

My Teaching Beliefs and Practices Paper

(1) My Incoming Beliefs and Practices

I have been teaching for two years now in a second grade classroom in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. At this point my definition of reading is “a complex process where one should be able to decode words and phrases in order to make meaning and connections of a variety of texts.” I see the components of reading as comprehension, phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency / accuracy, and vocabulary. In my mind, all good readers are able to use all five reading components simultaneously. In order for one to understand or comprehend what they are reading, fluency is very important. Students who do not read fluently often have difficulty making sense of the text. In order for students to read fluently they need to have strong phonics skills as well as phonemic awareness. I think vocabulary can encompass life experiences where vocabulary is naturally acquired as well as learned vocabulary. All areas of reading are closely integrated and connected and when one area is lacking, overall reading suffers.

In second grade I assumed in the beginning of the year that student would have a solid phonics and phonemic awareness base and some age appropriate vocabulary. I assumed that they would be able to read a short passage or story and be able to retell what happened orally. Additionally, I hoped that most students were reading independent leveled books somewhat fluently, understanding inflection and pauses. I hoped that all of my students enjoyed reading, although I knew that probably wasn't a reality. By the end of second grade I expect that all students can read on grade level texts fluently and apply the comprehension skills of prediction, inferencing, drawing out main ideas, retelling, and make meaningful connections with both fiction and nonfiction texts.

Throughout this school year I tried to really focus on my strategy groups in order to target specific skills and strategies with students. I worked hard to engage small groups of students in mini-lessons about fluency, phonics skills, using context clues, or even a specific comprehension strategy to target their challenging area within reading. Additionally, I focused on word study by adopting a new word study program “Words Their Way” with other teachers in my building. I gave three spelling inventories throughout the year to my students to see how their word knowledge was progressing and analyzing if they were using the skills learned in the word study time to help them solve words and within their writing.

I have been working hard to try and use the reading workshop format in my classroom. Because of this I feel that I have been doing a great deal of explicit and direct instruction with my students, telling them about what a good reader does and making anchor charts for them to refer back to throughout the year. I try to foster, through this reading workshop format, a love and enjoyment for reading with my students, trying to identify and take a keen interest in what they are interested in reading. We share favorite books and I try to know them as individuals as well as who they are in terms of their reading life.

Overall, I feel that in my short two years of teaching I have really gained a great deal of knowledge and skills for learning how to teach reading. These skills have been acquired through professional developments in my district, my MSU masters courses, and through knowledgeable and seasoned colleagues. However, it is the area of my teaching where I still feel overwhelmed. I feel overwhelmed with how complex it is, how to fit everything in, and making sure that what I am doing is producing effective readers.

(2) My Outgoing Beliefs and Practices: Affirmations

During this course, many of my current practices have been affirmed. One area of my teaching that has been affirmed through course material and discussion is my teaching of fluency in my second grade classroom. As one of the five pillars of reading instruction, fluency is important to directly teach to students. I find that by second grade students have really begun take off in their reading in terms of decoding and phonological awareness, however, they often then are missing the fluency piece of inflection, accuracy, speed, and automaticity. Many times the lack of fluency can cause a gap in comprehension. Noticing this after my first year of teaching, I created several mini-lessons and strategy lessons around the teaching of fluency to target struggling readers.

I know my teaching practice and beliefs are affirmed through the course material and research. Worthy and Broaddus discuss fluency in their article *“Fluency beyond the primary grades: From group performance to silent, independent reading.”* They explain that fluency, “...consists not only of rate, accuracy, and automaticity, but also of phrasing, smoothness, and expressiveness” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p.334). They further explain many of the traditional ways of fluency instruction. Some of the instructional practices they mention are: repeated readings, modeling through reading aloud to students, buddy reading, and peers sharing favorite books. I currently use these practices in my classroom to help students build and practice their fluency skills. McKenna and Stahl also mention fluency instruction in their book *“Assessment for Reading Instruction.”* Many of these same techniques are mentioned such as partner and buddy reading, repeated readings, and echo reading (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, Chapter 6). Additionally, after watching the video of

Richard Allington's thoughts on fluency, I recognize that many of the idea he discussed were beliefs and practices that occur in my current classroom. For example, he discussed the benefits of a read aloud for students and showed a teacher doing a quick mini-lesson where the focus was modeling "good" and "not so good" fluency for students through a familiar read aloud. I have done this several times in my own classroom where students are able to identify what a fluent, smooth reader should sound like.

