


# BUILDING THE LITERACY BLOCK

STRUCTURING THE ULTIMATE  
ELA WORKSHOP

BRIDGET M. SPACKMAN



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## **Praise for *Building the Literacy Block***

“Bridget does a fabulous job giving a plethora of concrete ideas for upper elementary teachers to meaningfully structure their literacy block. Her emphasis on intentional planning, building routines, and putting students in the driver seat of their own learning supports student critical thinking while simultaneously cultivating their love of reading.”

—**Shane Saeed**, Instructional Coach, St Vrain Valley School District

“Every upper elementary literacy teacher can benefit from Bridget Spackman’s deep knowledge of effective instruction and the structure, strategies, and specific examples provided in *Building the Literacy Block!*”

—**Michelle Emerson**, Author of *First Class Teaching*

“Structuring a literacy block is a challenge that is rarely a focus in preparing educators for their time in the classroom. Spackman has done a phenomenal job of using her classroom experience to create a resource that feels like she’s sitting next to you and guiding you to literacy success!”

—**Juan E. Gonzalez, Jr.**, Third Grade Teacher

“*Building the Literacy Block* is the PD you need. Written by a teacher for teachers. Bridget Spackman asks all the right questions that make you take a second and third look at your routines, procedures, and how you teach standards, skills, and strategies. She offers intentional, practical, and effective solutions to bridge reading and writing into a true literacy block. The examples she provides lets you know she is a real, working classroom teacher. Whether you are a first year or veteran teacher, *Building the Literacy Block* is a must for your personal bookshelf.”

—**Lesley Carmichael**, Classroom teacher, Georgia, USA



# Building the Literacy Block

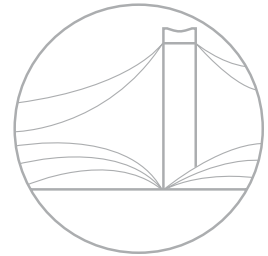
Structuring the Ultimate ELA Workshop



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*To my phenomenal husband, Trent Spackman.*



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# Author's Note

The strategies that will help us run our classrooms are what we go to college to learn. We are told about research-based practices, child development, and cognitive thinking. We can do well on exams. However, understanding how we apply this research to the classroom remains ambiguous. We practice strategies during internships. We see the connections between what we have learned and how to apply it to teaching. Even then, nothing prepares us for the day that we begin our teaching careers and go deep into the trenches of our classroom.

We greet the first year of teaching with stress, feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities and minute tasks, and the need to survive. Most of us don't read research articles or work to understand the science of learning during our first year of teaching. Instead, we turn to coworkers for advice on how to structure our classrooms, resources that work, and strategies that make things easier. As we get more comfortable with our position, we look more critically at the practices we are implementing. This process leads us to research and evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching. However, we receive little guidance on how to apply this research to the everyday classroom. So how do we go about applying the research and continuing to develop what is working in our classrooms? The answer lies in creating connections between our experiences and the research we are reading.

A game of balance is what we experience in teaching and in life. We have to balance the sweets we consume, the tv we binge, and even the amount of work others put on us and we put on ourselves. Identifying the strategies

and ideas that we incorporate into our classrooms is another example of how we have to remember to balance everything we do.

It is not practical to dismiss the experiences you have learned; instead, take the research you have collected to reflect and improve on the practices in your classroom. This book is an anecdotal collection of my journey as a teacher. I hope it helps you reflect on your practices and beliefs about what literacy instruction should look and sound like. I hope you use this as an opportunity to create connections between the research you've read and studied and the experiences that I share with you. Remember, there is no one way to structure your literacy block because the 25 students in your classroom have unique personalities and needs.

My career has taken me on a never-ending journey to find methods and practices that are authentic and practical. I have pored over research articles and challenged them with skepticism. I've developed connections to what's happening in the classroom and how it will apply to the world. This book directly results from the years I have spent reading research and doing the work of a public school teacher.

## **Who Is This Book For?**

I am a believer in making sure something is going to benefit me before I put in the time and money. Therefore, I wanted to share who exactly this book is for and the purpose of this book. This book is mainly for upper elementary teachers. While I share some of my kindergarten experiences with you in this book, they provide a context for my viewpoints on education, as well as teaching reading and writing. Some of my biggest learning moments came from when I taught kindergarten and this carried over into upper elementary. As an upper elementary teacher, this book will offer you insights into how to structure your literacy block using various components that are found in an ELA workshop. There are helpful tips for management, organization, and an answer to the famous question, "What do I have my students do during independent work?"

