

PART I

Reading in K–6 Classrooms

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CHAPTER 1

Reading From the First Day of School

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He stood in the computer center of my primary first- and second-grade classroom looking around with uncertainty and maybe even fear. His eyes darted to me while I talked with a parent during our open house. School would be starting in a week and this was the “Big Night” to come and meet your teacher and see your classroom. I smiled at him and there was a brief hint of a grin. As I walked over to meet my VIP (Very Important Pupil), he looked somewhat like a deer caught in the headlights. I could tell he really wasn’t sure how he was supposed to respond. I bent down to where we could be eye-to-eye and asked his name. He responded rather timidly. I asked him what he liked to do and what he hoped to learn this year. I will never forget those great big brown eyes looking at me and his quiet voice saying, “I don’t know how to read. I want to learn how to read.”

I took his chin in my hand, looked directly into his eyes, and said, “I guarantee that on the first day of school you will be able to read something.” He looked at me again with those enormous dark brown eyes, smiled, and said, “Promise?” “I promise,” I assured him. With the solemn vow that passed between us, I knew I had to make certain that he would be able to read something that first day of school. I also knew that other parents were listening, and I could tell that they were skeptical about my promise.

The first day of school arrived and I welcomed all twenty-four of my children to the classroom. Some of them had attended the open house and we had met; others were seeing me for the first time. Six-year-olds have a way of remembering promises, and my little guy was no exception. He came in and wished me a good morning and found his seat. I could tell he was just waiting for me to teach him to read. We waded through all those first-day-of-school preliminaries and then the parents left. I told the class that I had made a promise to one of their classmates and that it was that they would be able to read something that very first day of school. I knew I had to hook them all and begin that slow process of teaching them not only to read but to love to read.

I found my new dry-erase markers in all eight colors, and I began to write on the board in red the word “red.” I turned and asked the children, “What word do you think is up here?” My young man raised his hand and said tentatively, “Red?” “You are exactly right! Now give me a high five!” I smiled. I then proceeded to write each of the six color words in their respective color—blue, green, yellow, black, orange, brown—and then decided I would have to write the word “white” in black. I pulled this off by telling the children I was writing this color word in the opposite color hoping they remembered what *opposite* meant. I found out very quickly that they certainly did remember when many shouted, “White!!!” I looked over at my new student, who had a smile on his face that would light up a room. I knew I had piqued his interest.

It wasn’t long before our curriculum specialist walked in to meet the children, and I told her that my children could already read. She played right along and asked me to prove it. The children were in their glory at that minute. The color words were still on the board and the children read them in unison. She turned to them and said, “I can’t

believe you all are already reading! I am so excited that we have such smart boys and girls at Indian Hills!” I told her about my promise. The children’s confidence levels began to climb that very day. The color-word activity on the first day of school is the hook that catches the children and gives them confidence to tackle learning to read.

Another confidence builder is reading to the principal, guidance counselor, curriculum specialist, or secretary. These folks do a great job of encouraging and promoting reading. They listen, applaud, hug, and give a treat to the child. I want every child to be able to go to the office and read for someone before the year is over. This simple activity doesn’t cost anything, but a little time and the rewards for my students come back tenfold.

I recently had a parent ask me what I had done to her child. My stomach did a flip, and I couldn’t think of a thing that I had done because this child is a good student and very well behaved. I answered, “I don’t know. What have I done to your child?” She answered, “All she wants to do is read! She didn’t even want to pick up a book before she came to your class. Thank you so much and please keep up whatever it is you are doing! It is wonderful to see her enjoying reading and wanting to read.”

The most rewarding part of teaching first grade is knowing that when my students leave my classroom, they can read, and they are taking a skill with them that no one can take from them.

Helpful Tips

- I echo read the story the first day it is introduced. I read one sentence at a time adding voice and following punctuation. I think that by modeling the correct form of oral reading, the children will follow suit.
- My students love to buddy read. I team a pair of students, one that is a good reader with one that may be struggling or just needs a little help.
- Peer tutoring is a lifesaver at times. I use peer tutoring in math also. Sometimes all it takes is a child explaining it to their classmate. I see rewards in this for both students. The one doing the tutoring is

reinforcing the skills they have learned, and the one struggling is benefiting from help by a peer.

- The students love making their own sight-word/vocabulary flash cards. This helps them because by writing the words, they are becoming familiar with the way the word is spelled and how each letter sounds. Our local print shops give us scrap card stock and they make perfect flash cards.