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A Portrait of a Reading Teacher

Barbara J. Griffin

Teacher knowledge is dynamic and experiential. It is both constructed and reconstructed daily as teachers live out their lives in and out of school (Clandinin and Connelly, 1991). Therefore, listening to teachers' stories can be a valuable avenue to gaining insights into the methods other teachers use to teach children to read. My goal is to share one teacher's story in such a way that readers will reflect on their own stories and examine their practices of reading instruction, their knowledge and beliefs, and how all these elements of teaching are interrelated. It is up to readers to take from this qualitative research those parts which fit their individual professional development needs.

Following Seidman's (1991) research method that uses three, ninety-minute in-depth interviews, my purpose was to discover: 1) the events that had led to the teacher's present teaching position (both personal and professional); 2) the description of a typical day's reading instruction; and 3) the teacher's reconstruction of and reflection on the meaning of teaching reading.

The following profile is constructed from four and one-half hours of audio-taped interviews and over 60 pages of verbatim transcript. This portrait of a reading teacher is

verbally painted by a kindergarten teacher who has taught for twenty years.

A reading teacher's story

I've learned over the long run that kids learn to read because people that they love and care about read to them. It's that emotional connection. When you have an emotional connection you want to emulate somebody ... [it's] the same thing about reading. Put a kid in your lap and you read to them and it becomes important to them. That reading, that love of reading, or being able to take the words and do different things with them, and translate them into something. Kids are fascinated with that. [The purpose is] to convey enthusiasm for reading. I like to read. And I like to teach the kids that, "You can do this with words. They're there to be used." That's what I think reading is about — getting them to like it and exposing them to it.

Everything that I do in teaching reading has to do with things that I have picked up from other teachers, workshops, or the kids. Try new things; change it for something else that works with the children. Trends change over the years but still those early childhood principles, of course, are true: see, say, do. You've got to give them all the cues that you can possibly give so they can pick that up: tactile, auditory, and visual experience. You have to teach a base for all those things. So it still is the basic tenets you're teaching. Over the years I've picked up different things: audio-visual, phonics, ways to teach sounds with signs. I incorporate the best parts of everything I've done. You pick the best of what works and what really works with your children. And that varies from year to year too. But over the years I've collected a bunch of tricks to put up my sleeve. I pull out what's needed. You wouldn't even plan to use a lot of these ideas, they come out as needed. That's the essence of teaching after many years.

The combination I've found is that the best reading programs offer a combination; an integration approach to teaching reading. All day long with the kids we use the term *reading*. "This is sustained silent reading and this is shared reading." We call the period reading/writing, because we are emphasizing that whatever you have written can be read back, whatever you say can be written, that whole cycle. And we use those terms. The kids come to school with preconceived notions and you have to do what you can to help them understand that the same term can mean different things. Everything is reading. It's when you see something and you say something to go with it. The concept of reading is much more global than print on the page.

Everything we do teaches some concept of reading. It used to be language. That's the way I was trained. Language they said should be the base for your whole program. Well as I've gotten to know kids better and their learning styles, I know that you're going to have a better chance of learning language if you see it, and do it, and hear it. Well, it just so happens, that's "reading." So in the end, everything we do is language based and we write as much as we can. What we're providing for is that language and that gets back to the need for reading. It has to come from having need. We've got to have a need. You have to establish this with these kids. These kids don't need to read. They hear it on T.V. or someone will tell them. They don't have to think for themselves. To me if we're going to teach reading we have to show them that there's a need to be able to read.

I've adapted over the years and that's why even though in the beginning I was trained in early childhood techniques — and that turns out to be developmentally appropriate activities — and those turn out to be whole language, and all those

kinds of things. So I think that I'm making a profession out of adapting to the needs of kids and so the reason I teach reading the way I do is because of the observations that I've made of children over the years. Teaching kids to read has everything to do with development. Bridging that gap for them. Facilitating is what you're doing and the kids do it themselves. Most of it's out of my control. It has a lot to do with previous knowledge, with what they're getting at home, what their experiences are, et cetera. And it's an unfolding process. It's an upward spiral. Everything starts to build and it becomes a structure. That's how kids build knowledge. But it's just building on what you have. Being able to store stuff that you can use later.

The first thing that you do [with children], is an assessment. I'm not talking a paper and pencil assessment. I mean you get to know the child, literally. And you get to understand what all their little parts are about: their motor skills, their language development, their home life, their social skills, where they fit into the class. All those kinds of things. And then you look at them. Are they risk takers? Are they comfortable? And then you set the classroom up to make them comfortable. You let them be all that they can be in the classroom. Then you start providing the things that you know are important: the inundation with the written word, then going into spoken words and making that connection for them, or modeling that connection. And then modeling the written language, explaining every little thing as you're doing it: capital letters, periods, all those kinds of things. So I think first, you want to get to know the child, then you take it from where they are, and in that context, what's missing to help them build. What rungs of the ladder are missing in this child's background and how can we build in those rungs to provide a good foundation? You get to know children well enough to know which little piece is missing so you can help

them gain that and then get to the next step. Assessing the kids starting from a level of independence and success and moving to a level of instruction.

Reading can be the key to life. It can be the money for the bank account of life. It can be so many things; it's such a powerful tool. The more you can read, the more you do read, the more you open yourself up. Reading forces you to conjure up images and that's where creativity comes from. You teach kids that pictures can come from my words, or book words, or from their own words and that's a powerful thing. Reading and writing are some things you can always do for yourself. That's what I try to convey to the kids too. "Once you get these words, you can open up any of these books."

So my philosophy is basically that the children can be responsible for themselves. They have the right to be treated well and my job is to provide an environment that will nurture their personality and their abilities and their self-esteem. It should be clear to people when they walk in [to my class] that this is a place where we care about kids, and adults are welcome but they're not the focus.

References

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