# My Teaching Beliefs and Practices

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# My beliefs and practices regarding literacy instruction were influenced by this course.

# My Incoming Beliefs and Practices

## What is reading?

Reading is a skill applied to print for enjoyment and/or knowledge. In order to read, one must be able to recognize words. Word recognition requires knowledge of the letters and the sounds that the letters, or combination of letters make. Words are then connected to the individual’s life experience and knowledge base. The ability to read is essential in order to succeed in our modern society.

## How do children learn to read?

Studies have shown that a child’s ability to read in first grade is a good predictor of how well they will be able to read later on. For this reason, it is important to provide quality literacy instruction starting at an early age. Children learn to read at different rates. A child’s exposure to language through conversation, books, environmental print and observations of adults reading and writing will influence a child’s pre-literacy skills and their interest in reading. Instruction needs to meet multiple levels of development, as well as be individualized based on student need. Specific skills, such as reading left to right, need to be explicitly taught and modeled. Incorporating Nursery rhymes, poems, and songs into the classroom helps children develop phonemic awareness, which is a prerequisite for reading. As children begin their formal education, the amount of motivation a child has will also play a role in their reading development.

## How do I teach children to read?

Currently I teach in Great Start Readiness Preschool Program. I have been there for two years. In my classroom I focus on letter and sound recognition, story comprehension and discussion and rhyming. I try to immerse my students in literacy by having a word wall, posting the names of objects around the room, reading them various types of text and providing toys that allow children to experiment as they create letters and words. The Houghton Mifflin curriculum I use teaches one letter a week through the use of visual aids and songs. Three times a year I do a formal assessment, testing to see what letters and sounds students know, and to see if they recognize or produce rhyming words. In addition to the formal assessment, I use daily observations and anecdotal notes to assess their knowledge and understanding. My end of year goal is for students to recognize rhyming words, all the capital letters, and some letter sounds. Due to the nature of the program I teach, the majority of my students come from diverse backgrounds. Because of the differences in their prior life experiences and variance in learning styles I have some students who leave preschool reading and writing, while others just acquire basic letter knowledge. By taking this course I hope to attain new skills and ideas to support literacy development in my classroom.

# My Outgoing Beliefs and Practices

The course readings supported many areas of my beliefs and practices regarding literacy development and the role I have supporting student development in the early childhood classroom. Additionally, the course readings also made me question some of my practices, and think about better ways I could support my students.

## Affirmations

### Concepts of Print

Snow, Burns and Griffin cite lack of knowledge and understanding of the alphabetic principle as one problem that interferes with students learning to read (1998, p 4-5). A child’s understanding of print is fundamental to their reading development since it is the basis for later development of decoding skills (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 15). Stahl and McKenna express the importance of children developing an understanding of basic print concepts before formal reading instructions begins (2009, p. 75). Chapter Four, “Emergent Literacy”, from *Assessment for Reading Instruction,* mentions several important concepts children must develop that I address in my instruction including: the message is in the print, not the picture; a group of letters form a word; and the white space between words is the boundary (Stahl & McKenna, 2009, p. 76).

Students develop understanding of print through direct instruction and extensive modeling (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 76). When introducing a book I am reading to the class, I point out the parts of the book, as well as have students give the appropriate name while I point at different parts. When reading a Big Book or a poem I use a pointer to point at the words from left to right. Every day I write a “silly sentence” about a student. After I write it I explain the difference between letters and words, followed by counting the number of words in the sentence. An additional practice I use, reading predictable books helps students learn print conventions as they read the book themselves (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 85).

### Incorporate a variety of different texts into the classroom

Several years ago my Grandma commented that my daughter had a lot of books. I chuckled because the books she was referring to were mine! My love of children’s books has increased my personal library into the thousands. Fortunately, as an early childhood teacher, that is expected! Several course readings stressed the importance of including a variety of different types of texts within the classroom: “What I've Learned About Effective Reading Instruction From a Decade of Studying Exemplary Classroom Teachers” (Allington, 2002), *Essential Elements of Fostering and Teaching Reading Comprehension* (Duke, et al., in press, p. 20) and *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade: A Practice Guide* (Shanahan, et al., 2010, p. 30). This practice helps children develop the ability to understand a wide variety of texts that they will use throughout their school and life experience.

The practice of providing a multitude of texts was affirmed for a variety of reasons throughout the course. Read aloud books as well as books in our classroom library incorporate a large variety of themes, genres and authors (Shanahan, et al., 2010, p. 31). For each topic we study I incorporate literary and informative texts, choosing books with rich language and interesting pictures to keep student interest and build language and comprehension skills. By maintaining a variety of books in the classroom library based on student interest, my students are more apt to read. Research has shown intrinsically motivated students “… spend 300% more time reading than students who have low intrinsic motivation for reading” (McRae & Guthrie, 2008). Children who spend a considerable amount of time reading continue to become even better readers (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 16), thus reinforcing the importance of keeping a well-stocked, interest based library.

