

What Really Matters in Literacy Instruction?

Heidi Mills with Timothy O'Keefe

Basic skills, intensive and systematic phonics, high test scores, English only programs, discipline. Basic skills, intensive and systematic phonics, high test scores, English only programs, discipline. Basic skills, intensive and systematic phonics, high test scores, English only programs, high test scores, discipline. And so it goes. This mantra fills newspapers, school board rooms, political party headquarters, and staff development workshops. The extensive nature of current attacks on education is astonishing, shameful, and intimidating. Even the most thoughtful and successful teachers are being questioned and are questioning themselves.

Tim O'Keefe and I realize our teaching practices are certainly not yet mainstream, although we thought we had finally lived through and survived the hazards and dominance of textbook-driven curricula. Unfortunately, we once again find ourselves and colleagues across the country in the midst of professional turmoil. We are saddened by the fact that politically driven attacks on our practices have caused many of our colleagues to question their own judgment and professional autonomy. Others have retreated to the "good teaching is only safe behind closed doors" syndrome. We sincerely believe we were just beginning to access the potential of a holistic, literature-based model of instruction when our professional integrity and children's learning potential were severely undermined. In this article, Tim and I hope to remind readers why it is absolutely essential that we continue to strive for what is possible rather than retreat to what has been typical in literacy instruction.

Tim and I have been working together in various parts of the country for eighteen years. Most recently, we have been collaborating with a group of remarkable colleagues at the Center for Inquiry, a small public school of choice in Columbia, South Carolina. Tim is the second/third grade teacher there and I

Heidi Mills is a Professor in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. **Tim O'Keefe** is an elementary teacher at the Center for Inquiry in Columbia, South Carolina.

am a member of the University of South Carolina curriculum-research team. Before opening the Center for Inquiry, I spent one day a week for eight years living and learning in several of Tim's classrooms, exploring how children learn language and mathematics within the context of a holistic, inquiry-based curriculum. The classrooms featured in this piece represent a range of districts and learners. However, they are all united by a teacher who carefully creates curriculum by looking closely and listening carefully to his students. I hope to challenge the restricted vision of education portrayed in public venues by inviting readers into the thoughtful learning communities Tim has built and, in so doing, reframe what counts by examining what matters first.

Fundamental Beliefs that Inform Our Practices

As holistic educators, we ground our literacy instruction in powerful pieces of literature, writers notebooks and frequent, focused learning rituals built upon reflection and conversations about the learning process. As we consider the essential features of thoughtful classroom engagements that are anchored in writing and talking about children's literature, it is the general stance we take as teachers and learners that makes the difference. We have learned to critique our classroom dialogue by asking whether or not our literature study group discussions reflect the passion, interest, and commitment we find in adult reading guilds (Short & Harste with Burke, 1996).

We understand that as teachers we have the right and responsibility to provide intentional, thoughtful instruction within the context of literacy engagements, but we must do so carefully so as not to "basalize" the experience. While Tim provides daily opportunities for children to *learn about language*, he does not frame such discussions around powerful literature in contrived or artificial ways. Instead, he creates a balanced daily schedule or curricular framework so that children will *learn language, learn about language and learn through language* each day (Halliday, 1982). Children learn language as they use it for various purposes; they learn about language as they consciously reflect upon its processes, skills, and concepts; and they learn through language by exploring content across disciplines via oral and written language. Tim accomplishes this balance by creating a daily schedule that includes demonstrations, engagements, reflection, and celebration:

- Demonstrations of language, skills, concepts, and strategies in use;
- Extensive opportunities to engage in uninterrupted reading, writing and conversation;
- Individual, small group and whole class reflection sessions;
- Daily opportunities to celebrate accomplishments with others in the classroom or school.

This curricular framework reflects our belief that children learn best when skills and strategies are taught within the context of authentic literacy engagements (Avery, 1995; Freppon & Dahl, 1991). In so doing, we create curriculum *with* and *for* children (Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992). Our learners are provided opportunities to intentionally and systematically uncover the skills, strategies, and concepts that accomplished readers and writers understand and use.

