LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Reading and writing have always been second nature to me. My father read to me as a young child, and continued reading to me through grade school. My love for books stemmed from fairy tales, mysteries, and the antics of the Charlie Brown gang. It only seemed natural for me to entertain myself with a book, and this inborn love for books has never subsided.

I believe reading and writing can be taught without ever being “taught”. A parent can read with a child, or write with a child, and the child is watching that skill being modeled from the time they can see. For instance, my mother made grocery lists, to do lists, and wrote letters to aunts and uncles regularly. It was looked upon as our job as children to write to our cousins, and read each night before bed, just as my parents did.

To be a teacher of reading and writing, I firmly believe you must love reading and writing yourself. I cannot see a teacher simply reciting the steps to read, and drilling students over and over on words. The interest level of the teacher should shine through. He/she should be as excited about reading as the new readers, and allow that excitement to guide the lesson. To me, a true teacher of reading is one who cannot wait to read the book again, or who cannot wait to receive a letter to which to respond. True reading teachers do not have to “teach” reading. They can model reading with their own interest books, and children will follow suit.

For those children who are not exposed to written print or books until school, I feel a strong desire to let them explore any book they want, and gain their interest in what the book says. Children may choose a college level text, but if it is that book that draws their interest to the written word, so be it. Obviously they can not begin reading at this level, but the interest has been achieved. Kindergarten classrooms should be filled with bright covers on books, and the books should be on the child’s level. They should not be in rows, with the spines showing, rather on shelves with the covers in full view. I believe this is the first crucial step in teaching and writing, gaining the interest.

I also believe, after teaching at risk and non readers in the fourth grade,
that children learn to read and write differently. Some children learn phonetically, and need basic sounds and sight words, whereas others learn by looking at texts and pictures to read the book. Each child develops their own individualized way to process information, and the two processes (phonics and whole language) can be combined to achieve maximum reading potential. To fully reach a child, there must be an element of trust. The child must trust that the teacher loves to read, and is anxious to share that love with the child. A teacher must trust the child, knowing he/she will give his/her all if the teacher does as well.

In addition to loving to read and write, to teach a child the teacher must also have patience. Not all children will get it quickly, and not all methods will work with every child. Children recognize impatience, and will compensate their learning by acting tough or resistant. A reading teacher must be patient and allow students to try new words and risk new failures at their own pace. A patient teacher will soon realize her students are more willing to risk failure when they know they are under no time constraint and will not be penalized for incorrectness.

The true reading and writing teacher teaches self expression. First, to become a good writer, one must look inside themselves and discover the vast array of personal topics. To write, one should start with themselves, personal stories and tribulations, and move forward from there. Personal journals written on a topic for ten minutes a day is a great starter. So often children complain they are told to write without stopping, and they have no idea what to write. A teacher of writing should foster their personal feelings with short journal prompts that get the class started. For instance, the first journal prompt could be “Tell what you like and dislike about your name. Explain why.” This is a terrific prompt to begin with, because the one thing that is the child’s very own is her/his name. They own it, and can decide if they like it or not, and no one can say if they are right or wrong. The young writers gain a sense of ownership and possession, and perhaps this will allow their thoughts to freely flow in each journal.

Journals never should be graded. They are a personal response to one’s feelings, and a writing teacher cannot put a grade on feelings. However, the journals can be collected and read through, if the child agrees, allowing the teacher a first hand glance into the secrets of the students in her
classroom. Journals are the way I have introduced writing for the past three years. It makes the children feel safe, and they always have an opinion to personal prompts, thereby almost eliminating the “I don’t know what to write about” syndrome.

After journals have been introduced, they are used as a warm up before each writing session. Then, the writing teacher can move into her lesson, confident the students are turned on to writing. One great way to begin writing is to stay along the personal lines and work on autobiographies. These are simple to do because they are about the child’s life. The teacher should provide questions to answer, and get the children thinking about their earliest memory, their most poignant memories, and benchmarks in their lives. Students in my classes have always loved beginning with autobiographies, and enjoy learning about each other through reading the autobiographies.

I feel writing instruction can begin with no regard to spelling, punctuation, or capitalization. Mechanics often add to students’ anxiety over writing, and my feelings are if a student has the content, the mechanics can be taught as needed. For instance, if several students are all misusing commas, a quick mini lesson on appropriate comma usage for those individuals is easy and efficient. I teach grammar to small groups according to their needs in my classroom. Only if the majority or entire class is missing a skill will I teach to the whole group.

