got other workers to stop working until farmers treated them fairly. He walked through all of California to the statehouse to get someone to listen to him. Cesar Chavez was a great man like Martin Luther King, Jr. I thought it was sad he couldn't speak Spanish in school. I wonder what it would be like to lose my home and have to go to work like he did.

Entries like this didn't reflect the nature or depth of the conversation we had in class. After spending a full hour on that book and related conversation, students' written responses didn't seem to capture the significance of what I thought they should have learned. And, as a teacher

faced with time constraints, an overloaded curriculum, and ridiculous pass/fail tests looming in the months ahead, I had to take stock: Was I using my class time wisely if the written responses did not capture the essence of student understanding as verbalized in the class conversation?

Deep down, I know these conversations that take place after reading beautiful texts like *Harvesting Hope* are ones that I'll refer to throughout the year. Because of the rich conversation, the book becomes an anchor text that students will revisit over and over again. But the talk didn't spill over into the students' written responses like I wanted, not yet.

So, Where Is the Hope?

As teachers, our anxiety to do well and to teach the curriculum while pretending not to be bothered by all of the testing that takes place sends hope into hiding. But when I sat down and thought about what I know is true about how children learn, I realized a few things. First, teaching students how to read and comprehend what they're reading is complicated. It's not like teaching writing, where the writing process is so similar for most writers. With reading, you have to consider fluency, comprehension strategies, word work, plot structure, literary elements, different genres, and everything that is lumped into the "skills" category. Second, students need time. They need time to read without the interruptions of sticky notes and thinkmarks. They need time to develop and fine-tune their own thinking processes while reading. They need time to talk about books and write about all that stuff that goes on in their head while reading. And third, children will not write well when they are overwhelmed or bored. If I have students writing in every subject, every day about deep, thoughtful topics that take a lot of brain power, it stands to reason that nine-year-olds will get tired and not write well from day to day. Or if I have a standard format for them to write to me about their books, the writing becomes formulaic and automatic with buzzwords to keep me thinking they're thinking when we both know they're not. I'm embarrassed at how many times I was thrilled with responses to literature because the student used the word *infer* or

visualize. When I look back, the entries may actually resemble a traditional spelling assignment to write the words in a sentence: *I visualized the story. I inferred and I was right.*

When looking at this and at what my students need to know for “the test,” it’s no wonder I didn’t see the hope. But it’s there. Hope, that feeling that what we want to accomplish in our classrooms with our students can be done, is something I have to keep in the forefront of my mind as I plan. It keeps me looking ahead at what my students can do rather than what they’re not doing. Hope, for me, is keeping focused on the goal—lifetime readers and writers—and continuing to work toward that goal, rather than worrying about the obstacles that loom ahead. Hope is immersing my students in quality literature and the many reading and comprehension strategies that they can learn to use effectively. It’s giving kids time to develop their strategies for reading and comprehension and learning to use them automatically. Hope is what starts as a feeling and a belief, about my students as learners, and grows into reality. It slowly changes from a vision in my mind to experiences in my classroom as we tend to the complicated act of reading with anticipation and joy rather than dread and the threat of a looming test.

Strategies That *Do* Work

I’m a lifetime member of Weight Watchers. It’s true. And, unfortunately, just because I know how to lose weight and keep it off doesn’t mean I do. But when I gain weight, I think about what I know. I know the point system works for me. I know I can’t eat peanut butter with every meal. I know that I need to drink water. But actually following through with all of this is a very different story. It’s that way with teaching. I know a lot about how to teach writing, and I know a lot about how to teach reading. What took a while was figuring out how to connect what I know about teaching these two subjects to affect student achievement.

I know that keeping a writer’s notebook as part of one’s writing process helps writers think and plan their next writing project. I’ve seen it work with