



DEBBIE MILLER

What's the  
**BEST**  
That Could  
Happen?

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New Possibilities  
for Teachers  
& Readers

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For Eliot, Finley, Frankie, Cora,  
and children everywhere—  
may your brilliance, goodness, and  
light shine forever bright.





## CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* xii

*Introduction: We Can Do This* xiv

Asking Beautiful Questions xiv

Paying Attention to What Doesn't Feel Right xv

Asking, "What If?": Creating Space for Possibility xvi

### CHAPTER ONE

## What If Each Day's Teaching Focused on Children's Agency? 1

*Second Grader Emiliano Tries a New Strategy*

Finding Our Way to a Beautiful Question: The Disengaged Child 1

What's the Best That Could Happen? Agency Fosters Engagement 2

Imagining New Possibilities for a Child 9

Conferring to Support Access and Choice 11

Paying Attention During Independent Work Time 14

Conferring to Inquire and to Offer Community 20

Postscript 23



## CHAPTER TWO

# What If We Made What Children Make and Do Our Priority? 25

### *First Graders Remember and Retell*

- Finding Our Way to a Beautiful Question: Workshop Planning 25
- What's the Best That Could Happen? Meaningful Work 30
- Planning for What Children Will Do First 33
- Planning for What Teachers Will Do During Work Time 42
- Figuring Out What to Teach 47
- Playing with the Sequence 52
  - The Classic 56
  - The Liftoff 57
  - The Have-a-Go 58
  - The Let-Them-Read 59
  - The Skinny 60
  - The Double-Time 61
  - The Shift-the-Share 62
- Taking Ownership 63



## CHAPTER THREE

# What If Our Classroom Environment and Routines Offered Choice? 67

### *Fourth-Grade Boys Develop Their Own Routine*

- Finding Our Way to a Beautiful Question: Frustration over Supplies 67
- What's the Best That Could Happen? Managing Their Own Work 70
- Being Intentional in Our Language 73
- Cocreating Routines 82
  - Pencils 83
  - Sticky Notes 86
- Where Children Read, Write, and Talk During Work Time 92
- Designing Agentive Environments 94



## CHAPTER FOUR

# What If We Owned the Units We Are Asked to Teach? 101

*Kindergartners Explore the Characters of Mo Willems in a “MOseum”*

*Second Graders Learn Economics Through the Perspective of Consumers*

- Finding Our Way to a Beautiful Question: The Units We’re Given 101
- Are These the Right Goals? 108
- Which Texts Work Best? 114
- How Will We Know When We’re Done? 118
- How Can This Happen Within Daily Workshop? 124
- What’s the Best That Could Happen? Perfection in Imperfection 131

## CHAPTER FIVE

# What If Read-Aloud Sustained Children’s Independent Thinking? 135

*Kindergartners and First and Third Graders Bring Their Thinking About Books to the World*

- Finding Our Way to a Beautiful Question: The Wisdom in Children’s Thinking 135
- Expecting Brilliance 139
  - Please, No Pullouts 146
- Finding Time for Read-Aloud 150
- Reading Aloud for Joy 153
- Teachers and Children Thinking Aloud 156
  - Thinking Aloud as We Read 156
  - Inviting Children to Think Aloud 157
  - Inviting Children into the Story 158
  - Listening in to What They Say 160
  - Handing Read-Alouds off to Kids 160
- What’s the Best That Could Happen? Being Inspired to Act 162

*Conclusion: In Pursuit of Beautiful Questions 173*

*References 182*

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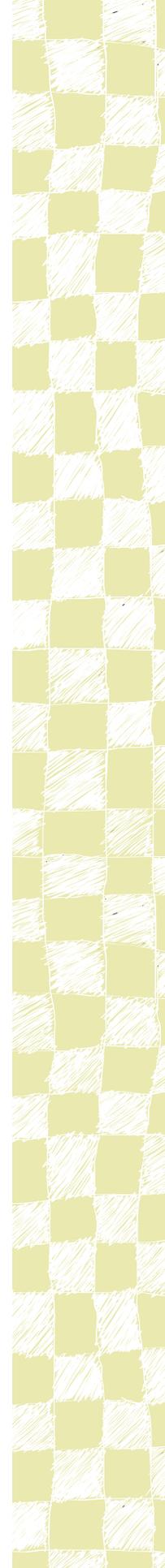
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## INTRODUCTION

# We Can Do This

### Asking Beautiful Questions

Impressed by the innovations around him, journalist Warren Berger decided to investigate how designers, inventors, and engineers came up with ideas to solve problems. In his inquiry into how the world's leading innovators and creative minds approached challenges, he found no fixed answer for their success.

But in searching for common denominators among these brilliant change makers, he kept finding that many of them were exceptionally good at asking questions (which led him to write his 2014 book *A More Beautiful Question*). For some of them, their greatest successes—their breakthrough inventions and solutions they'd found to tricky problems—could be traced to a question (or a series of questions) they'd formulated and then answered,

Berger laments the fact that for too many of us, our impulse is to keep plowing ahead, doing what we've always done, and rarely stepping back to question whether we're on the right path. On the big questions of finding meaning, fulfillment, and happiness, he says we're deluged with answers—in the form of off-the-shelf advice, tips, and strategies from experts and gurus. It shouldn't be any wonder if those generic solutions don't quite fit: to get to our answers, we must formulate and work through the questions ourselves.

I think the same might be true for teachers. So many different voices—principals, coaches, programs, policies, standards—pepper us with answers that don't quite fit. And do we even know what the questions are or who is asking them?

Sometimes we are the ones pushing ahead as if on autopilot, with no time to step back and question and reflect on what we're doing, where we're going, what we believe, and who we are. It's as if our days are more about *getting* through than *thinking* through, checking off the boxes instead of being present, delighting in children, and working hard to meet individual needs in authentic ways.

But what if we worked together to change all that? What if we joined the ranks of the change makers and committed the time and effort it would take to formulate and work through our own beautiful questions? Could these actions change the narrative about how schools work? Could teachers be the ones to begin real conversations with each other and those in power?

Yes! And if we do, I'm betting we'll have inspiring and influential stories to tell about who we are, what we can do, and most especially what children can do when we put them in the forefront of our minds. And hearts.

Berger defines a beautiful question this way: "an ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something, and might serve as a catalyst to bring about change" (2014, 8). He asks us to think about this: "Why are we doing this particular thing in this particular way?"

## Paying Attention to What Doesn't Feel Right

When I do demonstration teaching in schools across the country, teachers sometimes worry:

- ❖ "But I can't do it that way. When I teach my minilessons, I have to follow these four steps. In order."
- ❖ "I need to follow the rules for workshop. I don't think what you're showing us is allowed."
- ❖ "I've been told I have to teach content this way, so I can't really do that."

Of course it would be a different story if they weren't interested in and intrigued about what they'd seen and heard, if they didn't believe it would help children become better readers. But they say they can't after they say they wish they could. Why do so many of us feel like we can't try new things or do things differently from how we've been told? And what must that feel like when walking into school each day?

Testing, mandates, reading series adoptions—all these add to the intense pressure we can feel. Compliance at least puts us in charge of something, especially when we're under pressure and feel in charge of little else. But what does that mean for children's learning, I wonder? Does being under pressure—and feeling restricted—cause us to put children under pressure and restrict them too?

We've all had times in our lives when we've been stuck: we've gone through the motions of teaching without being present in our bodies, hearts, and minds.