Another area of my teaching that has been affirmed through course material and discussion is my use of "just right" books and the idea of choice in the classroom to create reading motivation. Many of the texts read during this course discussed the importance of motivation in reading and reading attitudes in order to create successful and lifelong readers. McKenna and Stahl discuss this topic in chapter nine of their book *"Assessment for Reading Instruction."* One point of discussion they mention is establishing an extensive classroom library including books that are of quality and variety. This promotes students desire and interest in reading because there is something for everyone. I currently have a fairly large classroom library that is continuing to be built but includes non-fiction, fiction, thematic, series, and award texts at the appropriate levels for all students. This allows students to be able to choose books at their own level, avoiding frustration, and ultimately increasing their motivation in reading. Therefore, I believe I have helped "deliver the goods" to my students, affirming this piece of motivation and choice in reading in my classroom (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p.209).

Turner and Paris also discuss literacy motivation in their article, *"How literacy tasks influence children's motivation for literacy."* As I mentioned, I provide a great deal of

choice for my students, which these authors explain can be a “powerful motivator” for students (Turner & Paris, 1995, p.664). Students in my classroom do select their own texts for reading practice based on their interest and levels. In Gambrell’s article, “*Creating classroom cultures that foster reading motivation*,” she further affirms my teaching practice of using “just right” books and choice in the classroom in order to create positive attitudes around reading. She explains, “One of the most consistent findings across our studies with first, third, and fifth grade children was the power of choice” (Gambrell, 1996, p.21). I believe this is also very true in my second grade classroom and gives my students a sense of empowerment with regards to reading. Further, Gambrell explains, “The first-grade motivational studies clearly suggest that increasing the number of books available to children in the classroom can have a positive effect on the amount and quality of the literacy experiences in the classroom as well as the home environment” (Gambrell, 1996, p.21). By providing my students with a continuously growing classroom library full of variety of interests and levels, students are able to be excited about reading.

Additionally, I provide adult models that speak to my students about their own reading and then share a book with the class. I call this program “Mystery Readers,” because students do not know who will be coming to share each week. This is another area I know is affirmed through text materials, as it is discussed in McKenna and Stahl as a way to foster positive attitudes about reading in chapter nine.

A third area of my teaching that has been affirmed through course material and discussion is the framework to teach all areas of reading, specifically the need for modeling. In my second year of teaching, I am becoming better at using the gradual release of

responsibility model to teach reading, specifically reading comprehension skills, to students. As I create and teach mini-lessons surrounding areas of comprehension such as visualization, prediction, and inferencing, I know my framework is an effective one. In an article by Duke, et al, they recommend this model where a teacher would begin with “*an explicit description of the strategy and when and how it should be used, a teacher and/or student modeling of the strategy in action, collaborative use of the strategy in action, guided practice using the strategy with gradual release of responsibility, and independent use of the strategy*” (Duke, et al, 2011, p. 8/9). I believe that I do take the time to explain the strategy I’m attempting to teach students, model the strategy through possibly a read-aloud text, provide active engagement where students are working as a whole group or in small groups to practice and try-out the strategy, and then eventually giving students independent practice during reading workshop time.

Many of the readings throughout the course discuss the importance of direct and explicit teaching of a strategy. I believe this to be the absolute best way for students to succeed with their literacy learning. Therefore, this belief has been affirmed through course material like McKenna and Stahl who explain, “Comprehension is the “bottom line” of reading and in order for all students to be able to comprehend many varieties of texts on deep levels; teachers must explicitly and directly teach these strategies and skills (McKenna and Stahl, 2009, p.160). Harvey and Daniels in their book “*Comprehension and Collaboration,*” also comment on the need for direct instruction, specifically for comprehension strategies. “When researchers explicitly taught these comprehension-fostering strategies, not only did kids learn to apply the strategies, but the instruction had positive effects on students’ general

comprehension as well” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p.25). I believe that I try to explicitly teach all strategies of comprehension to students with assistance from the *Making Meaning* program provided by my district.

(2) My Outgoing Beliefs and Practices: Questions

One aspect of my teaching drawn into question by course material is not enough inquiry circle use within my second grade classroom. The main source that caused me to question this aspect of teaching is Harvey and Daniels book, “*Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action.*” I do not do as much “on your own” small group work as they mention. I do find some of my own roadblocks with this in second grade, some of which they mention. Even when working in a group is modeled and expectations are clear I find that in second grade there are still some students, especially in the beginning of the year, that are just not ready for this much independence with a group of peers yet. So therefore, I do have to call so much group work into question a bit. I have concerns about off task behavior and resistant kids.

The Shanahan article, “*Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade: A practice guide,*” also called many of my thoughts about small group work into question. I related with roadblock 3.1 within recommendation 3 mentioned in this article, where they discuss students needing structured small-group discussions. As I mentioned before, I often hesitate to have small groups working independent from me because I am nervous about the potential behavior issues or off task behavior. However, I liked the way this recommendation explained that students need clear guidelines when in their small groups or “training wheels” (p.29). I think in order to make me more comfortable with the idea of small group work I could have it be very structured at first, with “training wheels” on and then slowly take away some of

the scaffolding. These readings therefore bring up questions about my infrequent use of inquiry circles and independent small group work surrounding reading.

