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## Growing Independent Learners From Literacy Standards to Stations, K-3



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# Introduction: Growing Independence

I am a gardener. My father and my paternal grandmother were gardeners, too. Planting seeds and watching them grow makes me smile. I live for the promise of spring, curious to see what will return from last year. My gardens have taught me many lessons: patience and the value of paying attention; the need to weed and prune; and that there is no substitute for good planning and preparation.

I've learned that plants have individual needs and require specialized attention. Some like sunny conditions, whereas others prefer shade. All plants need water and food, but they don't all need the same amounts. It is my responsibility as a gardener to tend my plants, and their health and vigor is usually a direct result of the work I've invested in their care, especially during their early stages of growth. Of course, there are some things beyond my control, and I've learned to accept each season and the changes it brings. What I've learned in the garden parallels what I've learned about teaching. In fact, my gardening experiences have helped shape my views about the role of teachers as seed sowers who nurture growth of understanding and help young children grow to independence. All of these experiences have shaped my beliefs about life and about growing independent learners.

As a teacher, I've been planting seeds of learning for almost four decades. Sometimes those seeds take deep roots and become beautiful blooming plants. At other times, they can be slow to germinate and require extra attention. But I am patient and keep learning and teaching! I constantly strive to accept and work with whatever the winds of change bring to the world of education: new technology, new legislation, updated

standards, and more. Over the years, I've had to reinvent myself as a teacher many times. There will always be something new coming our way, and it will undoubtedly affect our students' ability to work on their own, especially as more and more is expected of them and of us. But in many ways isn't that what teaching is really all about—learning how to adapt and change to meet the needs of our children and the world in which we live? To survive and thrive, we need a code to teach by, a set of beliefs to guide our instructional decision making and to keep those seeds of learning healthy, regardless of the education climate or season.

## My Beliefs About Teaching for Independence

I have always had a set of beliefs about teaching and learning that guide my instruction. These beliefs have strengthened across time as I've gained experience as an educator. They are part of my foundation—the place from which I make decisions as a teacher. They shape every instructional decision I make and form the basis from which I have written this book. This is what I believe about helping children become independent learners:

1. All children *can* learn to work independently of the teacher.
2. It is the teacher's responsibility to create a setting in which children can work independently.
3. To help children become independent, teachers must release responsibility and control to them over time.

My thinking about independent learning has been shaped by my experiences as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, and national consultant. By visiting thousands of classrooms in diverse settings, I have observed situations in which children ages four through fourteen have worked very well independently. And I've seen places and times where students have been disruptive and unable to work on their own. Underlying it all, I've noticed that the accountability for independent learning lies first with the teacher, the adult in charge of what happens day to day in that classroom community. From there, children are accountable to one another and to themselves for learning.

### All children can learn to work independently of the teacher.

My earliest years in teaching were spent with three- and four-year-olds. During this time, I learned that some of the children's favorite words were "Me do it myself!" Young children have an inherent desire to become independent. They experience a strong sense of accomplishment when they can do things on their own. The trick is to set them up for tasks that they will be able to accomplish independently with success.

It is a bit like planting seeds in conditions in which they will thrive. I plant succulents in pots on my patio, because I can leave them for a week or two at a time without water. I've learned to plant zinnias in full sun in well-draining soil, because they'll rot if their roots stay too wet. Azaleas are tricky—they have special food and light requirements, but are worth it for their spectacular blooms.

When children are asked to work by themselves on tasks that are too difficult (or too easy), they often are frustrated, which can lead to off-task behavior. Students do not intentionally play around during independent reading time. When they stare into space or flip through books without reading, it is often because they haven't found the right book. I believe it is crucial to set up a classroom library in every room where children learn how to choose books they can read. Teaching children how to select "just-right" books is one of the first routines to establish. We can then connect this learning to the wider arena of choosing books at school, in the public library, or in a bookstore. Helping students choose "just-right" books can help them work independently of the teacher.