### Rhymes, poems, songs and games

Rhymes, poems and songs are an important addition to any early childhood classroom because they help children develop phonemic awareness. McKenna and Stahl recommend children develop phonemic awareness before or during kindergarten (2009, p. 83). Incorporating rhymes into the classroom is important because young children develop understanding and control of large units of sound before they are able to control small units (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 132).

My integration of rhymes, poems, songs and games into my classroom was affirmed by several readings, including: “Supporting Phonemic Awareness Development in the Classroom” (Yopp & Yopp, 2000) and “Ten Myths of Reading Instruction” (Wren, 2002). In my classroom we learn a variety of rhymes, poems and songs related to the season and our theme. As I point out the words in our theme related poems, I reinforce concepts of basic print (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 86). Games and songs are an ideal and motivating activity for my students to engage in (Wren, 2002), and my students love playing literacy games such as “Doggy, Doggy, Where’s the A?” As I prepare for the new school year, I have been reading many preschool and kindergarten blogs in search of new activities.

## Questions

### How can I support story comprehension and discussion?

Currently when I read books to my class we do not spend much time discussing the book. This is partly due to the restless nature of my students. Despite my belief that comprehension is important, as I read *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade: A Practice Guide,* published by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (Shanahan, et al., 2010), I realized our discussions tended to be teacher directed. I also realized I was not incorporating strategies that would help my students understand and discuss what is read. As comprehension skills are vital for academic success (Shanahan, et al., 2010, p. 5), I need to “…model and explain how to identify and understand the aspects in every story that give it meaning and shape” (Shanahan, et al., 2010, p. 18).

During our discussions this past year there were times when my students asked questions that I brushed off because I didn’t know the answer. I have realized that creating dialogue in my classroom about books and student interests is important to help students develop lifelong thinking and comprehension skills (Harvey and Daniels, 2009). When students have questions that I can’t answer, I can write down the question, then model ways to find the information (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, pp. 145-147). By using this strategy I model that I value my students’ questions and inquiry, even if I can’t give them an immediate answer. Based upon my new understanding of the importance student inquiry and comprehension have on reading development, I have many strategies I plan to integrate into whole class and small group discussion.

### How Can I Incorporate Vocabulary Instruction into Daily Practice?

Several of the course readings, including “Fluency Beyond the Primary Grade: From Group Performance to Silent, Independent Reading” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001-2002), “For the Love of Words: Fostering Word Consciousness in Young Readers” (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008), and a section of text in *Assessment for Reading Instruction* (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, pp. 172-173) made me realize I needed to do more to help my students in their vocabulary development.

Throughout the school year I typically read a new book to my class each day. This course reinforced the importance of rereading books (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001-2001, p. 336). Graves and Watts-Taffe state, “Reading the same text around three or four times over the course of a week gives children an opportunity to become very familiar with the text and its surrounding context and to focus on a small set of new words in the text” (2008, pp. 187-188). In terms of teaching vocabulary, in the past I typically taught vocabulary during or after reading a selection. According to McKenna and Stahl, by providing background knowledge and vocabulary I help my students understand the passage being read (2009, p. 172). Based on my new insight, I plan to choose one book each week that will be reread several times. Additionally, I will take the time to preview texts ahead of time, looking for material that should be pre-taught.

### How Can I Effectively Take and Use Anecdotal Notes?

Currently I assess students using two different methods. Three times a year I use a formal assessment which tests for letter recognition and concepts of print. I also keep anecdotal notes, a practice required by my program guidelines. Based on student age and development, anecdotal notes are an appropriate assessment to use with my preschoolers. Over the last two years I have struggled to find time to write daily anecdotal notes. Paul Boyd-Batstone’s article, “Focused Anecdotal Records Assessment: A Tool for Standards-Based, Authentic Assessment” (2004), caused me to think about the content of my notes as well as ways to use the notes to drive instruction.

I realize the primary use of my notes has been to meet program guidelines. I have written notes about my observations as time allowed, often going several weeks between documenting new information for each child. Once I created an anecdotal note, I didn’t use it, but filed it away until I wrote up comments for conferences. Boyd-Batstone’s article also helped me realize my notes were redundant and unspecific in nature.

Using the suggestions Boyd-Batstone provided for Anecdotal Records Assessment, I will base notes on the objectives we are working on, which gives me structure and purpose in my note taking. Boyd-Batstone suggested several ways to speed up note taking by writing notes that begin with a verb, using abbreviations, and omitting the student’s name. Based on the individual note, I will then writes down any instructional suggestions on the individual child’s ARA form.

## My Plan of Action

In addition to my current teaching, there are many practices I can incorporate into the classroom to further student development in literacy development.

## Affirmations

### Concepts of print

In addition to the strategies I currently use, I will be incorporating another direct instruction strategy to help my students gain concepts of print. When I create our word wall, I will add student names to it. In October, when we begin learning letter names, it will become a reference point. We will use it to find names and words that being with a specific letter, as well as look for the letter within different words. This practice will typically occur daily during our literacy instruction. At the beginning of each week, I will point out the letter. As the week progresses I will have students come up and identify the letter.

