

Confessions of a Kindergarten Teacher

By Trish Prentice

WEEK 1

Day 1 Tuesday

It's a new year, new folders, new pencils, new books and most importantly, new children. I'm so wound up the night before the first day; I can barely sleep. I'm up by 5:00, at school by 6:00. A few last minute touches and then the children arrive. We're off to the races.

Oh boy, by lunchtime, reality sinks in. This is hard work! It's a bit like being in labor for the second time. I'd forgotten how difficult it could be because the end results are so worth it. But now, I'm back at the beginning with lots of work to do. There's no turning back, the only option is to take a deep breath and get busy.

I'm trying to channel Gail and Joan in the moment and decide to begin with the 3 Ways to Read a Book lesson. I think this is perfect for the first day of Kindergarten. Many little ones are so afraid of reading; they think it's only about words. I know I have to convince them that reading the pictures is reading too. If I can keep their noses in books while boosting their confidence, everything will fall in place.

I started with a class set of books that contained only pictures. We read the book together as we talked about the pictures. Next, I demonstrated the second way to read a book, with words. *Miss Bindergarten Celebrates the First Day of Kindergarten*, of course. It only took a few minutes to do, but I set the groundwork for Daily 5 success. What a meaningful activity!

All in all, it was a great day. We only had one bathroom accident! Note to self; take them to the bathroom every thirty minutes tomorrow.

Day 2 Wednesday

Here we are, back again. The children are feeling at home and a little frisky. Think about the movie Kindergarten Cop. I've heard other people compare teaching Kindergarten to herding cats. Anyway, I'm pulling out all the tricks of the trade, some work, some don't. But I've got lots of tricks, so we keep moving.

It's time to review our 3 Ways to Read a Book. First, we pull out the picture book we read yesterday and retell the story together. Then, I've got another wordless book for everyone to read together. Now, it's time to read a book with words. I explain how to stop and check for understanding. We make a check in the air with our fingers. Then we make W's with our fingers for "who" and "what." Another meaningful moment!

We begin reading our first poem that we'll add to our poetry notebook. We picked a word from the poem, made a drum roll sound and added our first word to our word wall!

I saw some of my students who are in first grade this year in the hallways. I swear I'm going through a grieving process. I want to grab them and pull them back to Kindergarten. I miss them terribly! I try to convince myself that this happens every year, and I'll get over it. But right now, I'm sad when I see them, even though I'm smiling and waving.

One fun moment came when I was talking with several of our fabulous fourth grade teachers after school. We discovered that we had all introduced check for understanding today. Isn't that something, similar things are happening all over the school despite the grade level? Now that's alignment!

In the end, it was a successful, exhausting day. No bathroom accidents. Hallelujah! Yet by 9:00PM, I'm texting Cheryl, my Daily 5 teaching buddy down the hall, saying, "I can't wait another day! I've got to start rotations tomorrow." She's feeling the same way, so we agree on what we'll add to the I-Charts. I go to bed excited and relieved.

Day 3

Thursday

Okay, let's get moving. We began making our I-Chart by adding stay in one spot, quiet reading and read the whole time. I placed the children around the room and we had a ninety-second rotation. No problem. We'll try it again! This time we made it for two and a half minutes. Yeh, we're making progress. We graphed our results so we could see our improvement. Ah, I feel like there's light at the end of the tunnel. We'll get there, seconds at a time.

Isn't it amazing that children who are sixty months old can work so independently on the third day of Kindergarten! It takes my breath away.

The best part was that I heard a student say in amazement, after the first rotation, "I could read this book." He had surprised himself! It's time for a happy dance.

We also reviewed 3 ways to read a book. This time we read the pictures using a book that had text. I want the students to realize they can picture read books with words too.

Also, we added our "check for understanding" card to our CAFE menu. Ta-da! It's the first of many. Also, we put another word on the word wall. I love teaching!

Day 4

Friday

I know this is going to work!

Today when I said we were going to do Daily 5, several students cheered.

When I asked the students if they thought they could increase their stamina, they replied they

wanted to fill up the whole column on our graph. Okay, we didn't fill the whole column, that would be fifteen minutes, but we did get to three and a half minutes. After I read a picture book to the class, one student lamented, "We only stopped and checked for understanding one time!" Wow, they're getting it.

One interesting thing popped out at me during our rotation time. There were many children talking, but they were talking to themselves...reading the pictures or reading out-loud. Could this be a legitimate stage in learning to read? I also remember some students last year did that all year long? Perhaps we might try whisper/phonics phones if it becomes a problem.

Cheryl said she told her students that some people read inside their heads and some read outside their heads. If you read outside your head, you've got to whisper read. Sounds like a good idea.