We have successfully taught children to read and write while using reading and writing to learn (Short & Pierce, 1990).

Tim and I realize that it takes a tremendous knowledge base, and a great deal of thought, planning, reflection, and revision to truly operationalize these beliefs. In fact, we agree with Jerome Harste (1997) when he suggests that it is a lot easier to make a classroom look holistic than it is to make it sound holistic. It is not enough to purchase tables or move desks together, to bring in high-quality children's literature, to publish children's writing, and to encourage children to talk about and/or write about books. It is the *stance* we take as teachers toward texts, knowledge, learning, other learners, and our role in the world that makes the critical difference. And because of this stance, our children's insights, ideas, questions, poems, and stories are heard, valued, and used as both anchors and springboards for curriculum development.

Valuing the Informative and Transformative Role of Literature

Before we share the engagements that frame our reading and writing instruction, it is important to look closely and listen carefully as Tim O'Keefe leads a literature discussion. We begin with the "talk" because we have found that the ways in which the teacher interacts with the children and the sense of community that pervades the classroom profoundly influence the moment-by-moment incidents that make or break a strategy lesson, classroom ritual, or evaluation device.

We join Tim's third grade class immediately following the reading of two books from an intergenerational text set. On this particular day, he chose *The Sunshine Home* (1994) by Eve Bunting and *The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins* (1998) by Lester Laminack. It was late in the year, which meant that Tim had already negotiated the structure of the day with his children. It was decided early in the year that whole group responses to literature were most engaging when the children had some uninterrupted, yet focused time to respond through sketching or writing before talking. Reflective writing or sketching in response to powerful literature had become a habit of the heart and mind for this group. This plan encouraged more children to participate because they had time to think about individual insights, questions, and connections that would then be woven into the fabric of the conversation. In fact, the group developed a shared code or shorthand ("lessons and connections") that they often accessed when interpreting texts. They found common themes such as the search for personal connections, connections across literature, and the identification of lessons learned to be useful lenses when responding to literature.

Lovely classical music filled the room as the children wrote and wrote and wrote. While there was a predictable structure to literature study, the class was so connected that Tim simply "read" the group to determine when they were ready to return to the carpet for their shared book talk. When he noticed that most of the children were finished writing or sketching, he changed the music to signify the transition to the whole group gathering area in the classroom.

Tim opened the conversation by saying, "Who would like to start us off in this discussion? Remember, you don't have to read your notes, you may just want to have your notes in front of you and say what's on your mind."

Suzannah began by reading her written reflection: "This story really makes me think a lot about my grandma who died in a hospital and how things would have been if she was still alive." She paused, eyes glancing down her paper, then continued, "And, uh, Eve Bunting is one of the best writers. She can experience love and sadness and hope in her stories. And to do that is one of the best gifts in the world."

Tim responded, "Nice comments. One of the things I wonder is how an author can do that? How can an author move you to tears in just a few words? Edward, your go."

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Edward responded, "Connections and lessons. I learned that some grandmas and grandpas live in nursing homes and some don't. And my favorite part was when Mrs. Nelson was puzzled and said, 'Was that the boy that came in just a minute ago?'"

Tim said, "So you liked the humor in the story too. And it's nice that she put some humor in there, 'cause if it was all sort of sad, if it was all the same emotion, I don't think it would be such an interesting book. So the little things around the edges of the story make a big difference."

Rebecca inquired, "I wonder if Miss Olivia had some kind of memory or thinking disease since she didn't talk or anything. And if she did, I wonder what the disease was?"

Tim responded, "Do you remember the dedication in Lester's book?"

"I think it was his grandmother. She died of Alzheimer's disease."

"I think he was describing her as having Alzheimer's disease—where she is apparently able to think about things but really can't say them."

Several children chimed in, "It's a really bad disease. Some people die from it."

Tim paused and spoke softly, "Both of my wife's grandparents had that before they eventually died."