When this happens, the good emotions feel a little further away and the bad ones a little closer. And then, hopefully, something snaps us out of it: we get inspired, or we get fed up enough to change. That all begins with paying attention when things don't feel right. Noticing when we feel like we don't have a choice or voice can allow us to recognize where and how we do. And it can start by reframing what we think of as a "given" as a question instead:

- ❖ Does the minilesson really have to follow these four steps?
- ❖ Are there rules to workshop?
- ❖ Does teaching this content mean I can't do that?

Simply asking the question gives us some of our power back, and pursuing the answer makes us more powerful still. When we examine our goals, we'll soon find that each of these questions can be answered with "No"—we can say no to the too-rigid, limiting expectations for our teaching and we can say yes to questions that invite us to reflect, create, and be present as the creative, brilliant educators we can be.

- ❖ If the minilesson doesn't have to follow four steps, what might I do to better serve children's learning?
- ❖ If there are fewer rules to workshop than I thought, how might I make my workshop more focused on the children in my classroom and less on the rules?
- ❖ How can I fulfill my obligation to teach this content in a way that engages and expands what's possible for children?

Notice that these questions focus on children and our behaviors rather than on strict definitions of established teaching structures. No structure, no standard, no unit, no expectation matters until we take it off the paper and bring it to life for children and ourselves. Teaching is about taking responsibility, not about following orders. Teaching is about creativity, not about limiting possibilities because we have to stick to someone else's script. Teaching is about relationships with children, not about rigid structures.

## Asking, "What If?": Creating Space for Possibility

Literacy researcher Anne Haas Dyson reminds us what children need from us: "A child must have some version of, 'Yes, I imagine I can do this.' And the

teacher must view the present child as capable, and on that basis, imagine new possibilities” (1993, 396–397).

For a child to imagine he can do something, he needs time to explore, discover, and reflect on who he is as a learner, what he needs, and why. And he needs someone with a broader sense of the present moment, someone who understands that what he is doing is significant because it is part of the bigger picture.

Most children can’t do this without us.

That’s why teachers must also have some version of “Yes, I imagine we can do this.” Before we can support and encourage children to find their way, we have to believe that we’re up to finding our way, too. Before we can trust children to make decisions about what they need and when they need it, we need to know how it feels to make decisions that matter to us and the children we teach. And before we can imagine new possibilities for children, we have to imagine new possibilities for ourselves.

We have to learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable.

Sometimes it’s the small things that can liberate us and instill the early sparks of agency, ownership, and independence. Even something as mundane as how we use sticky notes helps us be clear about what our mandates or restrictions actually are. Can we begin to change the narrative from lamenting what we can’t and don’t do to imagining all the extraordinary things teachers, and the children they teach, can and will do?

That’s my goal. No teacher wants to be a fake teacher. And no child delights in learning from a script. Teachers dream of being real teachers—teachers who read, write, think, collaborate, get smarter, and plan for the real children who walk through their doors every day. When teachers are trusted, valued, and supported, children are, too. All of us—teachers and children alike—hunger to figure things out, forge new paths, create, question, and learn.

We all have difficult moments in our teaching, and without a question to drive us forward, we can get stuck. But that difficult moment might *be* the question we need to ask ourselves. Questions can bring a positive attention, creating a presence in the moment. When I ask children, “Are you the kind of kid who . . . ?”, I’m inviting them to imagine a new possibility for themselves, one in which they have more power than they did before. I want those new possibilities for teachers, too. Are you the kind of teacher who is ready to try something new, something that will make your students stronger, more joyful readers and bring you greater joy in your work? I think you are.

Every year, I commit to trying something new because it’s fun to learn more about something we’re unsure about—it motivates us and is part of being a

professional. I do it for children, of course, but I also do it for myself. That's what makes us joyful: it's something we do for ourselves *and* for children.

When we do, we're present in our teaching. We're flesh and blood, imperfect human beings who want to grow and learn alongside our children. We're strong enough to set aside judgment and discomfort and choose to focus on how to make things better. Each day we come to school we don't ask only our students, "What did you learn about yourself as a reader today?" We also ask ourselves, "What did

What If Each Day's  
Teaching Focused on  
Children's Agency?

What If We Made  
What Children  
Make and Do  
Our Priority?

## Beautiful Questions About the Teaching of Reading

What If Our  
Classroom  
Environment  
and Routines  
Offered  
Choice?

What If We Owned  
the Units We Are  
Asked to Teach?

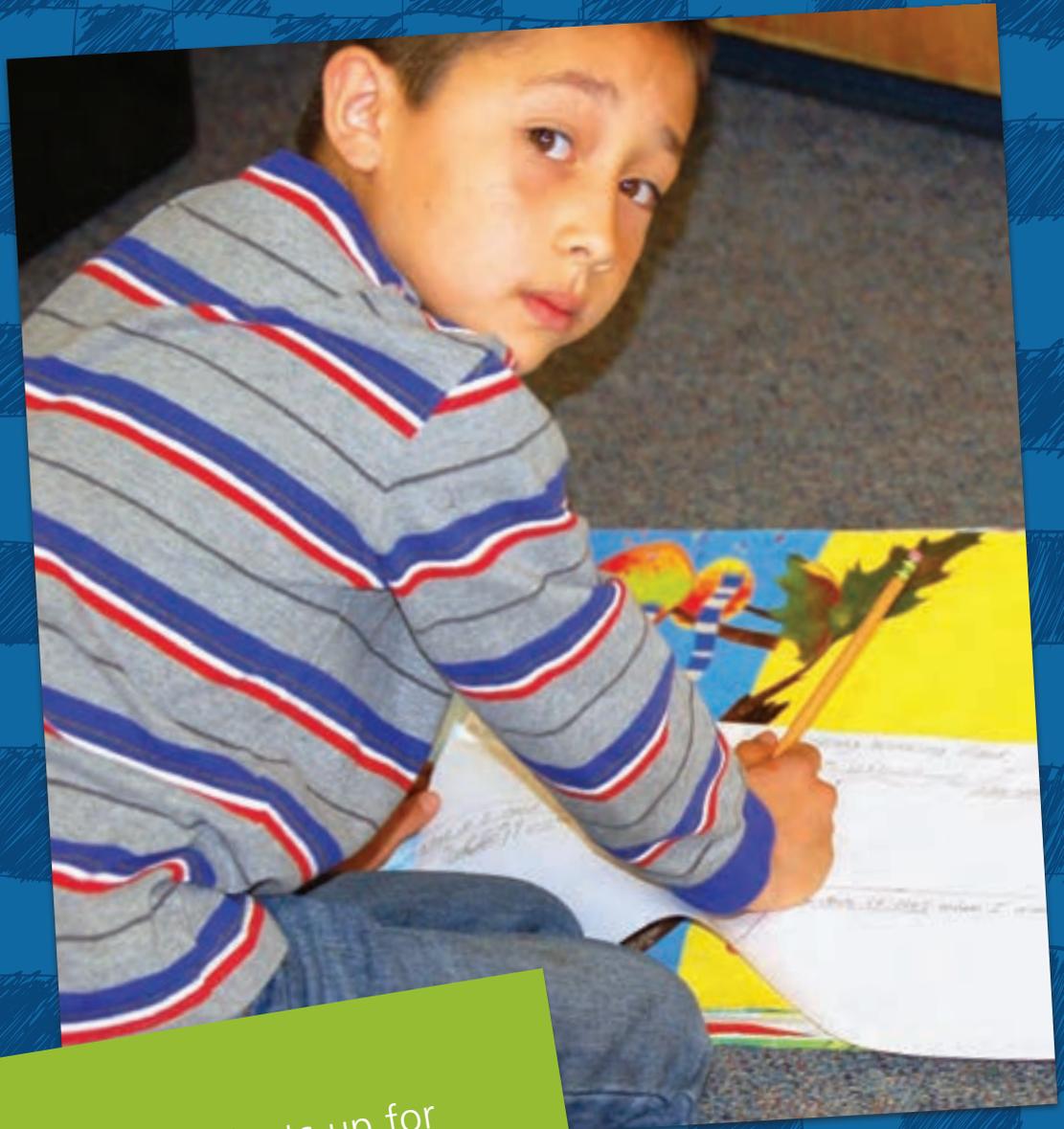
What If Read-Aloud  
Sustained Children's  
Independent Thinking?

