In this Teacher Spotlight, we are delighted to feature April Barefoot, a multi-age classroom teacher at Agnor-Hurt Elementary School in Albemarle County, Virginia who is currently implementing Making Meaning and Individualized Daily Reading (IDR) for grades 3–5. April shares her experience moving away from the traditional use of whole-class texts and how providing her students with a selection of diverse high-interest books and giving them choice has created a classroom full of engaged learners.

Tell us a little about yourself, your school or district, and the students that you serve.

My name is April Barefoot and this is my 12th year teaching at Agnor-Hurt Elementary School in Albemarle County. My school and more specifically, my classroom, is filled with courageous scholars who overcome adversity in education and life. I teach a multi-age class with a diverse group of fourth- and fifth-grade learners who are eager to learn.

What is the most rewarding part of being an educator for you?

The most rewarding part of being an educator is helping students push past the limits and barricades that have been put on them either by themselves or other outside factors. Being a multi-age teacher and having students for multiple years allows me to track this progress and success further than if I were to have students only for a year.

How did your district become interested in Making Meaning and IDR?

This year we were asked to roll out Making Meaning to the third and fifth graders as our kindergarten through second graders have been implementing the Being a Reader program for about three years now. We knew that the younger grades had been happy with Being a Reader so I was intrigued to learn more about Making Meaning. I do have to admit that I was a bit thrown off when I learned that the program would not be using classroom novels. I had spent the first couple of weeks of school preparing a whole-class text as we figured it was the best way to start literacy as we navigated through social distancing and keeping students safe.
As I learned more about Making Meaning, I discovered whole-class texts and reading groups were not a part of the program. That was a complete surprise and trusting Making Meaning and, more specifically, Individualized Daily Reading (IDR) was difficult as it was a new concept for my classroom and my students. Again, being a multi-age classroom, I have had some of my students for three years now, and they were very familiar with the way we had taught literacy.

To roll out IDR, we had to teach our students to learn what it meant to find a book at their reading level and their interest. We also took time to investigate our classroom library to see if we had enough books at every student's level, books that covered enough of their interests, and had representation and diversity that showcased all of our students. I am embarrassed to say that this was the first time that I had looked at my classroom library with such important intentions.

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What do you appreciate about Making Meaning and IDR? What do teachers appreciate about them?

I appreciate many things about IDR, but the thing I appreciate the most is the empowerment that it gives the students. We teachers have always talked about helping students become lifelong learners but still do so much to stand in their way, like telling them what to read, or that there were only certain books that could help them read. In just the short four months that we have implemented Making Meaning, IDR has given the power to the students to be in charge of their own learning and the path that they choose to get there.

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What have you noticed about students' learning and engagement?

IDR has allowed me to “level the playing field.” No matter how hard we tried to hide it, students are always smart enough to figure out which group is a “high and low” group. Students have told me they appreciate that when it is IDR time, the whole class is reading at the same time and they are able to read at their own pace from a book of their choice.

This is the first time in my 12 years of teaching that I can say that my whole class is instructionally reading all at the same time. And during this time you could hear a pin drop ... every student is actively reading and engaged in their book.

I follow the 15–20 minutes of IDR time that the manual suggests, but students actively request more. In fact, during our Class President election, one of the things candidates campaigned for was MORE IDR time! I couldn't believe that something that was such a small percentage of our day had made such a significant impact on their day and their learning.

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How has Making Meaning and IDR shifted teaching practices and/or professional learning in your school?

IDR has reminded me to trust and empower my students to become the lifelong learners that I want them to be. To do this, we as educators need to let go of some of the concepts we held so dear, like guided reading groups, which often fail to reach the class
outliers and the uninterested readers. IDR has also helped me in my journey of being a more culturally responsive teacher as I am now better able to respond to the needs of my students.

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What thoughts or insights would you share with a school that is considering Making Meaning and IDR?

For any educator about to implement Making Meaning and Individualized Daily Reading, I have one word... trust. Trust in the process, and more importantly, trust the students. They might just surprise you!