

Teacher Commentary Transcript

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PRIOR TO THE LESSON

J: Tell us a little about your class and school.

P: I teach second grade at New Prospect Elementary School, Inman, SC, in Spartanburg District 1. I have a wide range of levels of readers in my classroom. With Fountas and Pinnell we're looking at everything from an H-I through an O.

We're also a Title I school, so many of my students come from various different backgrounds as well.

J: You're working now on a unit where you're combining your English/Language Arts standards, your science and your social studies together in an integrated fashion. Can you tell us a bit about why you chose to do it that way?

P: I think it's really important for students to hear information more than once. Especially when I reflect about my teaching I did early in my career, you think you taught it once, and it's like a checklist, and it's really not like that with learning, they have to be exposed to it several times. So we've already discussed different regions of the US and the cultural aspects of it, so I thought this would be a perfect way to not only review that social studies content, but also get us started in our severe weather content that we have to learn as well. I think when you're combining that, and showing different resources that we're using, and teaching those comprehension strategies, I think that overall it helps the child really understand and apply the knowledge that they've learned, and not just memorize it for that short period of time and kind of move on.

J: So the thing with the regions, they learned the regions, but now coming back and learning about the weather in some of the regions, it's going to sink in more what some of the differences are.

P: And even just using the terminology, that vocabulary. When we first started talking about that, some of my students were struggling with what it means to be the regions of the US, and how SC is not its own continent or country. These are very difficult concepts for second graders, and it really takes a lot of exposure for them to really understand what that means.

J: You organized this whole unit in a reading workshop method. So talk a little about that.

P: I really like to provide a little mini-lesson. I have a lot of kinesthetic learners and their attention span is very short. I usually have about a 10 – 15 minute window with them, so I really like to get across my mini-lesson and then break them out into groups. The purpose of that is that I feel like at this age students are more willing to talk to each other and have conversations in a small group setting as opposed to with everybody. It also provides me more time to work with that small group and really be able to listen to them, to understand their thinking process, and then to be able to help them.

MODEL 1

J: So what were you trying to accomplish in the mini-lesson?

P: In the first mini-lesson, we were looking at just gathering facts, and facts that students would find interesting. It's easy to open up an informational text and just pull one fact, but I was trying to focus on having them figure out what would be considered a wow fact. And when we talk about wow facts, we mean a fact that you would want to run off and share with your brother or sister or mom or dad, something that someone would be really interested in learning. And I wanted them to also, in that same lesson, understand that we use multiple resources when we research, we don't just rely on one

book or e-book or article to gather that information.

J: Talk a little bit about the texts, the different kinds of texts and the way you chose to model for the kids and chose texts for the lesson.

P: For modeling for this unit, I really wanted to make it clear that researchers use a variety of resources. I think if you model and you just use the same big book, or the same book and you complete your task, then kids think, oh, that's all I have to do, I just need to use one resource. So I really wanted to show them that they were going to have to go through and look at all the different resources and then choose a couple that they wanted.

J: And then you had different kinds of resources, right, you had some books,

P: We had traditional books, we had articles I printed off from the internet, we had some websites, we had some E-books, lots of different varieties of books, in order for them to learn that you learn information not only from paper but all types of multi-media as well.

J: You had a couple of U-Tube videos

P: Yes, videos. I think it also engages them. I knew that when we did the baskets, the first thing they would do was pull the e-books out, pull the I-Pads, I knew that. That's fine, that's the type of world we live in today and that is a resource, they just have to learn how to use the resource efficiently.

J: How did you gather your texts? Where did they come from?

P: Most of the books came from our school library. I also went out into our public library and gathered some resources there.

My school, we're currently investing in a lot of e-books, and we're fortunate enough to have I-Pads so I was able to have a class I-pad set so each child could at least have a couple of I-pads in their basket as well. There are also a couple of web resources. One of the big resources I like to look at is called, Weather Wiz Kids.com and it's created by a meteorologist who had a second grader, and I think her second grader couldn't read anything, so this meteorologist created this website, and it's fantastic. My kids were using that today as their article. So it kind of puts all this severe weather in kid language. So finding resources that they'd be able to use and read and understand.

J: And then within the books, it seemed like you had a wide range of reading levels as well.

P: I did. I pulled all of their groups, had reading levels from I-O, and you might have heard, I had some students say that this book is so easy or this book is too hard. The purpose of that is I really wanted my students to understand that even if they're not able to read an entire book, they can still read an informational text. They can still look at the illustrations, photographs and look at the captions underneath. That's the great thing about informational text, you do not have to read it from beginning to end in order to gather information, you can pick and choose what you want to learn.

TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENT/COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

J: And the groups, they had had some input into the groups?

P: Prior to starting the unit, we reviewed the different regions and talked about things we had talked about in the social studies unit. Then I asked them for their first and second choice of which region they were more specifically interested in learning about.

P: Luckily I was able to give everybody their first or second choice.

J: And then did you make the groups- what else did you take into account?

P: I also took into account the different reading levels of my students. I made sure that especially since there was such a wide range of levels of the books, I thought about that as well in putting the groups together. So a student that's reading at a F&P level I might have been paired with a student who can read at a level O, but that's OK because part of this inquiry process is to have to be able to communicate and work together. So I think their having conversations with each other even if one child can't read all the words in that book, he's still learning information from another child.

INDEPENDENT/COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE 1

J: A lot of your lesson depends on your going around and conferring with the students in their groups. So tell us about how you do that conferring. What you were learning about them, what you're thinking about as you work to support them.

P: I always have them start the conversation, so it might be me prompting them, "Tell me what you've read so far," "tell me about what severe weather you've noticed in this region." I try to have them get the conversation started. I still have students who are very hesitant to do that, they still want me to take ownership and take charge of it, and they've realized that I will sit back. I give a lot of wait time, and I think that's really important for kids, because you're learning, and when you're learning, it doesn't come as quickly as maybe they'd like it to, and it's easy for sometimes us as teachers to feel, well I'll just jump in and help them. But there's a lot to be said for if you give them that wait time and just let them think.

J: Any things you particularly noticed as you were working with them?

P: One thing I did notice when we were doing the research about the severe weather for each region, one thing I realized very quickly was that a lot of my students understand how to use the I-pad or go in and out of articles and change the e-book that I had placed up for them. And I realized they were going to get confused. I had one group and they started talking about they had sandstorms, I think it was the Northeast, sandstorms in the Northeast, and I said, no, wait, you've gone to the wrong place.

P: So that's one thing I would change next time. I would have to make it really clear, you are not moving away from this e-book, if you get lost I'll come help you and get you back where you need to be.

J: Somebody had the sound in Japanese, I noticed.

P: Yes, one of my students switched it over to a different language, I don't know how she did that, but they manage to do it every single time.

J: But the trade-off is they get the experience of using these materials –

P: And that's OK, it's messy. An inquiry-based project is a very messy process and it should be. So there are little hiccups in the road, and I think that's important, you learn from these as well.

INDEPENDENT/COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE 2

J: Did anything puzzle you about the kids today? Were you surprised by anything?

P: I was surprised at how many of them still seemed a little hesitant to think out loud. We talk a lot about the importance of thinking out loud, but I could see it in their eyes that they were thinking about something, but they still weren't quite sure. I think doing a unit like this reminds me that this is a process that you have to be constantly working on. It's not something that you teach and then your children become fantastic researchers, it's something that you have to consistently develop, which makes sense why they have it in all the standards, all the way up through twelfth grade, because it's not something that you can just teach in second grade and be over and done with. I think that doing a unit like this is very humbling for me as a teacher, I think, OK, this is stuff we have to work on.

J: And that whole process that you do, of giving them time, even telling them, "I can see you're thinking, talk to me out loud," I think those are the ways to help them over that hump. I heard when some of them said, "It's hard" and you said, "Yes, research is learning things that you didn't already know"

P: It's not always easy.

P: (Looking at student work): I was proud of him, because he, in school in general, is not a risk-taker, in fact he would much rather just sit off to the side and not participate at all. I was really pleased that he was making attempts to actually get some information down. He has a really hard time making that

transfer into writing. He doesn't like to write, and he will tell you that the moment you meet him. So for him, this is a huge accomplishment. You can tell he was interested in this topic and he was willing to do this writing, when ordinarily, that is not his cup of tea.

"They can pick up cars."

I bet you that's dangerous – "Dangerous things can happen with tornadoes."

Interestingly, he put "Tornadoes will not hit people." So I wonder if he read something about their safety with that.

J: So this is a child who could be much more verbal in explaining it than getting it down on paper.

P: So it's important – and that's the great thing about doing a reading workshop approach to this unit – is that you can not only get at students who have a strong writing skill, but may be more developed in oral language. And I think that's really important for kids to know, that you may prefer to say it than write it down, but you're still getting great information, and I think that's really important for kids to know, because unfortunately when we assess, we're looking at what you put down on paper. I think with the inquiry unit, it's much more advanced than that. You can actually see what they were thinking by taking the time to have a conversation with them.

