



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, Summer 2026

"Putting children at the center of learning."

Have We Lost the Plot on Student Achievement?

As national literacy scores have been declining since 2013 – coinciding with smartphones and one-to-one device initiatives becoming widespread, schools seem to have doubled down on diagnostic testing as the panacea to the problem. Add to that a lot of isolated skill instruction, test prep, and digital apps, and it is not surprising that schools are struggling to keep students engaged in reading and writing instruction. It seems we've completely lost the plot regarding how to develop proficient readers and writers.



Recently, I (Krista) had the opportunity to work with Dr. Alfred Tatum- an internationally known literacy expert, researcher, and author- while facilitating a literacy retreat for a local urban school district: a district where the superintendent and leadership team are deeply committed to improving literacy outcomes for **all** students. They know this will require changes to instruction based in the science of reading, but even more than that, a way to move students to high levels of literacy. Rather than small steps of incremental growth, this district is focused on high-impact teaching that fosters exponential growth: the kind of growth that changes students' lives.

Dr. Tatum's work is centered on applying concrete literacy metrics and teaching strategies to accelerate each student's progress. He believes nothing is more important than becoming highly literate, because literacy is a tool for protection in our world. Furthermore, when students have access to the entire curriculum with a high volume of reading and writing, their ability to read, write, think, and expand academic knowledge and vocabulary is inevitable. His message resonated with me and reminded me why I have made this my life's work.

In the three-day session, Dr. Tatum challenged us to reflect on whether we are holding each of our students in the "highest regard at the word level, sentence level, text level, knowledge level, and life level" in our classrooms. He then asked us to examine our instructional practices and **turn up the volume**. Generally, if a child has reading difficulties, we turn down the volume on reading and writing and offer them less – fewer words to decode, fewer sentences to write, fewer academic discussions, less vocabulary, and less knowledge to acquire from reading and writing.



To turn up the volume, we adopt engaging teaching strategies while collecting artifacts of learning and growth. Students are reading and writing during every hour of instruction, ensuring they gain the practice and confidence they need to achieve at high levels. This approach is more than having “high expectations”. That phrase is everywhere in education, representing the goal of believing in students and expecting high levels of learning. But what does that really look like? How do we measure it?

Dr Tatum impressed on us that when you increase writing volume, you automatically increase reading volume. When students are responding to texts, they must revisit the text often. He emphasized that we need to focus on students in the act of reading and writing rather than the “before, during, after” model, saying that it’s all “during, during, during” with the teacher coaching and supporting students the whole time. Some students are advanced, and some have reading and writing difficulties, but they can work on the same content with the individual support they need.

In each session, Dr. Tatum showed a slide of a student named Miracle and said, “I am Miracle. You are Miracle. Every child in this district is Miracle,” emphasizing that every child deserves access to rich, meaningful literacy learning in every hour of instruction. (Turn up the volume.) He challenged us to focus on the needs of every student, rather than pursuing single-digit, incremental gains that leave many behind. For example, if a district aims to increase proficiency by 5% from a baseline of 50% proficient and above, nearly half of the students would remain outside the goal. As the superintendent noted, it would be unacceptable to tell the parents of these students that their children were not a priority that year. They were not even included in the district goal. We can do better.



Encouraging the retreat participants to focus on specific, measurable instructional goals that he called “literacy metrics that matter”, Dr. Tatum described and shared examples of learning outcomes that are clear, measurable, and actionable. For example, “every 6th grader will read and respond in writing to at least 500 words of text in every hour of instruction”. The hour ties in skill work, discussion, and key vocabulary. An index can be used to gauge each student’s progress toward mastery in each metric. Artifacts of student writing responses are collected as evidence of progress. This type of measurable teaching goal is clear and specific. We know it when we see it.