I learn about myself as a teacher and my children as readers that I didn't know before? What are my goals for tomorrow based on what I learned today?" These are the essential beautiful questions that drive our teaching and our students' learning forward. To deny that distances us from the joy in our professional lives.

Asking questions leads to opportunities—it's about growth, openness, and a willingness to change, which top-down models don't allow. It's a way for us to focus our thinking and be present in the lives we've chosen to live. Asking the question is the essential behavior of teaching. It's not a perfect call-and-response but a messy business of wondering, stumbling, and figuring things out. It requires bravery and commitment, but that's what teaching is. It's a joyful, creative, purposeful profession. If you feel you've lost even some of your passion for teaching, I would love to help give it back to you. So, in this book, we'll talk about creating beautiful questions about the teaching of reading. To help you take on the process of asking beautiful questions, I'll share how I got to some beautiful questions about teaching reading and what I did with them as I worked with teachers in classrooms across the country.

These five questions shouldn't limit your personal inquiry in any way. The questions aren't final; they're "more beautiful," as Berger (2014) says, always in a stage of revision, like our teaching and children's learning. I hope these questions serve as examples for asking your own beautiful questions about the teaching of reading. Yes, each chapter will share practical insights and deeper understandings that I hope will benefit you and your children, but the larger purpose is to show you the process of asking questions. We (other teachers and I) arrived at these questions because something didn't feel right, or we experienced joy at seeing children do something unexpected, and wanted to understand why and how it happened. Then, we grappled with some messiness: what were we going to do with these questions? We found answers that inspired something new and worthy in our teaching, but even better, we found ourselves changed by asking the questions. I want that for you, too.

This book is about owning our teaching and making decisions based on who we are and what's best for the children in our classroom today. That all sounds ambitious and brave . . . and the work is—teaching is—but it happens in so many small and simple ways. My wish is for you to think about what you do and ask your own beautiful questions, so that you and your children can thrive and view yourselves and each other as valuable, idea-filled, creative, and contributing humans who own your teaching and learning. Be open and receptive to possibilities! Think: "What if we did it this way?"



Meet Emiliano.

Teaching for agency sets students up for generative acts, for creativity, for problem solving in the most powerful way.

—PETER H. JOHNSTON  
CHOICE WORDS: HOW OUR LANGUAGE AFFECTS CHILDREN'S LEARNING (2003, 31)

# What If Each Day's Teaching Focused on Children's Agency?



## Finding Our Way to a Beautiful Question: The Disengaged Child

**W**e've all known a child like Emiliano. He's the one who is in and out of the classroom, needing a drink, the bathroom, the nurse. On this particular day, I find Emiliano inside the classroom, his head on his desk, staring at I'm not sure what. Another child tells me Emiliano's in trouble and I shouldn't talk to him right now; Emiliano affirms this comment by turning his head the other way and staring at something else.

As you might imagine, Emiliano gets lots of attention for all the wrong reasons. His name is on the board day after day, followed by one check mark after another. The intention is to help him, but I wonder, "Could all the attention given to him and his behavior actually *encourage* him to misbehave?"

Everyone wants to be noticed. Even being noticed for the wrong reasons is better than not being noticed at all. So now, at the tender age of nine, Emiliano has taken on the identity of a child who doesn't participate in his learning, an identity no child should call his own. This is how he views himself, and this is how almost everyone else at school views him too.

It's easy to get into the habit of complaining about a child's behavior, lack of effort, negative attitude, or all of these. We drive to school with resolve to be more understanding and kind. But it all falls apart by ten o'clock when a child stomps out of the room, refuses to open her book, or rolls her eyes and groans at a mere suggestion.

No teacher disengages from a child on purpose—we're doing the best we can on any given day. But I wonder if we default to rigid, authoritarian systems when we ourselves feel lost and frustrated and don't know what else to do. And maybe when we focus our attention on behavior and compliance, it's hard to get beyond those feelings and recognize the gifts this child has to give. We get stuck there, in the difficulty. We know things could be otherwise, but we're not quite sure how or where to begin. We're caught between feeling too inadequate to try and understanding we need to do something.

We've all been kept awake because of the inevitable challenges of teaching, but how do we get up and out the next morning and greet the day? We try to look past ourselves, to avoid making assumptions or taking things personally, and to understand the child feels less than, too. We do our best to hold ourselves responsible and resolve to deepen our relationships with the children who test us, the ones who make us feel less than. We realize that, despite difficulty, we have some agency in figuring out a brighter path for these children and ourselves.

## What's the Best That Could Happen? Agency Fosters Engagement

We can't permanently isolate ourselves from difficulty and neither can children, so we maintain practices that focus on instilling children's agency throughout the day. We might start with "Why aren't things going right for this child?" but we'll improve the situation only when we take