Aaron was next to speak, "Well, one of my connections is that you see these two books remind me of when I go and see my grandpa. And a lesson was that you don't have to be afraid to go into a nursing home because no one is going to hurt you and nothing is going to happen to you. Um, and it was kind of scary for me but then I got kind of used to it and then I wasn't as scared. And, my feelings about this were both sad because you could feel how they would be in both books. And I know what it was like."

Tim reacted warmly, "So you can relate to it personally, can't you?"

Matt said, "I think it just made you think about how the people felt in the nursing home and the people visiting there. How they felt. 'Cause I'm thinking that Gram in the *Sunshine Home*, all she usually had to talk to were other old people in the nursing home and the nurses that didn't know about her life before she was in the nursing home."

Rosa jumped in, "I sometimes get butterflies in my stomach when I go to places like Vancouver where my granny lives. It was the first time for me to see her. I didn't know whether to back off or to take my chances. I took a risk. Once I knew her a little more, I did the same with my grandpa."

Tim asked, "Are you glad you took that risk?"

"Yeah."

Robert joined the conversation. "This sort of goes with Aaron's. I wonder why whenever Tim went to see his grandma, he was afraid to go in?"

Tim asked, "Do you have any thoughts about why he might have been afraid?"

Edward responded, "I have two things to share. Probably he thought that his grandma might not have been able to talk or anything and he might have been afraid to see her."

Tim added, "Afraid that she had changed so strongly."

"And I bet that Eve Bunting and Lester are serious writers. 'Cause they both write about serious things."

And so it went. The conversation continued for some time, with the children and teacher building on, confirming, and sometimes revising each others' ideas.

Reflecting on the Book Talk

When carefully analyzing the children's written responses and the conversation that followed, we found patterns that reflected the essence of literature study. This particular literacy engagement sounds much more like an adult reading guild than a formal lesson designed to teach reading. However, we have become quite passionate about the need for engagements that inform and transform children as readers, writers, and members of a democratic society. The children in this classroom learned the skills and strategies that count in elementary school. In fact, their standardized test scores were quite high. Most important, though, they learned what really mattered in literacy (Stephens, 1990). They did so in part because of their exposure to and interaction with high-quality children's literature. The books mattered a great deal, but good books alone are not enough. It is how we situate ourselves in relation to the books, how we juxtapose the books in relation to other texts we have encountered, and how the teacher and children co-create individual and shared interpretations of the texts. The teacher and the teaching make a critical difference. We have learned that it is essential that the teacher

- appreciates the power of story as a universal way of knowing and communicating.
- understands that learning begins with personal connections and interpretations of text. Comprehension is assumed while interpretation of the texts is explicitly encouraged.

- allows stories to grow out of stories. The children tell stories to explain and extend the meanings being constructed by individuals and the group as a whole.
- realizes that multiple perspectives are best uncovered through conversations as all members of the learning community share stories, personal experiences, and significant memories.
- allows new ideas to be born, refined, and revised as children make connections with others' contributions.
- values the way genuine conversations promote a sense of wonder and encourage children to make predictions, to identify lessons learned and knowledge gained.
- participates in conversations by naturally validating, supporting, and extending ideas generated by the group.
- promotes inquiry and co-creates curriculum with the children so that humanness is acknowledged and celebrated. The literacy endeavors begin, evolve, and end at the heart of things . . . what really matters.
- honors literature and accesses it as a tool for informing and transforming our understanding of ourselves, each other, and the world.

The previous conversation illuminates the ways in which the children used language and literature as tools for learning. They explored the writing strategies each author employed, analyzed critical issues in aging and inter-generational relationships, considered and/or reconsidered personal relationships with their own grandparents, and so on. The texts, reading, writing, and dialogue worked in concert to ensure that all who entered into the experience left as different readers, writers, and members of their classroom and family communities.

