

Literacy is the Key To Lifelong Learning

By: Kristin Zens

Ask a young child what they want to do when they grow up and some of the most common responses you will receive are firefighter, princess, pro athlete, veterinarian, and maybe even a teacher. Survey those students fifteen years later and you will probably realize that most have changed career paths just slightly. I, on the other hand, am an exception to this broad generalization. For as long as I can remember, I have always dreamed of becoming a teacher. There was something about going to school, learning new things, and looking up to the man or woman in the front of my classroom. I idolized my elementary school teachers and could not wait to become one myself. I have always loved the learning process; growing and achieving new things has been something I have strived for my entire life. Deciding to attend Michigan State University to become an elementary educator was a no brainer. The College of Education at MSU cannot be matched anywhere in the United States. While completing my undergraduate degree I was drawn to the Social Sciences. I have a passion for History and Geography; these were my first loves within the field of education. I completed my student teaching internship within a first grade classroom in the Detroit Public School System. This is where I met my second educational passion, literacy.

Can you remember learning to read and write? Despite my love for school and the learning process, I honestly cannot. Teaching young students to read and become literate individuals was a very rewarding experience during my internship year. Working in an underprivileged school setting in Detroit really opened my eyes to the need for quality literacy teachers. I spoke with parents of my students who had difficulties reading

themselves, these parents wanted better for their children. Literacy is the key to communication and success throughout the educational journey and beyond. Providing students with a solid base and a balanced approach to all aspects of literacy became a goal of mine during that challenging, and very rewarding year!

Upon completion of my internship year, I was hired as an All Day Kindergarten teacher within the Grosse Pointe Public Schools. Having spent a year in a first grade classroom, I felt very prepared to teach kindergarten students and provide them with a quality foundation in the areas of literacy, in order to ensure their success in first grade and throughout the rest of their lives. Skills and routines learned in kindergarten are carried with students as they progress as learners; it was my goal to instill a love for learning, reading, and personal growth. Especially when it came to reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as these skills are invaluable to any human being. Becoming the best literacy instructor and educator became a goal for me early on in my professional career, which is what led me back to Michigan State's graduate program, where I decided to focus my learning on Literacy instruction in the elementary classroom.

"Literacy at an Early Age"

A majority of school districts in Michigan have now shifted to an All Day Kindergarten program instead of a half-day approach. Twenty-one years ago when I was a kindergartner, only two full day programs existed in the entirety of the Grosse Pointe School District. We have now converted to solely all day programs. With all the additional instructional time in today's classroom, my views on the kindergarten experience have shifted as well. During our time together, my students were able to focus a great amount of

our day to literacy education. This block in our day went way beyond the story time and a sing-a-long with the piano, that I, and most of my students' parents remember when they attended kindergarten. Exposing children to many facets of literacy during their first year in school provided my students a great opportunity for growth, development, and preparation for first grade! Since I had almost eight hours each day, I was still able to provide many play-based experiences for the children in my class as well. I understand the value of authentic play and choice during these early years; much of which I learned from the renowned early-childhood educator, Vivian Paley.

By the end of the school year, I expected all my students to be readers, writers, thinkers, and conversationalists. No longer is learning the alphabet and its' letter sounds the primary goal. As readers, I taught my students to blend sounds together, read 50 sight words, understand common digraphs, such as /th/, /sh/, /ch/, and /wh/, and read primary level text with fluency. Much of reading and writing go hand in hand. No longer is handwriting and proper pencil grip the only focus in my kindergarten classroom. Students are expected to write both lower-case and upper case letters properly, spell common sight words, construct consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words properly, and begin to sound-spell words independently. Saying a lot has changed is an understatement! Students are begin exposed and held to expectations at a much earlier rate. Looking back just four short years, I wonder what many of my first grade students in Detroit during my internship year would have been like with such a comprehensive and intensive Kindergarten experience. Most of them came in with an understanding of each letter of the alphabet; however, most could not tell you the sounds each letter made. In my eyes, Kindergarten is the new first grade when it comes to literacy education!

“Learning to Love Reading by Feeling Successful”

Reading in a classroom, beginning in a Kindergarten classroom is great. However, planning reading mini-lessons that fit a curriculum, modeling effective reading behaviors, exposing them to quality children’s literature, and providing students with plenty of opportunities for independent reading are not enough in my eyes. My goal as a teacher of literacy has changed; it is not about me anymore, it is about them developing as readers. When I first began my teaching career I was very worried about fitting all curricula in the school day, following my teaching manuals, and making sure my principal was happy with the content I was teaching to my students. I have since realized that literacy education has a much more important purpose. I must instill a love for reading and learning inside each and every one of my students.