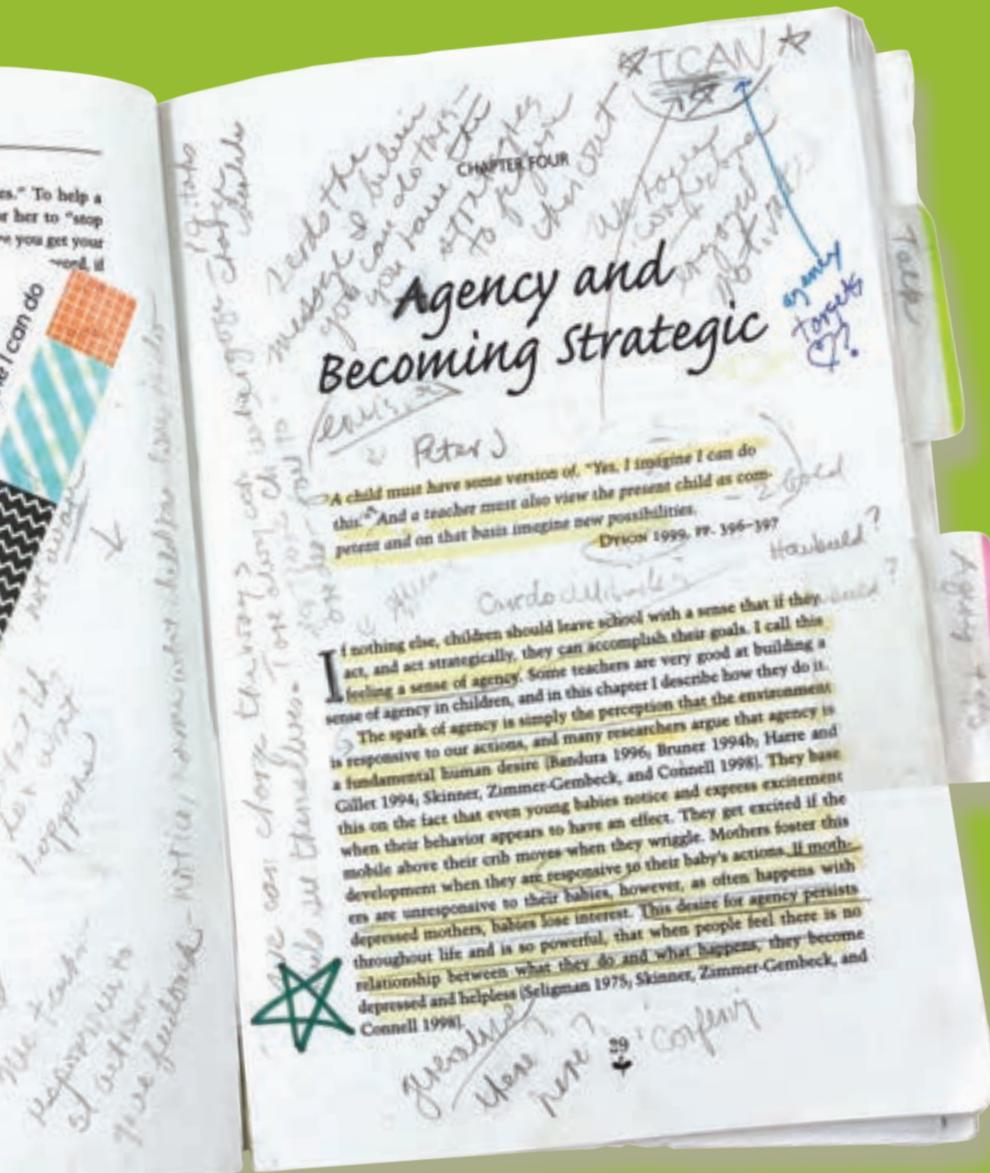


"If a student can figure something out for him- or herself, explicitly providing the information preempts the student's opportunity to build a sense of agency and independence. . . . When you figure something out for yourself, there is a certain thrill in the figuring. After a few successful experiences, you might start to think that figuring things out is something that you can

actually do. Maybe you are even a figuring-out kind of person. . . . When you are told what to do, particularly without asking, it feels different. Being told what to do and how to do it—over and over again—provides the foundation for a different set of feelings and a different story about what you can and can't do, and who you are."

—PETER H. JOHNSTON,  
*CHOICE WORDS: HOW OUR LANGUAGE AFFECTS CHILDREN'S LEARNING*

Peter Johnston's  
insights on agency



action, and work to place children in learning situations where they have daily opportunities to develop agency both as learners and as whole people.

I first learned the term *agency* from Peter Johnston in his book *Choice Words: How Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004). I've read that little green book again and again over the years, and every time I do, I find something new to wonder and think about.

Lately, when it comes to agency, I've been thinking about this: We can't give students agency. But we can give them the gifts of time, community, access, and choice, a clear vision of what they're working toward and why it matters, and one-on-one conferring so that agency can live and grow within them.

The word *agency* has an air of mystery about it. We may have a vague notion of what it means, though it's not something many of us talk about in the hall or the parking lot after school. But I wish it were.

Because I'm thinking agency is all about how we view ourselves as learners and doers, how we want others to view us, and eventually how we live our lives. Do we respond to challenging learning situations passively, or do we act with confidence and purpose? Are we helpless when trying or learning to do something new, or do we have a let-me-have-at-it kind of attitude? When we believe we have what it takes to figure out something that's within our reach, we set to work and engage, using what we know and doing what we can.

All true. But I find myself being and feeling all those things: sometimes I'm passive and sometimes I'm confident. Take writing, for instance. For me, it's hands-down hard, even though I've written books and articles before and have evidence that it's something I'm successful at. Even with all that, there are moments when I don't feel like I can figure out what to do to be successful; there are moments when I've lost my agency as a writer. But because I've come out on the other side of these feelings of frustration and self-doubt before, I have some strategies to help me.

For example, I can:

- ❖ set the timer for thirty minutes and write the whole time—no checking email, answering the phone, doing a load of laundry, watering a dead plant, or straightening up my writing area;
- ❖ scroll through photos of the four little girls I love most for inspiration;
- ❖ read;

- ❖ email my editor, Margaret;
- ❖ leave it be for today, confident that I'll be refreshed and ready to have at it again the next morning; or
- ❖ take a walk or try to take a nap, because sometimes it's magical and the answers I'm searching for somehow manifest themselves.

When I feel I can't write, there are things I know to do to help me get back to "I can." By navigating that struggle, I'm reminding myself that I'm a writer and that the struggle is just part of, not the limitation of, my experience.

Agency transfers. Having agency around writing also gives me agency about other things, too. That's because I know what it's like to succeed at something, to feel proud because I struggled, worked hard, and finished something I cared about. It means that in many other areas where I can't yet do something, I might be able to, and that I can choose.

## What the Research Tells Us

Agency is the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative—the opposite of helplessness. Young people with high levels of agency do not respond passively to their circumstances; they tend to seek meaning and act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives. The development of agency may be as important an outcome of schooling as the skills we measure with standardized testing. (Ferguson et al. 2015, 14)

As adults, we've hopefully identified enough areas where we are agentive that we can apply what we've learned in new situations. Take a look at my bulleted list of agency strategies for writing again (below). How are some of these agency strategies transferable?

## Strategies for Writing This Book

Set the timer for thirty minutes and write the whole time – no checking email, answering the phone, doing a load of laundry, watering a dead plant, or straightening up my writing area.

Scroll through photos of the four little girls I love most for inspiration. My granddaughters remind me of my life's purpose.

Read. Reading can give me new perspectives on what I'm writing about and replenish my intellectual resources. Sometimes, when I'm writing, I find unexpected and very specific inspiration in a book that has nothing to do with my topic.

Email or call Margaret, my editor.

Leave it be for today, confident that I'll be refreshed and ready to have at it again the next morning.

Take a walk or try to take a nap, because sometimes it's magical and the answers I'm searching for somehow manifest themselves.

## Strategies for Agency

### Transferrable Strategies for Agency

Work at the difficult task for a small, focused chunk of time.

Find outside inspiration, either directly related to the task or tangentially.

Temporarily disengage and focus on self-care. Before disengaging, set a time to return to the difficult task.