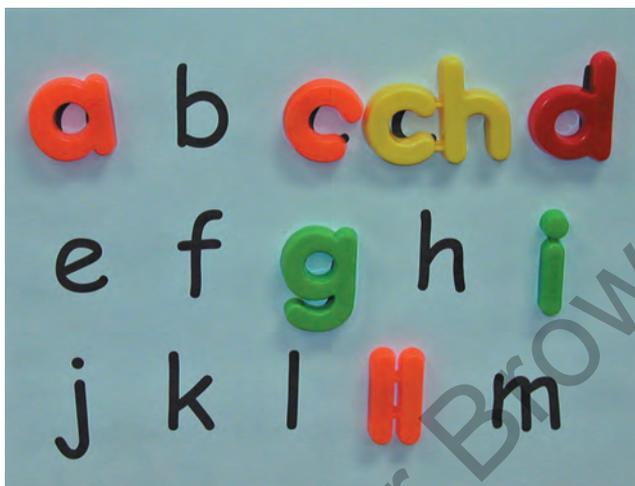


Early in the year, kindergartners learn to sort read-aloud books into fiction on the left and nonfiction on the right of this open-faced bookshelf. The top of the shelf holds three baskets with leveled books. Children's names are listed below their independent reading basket to help them choose "just-right" books.

Sometimes during literacy work stations time, well-meaning teachers pair a student who *can* do the work with a child for whom the work will be too difficult. This dynamic often puts both students in an unsuccessful situation; one student does the work for the other, and neither finish with a feeling that they've learned very much. I've found that it is often beneficial to pair students who need to work on a task at the same level, because they will work together to figure it out or explore even further without being superior to the other. Of course, there are many ways to pair children. Sometimes, one child will be able to support another so both learn together. Use what you know about your students to make these decisions, and be flexible on a daily basis.

As Marie Clay (1994) wisely said, "Don't do for the child what the child can do for himself." I have watched special education students work independently of the teacher when the work is at a level they *can* do. One day I visited a kindergarten where the teacher told me she had a child who constantly left the ABC station and wandered to the puzzles shelf in her room. When I asked her what the child could do with the alphabet, she said, "Oh, he really doesn't know any of his letters." That was why this child was walking over to the puzzles—it was something he *could* do. I asked the teacher to find some magnetic letters while I typed the alpha-

bet the same size as those letters, and in a few minutes, there was a task this child could do at the ABC station. He worked on matching the magnetic letters to the printed version in a puzzle-like fashion. It was a first step in helping this child move toward letter recognition; a next step would be to provide opportunities for him to work with the letters in his name to provide a meaning base for this learning. He could match magnetic letters to a card with his name, practice writing and naming the letters used, or sort letters that have the same feature, such as those with sticks, or letters with dots. If a few other students need similar instruction, this work could be done in a small group and then moved to a literacy station so the children could practice again and again.



The right level of difficulty for one child just learning about print in Spanish was to match magnetic letters to typed letters on a piece of paper attached to a magnetic board.

### It is the teacher's responsibility to create a setting in which children can work independently.

In the garden, I must prepare the site so my plants will develop strong root systems. Before I sow seeds or plant seedlings, I choose the location and prepare the soil by digging and weeding it, loosening and smoothing it, and digging an appropriate-sized hole. I make sure that I have pulled any weeds that might impede the plant's growth. If I'm container gardening, I choose a pot and use special potting soil. Sometimes I label what I've planted so I can remember its location and pay attention to its particular needs.

Likewise, students need to work in a safe, accepting environment to take risks on their own to grow independently. In today's world, many children live in transient circumstances and may feel unsettled or insecure. In addition, they come to us from homes with widely varying parenting styles. Some children have had few opportunities to practice independence, because their parents may be hesitant to let go of their babies. At the other extreme are children whose parents have given them too much independence, often with few or inconsistent boundaries. There are varying levels of support for schoolwork at home, too, because of parents' work schedules, kids' after-school commitments, or even parents' personal anxieties.

No matter what our children's circumstances outside of school, it is our responsibility to support students as they grow toward independence. It is our job to build a classroom community where they can learn to work independently. This huge task takes much love, commitment, and time. Input equals output is what I've found to be true: time invested in teaching kids what we expect is time well spent, and in return, over time, our students will be able to take on new learning and work independently. A second-year, second-grade teacher I worked with showed me just that in one of the lowest-income public schools in Houston, where I live.