The Habit of Kidwatching

Teaching from a holistic, literature-based perspective seems so simple and logical on one hand yet so complex, demanding, and compelling on the other. There are so many choices, children, good books, strategies, and skills to uncover, and learning communities to be built. Many teachers wonder how teachers like Tim make curricular decisions. What makes the critical difference? Put another way, what is truly basic? For us, kidwatching (Goodman, 1978) is at the heart of it all. Intensive and extensive kidwatching is central to Tim's instruction and evaluation. He can teach responsively because he truly knows his children. Such responsive teaching leads to intimate instruction. As Ayers (1993) suggests, to make learning genuine, it must be intimate. The information Tim gathers and interprets through his daily kidwatching rituals allows him to make informed instructional decisions.

From Kidwatching to Curriculum: Strategy-Sharing Sessions

Children in Tim's classroom function as teachers as well as learners. Tim builds time into the daily schedule to highlight strategies he notices children using effectively and to provide opportunities for the children to reflect upon and make explicit the skills and strategies they find especially useful when

reading and writing. These strategy-sharing sessions are quite generative. The children who present a strategy must consciously reflect upon and explain their thinking, which often leads to greater depth and breadth in the quality of the original idea. Additionally, their young colleagues often make connections with their own habits and share similar stories or variations on the theme. The teacher talks too and, in so doing, offers his personal experience and expertise regarding the concept, skill, or strategy.

Tim formally invites individuals to highlight their work while also providing the group with ownership of this process. When children recognize that they have an insight to share with their young colleagues, they simply sign the strategy-sharing list posted on the board each day. Due to the predictable class schedule, the children know they will be invited to share strategies immediately following literature study and writing workshop.

Reflecting on Reading Strategies

While Tim has found whole group and small group discussions essential in his teaching, he has also come to believe that it is crucial to get to know each child well as a reader. To do so, he began conducting regular individual conferences during literature study time. He calls this time "coaching." During "coaching," he meets with individual readers and asks them to read from the book they are in the midst of exploring individually or with a group. He takes thorough notes regarding the children's miscues and reading strategies, makes general comments about the children's competence and confidence with the text and the students' reflections on their reading strategies. He uses this time to provide focused support for individual readers by validating effective strategies and making recommendations that will promote growth. Additionally, Tim uses the data he gathers from individual coaching to share important insights with the whole class during strategy-sharing sessions. In this way, he attends to individual needs and interests while also gathering information that will be instrumental in fostering growth in the class at large.

Sharing Reading Strategies

After "coaching" third grader Sana as she read and reflected on *Shiloh* (1991) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Tim asked Sana for permission to share some of the ideas they discussed during the "coaching" session with the class for their daily strategy-sharing ritual. Given that it was an honor to be featured during strategy-sharing sessions, Sana agreed without hesitation. At the close of literature study, the children met on the carpet to share their progress within and across literature study groups. Next, Tim said that he wanted to highlight some of the things he noticed Sana doing as she read and discussed *Shiloh*.

Tim began, "I noticed that the unusual grammar in the story didn't phase Sana. She read fluently. To me, it was a sign that she was truly immersed in the story and had learned to think and speak like the characters in the story. In fact, when I asked her to reflect on what she found interesting in the story, she said she liked the 'old timey language.' What a nice way to put it! It is the special language or dialect in good books that makes the characters come alive and give the story its color and shape."

Next, Tim told the class that Sana identified some words she found fascinating. She looked for words the author used effectively. Tim invited her to share by saying, "Sana, tell us what you thought about the word 'slinks.'"

Using her hands to show the motion, she said she figured out that "It must mean duck down and go away because that is what would work in the story. I also had a little trouble with the word 'pneumonia'. I knew that 'p' and 'n' don't usually go together and so I had to use what was around the word, I mean knowing that someone was really sick. I paused and thought about it and then remembered that it must be pneumonia and so I didn't need to make the 'p' sound."

To close the strategy-sharing session, Tim invited Sana to share how she had changed as a reader. Sana knew Tim was going to ask her to share such thoughts so she read her written reflection entitled "How I've Changed as a Reader":

I've been reading so much faster than the beginning of the year. So far I've read three chapter books. I've been learning a lot from reading. From reading, I've learned that whales used to live on land. I've been learning harder words like for example "enthusiastically." I'm using different strategies for reading like looking at the pictures and the words close to it and not using simple "sounding out". Sometimes I use the reading strategies for writing to help me figure how to spell words.

