Intellectual Biography

“What I Believe About Literacy Learning and teaching, and How I Came to Believe It”

I am in my tenth year of teaching. I began my career as a kindergarten teacher. In my second year of teaching I was moved to the third grade. I taught third grade for three years then, I was given the opportunity to move back to kindergarten which I did. I have been teaching kindergarten students since that time. I feel that working with two different age groups, (one that knows, theoretically, how to read and the other often with little to no knowledge of the written language) has helped me to reflect on my own instruction and to fully realize the importance of building a strong foundation for literacy learning in the early years.

Through my undergraduate studies and my experience in kindergarten and third grade the beliefs I have about literacy learning and the methods to teach literacy skills have remained the same, changed, were modified and enhanced. I feel that, as educators we must constantly reflect on our teaching beliefs and methods to ensure quality instruction.

I believe that there are several necessary components that must be employed in order to teach literacy skills to students. As a kindergarten teacher I became aware early on of the environmental influences of a child’s beginning skills in literacy development. As each school year begins it is evident which parents have exposed their children to the literary aspects of oral communication, books, and role modeled reading habits. I believe environmental influences play a huge role in a students ability to acquire reading skills at a faster pace because those students that have been talked to, read to, and exposed to reading and writing behaviors have a bigger vocabulary and more background knowledge. These students are already familiar with certain basic concepts of book and print awareness such as the front and back of the book, how
to hold a book, using picture clues, that text is read form left to right, etc. These students are not necessarily smarter than the other students they are just starting their literacy training at a more advanced stage whereas the other students must gain this background knowledge after entering school.

An important aspect of teaching literacy to children is modeling. Showing students how the reading process works is very important. I always think back to the saying, “Do as I say.” To be a good reading and writing role model teachers should have students “Do as I do.” By modeling literacy skills and “thinking aloud” as you read a story to students they begin to see the connections between the spoken language, the written language and how illustrations aide in the understanding of a story. In this stage of reading instruction it is essential to have repetition of the process as well as to have repeated readings of a particular story. Research indicates that repeated readings of the same story improves comprehension and students’ interpretations of a story. In addition, students love to hear the same story over again and are able to help “re-read” the words, which builds confidence. In fact, after I finish reading and discussing a story with my class the students often say, “Read it again.” Teachers also need to model reading comprehension skills to students. This is just as important as the mechanics of reading. This can be achieved by periodically stopping to discuss a story as it is being read. I believe it is important to ask students what is happening in a story, to predict what will happen next and why they think these events happened or will happen. By giving their interpretation and inferring about the next events students are not just regurgitating the obvious but thinking about it often times requiring them to “read between the lines”-a higher order thinking skill. By reading high quality stories aloud to students the teacher is helping the students develop literacy skills, develop an interest in reading, promoting language development, and positively influencing writing skills.
Exposure to different types of literature is also important during the modeling phase. This helps students understand that reading can have many different purposes such as for enjoyment or to gain knowledge.

It is my belief that phonics should play a significant role in the teaching of literacy skills. When students have the knowledge that letters make sounds they can begin to understand that when the sounds are put together words are created. I feel strongly about phonics instruction for two reasons. First of all, when I began teaching phonics was not encouraged. Therefore I did not do a lot a phonics instruction. When my students were not gaining the reading skills they needed I began doing a great deal of phonics instruction. The reading and writing abilities of my students improved as well as their confidence and desire to read. The second reason I believe phonics instruction is beneficial is because of a computer program I use called Wiggleworks. There is one portion of the computer instruction that allows students to type words on the screen. The computer then reads the words to the students. This lets the students see and hear first hand how words are created. The students think it is funny to hear the “non-words” but, it helps them to understand the connection between the letters, the sounds the letters make, and how that when letters are put together words are made.

Allowing students to express themselves through music, movement, and dramatic play is also important. Using such methods to teach skills is beneficial because they are natural activities of small children. Kindergarten children are highly motivated by this type of instruction. I can often here my students singing phonics songs during other parts of the school day. This shows that the lessons are being internalized and carried over to a type of independent review. These activities build oral language skills and listening skills, both of which are important in the development of reading and writing.
Learning to read and write are two skills that go hand in hand. When the teacher reads a story aloud and points to the words as she reads the students begin to understand that what the teacher is reading, what they are hearing, and what is written down on the page is the same thing. When students are given phonics instruction they use that knowledge to read words as well as to spell words in their own writing. I see this daily in my journal writing lessons. During journal writing I model how to draw a story picture by thinking aloud and brainstorming a main idea and details to support that idea. After the picture is complete I again think aloud to construct a story about the picture (usually one sentence for most kindergarten students). I then ask the students how to write the words for the sentence. I get responses like, “Sound it out” or “Look on the wall.” I have high frequency words listed on various colored cards under the letter they begin with. Most used journal words are posted on a chart (with picture clues) for their reference when writing. These types of responses and the work samples in the journals are evidence that modeling the writing process is a successful tool for teaching writing skills. Journal writing lessons also reaffirm the connections between what is said, written down on the page, and read perhaps in a more meaningful way than when stories are read to them because they are the author.

I also use Thinking Maps as a tool for teaching literacy skills to my students. Thinking Maps are graphic organizers. There are many different formats that can be used depending on the purpose. One example would be a “Double Bubble” map. This type of Thinking map is used to compare and contrast two topics. It is similar to the Vinn Diagram. At the kindergarten level the students can’t do these on their own but can contribute to class discussions and creation of Thinking Maps. I have found that using Thinking Maps increases story comprehension, story sequencing, and character descriptions when used after reading a story to the class. Thinking Maps also help students with their own writing. We go over the prewriting and brainstorming aspects of writing
as a group using a Thinking Map to record our thoughts and ideas. I have observed an increase of students staying on the main idea in their own writing. These same Thinking Maps are also used in the upper grades. Our school has been using them for a few years now. The upper grade teachers are now reporting better writing and reading skills in their students as well. They are also pleased to have students who already have the background knowledge of graphic organizers.

One of the major components of reading instruction is to make the lessons meaningful and fun for the students. I have observed a positive change in my students as well as in myself when the reading or writing assignment was of interest and the purpose was clear. Students who like what they are doing tend to do a better job and retain the information at a higher rate than those students who do not have an interest in the topic or do not clearly understand why a particular topic is being learned. When students see that learning to read and write can be fun and have real life applications their efforts improve.

I believe that all students are capable of learning. However, not every student learns in the same way or at the same rate. Just because two students are both five years old doesn’t mean both of them are ready to read and write. Pushing a student before he is developmentally ready and capable of learning these skills can be detrimental to his/her literacy development.

Learning styles of the students must be addressed as well. Some students are visual learners. They need to see the teacher modeling reading and writing skills. Other students are auditory learners. These students benefit more from hearing the teacher and from musical instruction. Kinesthetic learners enjoy role playing activities and using manipulatives such as the computer or other electronic devices. It is important to remember that all of these methods can be helpful in the teaching of all students but the teacher needs to individualize instruction as much as possible for learners who do not exhibit multiple learning styles. It is also imperative that
teachers address those students who have learning difficulties remembering that these children can learn but at different rates and with different degrees of success than the other students.

In conclusion, I believe that to be a successful teacher one must use many different teaching styles and methods. What works one year for a particular group of students may not be as successful for the next class. It is important to be willing to look at new teaching methods with the notion that they can be beneficial but, at the same time I feel that just because a certain technique has been around for a long time doesn’t mean that it is out of date and can no longer work. I believe that individual teachers need to look at their individual group of students and use whatever methods, techniques, and tools are successful -changing or adding to them as necessary along the way.