

## **My Growth as Master Practitioner of Literacy**

Like many novice teachers, before I came into the Reading Specialist program, I had minimal understanding and practice about effective literacy instruction. I also knew very little about how to provide a supportive literacy environment for students and colleagues. As I reflect back, I realize that I have grown in theory and practice in many areas since I started the program. I now understand, among many other best practices, that assessments, effective research-based literacy instruction, and a supportive classroom environment for students and colleagues will promote literacy in all language domains and will help students become independent and fluent readers and writers.

Before coming to the program, I felt uncomfortable administering assessments and thought that tests were the best way to assess students. Now I know that assessments drive instruction and that it is important to evaluate students in the form of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments in order to maximize instruction. I also realize that there is more than one way to assess students and that the use of a variety of authentic assessments (like anecdotal records, portfolios, and presentations) also measures proficiency in different areas, especially when it comes to evaluating English language learners. Now it is imperative for me to know students' reading levels in order to plan effective lessons and provide intervention or acceleration with their reading and writing. I now have ample experience administering different types of assessments like the Burns & Roe Informal Reading Inventory (IRI), the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). These assessments help me determine students' ability to decode words, reading fluency, reading levels, and reading comprehension. The use of a variety of assessments in my profession has guided me to identify students' learning difficulties, and it has helped me understand that

students develop literacy at different rates. More importantly, I now use assessment results during parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, and during collaborative team meetings to enlighten everyone involved about how to best meet the needs of students.

By reading about many literacy theorists, writers, and researchers, I can say for a fact that I used to be influenced by traditional school practices and by what I learned to be right in regard to teaching and learning. Now I am beginning to rely on what has already proven to be effective research-based literacy teaching practices. I now am influenced by Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development, Cambourne and the conditions of learning, Piaget with discovery learning and differentiated instruction, and by Webb's Depth of Knowledge framework. These theorists have taken me to a higher level when it comes to providing quality literacy instruction in the classroom.

One can see components of each learning theory throughout my learning and practice. For example, I used to think that all students learn to read and write the same way and that repetition and skill practice was an effective way of teaching. I am now glad to see that this thinking is no longer applied in my teaching practice and that it is important to use different modalities and differentiated instruction in order to reach all students. I am no longer proud of skills-based teaching practices and of transmitting knowledge without recognizing students' prior knowledge, experiences, and preferences. I can see that I have become the "guide on the side," providing discovery learning, hands-on activities, scaffolded instruction, explicit instruction, project-based learning, and flexible group instruction. I am constantly thinking and reflecting about how to best meet the needs of all my students, regardless of time constraints, lack of resources, and/or administrative limitations.

In addition, I have acquired ample knowledge about effective reading strategies. I reach students in a more effective way since I have put into practice (on a daily basis) small-group instruction like guided reading, Kid Writing, cooperative learning, literacy group stations, and individualized interventions. More importantly, I use interactive reading approaches that combine elements of bottom-up strategies to help students with phonics and phonological awareness and top-down strategies to help students with comprehension. All my students now benefit from the implementation of effective comprehension strategies like frontloading vocabulary, think-pair-share, think aloud, authentic literature experience, and accessing prior knowledge.

I am extremely conscious of language learners and adapt comprehension strategies that teach readers to stop, think, and react to informational text. These adaptations are very helpful to language learners because I group them according to their reading levels and allow them to work together for additional support. Entering and beginning language learners draw or write one-word responses for their reaction to the text, and this encourages participation and sharing with partners. Developing language learners write more as they feel comfortable, and expanding language learners write and share orally about their reactions to the text. Before sharing reactions, I allow language learners to practice reading their sentences or paragraphs to help them overcome anxiety and to help them read with fluency and expression.

I used to provide minimal student choice when it came to responding to assignments, like choosing literature for independent reading or selecting only certain students to do specific literacy projects. However, I now understand that students need to explore and investigate topics of their own choice in order to make the learning relevant and meaningful for each student. Currently, in my class I let students respond orally or in writing, and I let them act, explain,

draw, present, and/or create to prove they are learning the content. When it comes to choosing books for reading independently, they choose their favorite genre and topics. The choices and responses are theirs to make and I require the same high expectations from all.

Moreover, I have learned that the classroom environment and space also play a vital role in developing well-balanced literacy instruction. There is no question that classrooms need to include activities in all language domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In order to accomplish this, I currently promote literacy instruction in the classroom that includes lots of phonological awareness, independent reading, and word study. I now develop and provide more effective whole-group instruction like interactive read alouds, shared reading, and interactive writing. During these activities students practice strategic thinking like citing evidence, comparing and contrasting, and drawing conclusions. I also incorporate reader theaters, drama, choral reading, poems, and songs into daily classroom activities and routines; these provide a rich literacy environment in speaking and listening and help language learners acquire oral language in a more supportive environment. Responses to literature and free writing are constantly used to give students encoding and decoding practice, while also encouraging students to think critically and to think like writers.

This year, I have grown as a leader and have provided training about guided reading to both classroom teachers and paraprofessionals. I have mainly focused my trainings on why and how to implement guided reading. In addition, I have focused on teaching about the reading continuum of literacy instruction and on reading process systems of thinking within, beyond, and about the text. Furthermore, when asked by the administration, I also present my thoughts/findings during faculty or academic excellence committee meetings about the need to provide input to language learners and about the importance of including lesson objectives in all

language domains to help ELL students acquire language. I have also ventured outside my classroom several times during this program to help certain students in reading and to help other colleagues with the implementation of literacy practices like the writer's notebook. All of these practices have helped me feel more confident as a teacher and leader of literacy.

I am now a goal-oriented professional. I no longer like to waste time attending different trainings and faculty meetings with no specific direction, with no opportunity for participation, or with no thorough understanding of best practices in teaching. The required readings in this program have helped me become an effective literacy teacher and a student advocate, and it has also made me a more active member of our learning community. I am no longer a passive learner and I strive to provide a learning environment that is engaging and exciting for all, including other teachers. In order to make an impact, I make every effort to be a role model and read and write along with the students so they learn from indirect exposure and not just by me lecturing. If I teach and reach others by modeling enthusiasm, joy, and creativity, I will harvest a community of great readers and writers, and high-quality literacy professionals.

I know I have come a long way and I hope I do not stop here. I still feel that there is so much to learn and practice and so little time to spare. Students and colleagues are waiting for effective and knowledgeable literacy teachers and coaches that will help them reach their maximal potential.