Before Sana had a chance to sit back down, her young colleagues started making connections between their own reading habits and the ideas she mentioned. Tim reviewed the big ideas Sana demonstrated, such as reading fluently and attending to the beauty and uniqueness of the dialect in the text; and using what you know about the world, what is happening in the story, the word that would make the most sense in the sentence, and phonics knowledge to figure out unknown words.

Tim thanked her for sharing with the class. Everyone applauded in concert, and Tim introduced the next event. This brief yet predictable feature of the curriculum fostered self-reflection that led the children to analyze and gain control over their own strategies while also helping others become accomplished readers and writers.

Sharing Writing Strategies

The strategy-sharing session that follows emerged in the same third grade classroom immediately following writing workshop. Zac began, "Okay, the strategy I did today, so I would get my train of thought started, I read over my piece before I started writing."

Tim validated and extended this notion by responding, "How many of the rest of you do that? It is a great idea and I always do that even when I am reading to get into the train of thought as Zac said. Great idea, Zac!"

The whole class admired Zac for his idea because they all knew it was often difficult for him to find his stride as a writer during workshop. He sensed the group's respect and sighed as he returned to his circle of friends on the floor.

Frances made her way to the front of the group and began, "If I didn't know how to spell a word I would look it up in the dictionary or ask someone how to spell a word."

Tim reacted, "All right! Another good strategy." Looking to the group he continued, "Any other strategies for words when you are not sure how to spell it?"

Shelby said, "When I self-edit it, I, um, I circle it."

Tim inquired, "So when you write it you circle it and when you go back over it you see if it looks right?" She nods.

Robert chimed in, "Sometimes when I come to a word I am not sure of I just break it up into parts."

Tim responded, "So you spell one word part at a time?"

Rachael added, "I write it on the side three times and then whichever one looks the best I put it down but I still circle it just in case."

Tim verified the usefulness of using visual memory while also giving Zac credit for spreading the good word. He said, "That's what we called Zac's strategy at the beginning of last year."

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Zac reacted sincerely with "But I learned it from you."

Phillip jumped up and spread his arms open wide to demonstrate his strategy. "Sometimes let's say if there is a word in a sentence I don't know it's like let's see." He pointed to a spot in the air and asked, "OK, what's that word? OK, I'll come back to you. 'Blank' is where sun makes life for plants." He pointed to a spot in the air for each word as he said it. He looked down to his friends at his feet and continued, "That gives me a clue because I remember my dad told me that word was 'photosynthesis.' Because I know what it means then I can use the words around it [acting it out in the air] to help me."

I was videotaping and chimed in, "That makes sense to use the words around it to figure out what it means."

Tim added, "That is really a reading strategy, isn't it?"

Phillip interrupted by saying, "Besides, that is also connected. You see if you know how to read better, you also know how to write better because you know how to write those words because you have read those words."

Tim smiled and said, "No kidding! The better reader you are, the better writer. And the better writer you are, the better reader you are. Good connection."

It was Tim's turn. He followed the pattern established by the class. "The strategy I would like to share is about making paragraphs, going down to the next line and indenting five spaces or so. Robert, may I share your autobiography?"

Robert beamed. "Sure!"

"OK, as I read along, if you think the sentence I start belongs in a new paragraph, why don't you give me the thumb up. Of course, the first sentence you write will be in a new paragraph so you will indent." Tim began reading

and the children listened carefully, responding each time the subject in Robert's text changed. After completing the autobiography, they reflected on why they made the decisions they did, and summarized important points to remember about making paragraphs.

The third graders featured in this conversation had the privilege of working with the same teacher for two years through a looping organizational structure. On this particular day they learned a strategy for reconnecting to a work in progress; various spelling strategies (self-editing, using a dictionary, asking an expert, using visual memory, breaking words into syllables); the value of skipping an unknown word and using context clues to figure it out; and the importance of reading like a writer and writing like a reader.