This book serves new and veteran teachers looking to improve the structure of their literacy block. When you get the key to your classroom, you are on a new solo journey. You do the same thing for 180 days before you have a break and fall back into the same routine you were in just two months prior. You can easily become disconnected from the ideas and strategies that are developing in education. This book is an opportunity to learn about strategies for structuring your literacy block and how to implement strategies you may not be familiar with. Even if you're already familiar with the strategies in this book, taking the time to refresh and reconsider them for your classroom is incredibly powerful. It is easy to get stuck in your ways, and this book can bring life and excitement back into your classroom.

The book serves those who want to create an environment that is fun. A coworker of mine tells parents at meet-the-teacher night that she wants to be the teacher that she wants for her boys. I can't agree with her more. Each day, I walk in and imagine my boys sitting in my classroom. What experiences do I want to give them? How do I build an environment that they love and want to come back to every day? This book has ideas, strategies, and tips that will help you create a fun and authentic classroom. Not every teacher has to commit to transforming a classroom or creating a song to hook their students' interest. This book gives you practical suggestions, along with fun games and simple transformation ideas. In the simplest of words, there is something for everyone.

Finally, if you are someone who enjoys a simple and laid-back read that shares experiences and stories, this book is for you! Heavy research, statistics, and deep explanations of cognitive science are important to read about and understand; however, this book is not that. I enjoy reading about the experiences of other teachers when the text has a conversational style and easy-to-follow format, and that's what I have for you in this book. You'll find bullet points, end of the chapter wrap-ups that help you implement the information into your classroom. Join me on the journey to creating your ideal literacy block that creates authentic and rigorous learning opportunities for your students.



# Introduction

## **Been There Done That**

There is nothing more rewarding than having your own students push you to be your best. That feeling when they ask questions that go beyond the basic routine of what you do in your classroom and pushes you to *poke the box*; leaving you to question everything. It makes you stronger, and it continues to push education into a more meaningful experience for you and your students. This was the case several years ago when I sat with a group of seven sixth graders at my meeting area. It was a small space in the back of my classroom. I had the typical whiteboard and a small swivel chair to sit in. I surveyed the room to make sure that all the students were working on their assignments. I handed each of the students in my group a new word list and a pack of papers that allowed them to take notes from the Words Their Way Lesson. This was a standard routine in my classroom. My district at the time required learners to have lessons from the program known as Words Their Way, but to help customize the lessons students were placed in groups based on individual assessments. The goal with this entire process was for students to be engaged because we were challenging them and meeting them at the perfect level. However, that day my students blew my mind.

I had always known that spelling tests were not meaningful. There were so many research articles, posts, and leading individuals in the field of education who steered away from spelling tests. This understanding led me to try other forms of word study methods. Words Their Way, a program utilized by my district at the time, was one that I tried to incorporate into my teaching. In order to develop a more meaningful approach with Words Their Way, I decided on a more personalized approach. I separated my class into groups based on the needs of students. Each group would have its own lesson and activities to follow. While I thought this approach was impactful to the learning of my students, one particular group would bring it to my attention that it did not agree. It was a typical instructional day, and as I sat in my chair handing out the word list and packet, I started with the same routine: Students cut out their words and begin looking for a pattern with their elbow partners, an assigned turn-and-talk partner for classroom discussion. After sharing, I gave them specific notes to take and then they would spend a week working on various methods for practicing the spelling pattern. This included the typical things such as: using the words in sentences, speed sorting, rainbow spelling, and other methods. However, on this day, the group of students stopped working and they all looked at one another. Then one student said, “Mrs. Spackman, why do we have to do this?” I felt like a great teacher because I explained how understanding the patterns of words would help them develop their fluency, understand the meanings of words, and decrease spelling errors. I felt like I had nailed that question, but the questions and concerns continued. The next thing I knew my entire group was chiming in and countering my answer. They told me that it was boring, they were just memorizing for the test, and that it felt like busy work.

Ouch. That hit me hard in my teacher’s heart. At that very moment, I stopped and listened. I didn’t show my feelings of being hurt, and I didn’t tell them they were wrong. I sat and listened to how they were feeling. Everything they were sharing sounded completely logical. The more examples they gave, the more I began to question everything we were doing. So, I did what any great teacher would have done, I asked them what we should do differently while still meeting the standards. As you can imagine, this absolutely

stunned them. At that moment I could have either: A) told them that there was no other way, therefore we had to keep doing it this way, or B) stopped what we were doing and went back to the drawing board. I'll let y'all guess which one I chose.

