“What I believe about literacy learning and teaching, and how I came to believe it.”

My belief system about how children learn to read has evolved from much instruction, current research, and many experiences. They might be classified as graduate school training, Orton-Gillingham training, 10 years of actually teaching children and adults to read, my own difficulties in reading, and parenting a child with physical and learning difficulties. I know and understand reading as a complex process. It is not the same natural process as learning to speak.

Some children have a natural talent, or ability, to learn to read. They are able to effortlessly progress through the range of skills necessary to become readers. Many of these children arrive at school already reading, having seen it modeled for them by fluent adults. On the other end of the spectrum, another group of children need direct, explicit, systematic instruction to gain even a modest ability to read. Children range in their abilities to learn to read and to become proficient at reading. As some students are gifted athletically, the brains of some children are wired to process language more or less efficiently.

Heredity and environment play an important role in learning to read. Exposure to print and books in particular accelerates the learning process. Some children are read to since birth while others have illiterate parents and relatives. Print has no value in the homes of many illiterate families.

Oral language development is important for learning to read. Some children have little opportunity to speak and carry on intelligent conversations. Many have no knowledge of nursery rhymes. Playing with words is important in development of phonological awareness, a foundational element of learning to read.

These are the facts as far as graduate school and research are concerned. Through my teaching experience, I believe almost anyone can learn to read. Even a low IQ does not disqualify someone from being able to learn to read; however, more repetitions are
necessary and the process is much more difficult. My experience has shown this to be true and I have yet to experience a failure.

Having taught at an elementary school for students with language learning difficulties, I had access to state-of-the-art techniques and equipment. There I developed the literature curriculum and experienced how children with different types of language processing abilities and difficulties accessed learning. Working with children and adults in my own private practice as an Orton-Gillingham academic language therapist and trainer has further shaped my beliefs about literacy learning and teaching. With each new student come new combinations of strengths and weaknesses. I usually build on the student’s strengths and provide intervention for identified weak areas.

When I began my association with the NC public schools, I began teaching as a Reading teacher. Because I was outside of my educational background of science and chemistry, I was required to pursue additional coursework. Hindsight tells me my path would have been easier if I’d taken the Science jobs offered at that time. I wanted to work with students and teachers who wanted to benefit from my previous 7 years of teacher training. As a Certified member of the American Academy of Orton-Gillingham Educators and Practitioners, I had personally taught hundreds of dyslexic or language impaired/delayed students and trained many public school teachers in these strategies.

The County school district employed me as a Multisensory Language Instruction Specialist to do staff development at various schools and also work as a Literacy Specialist. Simultaneously, I began an academic pursuit of a Masters in Reading Education and Teacher Certification in Special Education at Appalachian State University. To date I have completed 42 semester hours of my required 78 hour program. They may waive the 12 hour student teaching requirement, reducing my program to 66 hours. The GOOD news is that I have only 23 semester hours left in the form of 8 graduate classes in reading and special education! Will I be Appalachian’s oldest, “living” graduate when I walk across the stage in May 2004? Maybe...ha!
Back to my beliefs about literacy learning... I have a son who struggled throughout school with physical and learning difficulties. Previously unaware of the daily struggles people with learning disabilities and physical impairments face, I learned to appreciate the tenacity of my son as he dealt with the obstacles of his life. I observed the callousness and disregard for people who are different. For many like me (before he was born) these individuals were to be pitied or ignored, but never respected as equals. Alternative methods of instruction for children like my son became my personal interest. Students with special needs became my champions and are now the passion in my work. I delight in working with these students where each situation is unique with many opportunities for creative thought.

I, too, have trouble in the area of reading. My well-disguised, impaired reading rate and comprehension difficulty are now officially documented. The only member of my education-focused, creative, literate family to despise reading, I consumed my days and evenings playing ball or swimming. An ardent competitor, I found success in sports and avoided all reading assignments. When books were assigned in high school literature classes, I relied on “Cliff Notes” for answers. No one knew my secret because my grades were excellent and I seldom spoke in my “advanced-plus” classes. Sunday School reading or “read-around” circles found me counting how many people were between the reader and me. I then counted over the paragraphs or pages to practice my part. As red blotches presented themselves on my neck, my tense voice stumbled over the words. I was intent on calling the words accurately and oblivious to understanding what I read. Of course I didn’t know how to ask for help. How does one verbalize a problem she can’t name?

I remained quiet until shortly after I met my husband, John. As he was an unconventional doctor, I was drawn to his avid reading of anything in print. Shortly after we were married, we moved to London, England. Alone and hungry for knowledge about the United States, I read the American version of the New York Times daily. I began to study brochures about our cultural and historical excursions. Finally I had a purpose for reading and a context for remembering. I continued to work on my comprehension problem. To this day, if I want to remember what I read or hear, I must take notes, write, rewrite, highlight, color-code, draw pictures, read, re-read, and pace. Apparently I am one who needs to employ various
strategies with movement for printed material to penetrate my mind. Once it soaks in, it stays, and it can be retrieved.

My unique reading difficulties require special strategies for me to be successful in graduate school. Likewise, many students in our schools have an assortment of academic needs requiring specialized knowledge and strategies. Reading instruction is complex, and the wise educator needs to be continually learning new ways to address student needs. I am grateful for my graduate school experience because it has provided needed balance in my educational background.