The richness of this learning ritual takes on new meaning when we multiply the insights shared during this single event by three hundred and sixty days. The opportunity to live and learn together intensively and extensively for two school years resulted in children who, by traditional standardized tests as well as holistic measures, became accomplished readers and writers.

The Universal Nature of Good Teaching: Strategy Sharing Across Contexts

Tim has come to believe that he is at his best as a teacher when he can *teach out of and into* children's immediate work. The previous classroom example featured a few specific strategies that were on the teacher's and third graders' minds at that particular point in time and Tim employed the same reflective device with other classes. The cultural, economic, ethnic, and academic groups Tim has worked with over time have varied from school to school, yet Tim's beliefs about teaching and learning have been anchored in a transactional/holistic model of literacy. Although the content in the explicit curriculum changed from district to district and grade level to grade level, he found that teaching practices such as strategy-sharing sessions supported all learners all of the time.

When Tim taught transition-first-grade he spent a great deal of time helping children learn letter sound relationships. He intentionally and systematically highlighted the role of phonics in reading and writing so that the children would come to understand and use the graphophonic cue system effectively. Tim puts it this way: "While graphophonemic relationships are highlighted in my classroom, I make an effort to get children to focus on the multiple cue systems available to them, for no cue system by itself is sufficient for effective communication. To the students in my class, letter sounds were only one way of supporting the meaning-making process, and it only worked when used in concert with other cue systems" (Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992, p. 1).

Phonics instruction often involved making the children's implicit understandings explicit. While Tim planned demonstration lessons and literacy engagements that foregrounded consistencies and inconsistencies in letter sound relationships, the formal mini-lessons did not follow any predetermined, artificial sequence. Instead, he looked to the children to determine when, how, and why he should address particular skills and strategies. He created a curricular framework that ensured daily opportunities for children to have *direct experi-*

ences with language skills and strategies, and he employed kidwatching strategies to determine which individuals, small groups, and the whole class might benefit from it the most. In this way, the curriculum was shaped and reshaped by each new insight or question.

Time for strategy sharing was built into the daily schedule much like it is in Tim's third grade classroom today. In the transition-first-grade classroom, Tim found that it worked best to use brief yet focused texts rather than powerful children's literature or even the children's personal narrative texts for whole class reflection sessions. Tim used predictable books or pattern books to feature language concepts, conventions, skills, and effective reading strategies as tools to teach children to read. After reading a predictable book together as a class, the teacher and children often discussed letter pattern relationships, words they recognized, the punctuation used, the pictures, and the strategies they used to make, confirm, or revise predictions. Tim wanted the children to first enjoy the story and construct meaning from the text. Then he used the same familiar pattern book to help the children develop a knowledge base about the ways in which letters, words, illustrations, and texts are structured.

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Tim established a class ritual of reflecting on entries from the daily class calendar to foreground phonics generalizations and other skills and concepts. For instance, when six-year-old Tony wrote a message on the class calendar to permanently record an important event in his learning history, he said, "I'm making a book." He spelled three out of four words conventionally and explained to the group that he simply remembered how to spell the word *book* from reading it. This explanation illustrated that he used visual memory as a primary strategy. When Tim asked him to share his thinking regarding *making*, which he spelled *macking*, he explained, "I've seen you put *ck* on the end of words. Then I just wrote the *m* and the *a* by listening to the sounds and then I wrote the *ing*," showing a sensitivity to common letter patterns in words.

"How did you know the *ing*?" Tim asked.

Tony answered quite matter-of-factly, "You taught me that they go together."

Tim noted that Tony demonstrated his understanding that *ck* and *ing* go together. He simply overgeneralized the *ck* in this instance. He also stated that he figured out the beginning of the word, *ma*, by listening to the sounds. Tony's explanation highlighted how he used multiple strategies to construct and share meaning (Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1992).

Strategy-sharing sessions such as these are used to publicly recognize children's effective use of skills and strategies. Tim's careful kidwatching allows him to *teach into and out of* children's needs and interests and, in so doing, he validates, expands, and fine-tunes children's competence while building their confidence as language users.