After visiting several classrooms where students sat at their desks and did worksheets, I walked into this amazing second-grade classroom during students' time at literacy work stations. While the teacher met with a guided reading group at her small-group table, kids were working in pairs at desks, on the floor, by a bulletin board, and on the computer. They were having conversations with one another about what they were learning, their voices were quiet and calm, and they were successful with mostly on-grade-level tasks related to English language arts standards. Students were reading and writing important facts about lizards at one station; they were searching for words with specific phonics patterns and jotting them on sticky notes in familiar books at another station; and they were interviewing each other and taking notes about each other's lives at yet another station, where they also read and discussed biographies. I asked the teacher how she was able to orchestrate this kind of independent learning in her room, and she explained:

"At first, we tried using stations, and kids got out of hand. We began with just one literacy station (buddy

reading) that I introduced for all students to do in pairs. I was clear and explicit about what I expected, but after just a few minutes there were kids goofing around and making way too much noise. So I called them to our whole-group meeting area, and we talked about why I'd stopped stations. Instead of lecturing them, I had them tell me what they needed to do differently tomorrow. The next day we tried again. It took about three weeks of being consistent with my expectations, reiterating and showing my class what they were supposed to be doing, and providing appropriate materials and feedback. My kids love going to stations, so I didn't have to offer any rewards. Stations were reward enough."

This teacher was patient, consistent, and persistent. She never gave up on her students or on her expectations for her classroom. She invested time and belief in her class and helped them experience success—over time. The following year, she looped with them, and they were easily able to begin literacy work stations the first week of school because they knew what the expectations were. Other teachers from her building can visit her classroom and learn from what she is doing with her students.

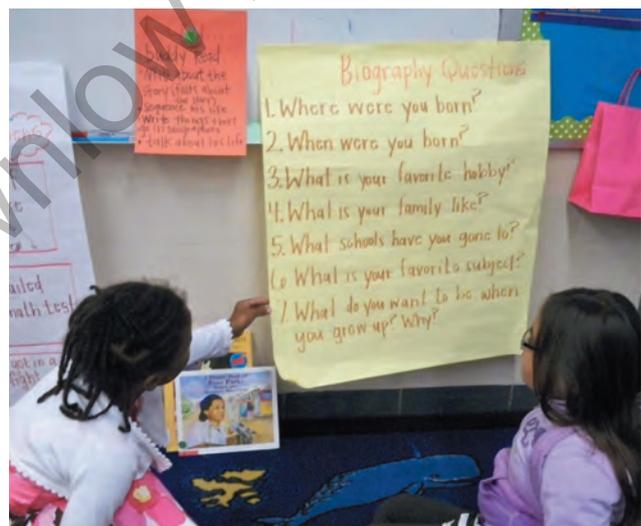
As I garden, I consider the needs of each plant variety and adjust my care based on what I know about that plant. Then I keep watch over my new plants, looking for new growth and signs of good health. I weed and prune, as needed. This is exactly what this teacher did. Each day, she adjusted instruction based on what she saw her students needed. When behaviors didn't match her expectations, she stopped stations and brought the class together to reteach. She looked for signs of growth and celebrated by having children share with one another what they were learning and doing at stations.

### To help children become independent, teachers must release responsibility to them over time.

As in the above scenario, the teacher had her students take responsibility for their actions and didn't expect overnight results. She knew it would take time. In the world of high-stakes testing and changing standards, it is often difficult to invest time in this way. However, I have learned that most things that are worth doing take time, and lots of it!



Second graders work together at an expository-text station where they read informational text and create a KWL (what I know, learned, and wondered) chart to respond to their reading.



These two girls are interviewing each other at the biography station, as well as reading biographies.

Sometimes it is hard to release control, especially in the classroom. We fear that if we don't watch kids every step of the way, they might make mistakes, even if we've taught well. But isn't that part of practice and learning, too? When I was in elementary school, I took piano lessons by choice. I begged my parents for a piano and promised to practice daily. My mom didn't sit beside me on the bench and watch my every move. (She was usually busy cooking dinner but could hear that I was practicing—mistakes and all.) My mom didn't run in and try to fix my errors. Every Wednesday I walked to Mrs. Mummert's home for my weekly piano lesson.

