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**Classroom Theory**

There are many different approaches to developing literacy in children. Each teacher must determine his or her own educational philosophy and use that philosophy when planning instruction. My personal philosophy of literacy education has been shaped over time through my formal education, my experiences working in education, and my experiences as a parent.

My overall educational philosophy is one of progressivism. All children deserve a teacher who will invest in learning about their interests, cultures, and skills so that those aspects of the child can be incorporated into the learning process. Strict adherence to one method of instruction cannot benefit the diverse learners in any classroom. I value Dewey’s idea that children’s natural curiosity should be fostered through choice and variety.

The constructivist theory of allowing children to explore topics and build their own knowledge complements my progressive philosophy. Piaget explains how children build their schema at different rates and by different means, which allows for creativity and ownership. Children in my classroom will be addressed as individual learners with individual needs. In addition, Vygotsky’s idea of using scaffolding and social interactions to help a child attain the high end of his zone of proximal development will play a significant role in my classroom structure. I will use small group or individual instruction and “peer partners” to provide students, especially ELL (English Language Learners) and special needs students, with additional support.

It is extremely important to consider the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students. I do not advocate assimilation. Instead, I will strive to welcome diversity in my classroom by encouraging students to read and write in both English and their heritage language. I will encourage them to share cultural traditions in the classroom. Today’s students live in an increasingly smaller world. They must become citizens of our global village by learning both about and from one another. Students’ cultures can be brought into the classroom through culturally conscious literature, multi-lingual word walls, art, music, and discussions of the world from different cultural perspectives.

A key element of my approach to literacy instruction is intertwining reading and writing through genre studies. Exposing children to quality literature helps them to see the principles of good writing in action. Likewise, practice in writing helps students to think more deeply about the texts they read. Writing about literature requires an awareness of one’s own thoughts regarding the text, as well as the author’s intentions for the text. Katie Wood Ray advocates the use of mentor texts in her book, *Study Driven* (Heinemann, 2006). I believe that mentor texts are a must for any lesson in writing. Students cannot be expected to produce high quality writing if they do not read and analyze high quality writing.

**Teaching Writing**

The writing process involves following a series of steps. Students need guidance to understand and follow these steps. I plan to use a Writer’s Workshop to teach writing. The Workshop will begin with a short read-aloud of mentor texts for the genre being studied, followed by a mini-lesson.

Mini-lessons will be followed by independent writing time, during which I will hold conferences with individual students. Goals for these conferences will be based on each student’s individual progress and needs. In addition to conferences, I will use independent writing time for guided writing with small groups. This is an ideal time to provide additional instruction for ELL students who are having difficulty grasping a concept or special needs students who need more intensive support. ELL students will benefit from the discussion that takes place during small group discussion, as it provides additional exposure to academic language. They will have individualized bilingual Quick Word dictionaries to assist with language development. I will use the resources available through the school community, the neighborhood community, and the Internet to facilitate translation. Students may also use independent writing time for peer conferencing or reading mentor texts.

I will help my students think of themselves as authentic authors by giving them the opportunity to share their work. On some days, my class will share with writing partners or in small groups. On other days, I will draw sticks to choose students who may share their work with the entire class. Some pieces will be published in an informal way, by sharing with classmates, while others will be published more formally. Completing a genre study will be cause for celebration and sharing of students’ work. I will seek out opportunities for my students to produce “luxurious literature” that includes typed text and colored illustrations. We will share those pieces with other classes, with families, or with the principal or board members.

Writer’s Notebooks will be an integral part of writing instruction in my classroom. Students will use a three-ring binder with tabs to organize handouts, a Quick Word dictionary, and planning strategies. They will keep a section of lined paper for ideas and drafts. All drafts will be kept to monitor student progress throughout the year. Students will be asked to challenge themselves by producing more complex pieces of writing as the year progresses. Students will also make notes about the texts they read in their Writer’s Notebooks as they find interesting words, experience light bulb moments, or find a writing technique that appeals to them.

It is imperative that students have visual cues to assist with the writing process. I will use charts and posters to remind students of the steps of the writing process, transitional words or phrases, and the various types of leads and endings (e.g., thought shot, snapshot, question, big potato, dialogue, onomatopoeia). Students will each keep a copy of the CUPS checklist for revising and editing in their Writer’s Notebooks. Peer conferences will be used for planning, revising, and editing works. Samples of writing created by the whole class will be posted for students to reference when writing individually.

**Using Children’s Literature to Teach Writing**

The use of mentor texts will be a key piece in my writing instruction. In *Study Driven,* Katie Wood Ray advises reading like a teacher of writing by gathering examples of different types of text whenever possible (p. 64). This can be done by gathering the actual texts (especially for items such as newspaper and magazine articles or pieces of writing from the Internet) or keeping an annotated bibliography as a resource for choosing mentor texts. A well-read teacher will ultimately select works that are appropriate for the type of writing students will do and that engage young readers.