Explaining that most state standards and curricula are pretty much the same, Dr. Tatum said that the difference is us, stating, “We can waste time trying to get the perfect high-quality curriculum. Rather, YOU make the curriculum high quality.” He emphasized that every reading and writing activity, from kindergarten through 12th grade, should build vocabulary and content knowledge. This means that while we are learning to read, we are also learning about a topic and building vocabulary and



knowledge about that content. Isolated, skill-based tasks do not significantly impact student growth. We get smarter by increasing our knowledge every day. Therefore, skills should be applied immediately to reading and writing to gain academic language and knowledge.

Dr. Tatum recommends that each hour of instruction include reading and writing across at least two texts, or at least one text for primary grades. And he clarified that we do “read to learn” in the primary grades (not just “learn to read,” as is often said), and some students may require more foundational skills even after third grade. Offering a structure for planning, he broke each hour into priorities - 25% is dedicated to explicit instruction, 30% to reading continuous text, and 44% to writing continuous text. Rich language permeates the hour. This cycle repeats daily with new texts, providing consistent opportunities for knowledge and practice. Scaffolding and real-time feedback from teachers support students at their individual levels, whether they are advanced or still developing foundational skills. (**An elementary example plan for reading and writing across two texts follows in this newsletter.**)

Supporting each student while making sure they have access to the full curriculum is the key. Dr. Tatum said we need to teach with a sense of urgency while making sure each student knows that if they show up at school, **we’ve got them**. Teaching and reinforcing foundational skills while building knowledge and vocabulary is how we turn up the volume for all learners. I believe Dr. Tatum has offered a detailed road map for how we can get back to the plot on student achievement.

Have We Lost the Plot? Reflection Questions:



Where do you feel we have lost the plot on student achievement? What can you and your school do to get back to what matters?



How often do your students read and write during the school day? How can we “increase the volume” for our students with reading and writing difficulties?

We want to hear from you!

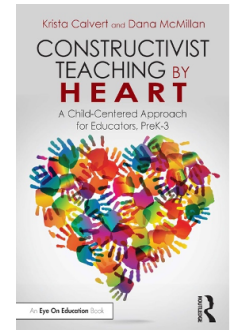
*Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **Have We Lost the Plot?**, [here](#).*



PONDER BOX

“... it's hard to become a better reader when you don't read very much. Yet, we've watched many reading lessons where the students did little to no actual reading. They are practicing the parts of reading, talking about reading, and getting ready to read, but not reading... Constructivist teachers pay particular attention to the students' “eyes-on-text” time because they know the student must build an effective reading process through a great deal of successful independent reading along with challenging reading with prompting and support. Each child constructs their individual reading process where phonics, fluency, and comprehension are intertwined into a fluid process where children can engage in more complex texts.”

-*Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, p. 84.

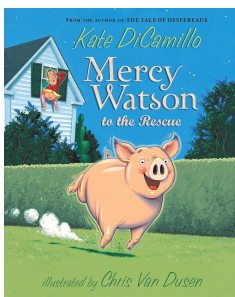


Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

Reading and Writing Across Multiple Books

Reading and writing across two or more books, poems, or articles increases opportunities for knowledge building, thinking, rich discussion, vocabulary, and comprehension within our students. This teaching strategy is not new but is gaining traction for increasing writing practice and applying isolated literacy skills to authentic reading and writing in the literacy block or literacy workshop.

Here are two delightful texts, one fiction and one nonfiction, to teach together with tips for skills, vocabulary, and reading and practice over one hour of instruction. (*To prepare, read 2-3 short chapters of Mercy Watson to the Rescue for 3-4 days before teaching the texts together.*)

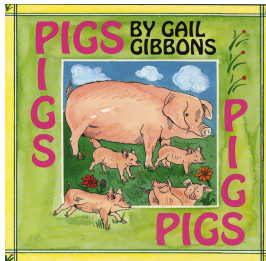


★ *Mercy Watson* by Kate DiCamillo

Synopsis: Mercy is a “porcine wonder” who is adored by Mr. and Mrs. Watson. They sing her to sleep and give her hot, buttered toast, sometimes letting Mercy cuddle up between them. One night, the Watsons’ bed collapses into a sinkhole. While the trapped Watsons panic, Mercy leaves to find food. She visits next-door neighbors Eugenia and Baby Lincoln for sugar cookies, creating quite a bit of chaos, eventually leading to the rescue of the Watsons.