I have come to my beliefs about the teachings of reading and writing through years of schooling, both as a student and as a teacher. In my school years, I remember being quite bored with grammar lessons, as I, along with many others, knew the general rules of grammar. We groaned and dreaded the rote workbooks and grammar worksheets. I also rely on my personal experience in school to guide my teaching of reading and writing.

I remember reading, however, I do not recall learning to read, nor do I recall the moment AHA! Everything clicked and I could write. I do remember more about learning to write than about learning to read, and one thing that stands out in my head is tracing. I hated tracing letters on a blue ditto sheet. Now, if ever given the chance to teach writing to young children, the ideas of shaving cream and powder Kool-Aid as tools to trace with are great
solutions to the worksheet approach. Nothing is more boring than tracing what someone else has already done.

To properly teach reading, I must step back. I never struggled in the area of reading, and to me, that is a minor setback when teaching children, because I can not rely on my own shortcomings as a reader. Not to say I never had any problems in school, just that reading was, and is, my strongest point. So, in order to step back and see why I believe what I do about reading, I rely on my first year of teaching.

I taught 4th grade at an extremely high risk school, 98% minority and free lunch students. My 4th graders ranged in reading levels from non readers to fourth grade level students. My work was cut out for me, as I had student taught in a rural, all-white, basically on grade level school for three months. Whatever I had learned about the teaching of reading in college seemed not to apply to these children. You cannot give fourth graders a fourth grade basal and assign work. The ones who are non and low readers will shut you out. Not that college supported basals, just the opposite, but I was not prepared to deal with the vast differences in ability.

I firmly believe in starting children off reading where they are in levels, not their grade level. To accomplish this, I grouped my class. Now, some people gasp at the thought of “ability grouping” and say it leads to tracking, but I prefer to work in flexible groupings in the room, with children moving in and out of groups as needed, and no rank given to any of the groups. This arrangement immediately made all students feel at ease because every child was in a group. Some groups worked on phonics, some comprehension, and others practiced alphabet sounds. Each group had a purpose, and fun activities designed to help members attain their goal. The students stayed in their group until they mastered the skill, and then moved to another group. Some children were missing basic skills, and they moved to another group to gain the skill necessary to move forward.

My strong belief in this type of grouping comes from three years of success. I am not the best reading teacher, but my students feel safe in reading groups, and I do not have them ever read aloud to a group, no matter how small. They read aloud to me individually and sometimes with a buddy partner, but never to the group. This eliminates the sense of dread during
"round robin reading." I believe in this because I have witnessed non readers gain a year's growth, and the comprehension of struggling readers rise. My few students already on grade level were challenging themselves to constantly strive to achieve higher goals, such as reading on a fifth grade level, or comprehending at a higher level. I know this way of teaching reading works, and the students are why I firmly believe it.

I have never had the experience to teach beginning writing. I started teaching in fourth grade. As you can imagine, a fourth grader who cannot read is not an avid writer. My class knew no grammar rules, no sentence structure, and had no concept of content. My school was convinced one particular graphic organizer was the answer to these children's problems in writing, and we teachers were instructed to use it. I quickly disregarded it as soon as I realized the children had no idea what beginning, middle and ending meant. To use a graphic organizer focused on these three concepts would be folly. Instead, we read good beginning paragraphs of stories, and then I modeled one of my own. When the students were ready, they attempted their own. For a while, their beginnings sounded amazingly like mine or the stories, but as time went on, they grew braver and branched out to try beginning paragraphs of their own.

For instance, I read the class the beginning paragraphs of three fantasy fiction books. Then, I modeled a beginning about a fantasy fiction prompt, say "Imagine your favorite character came to life. What would you and the character do?" The students copied down my beginning, and then invented their own. This procedure was done with the middle (action) and the ending. Some papers were finished all the way before the students even realized they had written an entire story. We would work on three beginnings a week, and then the next week pick back up and work on middles of the same story. This process of teaching writing is probably never going to be mandated into the curriculum, but it has not failed me yet, and that is why I continue to teach this way.

Switching to seventh grade this year has been a change. My students can form sentences, and have had formula writing beaten into their heads. It is difficult for me to get them writing freely, which is sad. Also, in reading, they seem to only want to read for AR points, not for enjoyment. To stop this, each class is reading a separate novel and will be developing a portfolio
to turn in to me for their assessment. I am beginning to see some changes in their attitudes about reading.

My philosophies on reading and writing are not based on whimsical studies, or whatever the "hot" new way to teach is. I have based what I believe on my own personal experiences and the experiences I have gained in the classroom. I believe my teaching reflects my philosophies in these two areas, and I strive to always keep in touch with what I believe. The single most important thing I believe is that all children can learn, given the proper instruction and care.