Students need multiple opportunities to explore mentor texts in order to produce a specific type of writing. I will read mentor texts aloud as an introduction to new genre studies and encourage students to spend part of their writing time reading. I will keep a selection of mentor texts available for students to read individually or with a partner. Partner reading provides students with a chance to hear how others use inflection, punctuation, and pace to add meaning to their reading. Partners can discuss things they notice about the text and how the text relates to our current genre study. They can talk about how the illustrations add to the text or debate why an author used a certain word or technique. Students will use sticky notes to make quick observations, which they may choose to reflect upon in their notebooks.

I will have discussions with the class about our mentor texts. We will chart the specific features that we discover and make note of how authors use various writing traits. We will use graphic organizers to analyze certain aspects of texts and compare them to others in the genre. We will confer with one another about why these are good examples of the genre. I will model how to write like the authors we read. As a whole class, we will create works that reflect the influence of our mentor texts. Students will be given time to “channel their inner authors” and write independently.

Finding culturally diverse literature will be a crucial piece of my planning. By choosing diverse texts, I will model acceptance of diverse people and ideas. I will highlight the differences that make our world a wonderful place to live. I will be certain to seek out literature that is culturally congruent for the ELL students in my classroom. If the books we read are available in an ELL student’s heritage language, I will obtain them so that the student can compare the two versions or read them with family members.

I will differentiate instruction for students of different abilities by finding mentor texts at a variety of reading levels. I will scaffold the writing process through the use of small groups, writing partners, and conferences. I will modify writing assignments according to ability. For example, if a genre typically contains five main elements I may ask students to focus on two elements as they write.

Overall, the main focus of writing in my classroom will be to study examples of good writing and emulate those. We will read like writers and write like readers.

**Using Writing to Teach Children’s Literatu**re

By using mentor texts, I will show my students examples of good writing in a specific genre. Those examples can be used to teach the skills needed to produce writing. In turn, writing can be used to teach children about literature.

Many students read without giving much thought to what they read. They need to be made aware of their own thought processes about literature. In her book *Comprehension Connections: Bridges to Strategic Reading,* Tanny McGregor describes using a “reading salad” to develop metacognition (pp. 12-16). Once students begin to recognize the thinking they do while reading, they can write about it. My students will have Reader’s Notebooks in which they will make observations. I will provide them with thinking stems and strategies for exploring their thinking, such as: visualizing, inferring, making connections, questioning, and summarizing.

Students will expand upon the strategies in their Reader’s Notebooks by writing in response to the literature they have read. They will practice different types of responses based on their own thought processes during reading. They may choose to write creatively about a specific passage that was easy to visualize or a text-to-text connection. They may write an opinion piece about a theme or lesson in the story. Students may write poems to clarify their thinking or use inferences and predictions to continue the story. A summary may be written as a newspaper article. Responding to literature requires deep thought and critical analysis of that literature. I will urge my students to think deeply about the qualities of a book and write about them.

I will discuss features of different types of children’s literature with my class. We will practice writing stories with elements similar to those in stories we read together. We will note the use of conventions within texts and practice using those in our writing. Making an intentional effort to observe writing styles and use techniques from established authors in our own writing will help strengthen the tie between writing and literature for my students.

Again, I will differentiate instruction for ELL students and special needs students. They may focus on one aspect of a text to write about. ELLs may respond to literature in their heritage language at times so that they can focus on their thoughts about the literature rather than the mechanics of writing in English. Writing partners will construct joint responses to texts. I will conference with students regularly to monitor progress and provide additional support. Students will be encouraged to add a personal flavor to their writing, as many successful authors do. I will welcome the addition of culturally relevant details in my students’ work. I will search for bilingual texts that allow students to see the connections between languages and ask them to write a bilingual text of their own.

**Conclusion**

My philosophy of literacy education has been shaped by many factors. A key element of my philosophy is a progressive approach to teaching in which children’s innate curiosity leads them to expand their schema and construct new knowledge. I believe that differentiation is crucial so that all students can be successful. I must learn about my students and bring their cultures into my instruction so that they feel valued. I must meet my students at their current levels and push them to reach a little higher.

Reading and writing are complementary pieces of sound literacy instruction. I must select quality children’s literature to study, emulate, and respond to with my classes. Consistently using diverse mentor texts as the basis for any genre study teaches children that diversity should be valued. Reading like writers encourages students to think carefully about how to craft good writing. Writing like readers encourages students to write pieces that others will enjoy. I must give my students the tools they need to become authors and model the strategies they will use through mini-lessons. I must conference with students regularly to provide feedback and allow for peer interactions to facilitate the learning process. I will immerse my students in literature so that they can grow as both readers and writers.

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