Key Vocabulary: porcine, wonder, boisterous, inadvertently, commotion





★ *Pigs* by Gail Gibbons

Synopsis: *Pigs* is a non-fiction children's book designed to clear up common misconceptions about swine. It explains practical farm behaviors, such as why pigs wallow in mud and how mother pigs care for their young. Gibbons uses accessible language and detailed, labeled illustrations to teach readers that pigs are actually intelligent, clean, and highly adaptable creatures.

Key Vocabulary: swine, boar, sow, piglet, hog, snout, rooting, hoof, wallow

Bringing the Two Texts Together

Writing across these two engaging books is a meaningful way for early elementary students to compare **fact and fiction**. Here is an example of a comparison students could create with their teacher, possibly “sharing the pen”. More prompts for writing across these texts follow.

Lesson Focus	Fact: <i>Pigs</i> by Gail Gibbons	Fiction: <i>Mercy Watson to the Rescue</i>
Main Character Type	Generic, real domestic farm swine.	Mercy Watson , a pampered, toast-loving house pet.
Diet & Treats	Eats roots, insects, and grain via rooting .	Eats stacked slices of hot buttered toast .
Sleeping Habits	Sleeps in clean straw bedding inside barns.	Sleeps in a human bed with Mr. and Mrs. Watson.
Intelligence	High; smartest animal on the farm.	High, but motivated entirely by food.

Read, Talk, and Write Prompts

- Gail Gibbons writes that pigs are highly intelligent. How does Mercy Watson show that she is smart? Is she smart for a pig, or smart like a human?
- Mercy loves to eat hot buttered toast. Based on what you learned in *Pigs*, what would a real farm pig actually eat? What body part would they use to find it?
- In *Mercy Watson*, Mercy lives inside a house and sleeps in a bed. According to *Pigs*, are pigs clean enough to live in a house, or is this just a silly story?



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- When Mercy smells toast, what is happening scientifically inside her snout? How does her sense of smell compare to her eyesight?
 - If Mercy got too hot running around the neighborhood, how would she naturally try to cool down? Why wouldn't sweating work for her?
 - If Gail Gibbons visited the Watson family house, what advice do you think she would give Mr. and Mrs. Watson about taking care of a real pig?

Connected, Explicit Phonics/Spelling:

Choose a focus or work in small groups on targeted phonics skills. Use sound boxes, word ladders, and finger tapping (changing out one sound before writing a word on the next “rung”) to engage students in learning. Observe and teach to any confusions you witness as students work.

1. **Sound discrimination and decoding:** Short Vowel /i/ and /e/ Contrasts - Young readers often confuse the short vowel sounds **short-i** (as in *pig*) and **short-e** (as in *get* or *bed*).
Target Words:
Short /i/: pig, piglet, big, dig, gilt, pink, sniff.
Short /e/: pen, bed, wet, get, red, fed, Mercy, deck.
2. Consonant Blends (Initial and Final)
Blending sounds smoothly together without dropping consonants. Both books feature rich vocabulary with consonant blends (two consonants next to each other that you can hear as separate sounds).
Target Words:
Initial Blends: snout, grunt, swine, breed, clever, scent.
Final Blends: pink, smart, hunt.
3. **Shared writing or dictate sentences.** Choose a sentence or two about Mercy Watson below to dictate to students. Dictated sentences. This structured practice reinforces letter-sound relationships, spelling, spacing, capitalization, punctuation, and ensures students can apply these skills in context.
 - Mercy is a big pink pig. She is a swine.
 - Mercy can grunt and sniff. She has a wet snout to hunt for a sweet treat. Real hogs dig and root in the mud. They wallow when it is hot.

Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here](#)!

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