WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LITERACY LEARNING AND TEACHING AND
HOW I CAME TO BELIEVE IT

All of my beliefs about teaching and learning are rooted in my belief that all children can learn. Children have many different learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. The challenge for teachers is to find the way that each child learns best. I believe that children come to school with many different types of experiences and learning that predispose them to learning at school. Children who have had many literacy and language experiences and who have been read to frequently have had multiple opportunities to figure out the structure of language and arrive at school with the necessary concepts about print to begin the process of learning how to read. Children who have very limited exposure to literacy begin school behind their peers, lack the necessary pre-reading skills to be successful, and have to spend a significant amount of time catching up. These children can learn with much patience and interventions from the teacher. It is important for them to make connections in the stories they read to their lives. Finally I believe in using good literature and a phonics-based approach to teaching children to read and write. Self-selection of materials is important to children in learning to read and write. If they are interested in something and choose their material and topics themselves, it is meaningful and enjoyable to them.

My beliefs about literacy learning and teaching are shaped by my own experiences with literacy as a young child and adolescent. My earliest memories of reading are of my father reading stories to me at bedtime. I loved these experiences both because I enjoyed the stories, but also because allowed me special time with my father whom I adored.

I grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, within walking distance of Yale University, the pride of our community. My experiences in this Ivy League town and contact with the
university shaped my early experiences about literacy learning and education. I had often listened to stories of how my grandfather came to this country from Italy in the early 1900’s, brought here an as expert stone mason to construct new buildings for Yale University. Although my father was unable to attend Yale due to the aftermath of the depression and the advent of World War II, he worked through college and pursued his B. S. degree and the study of law elsewhere. He knew how important reading and education are, and strived to instill these beliefs in me. I have had other male family members graduate from Yale. As child, my father take me to the Yale Co-op, the university bookstore to browse and purchase new books. He told me that I needed to read so I could be as smart as the “Yalies”. Thus my motivation for reading was set at an early age. I loved the opportunities that Yale offered, even though I knew I could never attend because it was not co-educational at the time. I guess I decided early on that I would read and be as smart as any male. Many years later, my second cousin, A. Bartlett Giamatti became president of Yale University. Later he went on to become Commissioner of Baseball for the United States. I remember that I thought he was “selling out” on his career in education and I could not understand why anyone would give up higher education for baseball, but I do remember growing up that cousin Bart, as we called him was always glued to the radio or TV listening to baseball at summer family gatherings because that was his love. It took me many years to realize that it is important to love what you are doing. This is one of my beliefs with teaching and learning. With these early family experiences, my thinking about literacy and education was etched in the stone buildings of Yale University that my grandfather built.

I recall one experience in first grade when I was absent. The teacher had told the class on the previous day that they were going to learn how to read. I was certain that I had missed this opportunity and would be doomed forever to a life of ignorance and illiteracy, but mostly I
would be unable to read by myself some of the stories that I had come to love, read new ones, and explore learning about new things. I yearned to know about far away places since I had not yet been anywhere but Connecticut. I did not know it then, but my purpose for reading had already been determined. I still recall my father coming to school with me the day I returned from my absence because I was so afraid of returning unable to read like the other first graders. My father smiled, and I think I recall him winking at my first grade teacher as he told her of my concern about missing out on learning how to read. The teacher appeared puzzled by my concern and exclaimed, “But Gloria already knows how to read!” She reassured me that I had not really missed much that day, that learning to read would take more than one day and that I was already ahead of some of the other children. I breathed a sigh of relief and realized then how important reading was to me at an early age. I also believe that these early success are important to a child’s self-confidence in learning how to read.

I have memories of Dick and Jane books, round robin reading, and being in the “Orioles” reading group, the top group. I thought that the group was named after a baseball team, and preferred to be with the redbirds or the blue jays, or at least to name the group after my favorite team, the Yankees. I became bored, because the reading was so easy and I wanted to look to later chapters in the book. This convinced me that there had to be a better way to learn to read than just sitting there in boredom listening to everyone else read. To this day, I have never used round robin reading in my teaching. I did not learn anything from these early reading groups except how to talk to my friends when I was bored. I also have positive memories of reading late at night after bedtime with a flashlight and visiting the library to check out book and not being able to wait until I got home to read them.
Graduation from eighth grade brought acceptance to a prestigious Catholic girls’
college preparatory academy. I missed having boys to compete with and win, but I was excited
at the opportunities that this high school afforded me. In high school, I had lots of self-imposed
pressure for academic success. There was a good deal of reading, but there was little time for
reading books of my choosing. I was an excellent student, but I grew weary of having to
analyze every book, every passage, and of trying to infer what the author was trying to say and
not being able to read the books I really wanted to read. I became turned off to reading
materials that I could not select myself. Any little free time I had gave way to the Beatles and
boys! In high school, my new pursuit was the learning of foreign languages. I was very
interested in the study of Latin, French, and Italian, but perhaps even more fascinated by the
process of learning a language and the structure of the language.

Shaped by the Kennedy years, global thinking, and the notion of peace through
understanding, I decided to pursue the study of foreign languages at the School of Languages
and Linguistics of Georgetown University. I majored in French, minored in Italian and
Linguistics, and managed to take some classes in Spanish and Portuguese. I enjoyed learning
about language learning and teaching and enjoyed my classes in Phonetics and Phonemics,
Morphology and Syntax, and coursed in applied linguistics, such as teaching languages, and
teaching English as a second language. This was when I realized the importance of teaching
phonics, decoding strategies, and language structure in learning how to read. The excitement
of being in the Washington, D.C. area in the late sixties and early seventies and these turbulent
times opened new worlds to me. I became very interest in reading non-fiction and biographies
and this continues to be my favorite type of books as an adult. It was also in college that I
became interested in journaling and writing for pleasure. It was more interesting and
motivating to be able to write about something of my own choosing than to write yet one more essay on how I spent my summer vacation. This greatly shaped my thinking about how children could learn to write and enjoy it.

When I greet my new kindergarteners each year, I know how important it is that I make reading a pleasurable learning experience for them. It is important for me to teach them the letters, sounds and words of the language, but it is more important that they enjoy reading and have the opportunities to select a variety of their own materials.