When Teachers and Parents Become Kidwatching Partners

During eighteen years of teaching, Tim has taught preschool through sixth grade in four states. While the political times and specific teaching contexts have varied tremendously over time and space, he has consistently been provided professional autonomy. As we reflected upon this fact, we wondered why he could teach in ways that were consistent with his beliefs when so many of his colleagues were required to "follow the book." We first thought that it was because of his commitment to his beliefs. However, in these political times, some of the most passionate and knowledgeable teachers are being denied access to information regarding holistic instruction and are being monitored carefully to make sure they "are true to the new party line," which often means using intensive and systematic phonics. So, how can we learn from our past to deal effectively with the present and our future?

As we took a second, closer look at the support Tim has received for his instruction, we realized that he establishes an intimate, collaborative relationship with his children's parents, just as he does with his students. In other words, he holds the same model when working with parents that he employs day in and day out with their children. He extends an open invitation for parents to visit, work, live, and learn in his room. He also writes extensive narrative reports each grading period whether or not he also has to respond using traditional letter grades. Such efforts, while essential, do not alter the hierarchy that is often established between teachers *who know* and parents *who care*. The single most effective engagement Tim has devised over the years to promote genuine collaboration with his children's parents emerged when he began incorporating parents' insights and questions into his weekly newsletters.

Tim sends a newsletter home every Wednesday. He usually begins each letter by sharing news from the classroom. He weaves in his philosophical position by "showing" and interpreting the children's work. The focus is always on the children and the rich learning taking place in the classroom. The parents, who know and care deeply about their children's growth and happiness, are delighted about the learning invitations and evaluation strategies simply because they make sense when presented in this way. He does not compare his teaching approaches against a mainstream norm. Instead, he illuminates the worth of using children's literature and authentic writing projects by featuring the children's insights, and accomplishments.

Tim has also adapted the same reflective engagements that work in the classroom for use in the newsletter. He extends an invitation to parents each week to engage their child(ren) in the same kinds of activities the children use during literature study, writing, and math workshop. Tim begins with a demonstration using an artifact from the children just as he does when presenting a new skill, strategy, or concept in the classroom. Next, he invites the parents to

use the 3+'s and a wish format when interpreting their children's response to the activity (Mills & Clyde, 1990). In so doing, he has invited the parents into his "kidwatching club" by explicitly valuing their insights and questions. Finally, he fosters collaborative and informative conversations among parents by publishing their written comments in the next newsletter. He validates their ideas, insights, and concerns just as he does their children's and lets them know that their wishes become goals for him instructionally. This strategy allows the parents' voices to be heard and valued and provides the opportunity for parents to teach each other as well. He earns their trust and respect because he has learned how to hold his model with all learners, tall and small.

Newsletter, 11/12/97

Dear Parents,

Things have been going great in the third grade. Over the last two weeks, as you must know, we have been doing quite a lot with our literature study of *Charlotte's Web*. Someone asked the other day, "Mr. O'Keefe, will we be doing *Charlotte's Web* all year?" The answer is NO but what we have done with it has far exceeded my expectation. The children have really developed as readers and writers through this book. Most children became very good at writing and responding to literature. The literature discussions were priceless. Several children got the chance to lead discussions and everyone rose to the occasion. Even children who hardly ever speak out in class were wonderful at leading the small group discussions of this marvelous book.

Thanks to the Mehmood's for loaning us the video. The children had the unique opportunity to see the film just after reading the book and the comparisons were great. To top it off, the play at the Township Auditorium, while different, was also enjoyable and gave us yet another look at this great story. We have created a three way diagram to compare and contrast the three versions of the story. The children wrote papers comparing the film and book. There are almost constant connections to the story throughout the day. Ahhh! It's a good feeling when something comes together as nicely as this literary unit has.