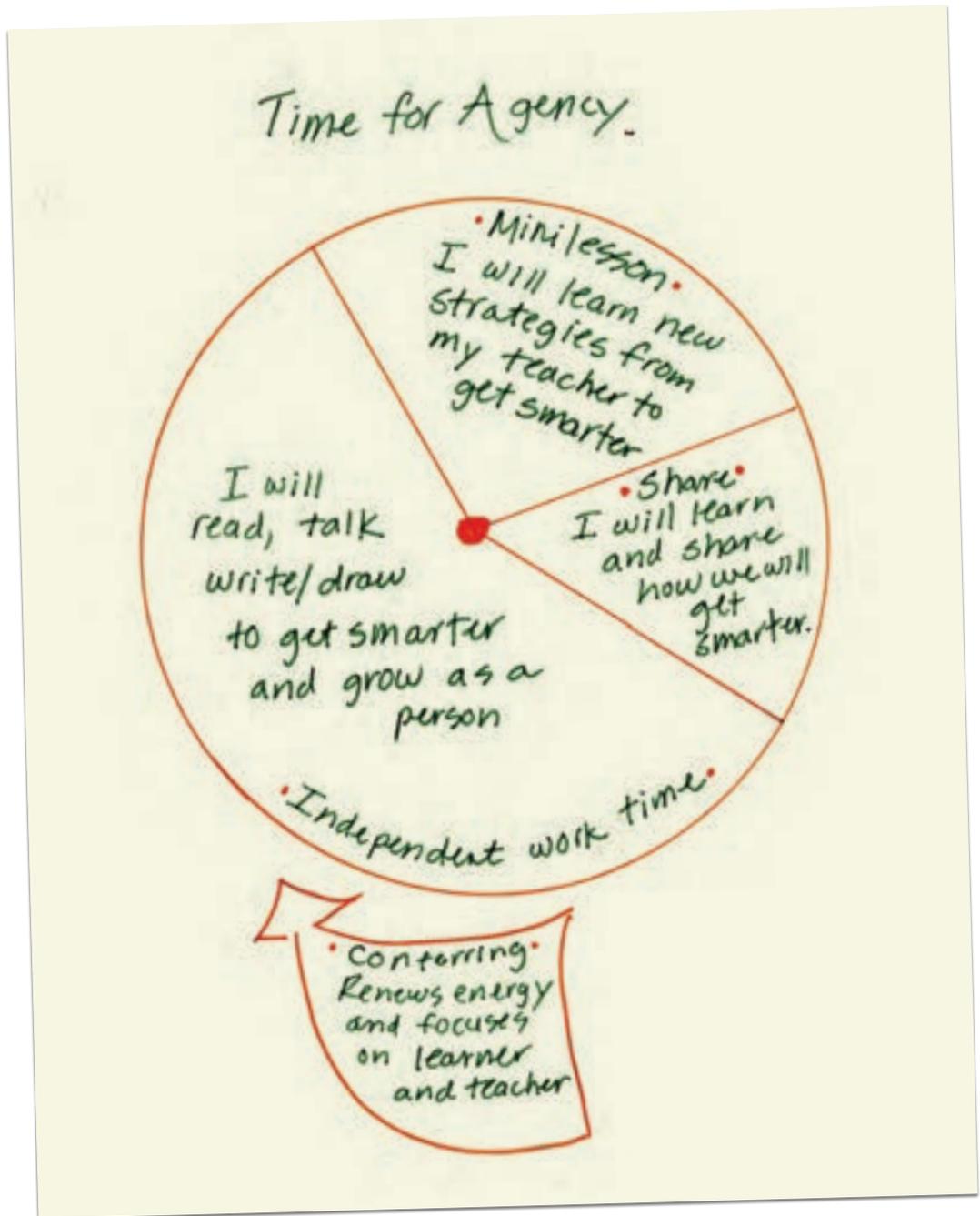
Talk to someone about the difficulty.

Our experiences with agency are never limited to the past tense: we're always facing new challenges that require us to access and expand our problem-solving strategies in order to feel and be successful. That's why I'm always asking children, "How did you figure that out? What exactly did you do?" This requires them to notice and name what they did, to think back and think out loud about the mental processes they've used to figure things out. The larger their problem-solving repertoires are, the more agentive, confident and capable they will be. When children experience confusion, I want them to think: "Okay. I don't get this. What do I know about what I can do to fix it? What strategy will I try first?" In time and through experience, children learn that this is a process they can trust.

Children come to understand that difficulty is normal, that there are strategies they know and can use to address difficulty, and that they can overcome difficulty through effort. Not perfectly, but successfully. We get into trouble when we are so eager for students' success that we eliminate opportunities for struggle. When we do that, we're not being honest, we're sending the message that they can passively glide through their learning, learning should be easy, and smart people don't fail or struggle. Then children become disengaged because they know something's not right. They think that we don't believe they have what it takes to be successful. And even if they actually do the work, there's no satisfaction in it.

Our intentions are pure—we don't want children to become disheartened if something doesn't work. But that disheartenment can be a good thing—it can help us guide the child into another way of figuring things out. We say, "That strategy wasn't quite right for you this time, was it? Let's think. What else might you try?" If they're stuck, we offer a suggestion or two. In time they'll learn to become metacognitive about their own engagement in learning and take action. They'll come to understand that when things go awry, it's a natural consequence of learning and not a big deal. They learn to try something else and keep going.

What happens if we underscaffold a child and he's not successful? We work with the child to fix it. Everyone—every child in our readers' workshop, every teacher, every adult, every human—fails and is disengaged like Emiliano at some point. We need to expect (and appreciate!) this, and our behavior—the way we respond to children when it happens—has to demonstrate that. The best way I know to support children's sense of agency happens within the workshop structure.



Work time is where agency develops and grows—children need time to dig in and work hard to figure something out and learn something new.

There's a reason that two-thirds of workshop minutes are dedicated to independent work time. This is where agency flourishes: Imagine children reading, writing, drawing, and talking together to get smarter about reading and

themselves as readers. They have their books, notebooks, pencils, markers, or whatever they need to figure things out and make meaning for themselves and each other. Their teacher has given them something to try, and they're working hard to apply it in ways that are unique to them. The teacher confers with them during this time, listening, giving feedback, and helping them set individual goals. Then during reflection and share time, children teach each other what they've learned about reading and themselves as readers.

Let's start to think about what that would mean for Emiliano.

## **Imagining New Possibilities for a Child**

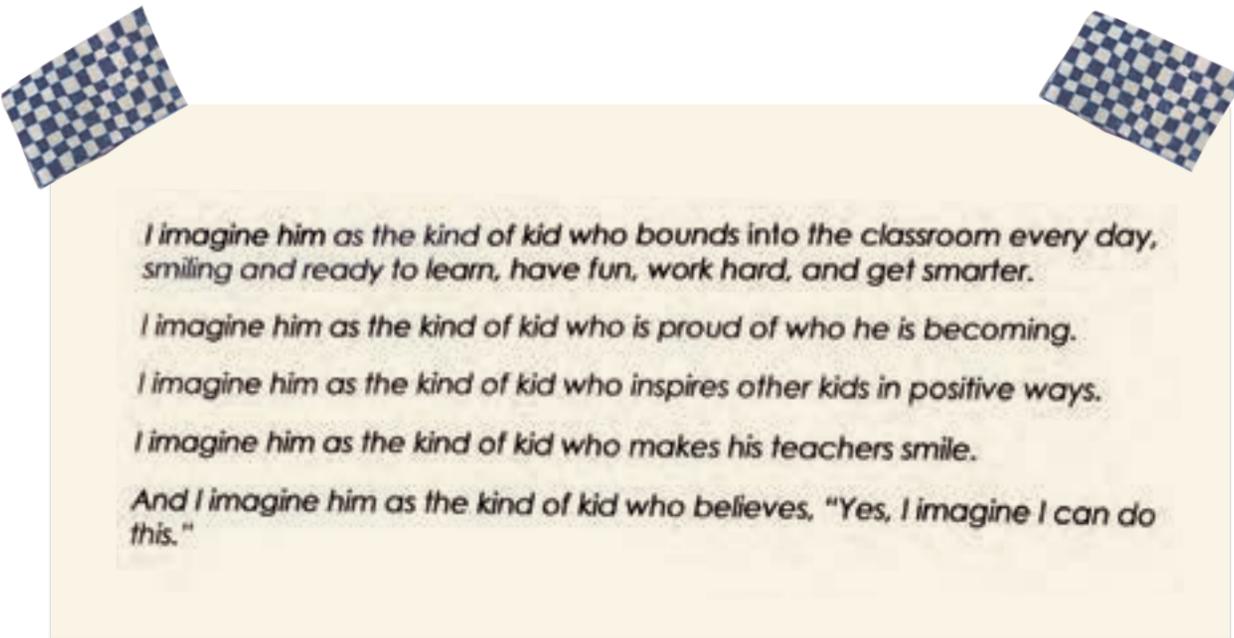
I'm drawn to kids like Emiliano. Somehow they wriggle their way into my head and heart and never seem to leave. (There's quite a crowd in there after all these years!)