I want you to stop and think about how often we consider the purpose behind what we do in the classroom. Why do you have students place certain items in a folder? Why do we start a lesson a particular way? Why do we teach the way we do? When we understand our why, we can be more intentional with our lessons and our time. However, we have to remember that everything we do is not about us. When we create a lesson, we might think it is intentional, authentic, and useful to our students, but if we don't have their buy-in and understanding, then does it matter?

I've taught so many grade levels during my career as a teacher. At the very beginning of my career, I was a kindergarten teacher. During this time, I soaked in everything I could from setting up a classroom to implementing behavior management. Honestly, without this experience I don't know if I would be in the same position I am in today. The school that I taught at was making some big shifts in how they were structuring their reading blocks. They had decided only a year or two prior to step away from using the boxed curriculum to fidelity and really looking at the needs of the students. We started the year off with a good old-fashioned book study as a faculty. The book was called *The Daily 5* by Gail Boushey. During my first and second year of teaching, I used it to help structure every inch of my classroom. I followed the first 20 days, a gradual release model that established the Daily 5 stations, and made sure my rotations were always up to date with the materials we had learned from the week prior.

Things started to shift my third year. At this point, I had a specific routine and process for implementing *The Daily 5*. I had a solid foundation and knew exactly what worked for me and my teaching style. I remember sitting at my kidney table in one corner of my classroom. I had the perfect visual of all my students as they were working on their rotations. Students

participated in reading by themselves near the library, worked with words at the tables, and read with partners at the big book station or the pocket chart area. On this day, I got my small group started on something to do. I stood up and walked about the classroom to see how my students were progressing with their work. I noticed that some of them were tapping, rather furiously, at the partner chart. The students at the independent reading station were laying down with the book on their faces, and the kiddos at the word work center were using the dry erase marker to create circles all over the boards.

What happened? How did the hours that I had spent creating and cutting out these centers not engage my students? Was this day just a fluke? Did they need a break? I spent the next month observing my class. During that month I noticed that my students were not engaged. They lacked passion for the centers and my biggest realization was that they were not learning. I resolved to create a well-structured and meaningful block for my kindergarteners. Was it possible?

During my fourth year as a kindergarten teacher, I made big changes in the approach to literacy instruction. I created meaningful integrated activities, established goal setting, and allowed my students to work on literacy projects that they were passionate about. I had students who created author studies, others who researched topics they were passionate about, and opportunities for those students to present to the class. My students grew in ways that I could not have imagined, but my time as a kindergarten teacher would be short lived. That same year my husband and I decided to move from Alabama to Pennsylvania after I accepted a position as a fourth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher. I was excited for the change, but nervous because I had no idea how to establish a reading and writer's workshop at that age.

I read a lot of books that year. In particular, *The Book Whisperer* and *Reading in the Wild* by Donalyn Miller, and *The Reading Strategies Book* by Jennifer Serravallo helped me understand the importance of developing an avid

reader. They offered some incredible strategies but they never really articulated what the block of time that I had would look and sound like. My school had limited resources and gave little guidance in how to structure my time. So, I did what most teachers do in this situation, I asked other teachers what they were doing, and I spent hours on social media and the web looking for answers. My first year was a hodgepodge of various strategies and activities. Individually, they all sounded beautiful, but together there was little to no harmony.

I spent years researching, reflecting, and analyzing how to best structure my block. It seemed every teacher in upper elementary was doing something a little bit different. Some were using *The Daily 5*, some were incorporating centers, and some taught the whole group and had the famous DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time. It was also evident that not all teachers had the same time in their classrooms. That year, I had about 1 hour and 20 minutes a day to teach reading, writing, word study, and grammar, while others had a whopping 2 hours! While I may have loved the setup that the 2-hour-time-block teacher had, it just didn't work for what *I* needed.

Over the course of two years, I transitioned from a fourth-grade teacher to a multiage teacher, teaching grades four, five, and six. I was passionate about literacy instruction, and I worked tirelessly to find a solution to all my problems. Like many teachers, I struggled with my time and how to fit it all in. It seemed that I could never find the balance between the length of my lessons and how much work to assign my students. I'll be honest with y'all, I am a bit of a chatterbox. I was able to find a rhythm with my reading lessons at a certain point, but that meant that I still needed to find time to teach grammar, word study, and writing. It was a constant balancing act and any shift could throw off my routine, leaving me feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

I also struggled with meeting all the needs of the ranges of learners in my classroom. Despite being a fourth-through-sixth-grade teacher, I had students from a second-grade reading level all the way to a seventh-grade level in my classroom. *What do you do with that?* I lived in small groups, and at one