Each week I send home a newsletter that includes the titles of books we have read and explains skills we have worked on. In addition to this information, I plan to include explanations of different concepts of print. In order to space these skills out throughout the year I will create a list of specific concepts we will be working on. I will begin teaching many of the print concepts at the beginning of the year, but I will space the newsletter description out so it’s included every 2-3 weeks.

### Incorporate a variety of different texts into the classroom

Throughout this course I have learned about several interesting children’s book I would like to incorporate into my classroom. The three children’s books I based lessons around in my course project were books I had never used before. I plan to follow the suggestion in *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade,* of findingquality books by looking at Children’s Book Award lists (2010, p. 30) and also referring to “Read-Aloud Books for Developing Phonemic Awareness: An Annotated Bibliography” (Yopp, H. K., 1995). I will pick out at least one “new” book to incorporate into my lessons each month.

In an effort to better utilize our classroom library, I plan to change the way it is set up. Currently the books are stored in a tiered book rack, making it difficult for students to find specific books because they are always in different spots. This year I plan to forego the book rack, and use book baskets on a shelf. I will use labels to identify what type of book goes in each basket. This will make it easier for students to find books that interest them, as well as assist children in locating books that would answer questions they may have.

### Nursery rhymes, poems, and songs

While researching for my focus project, I came across two great books. *Dr. Jean's Make & Take Book* (Feldman, 2010) and *Sing Along & Read Along with Dr. Jean (*Feldman, J., & Karapetkova, H., 2008). These resources compliment several of Dr. Jean’s children’s books I already own. I will use these ideas to incorporate easy songs, rhymes and reading into the school day. Learning one new song or poem a week will allow my students to truly memorize the material. The Resource Guide includes many activities that will interest my students. The Make and Take book will be a great resource since students can take their own copy of songs home. Since they will have the song memorized they will be able to “read’ it to their families, thus boosting their reading success.

## Questions

Throughout the readings I developed an extensive list of practices I plan to incorporate to improve my instruction in the areas I felt needed improving.

### How can I support story comprehension and discussion?

I identified many components I would like to integrate into my teaching practice that will facilitate discussion and comprehension during reading. Many of these strategies came from “Appendix A: A Tool for Evaluating Your Fostering and Teaching of Reading Comprehension” (Duke, et al., in press). Strategies that I will be integrating into my teaching include: previewing and predicting about a book prior to reading, activating students’ prior knowledge about a topic before reading, and using self-questioning and think alouds while reading aloud to students to model how I think about the text (Duke, et al., in press, pp. 20-22). These strategies can easily be incorporated into whole group read alouds. I will prepare for this by viewing the text ahead of time, jotting down specific strategies and questions I plan to use.

This past year student misbehavior during read alouds was detrimental to whole group discussion. In an effort to help students develop the skills necessary to discuss text, I will incorporate more in-depth discussion through teacher facilitated small group discussion. As the year progresses, I will slowly incorporate whole group discussion following class read alouds. I will use three types of questions: literal, inferential and critical (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 160) to facilitate a discussion that will help my students think about the story (Shanahan, et al., 2010, p. 7). As suggested by the NCEE, I will use simple clues such as: “When and where? Who? What happened? How did the story end?” (Shanahan, et al., 2010, p. 18), as I facilitate discussion regarding the important aspects of a story.

### How Can I Incorporate Vocabulary Instruction into Daily Practice?

To improve my vocabulary instruction I will preview texts ahead of time, looking for words that I anticipate my students will need help with. I will use Graves and Watts-Taffe’s tips to help my students understand meanings of unknown words by explaining the meaning, expanding the mean through examples, and engaging students by helping students connect the new word to their own lives (2008, p. 188).

Creating a word rich environment is one of the strategies suggested by Graves and Watts-Taffe to help increase student vocabulary (2008, p. 187). This past year our word wall wasn’t utilized much by students. I will be giving it a makeover, moving it onto the whiteboard so it’s closer to their eye level. Words will be hung with magnets, allowing students to take words that they want to write over to their table. Since my students are pre-readers, most words will also include a picture to help them connect the word to its meaning.

### How Can I Effectively Take and Use Anecdotal Notes?

I will be using Paul Boyd-Batstone’s suggestions to improve my assessment and instruction through the use of anecdotal notes. Prior to school starting, I will prepare an ARA form similar to the one pictured in table 4 of Boyd-Batstone’s article (2004, p. 236). I will also create a binder to keep ARA notes in with a tab for each student. On the front of the binder I will include the list of verbs as well as the abbreviation symbols shown in the article to serve as quick references (Boyd-Batstone, 2004, pp. 232 & 234). I will also divide my students up in groups of four, assigning one group to each day of the week. I will observe students on their specified day, documenting information based on the chosen objective. For the first several weeks I will look through my notes on a weekly basis to help me know my students and develop lessons based on their needs. As the school year proceeds, I will determine how often I will analyze my notes. Using this system, I will be able to determine student needs as well as provide documentation for parents and additional staff members.

# Summary

The materials in this course have expanded my knowledge of literacy development, instruction, and assessment. The knowledge I developed during this course, as well as my “Action Plan” has given me many ideas to integrate into my teaching practice. I am excited to see how these strategies help my students.

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