As a consultant in Emiliano's school, I have only five days in his classroom, but I'm determined to see whether I can find this little boy who isn't quite sure he wants to be found. At least not yet.

I need to view him in a different way—to get past what makes the relationship difficult and envision the child as truly capable, as someone who wants to learn and get smarter, and as someone who secretly, or maybe unconsciously, hopes his teacher will recognize the dreams that live within and see him for who he really is.

And so I wonder, "Could the conscious act of viewing a child as capable offer the promise of a new narrative? Does imagining possibilities make them more believable and doable?" I say yes! Because now we're focusing on what could happen instead of what is happening. We're thinking about the best that could happen, rather than the worst. But we all know that imagining alone won't make it so—it takes hard work too. But envisioning new possibilities for a child does mean that we are being generous and realistic enough to see a child as something more when he is in a moment of struggle—we are seeing who the child is, not who we (or a supervisor) wishes the child could be. As teachers, we hold onto that vision of possibility and make ourselves accountable enough to identify one realistic step for that child to take toward a more powerful identity today . . . and then another tomorrow . . . and then one the day after that.

And maybe, the child will imagine new possibilities for us, too.  
And so I imagine new possibilities for Emiliano.



*I imagine him as the kind of kid who bounds into the classroom every day, smiling and ready to learn, have fun, work hard, and get smarter.*

*I imagine him as the kind of kid who is proud of who he is becoming.*

*I imagine him as the kind of kid who inspires other kids in positive ways.*

*I imagine him as the kind of kid who makes his teachers smile.*

*And I imagine him as the kind of kid who believes, "Yes, I imagine I can do this."*

**"When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."**

**—MAX PLANCK, PHYSICIST**

We've been talking about one child, but we also want to take time to imagine possibilities for every child in our care. We don't have to do it all at once, or go down the class list, checking children off—we want to be open to the imagining. Maybe we notice that Charlotte always has her notebook with her, and when we look closely, her words sound like poetry. What might we imagine for her and with her? Or perhaps we spy Kevin out on the playground, gently mediating another dispute about the rules for King of the Mountain. What might be possible for him? It's the daily interactions with children that lend themselves to imagining possibilities. This is really part of long-term and daily planning. What do we want for them this year, this unit, this day, both

individually and collectively? Then we think about how our teaching can help them get there.

To make the possibilities I imagine for Emiliano real, I need to help him develop new habits and routines that allow him to try on a *new* identity. I need to ensure his learning situations aren't too easy or too hard, but just right. He needs to be clear that his effort, his hard work, and the strategies he's using to figure things out are making him smarter. And even though I know he's smart, he needs to discover it for himself.

I'm ready.

But I have to find him first.

## Conferring to Support Access and Choice

Conferring with children is the most important work we do—every child deserves our one-on-one attention. It's also our most interesting work, sometimes the most challenging, and often the most fun. We never quite know what's going to happen or what a child will say. Conferences are as individual as the children we teach—when we pull up a chair next to a child, we remind ourselves that she is the most important one in the room right now. That focus reminds the child that the work is about her and her agency as a reader, learner, and person.

I look and look for Emiliano until finally I see him. He's curled up under a table, barricaded by pillows, doing I'm not sure what. I get down on my hands and knees, put my head under the table, and say, "There you are, Emiliano; I've been looking for you! Come on out and let's talk about what you're going to read and do today to get smarter about reading and yourself as a reader."

He doesn't budge. "So are you the kind of kid who's going to hide under the table, or are you the kind of kid who's going to work hard and share with everyone how you got smarter today?"

I wait. My back is killing me. And then, finally, he crawls out.

"Hi. That's just what I thought you'd do! Go get your book and let's see where you are." He does, and we do.

During our conference, I learn he's reading a book about the life cycle of butterflies. I ask him what he's learned so far, and if there are any words or ideas tripping him up. I find out he's interested in the topic, and though the text is challenging by traditional leveling standards, the photographs are accurate and beautiful, and we believe it's within his reach if he decides to work at it. (In other words, it's perfect!)

So we make a plan. But not just any plan—I need to make sure of two things:

1. *We make it our plan, not my plan.* I listen to his ideas—he thinks rereading a page at a time is what he needs to do. And while that wouldn't be *my* first choice for him, I'm going with it—I've listened, it's a viable plan, and it puts him in charge of his learning. Right now, this is about building relationships and letting him know I trust him. And hoping he's learning he can trust me.
2. *He knows just what he's going to do during work time and why it's important.* Near the end of the conference, I write his goal on a sticky note, along with the plan we've made, and leave it with him. His plan is to find a good spot; have his book, his pencil, and a pack of sticky notes at the ready; and read. We talk about how rereading might be a smart thing to try, and he decides to tally how many times he needs to reread a page in order to figure out all the words and read it fluently. "This is like doing research," I say. "Now you'll find out if rereading helps you grow as a reader." The implication: *This is what readers do to get ready to read and learn. I care about you and want you to be successful. And you're the one who gets to do the work and figure out how, or if, this strategy works for you.*

When Emiliano chose the butterfly book, I could have directed him back to the Butterfly tub and asked him to choose a "just-right" book, one that would be easier for him to read. But I didn't. Choice is an agentive act, and he'd taken a risk, spending time choosing this book out of all the others.

So now the choice is mine to make: Do I change the dynamic from him *wanting* to read a book to *having* to read a book? Or is there a way I can support him just enough so that he can be, and feel, truly successful?

## What the Research Tells Us

According to John Guthrie and Nicole Humenick (2004), ensuring that students had access to an array of interesting texts produced reading achievement gains roughly four times as large as the small effect of providing systematic phonics instruction alone.

In addition, they found that providing students with choices about what to read, where to read, and with whom produced an impact on reading achievement more than three times as large as reported for systematic phonics instruction alone.

Could a book that's easy to read be just right for a child working on fluency?

Could a book above a child's level be just right for that child if he has extensive background knowledge about its content or is highly motivated to read it?

Could a book be just right for a child working on comprehension if the words are easy to read but the content is challenging?

Could a book be just right for a child working on decoding if she knows most of the words, but not all of them, and the content is easy to understand?

Could a challenging book be just right for the child who is highly motivated to read it?

Could a book that's easy to read be just right for the child who needs to build background knowledge for a specific topic?

# What Is a Just-Right Book?

Remember, the term *just right* is fluid—it depends on what children are working toward. As you help children choose, consider these questions:

(ADAPTED FROM MILLER AND MOSS 2013, 51.)