Walking into a first grade classroom during my internship year, I remember hearing groans each morning when my mentor teacher asked students to get out a certain book, gather in front of her white board for a phonics lesson, or get a sharpened pencil and writing notebook. They enjoyed listening to stories, but having to do the work themselves often resulted in frustration. I wanted to change these reactions and help students develop a passion for literacy concepts. Reading and writing are two topics that will be found in every avenue of their lived experiences during formal schooling and afterwards. Without this passion for new knowledge and personal growth, reading and writing will become things they continue to dread and they will not have as many rich encounters and experiences.

Over the past few years, I have take many courses, and one concept that has had a large effect on my literacy teaching practices I learned during TE 846: Accommodating

Differences in Literacy Learners, motivation. Motivation is key to student success. Students who feel frustrated during literacy concepts will feel defeated, inadequate, and are most likely to give up on the concept and topic at hand. All learners are different. Students enter any classroom with a variety of ability levels. This is evident in students entering kindergarten, fourth grade, and any other age group! No matter their experience, ability level, or personal interests, an effective literacy educator must approach each child differently and provide them with experiences at their appropriate level, not their frustration level. As a student succeeds at his or her own level, they feel successful with their accomplishments. This feeling of success is motivating and will hopefully inspire students to continue leaning, growing, and they will develop a passion for this feeling of advancement.

One way that I harness these feelings of success at an individual level is by requiring students to read books that are “Just Right” for them. During TE 842: Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction, I created a focus project that worked with this important concept. I have used this idea with both lower and upper elementary students, and I have seen its great benefits. Formally assessing students to determine their reading levels, and creating reading goals that are structured to each child individually allows me to properly understand their different needs. Once their reading level is determined, students read books that will promote success instead of frustration. I love the look on a lower-level reader’s face when they complete a book in its entirety and understand it. More often than not students choose texts of improper reading level and end up struggling to read the book fluently because they are stopping too often on unfamiliar words and are forced to decode. Struggling to decode words on a frequent basis takes away from one’s ability to

comprehend the story or information inside the text. Requiring students to read books at their independent reading level promotes the greatest amount of success and positive reactions upon completion. Positivity will hopefully lead to continued good feelings about reading in the future. Motivation and inspiration are my goals during reading instruction!

“New Approaches, New Insight”

Just like Kindergarten instruction has changed, literacy instruction and ideas are changing and will continue to evolve. I will need to grow and widen my repertoire throughout my career as well. What I know now about teaching literacy will not be the way I see it for the rest of my days inside the classroom. Over the past four years I have learned that someone in this profession must be reflective in his or her practice. I am nearing the end of my quest for a master’s degree, but I must not be at the end of my quest to be the best teacher I can be. During TE 800: Concepts of Educational Inquiry, we discussed a great deal about how to become, and remain, a reflective teacher throughout our careers. Going back to the work of Vivian Paley, I learned that a teacher’s job is not complete once the lesson has been taught and the test has been graded. Paley suggests in her article, “Talking to Myself in a Daily Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher,” that educators must make sense of his or her classroom by watching and observing teaching practices as they are occurring and how students respond to them. I learned to examine my teaching through many methods and have tried a variety of them out to determine which works best for me. Recording lessons, jotting anecdotal records throughout the day, journaling, analyzing records, and more have been a few of the reflective practices I have tried.

During the courses I took for my undergraduate degree, I learned how to use curriculum and the inquiry process to develop lessons and “teach” properly. My graduate

level experience seems to have been quite different. Once again, a shift has occurred from classroom practices that focus on the lessons taught to my students to how I can better educate my students and develop the best professional practices as I continue to grow and learn in this rewarding career. Over the past two and a half years, I have learned to be a reflective and motivating educator who is determined to put my students' needs first and develop the most balanced approach to teaching literacy across the curriculum, no matter what grade I am teaching. Each student is unique, each year is different from the last, and teachers must evolve and change depending on the needs of his or her students at any given moment. Teachers must work together and strive for best practices for children. I have learned to harness my own passions for learning, growth, and new knowledge into my career ambitions and daily teaching practice. As a learner I haven't changed much since my time in elementary school. I still have a desire for success and strive to learn all that I can. I am committed to learning new practices, procedures, and ways of being a better educator myself each and every day.