I have an interesting opportunity this year. Cheryl's son Ben is in my class! She overheard him telling his brother that he had to "read lots of books so he could get his stamina." She pointed to her CAFE board and asked if he knew what it meant. He touched the check for understanding card and said, "You stop reading and say who and what's in the story." He couldn't remember what voracious reading was...but that's okay; we'll talk about it again and again.

What fun it was for me to hear that many of the important concepts I introduced were absorbed. I could kiss that boy! Actually, I think I did.

Of course, we did many other things this week...practiced walking in line, learned what warm fuzzy words are, practiced cutting with scissors, learned how to twist a glue lid to open, ate lunch in the cafeteria, wrote in our Calendar Math Notebooks, added numbers to our 100 board, made our first teddy graham graph, kept rocks and sticks on the ground, went down the slide-not up the slide, made a self-portrait, bear puppet and a Corduroy bear, wrote our names with eraser pencils, sang the Bear Hunt and Bubble Gum song, marched in a teddy bear parade with teddy bear headbands, then had a teddy bear picnic and went to the bathroom many, many, many times. But my favorite moments were spent with books. When I read to my students, I have their full attention. It's a joy to behold. When they are reading to themselves, it's also a joy to watch. Is there any better way to begin the first week of school?!

WEEK 2

Monday

Here we are, ready for week 2! The big goal for today is to introduce writing journals. I know, I know, I should have done this last week. I just can't seem to tackle this task until week two. (Kudos to the teachers who do this on the first day of school!)

Since the children have learned about the three ways to read a book, I tell them there are three ways to write a story. You can draw pictures, label your pictures or write sentences. I throw in the idea of the drawing a line for a word you don't know how to spell and off they go with their shiny new blue journals. It all went amazingly smooth. I even have some students already writing in sentences!

Then I made a mistake, a big mistake. I know better, but I did it anyway. There was fifteen minutes left before lunch. I'm thinking that maybe we can fit in one round of Daily 5. Okay, let's try. Of course, we hurry while we review the I-Chart and we hurry the student who is modeling. Guess how the rotation went? Plus, we were late to lunch. Moral: Don't have a rotation unless you really have the time!

We're keeping track of all the books we read as a class this year. I'm thrilled that the children keep reminding me to write the titles down. We're up to 25 books already! All in all, it's a good literacy day. I'm not aiming for perfect; I just want to keep moving in the right direction.

Tuesday

I think you have to be a Daily 5'er to really appreciate this. We've been working as a class on writing an I-Chart titled "Let's Get Along." It includes social strategies such as Share, Listen, Walk Away, etc. We add a few each day. But today when I put the chart on the easel, Emily piped up and asked, "Are we doing Daily 6 now?"

Here's a success story, even though it didn't look like one at first. During our second rotation, I moved across the room to retrieve something from the cupboard. I inadvertently made eye contact with a student and noticed he was just sitting. Oh no, I probably need to ring the chimes. Then he looked me squarely in the eye, reading my mind and whispered, "I'm retelling a story in my head!"

I gave Mr. Noisy a whisper phone to read into instead of reading out loud. He wouldn't use it at first, but when he picked up an Old MacDonald book, he began to quietly sing into the phone. Maybe it will work again tomorrow. Today the journal objective was to learn to turn the page and begin coloring on the next page. Sounds insignificant, but you'd be surprised how Kindergartners can draw all over ten pages of a journal in a heartbeat.

Wednesday

I have found that when you are beginning to practice Read to Self, many of the rotations are very short, just a couple of minutes. Therefore, you can repeat the rotations several times. But as stamina

grows, the first rotation will stretch to seven or eight minutes. At this point, it's best to cut back to one rotation. Experience has shown me that one long rotation doing Read to Self is plenty. It's hard for them to maintain stamina when they have to do Read to Self again for a long, second rotation.

Now comes the push to begin preparing for adding another daily; mine will be Word Work. It's time to introduce white boards. I tell my students that white boards are only for words. We have new markers, but they have to last the whole year. Drawing pictures takes up too much ink. So, we practice writing our names and heart words.

While we're at it, we add the "Know many heart words" strategy card to our CAFE Menu. I had a moment today as I was checking journals when I thought; can we make all the progress that needs to be made? But I reminded myself that I think this every year and we always reach the goal line. I should have faith, faith in my students and faith in my teaching. I need to just relax and enjoy the journey.

Thursday

I added a couple of new books to each child's book suitcases just to get us through one more rotation for the week. Last year, I switched the books out each week and the children complained they weren't done yet. This year they seem to be going through books a bit faster. I don't think you can make a hard and fast rule about when to switch books.