So, I honor Emiliano's choice to continue with that butterfly book, but then we have to think together in our conference about what he's going to do with it. I ask him and he thinks rereading a page at a time is a good idea. I honor that choice, too, as an inquiry into strategies that work for him. Maybe it will help him in some ways and maybe he'll learn something about himself as a reader if it doesn't work, so we agree to that as today's inquiry for independent work time.

If rereading isn't helpful for Emiliano, we can talk about it. Nothing will be lost—investigating something you're interested in is never a waste of time. I might say, "It's such a good thing you did some research on this, Emiliano. What do you know now that you didn't know before?" The implication? *You're smarter now. You've figured out something about yourself as a reader.* And then, I can ask, "What do you want to try next?" The implication? *If one strategy doesn't work, try another one.*

If he doesn't have another strategy, I might say, "What about this? Hang on to the book you have, and go get a few more books about butterflies that you can easily read. I'm wondering whether building your background knowledge about butterflies with these new books will help you read your first one. You might even try reading them together. Want me to show you how that might look?" The implication? *I'm with you. I'll support you any way I can. Let's stick with this.*

## Paying Attention During Independent Work Time

Independent work time is when we study how children work. How are they showing engagement or disengagement? How might a quick conversation help both the student and I better understand his learning and offer him some strategies to grow? If I only released students to complete a task, then they might just

### What the Research Tells Us

*In a study that identified twenty ways students spend instructional time, the only variable that explained gains on the posttest was time spent on actual text reading; time spent on other factors like phonemic awareness, word, or alphabetic instruction failed to predict improved achievement. (Miller and Moss 2013, 16-17)*

For early readers, consider two independent reading sessions, ten to fifteen minutes each. In Rachel Brody's kindergarten class at Slavens Elementary in Denver, children come in, put their folders away, and find their way to the carpet, where every day there are a group of books spread out—one day might be alphabet books, another day wordless books, another day nonfiction. Children sit together in a circle and choose a book to read and interact with for ten to fifteen minutes. Rachel sits in the middle of the circle and confers with individuals and partners. Next up? Singing, maybe a little dancing, and a short morning meeting, followed by readers' workshop. Beautiful.

Work time isn't about head-in-a-book, silent reading. Think about what readers do in the world—they read, write, and talk. Show students how and why.

Are their books worthy of what we are asking them to do? If kids have books that don't allow them to do this work, they'll be stuck.

# How Do We Increase Stamina and Student Agency?

## Ideas to Think About

Do they have a variety of books they are interested in? Early readers need ABC books, songbooks, wordless books, rhyming books, and beginning readers in their stacks. All readers need fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, in all their variations. No limits!

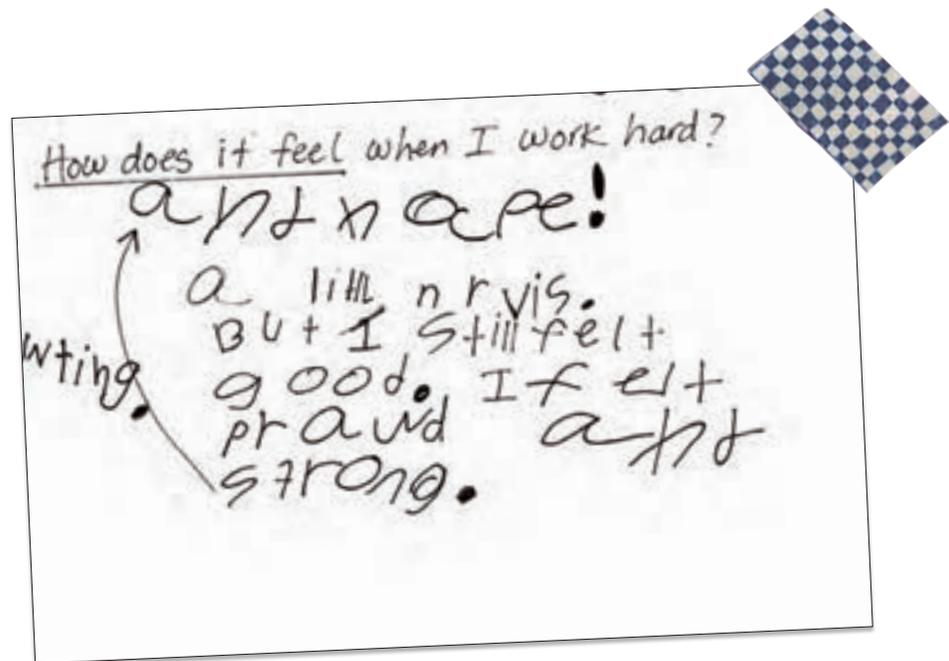
Do children have a clear vision of what they're going to get smarter about today? Do they understand why they're doing what we've asked them to do?

It's not as much about the minutes as it is about the books! Put away the timer and the "growing our stamina, minute by minute" charts. When we focus on minutes, kids do, too. When children have books in their hands that they are interested in, that they can read, and that give them ideas to think and talk about, five minutes blur into ten, ten into fifteen, and more.

view the work as an act of compliance, but through my observation behaviors—watching, taking notes, conferring that focuses on listening, and ending work time by sharing what children noticed through their independent work time—I let them know that independent work time is a time for discovery and that the work they're doing is the vehicle for discovery; it's secondary to the process. For children who, like Emiliano, show signs of disengagement or struggle such as not reading, pretending to read, wandering around the room, tapping their pencil, playing with something from home, and so on, I seek them out right away. If it's one or two children, I meet with them individually; if it's three or four, I bring them together in a small group. (And if it's more than that, I need to rethink my lesson—it's obviously me, not them!)

I tell them that I've noticed they're having some trouble getting started, or sticking with it, and ask, "How can I help?" or, "What do you need?" Maybe I'll learn they didn't understand what to do, their book isn't a good match, they're not feeling well, or they're missing their dad, who is out of town. Whatever it is, we do our best to fix it, we come up with a plan, and back out they go. I check back in five minutes or so to see how things are going.

We increase time spent reading on subsequent days, depending on what we're noticing. As soon as things show signs of falling apart—kids getting restless, asking "How much longer do we have?" and so on—I call everyone back to reflect and share.



Emiliano's Exit Ticket

At the end of independent work time, Emiliano has clear evidence that he's smarter than he was in the beginning, and he knows just how he did it, as shown on his exit ticket. Emiliano is smarter when he finishes. He can read three pages that he couldn't read before, and he can teach others about what he learned about himself as a reader. And he's close to discovering that rereading helps him not only learn new words but also remember what he's read. The implication: *The more I work, the smarter I get.*

**Dear Reader,** *I loved reading this response from Emiliano—the fact that he used the words **good, proud, strong,** and **happy** to describe how he felt made me feel proud, too. Proud of him, for sure, and also proud of myself—I stayed mindful and calm, and it paid off.*

*And I also loved his honesty when he wrote he felt “a little nervous.” Again, I thought, “Me, too.” Sometimes we feel unsure about how to begin. We wonder, “What will be best for this child?” I started slowly with Emiliano, asking him if he'd take a few books back to the library and making sure to thank him when he returned. The message? **I trust you to leave the classroom and come back.** When I noticed him working, I nodded, smiled, and sometimes asked, “How's it going?” The message? **I'm noticing your hard work. I see you.** Not in an “I'm watching you” kind of way, but in an “I'm noticing and I believe in you” way.*

*When I sent my own children off to school, I wanted them to learn and be successful. But even more, I hoped their teachers would take the time to get to know them, to care about them, to understand and appreciate the little boys we loved so much.*

*I try to remember that. Emiliano, and all children, have moms, dads, and families who need us to appreciate and love their sons and daughters too.*

*—Debbie*

Emiliano has gotten smarter today, both as a reader and as a learner. Is he now, in just five days, the kind of kid who thinks, “Yes, I imagine I can do this”? Not yet. But he’s closer this day than he was the day before.