Another aspect of my teaching drawn into question by course material is use of reading assessments, both formal and informal. Mainly what was called into question for me was how often to use reading assessments, which assessments to use with students, and when to use them. As a newer teacher, this is an area that seems overwhelming at times. In an article by Boyd-Batstone called, "*Focused anecdotal records assessment: A tool for standards-based, authentic assessment,*" he mentions that the lack of time can be a source of stress for a teacher and can create a lack of keeping track of very important anecdotal records within classrooms. He explains, "In attempts to record observations of children two problems emerge: limited time and how to compose quality records" (p.231). I believe this summarizes my biggest weaknesses with regards to assessment in my classroom. I feel a pressure to get to every student every day in order to make an impact on their reading, but I know that due to time limitations this is not possible. I also think that when I do have the opportunity to meet with students to make anecdotal records I am not focused and I'm not quite sure how to organize them.

Additionally, McKenna and Stahl have called into question assessments in my classroom through their discussion in chapter three of their book, "*Assessment for Reading Instruction.*" McKenna and Stahl explain, "IRIs tend to provide more reliable information about reading growth than group standardized measures" (p.67). I believe this to be extremely true and although I do give a DRA assessment that provides information classified similarly to an IRI, I question how often to give it and to what magnitude to give it to students, being that it is such a lengthy and formalized assessment tool.

A third aspect of my teaching drawn into question by course material is the amount of time spent teaching vocabulary. My main concern about the instruction and assessment of vocabulary in my classroom is that there is not enough of it and after completing some of the course readings; I feel that I tend to focus more on comprehension, word study, and phonological awareness when it comes to the five pillars of reading. Vocabulary tends to not get as much attention in my classroom. In an article by Stahl and Bravo called, "*Contemporary Classroom Vocabulary Assessment for Content Areas*," they discuss ideas for assessing vocabulary in my second grade classroom. These ideas have called into question just how little assessing I currently do of vocabulary in my classroom right now. It seems as though I almost forgot to assess just vocabulary in content areas such as science and social studies. I think remembering that these assessments should be given as pretests and posttests is very important and will allow for me to see their vocabulary development throughout a unit or even throughout the year. In addition, the article by Graves and Watts-Taffe as well as the article by Rasinski provide suggestions about how to teach and have students practice vocabulary building in the classroom several times throughout the week. After reading these articles, I realize how many wonderful opportunities there are for students to build a rich vocabulary that I am not providing for them. This therefore has called my lack vocabulary teaching / building into question.

(3) My Plan of Action: Affirmations

In my first affirmation, I described my teaching of fluency. Based on this affirmation, I would like to continue in my fluency instruction and vary the activities that I use to teach and reinforce fluency in my classroom. One way I would like to do this is by incorporating more reader's theatre and plays in my year. There was much discussion throughout the readings

focused on fluency about the value of students being able to practice an appropriate level text and perform it in front of an audience. I do not do much of this to accompany my fluency instruction and would like to. I think it would give my students added motivation to practice being fluent readers as well as target confidence in struggling readers. My plan is to involve the other second grade class in my building. I think it would be wonderful if their peers were the audience for the performance. Each second grader would then have fluency practice and performance experience, while also gaining practice of how to be a good audience member. Additionally, I value the opinions and suggestions presented by my teaching partner and therefore collaborating with her and her second graders would be a great benefit and support.

My second affirmation addressed choice and the ability for students to choose “just right” books in order to support reading motivation within my classroom. I believe that leveling my library and knowing where / when to acquire books to add to my classroom library is key in giving my students opportunities to choose what they are interested in at their appropriate reading level. Therefore, I would like to offer up my discoveries to the rest of the teaching staff at my building or possibly in elementary schools throughout my district. I would ask my principle for some time during a staff meeting or PLC (Peer Learning Community) meeting in order to share my knowledge with my colleagues. I would create a one page handout for them to have in order to review information when convenient for them. On this page and in my discussion with them I would share where I bought my library book bins from, how I went about labeling each book (by color for topic/genre and by Fountas and Pinnell lettered levels), the websites I used to help me find the levels of each book (Fountas and Pinnell’s website and Scholastic’s Book Wizard), and the top spots I look in order to buy

my books without going broke (garage sales in the summer, St. Clair used book sale located at a local church, and using my points on scholastic orders), and finally how I manage and organize my students' "shopping" for books within the classroom library each week. As a newer teacher I had to really *beg, borrow, and steal* ideas and tips from other professionals and therefore am always willing to share what I have learned and found to be successful with my peers.