At that time, she could gauge my practice by how well I played the pieces I'd practiced during the week.

A similar dynamic is possible in our classrooms. It is not necessary to hover over students at work stations to be sure they are doing everything right. It is important to teach well in whole group with a standards-based focus made explicit to the class by posting and referring to it throughout a mini-lesson and to observe students as they read and write along with us. Share high-quality children's literature—stories, informational text, poetry, dramatic readings—that match this focus while modeling how to read like an author and write like a reader. Give students opportunities to do this same kind of work, over time, as you spend time with them during reading workshop to allow the ideas you've planted to germinate. Pay attention to your students and give them all the support they need. Then move those same materials and activities to practice with partners at work stations, over time, as you see students showing that they can do this same kind of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and working with words without you sitting right beside them.

Take time to work with some children in small group, too. There you can give children just what they need, adjusting what you've taught previously in whole-class lessons and ensuring a strong foundation for them as they work independently. In small group, be sure you can see the rest of the class at work stations so you can quickly observe how they are doing, too. And be sure to bring reading workshop to a close with a brief "sharing time." Have the class gather in the whole-group meeting area to reflect on what they've learned that day. This gives them responsibility for their learning, which leads to further independence.



A student shares her work from the writing station with the rest of the class during "sharing time" at the end of reading workshop.

If you're wondering how to know it's time to move the work to a station, consider what a gardener does. Watch for signs that students understand well enough to work independently. Ask yourself: "What level of reading and writing can these students do without my being beside them? What activities have we done together in whole group (or small group) that students can now manage on their own? What kinds of support (in the way of familiar materials) can we place at a station to help students be successful?"

Remember that stations are where students develop independence, especially by working with tasks and texts that have been modeled previously. Familiarity breeds independence. For example, teach and then post anchor charts and references at stations for support, and remind children to use these tools.



Moving the writing rubric and student samples that had been used extensively during whole-group instruction to the writing station helps students write more effectively on their own.

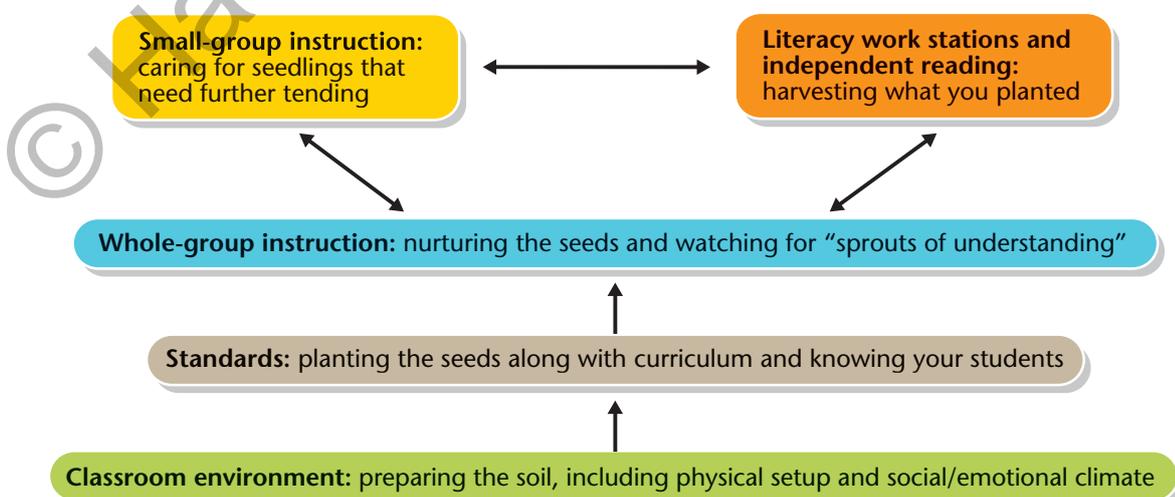
It is quite possible to help children work independently, even if you are the only adult in the classroom. In many schools, there is just one teacher for every twenty to thirty students. If there are two adults in the classroom, arrange schedules so that both can teach in small groups during station times. I've seen excellent results when the classroom teacher and another adult (a special education or Title I teacher, or an assistant) meet with small groups; there are still plenty of children working independent of the teacher, and teachers can easily meet with every group each day between the two of them.