Watch the children, their behavior will show you the way. Let's explore the new word work tools. Besides white boards, wiki sticks and stamps; I'm also going to try "shell spell" this year. Those tiny shells will work on fine motor skills too. Today, let's play with our tools so we can work with them later.

I noticed several children reading from their poetry notebooks and writing journals during Read to Self. That always makes me happy!

Friday

The children are tired, I am tired and it's raining, therefore, no recess. Thanks goodness Labor Day is Monday. This will give me time to rest and regroup. By now, the "begin the year honeymoon" is completely over. Behavior issues are apparent and frustrating. But, I'm proud to be a part of the greatest "problem-solving" profession known to man. We are experts at figuring out a new arrangement, a new technique or a new response. We never give up. Teachers help each other, we listen, we give suggestions, we loan supplies, we give moral support and we understand how hard it can be.

So next week, have no fear, I'll be ready with newfound energy, a couple of different ideas and a smile.

WEEK 3

Tuesday

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

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

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

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

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

And Kindergarten teachers love little things, especially little people.

Wednesday

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

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

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

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

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

Thursday

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

I would love to start pulling groups but I'm resisting the urge. I want the children's Daily 5 work habits to be so deeply ingrained that I could walk out into the hallway momentarily to speak to another adult and the children would not even know.

When the focus on their work is that intense, then I can meet with individuals and groups. I'll be able to give my full attention to the children I'm working with because the rest of the class is on task.

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

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

Friday

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

But I'm finding that relying on my memory, from year to year, is getting to be unreliable at best. Maybe a fancy new clipboard would help...my new answer to all problems.

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

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

WEEKS 4 & 5

It is the fourth and fifth weeks of school and we're busy people! Read to Self and Word Work have become routine while we add Work on Writing to our rotations. Now we are up to three rotations! We've learned how to book shop and share our journals with the class. Daily 5 is alive and well in the Prentice Puppy classroom!

Here are some highlights...

Prentice Pleasure Reading Program: The students are beginning to take books home to read with their parents. Here is our schedule.

- Monday-Poetry notebooks go home for the evening
- Tuesday-Students check out a book from their reading suitcase
- Wednesday-Library Day
- Thursday-Another book is checked out from their reading suitcase

The children are excited to get their new reading folders and tuck the book inside. Each parent records which book their child brings home, then I have a record throughout the year of the books they've selected.

Writing: Since we began writing in our journal, I've noticed some children are writing about the same thing day after day...after day. I have a future Waste Management Technician who has drawn a garbage truck for every single entry. I decided we needed a discussion on "things to write about". I made a chart with the children of various ideas from animals to friends, parties, favorites, vacations and many more. I added a quick picture icon to help the non-readers. This poster can be a reference tool for the children. Update: Next day, garbage man drew a dump truck! Now that's progress.

We made our Work on Writing I-Chart. Today the students now have three choices and three rotations. We're getting closer to having everything up and running! I was worried that the students wouldn't be able to maintain stamina with their writing, but the opposite was the issue.

Most children said, "I'm not done yet" when I rang the chimes. The best part of journal writing is journal sharing! After each rotation, the Work on Writing friends sit in the share chair and talk about their drawing and/or story. My job in this process is to "notice" and celebrate what the children are doing correctly. The students' work leads the instruction, and they learn from each other's examples. The bottom line is, the children motivate and support each other.

Book Shopping: It's finally time for the children to begin to book shop. I try to keep it simple, but it's always a little confusing at the beginning of the year. First, I instruct the students to look through their reading suitcases and make two piles, a "keep pile" and a "trade pile". "Keep" books go back in their suitcase, "trade" books get returned to their matching box or table.

New books! I love having the students choose books they are interested in, but I've learned to provide limits. For example, I put leveled readers on my tables and nudge the children to visit their best-fit table. I also have themed book boxes throughout the room filled with picture books that, for the most part, are above their reading levels. For their first shopping experience they may choose three books from the leveled table and three books from the picture book boxes. Next week, we'll jump up to five or six books from each group. This way I know that students will have a nice variety

to use during Daily 5. As I suspected, after book shopping, Read to Self was the most popular choice during check-in. That's good! The bottom line is, I want children to be excited to read their books.

Here's a fun email I received from a Mom:

Tonight at the dinner table, we were going around saying the worst part of our day and the best part. James said that the worst part of his day was that I forgot his towel for rest time. Oops! He said the best part of his day was shopping for books! :)

A few more book shopping ideas: It all began with the thought that I don't yet know what kind of books each child loves. Then I thought the children might not even know what kind of books they love. Hmm.