I want to thank you for the responses to the written conversations about the story. The children and you wrote such wonderful, thought provoking questions. The depth and clarity of the responses was great. Am I wrong, or did I spot some tear stains on the papers? Some of the connections to other books and people in your lives made your written conversations exciting to read. Many of your papers were so personal that it felt like I was eavesdropping on an intimate conversation.

Your comments about your child as a reader were right on target. Some of your comments are listed below:

Thomas is very good at understanding the meaning of words he's not familiar with. He uses the context of the sentence to help learn the meaning of the new word . . . He got into the emotions of the story and identified with how Wilbur felt about Charlotte . . . Reginald is getting more out of stories. Not only is he reading better, he's listening to what he's reading . . . Each character had a different voice or timing . . . She has a good use of emotion when she sees the exclamation marks . . . She brings interest and excitement by changing her voice when reading different characters and displaying different sentiments . . . She's

learning to inject emotion into what she is reading . . . I've noticed improvement in his retention as well as relating what he reads to other stories and events . . . Reading this chapter together led into some healthy discussion of life, death and friendships . . . He is reading new words and building endurance to read longer . . . He gets a real kick out of the funny parts and really "feels" the sad parts . . . She can discuss what she reads and writes about it confidently . . .

There were so many excellent comments and observations from you. I continue to be impressed about you as "Kidwatchers." Of course, there were many wishes for your children as well. Your wishes for your child as a reader become my goals. Your feedback is so important. I know it takes a lot of time to complete an assignment like this but your work makes such an important difference.

We will be reading another chapter book as a class. The book is *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. It is a wonderful story about a child and his relationships with an animal and his family. There are lots of lessons in the story. I'm sure that you would like to read it along with your child. If you were able to keep up in the book, you could have some wonderful literature discussions at home. I'll let you know the cost as soon as I contact the bookstore. If you have the book at home, let me know so that I can order the right number for our class.

The field trip to see *CW* was a nice success due, in large part, to the parents who came along. Our sincere thanks to Katy and Gary Hassen, Rubina Mehmood, Susan Bergmann, Claudia Johnson, Lark Francis, Karen Colburn, and Frankie McLean. It is so nice to have such a supportive group of parents along.

This week's newsletter assignment is for the children to complete the multiplication problems created in class. These demonstrate that the children really DO know what multiplication is and how it is used in a practical way in our daily lives to figure out real problems. Most of these stories involve multiple sets but a few deal with arrays (rows and columns). The children are supposed to write an **equation** for the stories and solve them. Everyone knows that they also need to write the **units** for each problem by their answers. As always, your comments to me about how your child did on this assignment would be helpful. Let's have these completed by Monday.

That's all for now. Thanks for reading and thanks for all you do!!

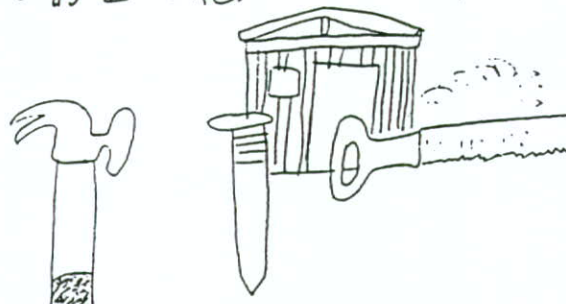
Tim

We have 6 tables in our class. Each table has 4 legs. How many legs in all?



megan Fults

Each day I work for six min.
I get 7.00 for a min. How much
do I make? Phillip



When What Matters Counts

Teaching during these political times can be discouraging when best practices are under constant attack by politicians and the media. As educators, we are constantly reminded that we must focus on basic skills, in other words, on *what counts*. However, the teacher and children featured in this piece have very different notions about teaching and learning than those often found on editorial pages in newspapers. It is my hope that our profession will continue to look closely and listen carefully within the walls of our classrooms. In so doing, I am confident the children will simply remind us that *what matters* is really *what counts*.

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Editors' Note: The Children's Voices section in this issue features the reflective writing of Tim's students as they responded to *The Sunshine Home* (Bunting, 1994) and *The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins* (Laminack, 1998).