Surprisingly, there can be situations in which too many adults are available and it hinders student independence. I've been in classrooms where there were three or four adults working simultaneously with young children in small groups and/or monitoring their independent work. It was detrimental to students' independence because there was always someone there to help them, and they didn't have to figure out anything on their own. If you have several adults available, you might plan for them to work with specific students rather than circulate and monitor the room. Also, it is wise to be consistent and have everyone follow the same expectations about interruptions. If children learn that a particular person will always help them, they won't try to do things by themselves.

## Growing Independent Learners Model

As I've worked with teachers across North America, I've developed a visual model (see Figure 1) that demonstrates how to grow independence. This model is the basis for this book. Use the model to help you think about the connections you're making throughout the day and across lessons with your students to help them "grow" into independent learners. Prepare the soil by setting up a well-designed learning environment. Then "plant the seeds" of your standards, curriculum, and what you know about your students as you teach whole-group mini-lessons. From there, watch for "sprouts of understanding" and then move what you've been teaching in whole group (or small group) to literacy work stations (and independent reading) over time.

**Figure 1 Growing Independent Learners Model**



## A Quick Look at What's Ahead

As you read this book, the Growing Independent Learners model can help you think about "growing" student independence as you "reseed" what you're teaching in whole group (or small group) into literacy work stations over time. The first four chapters of this book will help you "prepare the soil" in which you'll be planting instructional routines for learning and "observe for root development" before moving the work to stations. Chapter 1 is about how to teach and plant the seeds of standards in whole-group instruction with focused standards-based mini-lessons to establish a strong foundation for later work at stations. Chapter 2 moves beyond my book *Spaces & Places* to give you ideas for how to make your classroom learning environment support independence, including my latest thinking about storage and wall spaces. Chapter 3 is centered on how to plan for instruction and related literacy work stations using standards. I examined standards from every state and created tools and processes for you to use that will strengthen instruction as well as save you time. And Chapter 4 takes a look at anchor charts, a subject I've been studying for the past few years as teachers have become more aware of this powerful teaching tool. You'll learn how to plan, design, create, and manage anchor charts, as well as how to use them at literacy work stations as a tool to increase students' independent learning.

Chapters 5-9 focus on how to nurture the seeds and watch sprouts of understanding grow into meaningful practice at specific standards-based stations. Each of these chapters is centered on an English language arts

strand, such as reading literature; reading informational text; foundational skills; writing; and speaking, listening, and language. Within these chapters you'll find many ideas for how to plan for and teach the skills necessary to meet the standards, as well as how to connect these to meaningful stations practice where students work independently.

In Chapters 5–9, I've provided a comprehensive picture of what instruction can look like when you follow the Growing Independent Learners model. These chapters provide a structure that's predictable and easy to follow and takes you through every phase of the planning and instructional process. Each chapter contains helpful tools for you to use in teaching specific concepts within the standards. These tools are repeated throughout the chapters and have the following titles:

- “Sifting Through the Standard” breaks down the standard to help you understand its meaning, instructional implications, and real-world importance.
- “Team Planning Tool” shows ideas for planning to teach that standard, including important academic vocabulary to use, plans for whole-group instruction, and suggestions for literacy work stations.
- “Lessons That Last” contains detailed whole-group lesson plan templates.
- “Connections to Whole-Group Lessons” can help you extend the concepts from the lesson into other areas of your daily instruction, including ideas for independent reading, small-group instruction, writing, and evaluation.
- “Mentor Texts” gives lists of exemplary children's books to use while teaching the standard.
- “Teaching Tips Across the Grade Levels” provides suggestions for building the skills necessary to reach the standard in pre-K through fifth grade.

Each of the “Lessons That Last” is focused on a particular standard. Each lesson is meant to be taught in whole group with engaging texts (see the “Mentor Texts” section for ideas). These lessons can be (and often should be) repeated multiple times using different books—that's what makes them lessons that last! The lessons don't have to be taught in one sitting. Please observe your students, and stop when their interest wanes; you can pick up the lesson where you left off the next day.