- Idea 1: I made a quick grid with a box for each child in my class. I wrote their names in the boxes in the order that their reading suitcases are located on the shelf. Then I took several minutes and quickly searched each suitcase. I made a note of any topics that had multiples. I looked for children who picked out non-fiction over fiction. After several times of tracking, maybe I'll see some trends. I'll also be able to monitor if students are picking appropriate leveled books too.
- Idea Two: Before book shopping, I paired the students and had them talk about the books they read last week. I suggested they could even trade some books with each other. I told the students that not only did I want them to discover what kind of books they like, but their partner too! I know I won't have time to do this weekly, but maybe every now and then. Here's a bit of advice...model this with another student first, then children can get the idea of the lingo and what you're really trying to accomplish.

Word Work:

The more I practice Daily 5, the more I find that my lesson plans are quite fluid from day to day. It seems that what happens today drives what I want to accomplish tomorrow. For example, I checked in with my friends who had not known any high frequency words the first week. I wanted to find out if any of the newly added word wall words were sticking? About half those children are doing great, but several others are not. Now I've got my first strategy group. Let's slow down and concentrate on one word at a time for them.

Next day I came up with an idea. I wrote one word, "the", on a heart shaped sticky note. I made one for each friend who needed some extra practice. I stuck the sticky note on their folder of words. I told them I wanted them to concentrate on that one word. Their job was to build "the" with each tool. I said I would come back every day and ask them to read it for me. So far, it's working.

I decided I needed to up the ante for the students who already know the sight words. I'm finally seeing that they are including the words in their writing, so it's time to add another challenge. I made a list of thematic words that went with our social studies unit. I challenged these particular students to write sentences using the thematic words and the heart words together. Here are some sentence examples from our health unit. "Be healthy." And, "Do get sleep."

Strategies:

Good news! Last week I introduced Connect to the Story with an accompanying hand motion. (Move fists together until they touch.) Today, as I was holding up our read aloud, one of my little firecracker friends shouted out, "We need to...you know" and then she made the action with her

hands and said, “talk”. She couldn’t remember the name of the strategy but she did remember what to do and repeating the action seemed to help her get the word out. Love it, love it, love it! Cross Check, Double Check! The children are crazy about this new strategy. They enjoy listening to me make little mistakes as I read and then shouting “It doesn’t make sense.” What would I do without their help! :)

We practiced our new strategy, Play with Rhyming Words, by giving the thumbs-ups when we heard a pair. We read *The Seven Silly Eaters* since it went well with our nutrition unit that week. I contend you can reinforce almost any strategy with almost any picture book. Sometimes it’s a fun challenge to make the connections!

The students have been hounding me to introduce a strategy in the Expanding Vocabulary section. (Now that’s cool!) We didn’t have one in that column yet. But now we do, the word “awesome”. That sums it all up.

Ben Update:

My Daily 5 partner Cheryl, has a son Ben, who is a Kindergartner in my class. This boy has become a word detective! He is noticing words all around him. While playing a video game he mentioned to his Mom, “Hey, here is the word ‘to’. Do you know there is another way to spell it...’too’? Mrs. Prentice told us that.” Another day, he brought a book to his Mom and said, “Will you help me with this? I really need to learn these words.” That’s a boy with a sense of urgency! He’s a zoomer!

Community:

How long does it take to form a class community? Certainly the answer varies depending on the particular children. But for me, it takes about four weeks. Of course, some children you bond with instantly, but it’s not really about one or two, it’s about a group identity. By now, we’ve had lots of laughs, made a few mistakes and fixed them, read about seventy books, eaten together, discovered consequences, made beautiful pictures, sang together, exercised and rested together. We’ve started to take chances and reveal who we really are. We’ve learned some new ways to handle problems and get along. We’re happy to see each other in the morning and a little sad to wave goodbye in the afternoon. Now instead of being “my new class,” they are just “my class.” I’m always relieved to reach this point. There’s always a shadow of doubt that I won’t be able to love this group like I did last year. But now I know...I can and I do.

So as my reflections come to a close, here’s my wish for you and your class. May you find pure joy in sharing the love of reading and writing with your students. Relish each success a child makes; there will be many. Try not to take the disappointments personally; there will be some of these too. Believe in Daily 5 and CAFE, it’s worth the effort. Find a teaching buddy and share your thoughts. Always remember that you are part of a community of educators. We may not know each other’s names, but we walk the same road together with determination and strength. On those high days, we celebrate together in spirit. In those low moments, know that you have a community who believes in you and your purpose. Have a magnificent year my friend.