

APRIL EVANS, GRADE 1 TEACHER, VISTA PEAK EXPLORATORY SCHOOL, AURORA, COLORADO

“Reading to Learn” in Grade 1, Thanks to Geodes[®]

The conventional wisdom says that students learn to read, and *then* they read to learn.

But by using the Geodes library of books for emerging readers from Great Minds, April Evans and her Grade 1 students at Vista PEAK Exploratory School in Aurora, Colorado, are turning that conventional wisdom on its head.

“Even my students who are still having a hard time decoding words are engaged and building their knowledge in so many ways,” says Evans, now in her 13th year of teaching.

After teaching with three small groups of students last year, Evans created five this year so she could work with fewer students at a time. Those not in small groups work independently on questions and vocabulary activities related to the Geodes book the class is reading. Groups 1 and 2 are still learning to decode words. Groups 3 and 4 have largely mastered decoding and are working on phrasing, which allows students to focus on the meaning of groups or phrases of words. Group 5 students are advanced enough to conduct small research projects.



April Evans

CLASSROOM PROFILE

22 students

Five reading groups

Began using *Wit & Wisdom[®]* in September 2018 and *Geodes[®]* in January 2019

But *all* the students are reading the same book. And *all* the students are building their knowledge.

Her class has already seen major gains in phonemic awareness and phonics. Evans expects that her students’ end-of-year tests will confirm the major gains in content knowledge she sees every day.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

She especially appreciates that Geodes connect to the content of the *Wit & Wisdom[®]* English language arts curriculum, also from Great Minds. In addition, Geodes align with the scope and sequence of Wilson Language Training’s Foundations[®], a structured literacy program for Grades K–3 that supplements the core instruction and provides a systematic approach to comprehensively address foundational skills as well as spelling and handwriting.

The connections allow Evans’s students to immerse themselves in acquiring knowledge on a topic while practicing foundational skills. For example, the Geodes



On the wall, Geodes Module 2 text sets and themes constructed by students, with corresponding *Wit & Wisdom* books on the table.

book *Super Spiny Mouse* is part of a set called “Safety First” that offers practice in consonant blends from Foundations and aligns with the *Wit & Wisdom* module “Creature Features.”

“Students become little experts,” Evans says.

She says that all students have an entry point into conversations about their texts because they’ve all built so much background knowledge of the focus topic. They’re able to feel successful in group discussions.

She recalls reading the following passage in the *Geodes* book *Bee Waggle*: “Can the group find the food? She steps to the rink. Observe my dance, she tells with a wink.”

“As soon as they read the word *observe*, it was like a light bulb popped on in their head,” Evans says. “They said, ‘Observe, like in *Me ... Jane* [a *Wit & Wisdom* text they’d read],’ and right then they made a connection to previous knowledge that helped them build new knowledge in this text.”

As students build knowledge and vocabulary with *Geodes*, they practice their phonics skills. The intriguing content and the skills practice reinforce each other.

“Students are super excited to read these texts, not only because of the knowledge they gain but because they’re able to feel successful at reading the words,” Evans says. “They’re applying their phonics in a relevant way in this topic and to something that they now have tons of knowledge about.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY TEXTS

Evans—like most Grade 1 teachers across the country—previously used leveled texts, with a different book for each student’s reading level. The new approach is better for her; instead of planning lessons for five books at a time, she can plan in-depth lessons for one book at a time. “This has changed my practice. It has opened my eyes to the importance of quality texts,” she says.

She says her students are having many more conversations about the reading than before. “I’m doing a lot less talking. They’re always asking, ‘I have so many questions.’ ‘I wonder ... ,’” Evans says.

“They are so engaged and curious,” she says, recalling a recent episode when a handful of students who were working independently came to eavesdrop on her small group’s discussion of *Super Spiny Mouse*, about a species capable of quickly regrowing skin to survive predation.

Reflecting on her past year using *Geodes*, Evans says, “All of us have found a new love for how we can build knowledge and foundational skills at the same time. The *Geodes* texts have changed my students. They’ve changed the way students think about books and about themselves as readers. They know that when they read, they’re learning with these texts. They come to group excited. They’re actively engaged in reading the entire time. It’s magical.”



A small group table.