Yes, he has a long way to go, but this isn’t about mastery. It’s about approximation, and becoming, and believing in himself enough to experiment, to take some risks and try something out, to stretch himself a bit and see what he can learn. Every day he gets a little smarter, learns a little more, and begins to believe that maybe, just maybe, he is that kind of kid.

And that’s our responsibility to children: we put a child in learning situations that are just beyond his reach—the kind that, with a little support from us and a little struggle from the child, will help him be successful, once, twice, and again and again and again.

And just imagine the possibilities for Emiliano—and his classmates—in five weeks, five months, and five years. There are often issues that get in the way of establishing enough trust to talk with a child about his or her learning, but overcoming those obstacles (even if we have to crawl halfway under a table!) is the essence of our work. If we can continue to show up, teach, and develop the spark of agency within the children we teach, we’ll show them how to get smarter about themselves, how to learn, how to live, and maybe even how to love.





“Smart isn’t  
something you  
are. Smart is  
something that  
you get.”

—JEFF HOWARD,  
EFFICACY INSTITUTE



You might be wondering, “But what if he hadn’t crawled out from under the table? What then?”

Well first off, dragging him out from under the table wouldn’t be something I’d have considered. (And I doubt you would, either!) Neither would I have written his name on the board, sent him to the office, or denied him recess. He was not hurting anyone, and any one of these options would have further escalated the situation and put us right back where we were before.

Instead, I’d have said something like this: “Emiliano, I need to confer with Angel and Mara. When you’re ready, get your books, and find a good spot to start reading.” The implication: *This decision is yours to make; you’re the one with the power. I’m getting back to business.* I’d have been giving him a vision of how he could make things right—get his books and start reading. Low-stakes, win-win for both of us. (And we can talk about this hiding thing another time, thinking together about why and how we could make things better.)

## What the Research Tells Us

No matter how well you plan and structure learning tasks, it's the one-on-one interactions [with children] that inform the power and effectiveness in your teaching. (Fountas and Pinnell 2017, 1)

## Conferring to Inquire and to Offer Community

The structure of conferring sets up an expectation that students have been doing something worthy in their independent work time. I walk over to a child, excited to find out what that child is thinking about. Part of it may be struggle, but there’s going to be something important in that struggle that, if attended to, might help not only that child but the entire community of readers in that classroom, and so I invite the child to share.

Conferring is a moment for fixing our assumptions about what we imagine a child is doing. Sometimes we assume more or less is going on with a child than is actually happening, and truly we can’t rely on our assumptions to assess

children's learning. Conferring grounds us in reality. Without that daily practice, we risk stumbling upon our own fears and fantasies. Through conferring, we recognize not only where the child is but also where we are, and take the opportunity to refocus on reality.

At the end of my five days in Emiliano's classroom, I wanted to make sure to check in with him. I went to where I'd seen him last, and though his books were there, he wasn't. I spotted him huddled in a corner with a permanent marker and whole pack of sticky notes and found myself shaking my head. "What's he doing?" I wondered, feeling somehow betrayed and thinking that whatever it was, it couldn't be good. I took three deep breaths and headed over. "So what's up?" I asked. He gave me a shy smile, lined up four sticky notes on the file cabinet nearby, and explained, pointing to each one:

"This is me reading.

"This is me reading more. See how my brain is getting bigger?"

"And now I'm reading more and more and I'm getting smarter and smarter! See how big my brain is now?"

"It's a little book. And here's the title. Can I share it?"

"Oh, Emiliano," I said. "Of course you can share. Putting all that effort into reading your books really is making you smarter. Can you share with everyone what you do as a reader now that you didn't do before?"



Emiliano's book to share

He looks at me, smiles, and nods.

Conferring is one of the ways we help children understand that even when they're working alone, they're not alone in their work. When we confer, we show we're interested in what they are doing and that their work is interesting and relevant enough to share with others.. We invite children to share their thinking and learning, keeping their focus on what they learned about themselves as readers, rather than their reading. This highlights the processes children use to make meaning and figure things out, serving not only the child who is sharing, but also giving others something new to think about or try.

Here are other questions we might ask children to discuss during share time:

- ❖ How did work time feel today? What made it feel that way?
- ❖ What did you learn about yourself as a reader today?
- ❖ Why are we spending our time learning how to do this? Why does it matter?
- ❖ Is there something you tried today that you think you will do tomorrow and in the days and weeks to come? Is there something you're still thinking about?
- ❖ Did you have any problems today? What did you do?
- ❖ What goal(s) will you set for yourself tomorrow?

When we ask questions like these, we're going for conversations, not isolated comments. We facilitate that in the beginning with questions like, "What does someone else think about that?" and children gradually assume more and more responsibility for these reflective share-time discussions, and at the same time advance the collective sense of agency. Here it's about children coming together, reflecting and teaching each other what they've learned, how they did it, and why they believe it matters. So now it's not so much about "I'm the kind of kid who can figure things out" as it is collectively "We're the kind of kids who can figure things out."

The previous questions are those I most often ask children, but they hold true for us, too. What if we chose one of these to think about every day?

- ❖ How did work time feel today? What made it feel that way?
- ❖ What did I learn about myself as a teacher today?
- ❖ Why does the work I'm asking children to do matter?
- ❖ What did I learn or do today that I want to keep doing?
- ❖ What was problematic today? How will I fix it?
- ❖ How hard did I work to get smarter about my students today?  
What are my goals for myself tomorrow?

## Postscript

I went back to Emiliano's school to visit the following year. I met a lot of the children I'd worked with the previous year, but (wouldn't you know) Emiliano had moved to another school. And so I wrote the following manifesto (as if he'd written it) to all the teachers he'll have in the years to come—it's my love letter to him and so many kids just like him.

Things changed for both of us over those five days. Emiliano was on his way. He was becoming more literate and developing an agentic stance, right in front of his (and everyone else's) very own eyes. Now he saw himself as the kind of kid who was getting smarter and smarter, the kind of kid whose brain was getting bigger and bigger, *and he knew it was because of his own efforts*. He was the author of a new story about himself, and though I'll never know what happened next, I remain hopeful that he continued to feel proud, and strong, and happy.

### Emiliano's Manifesto

Make sure the work you ask me to do is challenging enough to help me grow.

Give me time. Notice and praise my effort and hard work, and ask me to explain the strategies I used to figure things out.

Support me, but let me find my way.

Please don't feel sorry for me—your sympathetic smile and eyes become an excuse for us both.

Please don't overscaffold me, no matter how much you want to, or how many times I say, "I don't want to," or "I can't." This is not good for me. Believe in me and help us both understand that a little struggle is a good thing.

Help me understand that when I fail, you're not worried, and I shouldn't be either. What's important for me is to stick with it. Show me possibilities.

Show me that you care about me and that you'll always be in my corner.

Believe in me, no matter what. Know that sometimes you have to believe in me first, before I can believe in you, or myself.

Let me know you love me. (I'll love you back.)