## A Note About Standards

In writing this book, I searched the standards found across the United States, including the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the Standards of Learning (SOL), from Virginia, and the Indiana Academic Standards. Instead of trying to include every single standard from every state, I zeroed in on these four sets and found many similarities. These I came to think of as “big ideas”—standards I would continue to teach even if every standards movement disappeared. In the online appendix, available at [www.stenhouse.com/gilappendix](http://www.stenhouse.com/gilappendix), I have included charts that show the standards highlighted in this book compared across CCSS, TEKS, SOL, and Indiana Academic Standards. I think you'll find it interesting—as I did—to see the many commonalities.

I've included an exact standard in each section to show how to use standards as starting points, but I've varied the reference to a particular standard from lesson to lesson to make the teaching ideas in this book inclusive. In other words, some lessons start with standards defined by the CCSS, and others are based on a TEKS or SOL or Indiana standards. You can consult the appendix to reference your state's specific standards. Please use the resources in this book flexibly. Read the material, examine the standards from your state that correspond to it, and adapt as necessary, even if the grade level on the lesson is different from the one you teach. You should be able to apply the information in any lesson or related idea to those connected to the specific state in which you teach and use tools provided to think about how to adapt it for your grade level.



## How to Get the Most from This Book

Think about how you'd read a gardening book if you were getting ready to plant. You would want to read some pages very carefully and from beginning to end—those that talk about preparing soil, fertilizing, planning the layout of the garden, drainage, and so on.

Then, you'd choose specific pages pertaining to the particular plants that you were working with, based on the time of year or geographical location in which you were gardening. You might read about specific herbs if you wanted to plant an herb garden. Or you'd read the parts about preparing your garden for winter just before that season.

I recommend you approach this book in exactly the same way. Read the first three chapters in their entirety to get started. Planning an engaging classroom, getting organized to support student independence, and thoughtful lesson planning can't be skipped. The plants will suffer! You might read Chapter 4 on its own to think about how to integrate anchor charts into your instruction most powerfully. But after that, the chapters do not have to be read in order or read all at once. You can take them slowly according to the standard you are teaching. Then come back to the book in several weeks when you are ready for the next standard.

It is my hope that this is a book you will return to again and again. It is meant to be a guidebook, a faithful companion to help you as you approach teaching the standards with depth and complexity and help your students grow into independent learners. Thank you for joining me on this quest to "grow" independence as we teach thoughtfully and with purpose at every turn.

## Digging Deeper

This book could serve as the foundation for powerful ongoing professional study with colleagues, too, with a study group reading the first four chapters together, then practicing with the materials in Chapters 5-9 over time, sharing successes and

generating new instructional ideas together based on your learning and experience. To facilitate that type of group study, each chapter in this book ends with questions and/or exercises to help your learning go deeper. It is my hope that you will reflect on these questions as you read and study with your colleagues. Additionally, I am often on Facebook on Sunday evenings and post weekly questions for teachers to respond to. I hope you'll visit my page at [www.facebook.com/dillerdebbie](http://www.facebook.com/dillerdebbie).

Think and discuss with colleagues the following questions now that you've read this introductory chapter:

1. What are your beliefs about independence? What has shaped these beliefs?
2. How have you released control to your students over time? Are there any areas in which you are still struggling to release control? Or are there areas where you might have released control too quickly?
3. At which literacy stations are your students working most independently? Discuss what conditions enabled this to happen.
4. Make a plan for reading this book with your colleagues. Begin with Chapters 1-3. Then choose which standard you will be teaching next and plan to read the accompanying chapter.
5. Consider reading Chapter 4 as a stand-alone chapter in conjunction with looking at anchor charts and how you're using them in your classroom.
6. Find one of the "Lessons That Last" in Chapters 5-9 to match a standard you're teaching. Discuss with a colleague how you might break this lesson into several sessions, as needed by your students. Look at the accompanying "Mentor Texts" and talk about how you could repeat this lesson with a different text. What would be the advantages of teaching this lesson more than once with a different book?