J: And where they realize it's their thinking that matters, not necessarily the form in which it comes out. Their comprehension is all about what they are understanding, one way or the other.

SHARE

J: At the end of the lesson, they came back to share. Talk about your goals in the sharing and how you tried to have it meet your goals.

P: Some of my students are more comfortable sharing in front of the group, and that's OK, but at the same time I want to teach that they need to be able to communicate with others. So we do a lot of think/pair/share and that sort of strategy that Stephanie Harvey talks about, where you're actually having a conversation with somebody, in a large group setting, but you're just telling one person. That way I can insure that everybody has had a moment to share something, because I think when you share you'll absorb more and understand it better.

I think children are naturally inquisitive and they want to share things, so if I provide that time at the end of every lesson, they feel like they've had that opportunity, even if it wasn't in the whole group setting.

J: And I heard lots of the language of new learning, of "I didn't know that" or "isn't this cool" so I think they appreciated having that opportunity.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

J: So tell us about some of the things you do to make your lesson go smoothly – any organizational tips that you have for teachers.

P: I love having a long range plan for these units. I think it's really important to have your whole unit laid out. The great thing about an inquiry-based unit is that it can change as you're going through it, but I like to have an idea – to have the end in mind. That's really important to me. I have to make sure I'm addressing my South Carolina standards and I know what my goal is at the end so I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. So I would definitely recommend having a layout for it as well. I would also recommend gathering resources at least a week in advance to when you're doing a unit. Even as early as today, we had one of the e-books, we had downloaded an app on all the I-pads and it was causing us to have to re-log in to all of the e-books. Some of my kids noticed that today and they would turn it on and it would need a user name and password. So little things can occur, and it's important to make sure you have enough resources.

J: Were there any things as you were doing the lesson

that you thought oh, maybe next time I would do it differently?

P: I had a lot of kids come and ask me how many facts do I need, and I probably should have said something like we're not doing a number on facts. That just goes back to their way of thinking, I have to have this many to get it right, and I probably should have set that precedent with them as well.

J: So where is that leading? Where are we going next with all of this?

P: In the second lesson, I really wanted to challenge them, and I wanted them to focus more on now that they have these facts, what questions or thoughts are going through their minds. This is a very difficult concept for second graders to do, and I think just starting to have them think about well, what does this mean, or what would be the effect of this, or how did this come about, I think those are all really great starts to this inquiry process. It really helps them with their research, because then they're able to hone in on what they're looking for.

J: And think about it more deeply than if they were just finding a quick little answer

P: And they absorb it more too. If I just said I want you to find how many lightning storms occur in a day, they could easily go find that in the book, but they probably wouldn't remember it. But I think when they are writing these facts and they are further thinking about them or wondering about these facts, it really helps them learn that information more, as opposed to, I answered it, and I'm moving on.

J: It becomes more theirs, too, than just the teacher's

P: Yes, they have ownership of it.

J: Here's her question, I gave her her answer,

P: Now I'm done!

P: What we're going to do next, now that they've researched about the different types of severe weather in these regions, we're going to start investigating more in-depth, specific types of severe weather. So later on we're going to get to choose which severe weather topic they're most interested in learning, and then we're going to go and examine why it's important to gather facts from a variety of resources. So for example if you're researching about tornadoes, why do I not want to just pull from this book. What information is the same in this book and this e-book, what information is different, why is that important to note? Or do you have conflicting information? I know sometimes you read a book and it says this about this, and then you read another book and it says the complete opposite. I think that's important for students to be aware of, just because it says it in this one book doesn't mean that that's it, and there are no other conflicting facts. So that's what we're going into next. Once we've done that, we're going to eventually investigate, we've learned all these specific facts about this particular storm, we're going to create how-to videos and these videos are going to focus on the safety features needed in order to stay safe in that specific type of severe weather.

J: And the unit will last about –

P: Depending on the amount of research days, anywhere between 8-10 school days.

J: So then I guess the other thing that's great to watch over the course of the inquiry is as the kids gain more background knowledge of the topic, do they then go deeper because they know more.

J: Any other thoughts to share?

P: I definitely want to make a note that sometimes we as teachers we judge how well a unit is going based on how well our higher level readers are doing. And I think it's important to note that those students with a higher reading level sometimes struggle with this a little more, and not to let that get you down or think that I haven't done this right or give up on the unit. Sometimes you have to go through the mud to get to the other side. And I think that keeping that in mind is very powerful and just listening to your kids and making sure that you are trying to understand what's going on inside their brains and encouraging them to voice that with others.