Align Your **Beliefs** with Your **Practices**

Consider devoting an upcoming staff meeting to sharing beliefs on literacy learning. Our beliefs drive our teaching practices whether or not we articulate them, so bringing those beliefs out in the open can have profound effects on our teaching. Discuss, chart, and notice areas of agreement—and disagreement. Look at what you’ve written on the chart paper as a group. What do you see? Where might this lead you in terms of next conversations, next steps? This initial conversation is a crucial first step in making needed change. My experience has been that until all the teachers in a school and/or district recognize where their beliefs diverge—and then align behind commonly held beliefs, high achievement remains out of reach. Why?

Because common beliefs create a coherent vision that in turn drives coherent teaching practices across the grades. Without that synchronicity, it’s like hearing an orchestra warming up as opposed to playing a Stravinsky symphony.

There is a theory of insanity postulated by Albert Einstein: if you keep on doing what’s not working, you’re going to keep on getting the same results. If the test scores are low or remain flat, if the students hate and fear writing, if students are not applying the reading strategies we’re teaching, we need to change course. Sadly, many of us continue on the same path even when things are going badly because we don’t know what else to do or because learned helplessness, often accompanied by fear, has set in.

**Examine Your Beliefs and Keep an Open Mind**

At one school where most of the students are nonwhite and come from families with low incomes, achievement, as measured by tests and work samples, is dismal. Yet teachers continue drilling students on skills in isolation as they have always done. Even when these teachers see dramatic improvement in students’ writing during my residency that focuses on whole-part-whole learning, they hold fast to those teaching-in-isolation beliefs.

I used to think that when teachers saw the dramatic achievements their students were capable of during a residency, they would change their practices. Not so. As I said before, but it bear’s restating, we all teach from a firmly held beliefs system whether we articulate those beliefs or not. As an example, many teachers in the intermediate grades believe that students are best served in ability groups, despite the fact that research does not support such grouping once students are readers. So it’s a necessity that individually, schoolwide, and districtwide, those beliefs be continually examined, articulated, and discussed. Our beliefs determine our teaching practices.
Keep on open mind. Be willing to change your views when research and experience warrant it. I find that most teachers and administrators are open to new possibilities. The few exceptions are those who hold on to rigid and inflexible behavior and are unable, for whatever reasons, to alter and adjust their beliefs and practices—even when presented with evidence that does not support their current methods. We teachers must also believe that we are still learners, capable of acting on new knowledge.

Rely on Common Sense

Very often, at the end of a residency, teachers comment, “But what you do is common sense.” And I respond, “Since when is common sense not allowed in teaching?” So many requirements cause us to teach in a frenzy and rely on others’ judgments. If something seems like a ridiculous practice and waste of time, it probably is. Unfortunately, because most of us have so much on our plates—and, rarely, is anything ever taken away—we end up going along with practices, materials, and procedures that are not good for children, mostly because we are exhausted. Nonetheless, as educators, we need to be the gatekeepers for sane and sensible practices. Keep in mind, too, that even sound new research that enters our field should not completely engulf our practices; rather it should inform it. Research should help us raise fresh questions about teaching and learning that help us make smart instructional decisions to improve our practices. Too often, tried and true practices get entirely and unnecessarily pushed out of the classroom. Again, we are professionals and need to believe in our knowledge of what works in our classrooms, for our particular students.

Notice and Value What You Do as a Reader and Writer

While it’s true that in teaching reading we need to focus on phonics, fluency, and comprehension (among other things), we also need to focus on ourselves as readers and writers and think about the strategies we use and why we use them. As readers of nonfiction, for example, we skim, scan, reread, look at headings and charts, figure out vocabulary, connect to personal experiences, set our ideas up against those of the authors, think and question as we read, and a whole lot more. It stands to reason that our teaching practices might mirror those reading tendencies. We need to weed out strategies that don’t make sense.

When we read fiction, we set out to get lost in a book. We often unconsciously make connections between the character’s lives and our own, and use our background knowledge to make sense of and engage with the story world. As a reader, I for one am not methodically predicting what is going to happen next or slowing down in any way to link what I’m reading to another book. With a great book, the author’s words carry me along and I am in a flow of total engagement and enjoyment. And so when I go to teach reading to understand narrative, you won’t find me overdoing pause-and-predict work or stopping to teach strategies in isolation. Be true to your own reading habits.

Similarly, as writers, we often jot down ideas, draft, revise, and edit as we go along, write with our reader(s) in mind, and rarely use a graphic organizer to plan before we write. We need to show and explain to our students the strategies we use to understand and com-
pose text and to note that we use these interactively, not one at a time. In other words, when teaching strategies, as is true of teaching anything, keep it real, and use what you do as reader and a writer to restore balance to your teaching practices. One key question to keep in mind for all our teaching: Is this a practice that occurs in the real world? If it’s just a school thing, we need to question the practice.

We also need to apply common sense and give credence to and spend time on practices we know work: the importance of the reading/writing connection for helping kids become better readers and writers and doing so more quickly, the power of social networks such as partner reading for improving reading, the necessity for free-choice voluntary reading and writing supported by wonderful classroom libraries, and the revision and editing efforts students willingly make when they write for authentic and valued audiences and purposes. And that’s just for starters.