Additionally, I would like to share my success about "Mystery Readers" with my colleagues. In my affirmation about motivation, I mentioned my connection with McKenna and Stahl about getting adults involved in your classroom in order to promote a love of reading in students. This is something I have found to be successful. My plan in the beginning of the school year is to provide colleagues with the form I use at "Back to School Night" that has parents sign up to share their reading experiences and a book or two with students throughout the year. It is a simple form that explains the mystery reader program to parents and how I will remind them via email one week prior to the date they signed up for. Teachers can then choose to "use or lose" this form and hopefully incorporate it into their reading programs. I would also provide a brief rationale about why I think it is a valuable piece of my literacy program and the benefits these adults have on motivating students enjoyment of reading.

My third affirmation explained the framework to teach all areas of reading, specifically the need for modeling. Based on that affirmation, I plan to be more structured in my planning of mini-lessons. This is something I have already begun through my work of my focus project. Even though my belief aligned with this framework and structure, I'm not sure

I am always concise and focused on each step of the gradual release of responsibility model. I think it will be helpful as I move forward to really write out several mini-lessons to ensure this structure. It will help keep me focused on what I know to be best practice. For example, if I am going to teach students the comprehension skill of prediction, I might write out a set of three mini-lessons where each step of modeling, guided practice, active engagement, and independent practice are laid out. It will allow for more reflection after the lessons are taught as well as help me better each lesson for the following year. The structure is also one I can share with my teaching partner to see if she has input on books to help model specific strategies, read-alouds for certain lessons, and suggestions about monitoring student's independent practice.

(3) My Plan of Action: Questions

The first aspect of my teaching that was called into question through the course material was the use of inquiry circles and independent small group work. One of the major ways I am currently addressing this is by not being so scared of it! I can no longer rest on my “new teacher...take it slow” excuse. I know I need to jump in a little more and that with organizational tools, structured time, and lots of explicit modeling, my second grade students will be able to handle this type of inquiry work. I am changing my mindset! Additionally, I know one of the third grade teachers in my building uses book clubs similar to the ones shown in the video of Ms. Namba's classroom, viewed in Module 4. I think it would be helpful for me to talk with her and even go and watch her and her students prepare and actually participate in these inquiry book clubs. She is an experienced teacher who is open to having colleagues come and observe in her classroom. I would want to see how she models

appropriate talk in each group, off-task students, and monitoring their progress. I would want to discuss with her the time students spend in those groups each day and how often she brings students back for a reteach of group behaviors. Finally, in order to be able to improve the use of inquiry circles in my classroom to help increase student comprehension, I will need to use Shanahan's term of "training wheels" to begin structured scaffolding for myself and my students.

The second aspect of my teaching that was called into question through the course material was the use of reading assessments to drive instruction. One change I will be making in order to improve my assessment work is an organizational one. When it comes to conferring with my students, I am often unfocused and make what I have learned to call now "not observable" notes about what my student's strengths and needs are. "Individual conferences provide an ideal opportunity to talk one-on-one with students and help them sort out their thinking as well as come to a deeper understanding" (Harvey and Daniels, p.273). I believe that in second grade the individual conferring is so important in order to push students to the next level of reading, digging deeper into texts, and planning for future whole group lessons in reading. From Batstone I was reminded that like any other aspect of teaching, "observing children requires planning and preparation" (p.231). I would like to adopt much of the organizational strategies that are mentioned in his article. First, staying focused on only a handful of students to observe each day is going to be something I immediately implement in my classroom. I will take only four students per day to look at and make observable notes about and have their labels premade as suggested. This will save time when actually observing as well as help me feel organized and purposeful in my

observations. Batstone explains, "...with anecdotal record taking, teachers require a dominant focus to avoid being distracted by disruptive or unusual behaviors, personality differences, and so forth" (p.232). He also explains the difference between observable and not observable collection and the helpful use of verbs to stay focused. I will be making a copy of Table 1 (meaningful verbs for writing anecdotal records) and Table 3 (helpful abbreviations) to help me get started. I think one other suggestion that I will definitely take away from this article is referencing each standard as I go through the anecdotal records, having them typed out prior to observations. This is so important because it will allow me to link the skill a student or group of students is struggling with to a very specific and targeted standard that they are not meeting.

The third aspect of my teaching that was called into question through the course material was the amount of time spent teaching vocabulary. I will be using the Vocabulary Recognition Task (VRT) in my classroom with my science and social studies units. I will be selecting a bank of words that were a part of a specific science or social studies unit which students are accountable to know, in order to measure breadth of vocabulary knowledge on that topic. I feel that the rationale behind this assessment holds significant validity, "Using the VRT as a pretest allows teachers to determine which words are known and unknown. As a result, less instructional time can be devoted to known words while providing more intense instruction to less familiar vocabulary" (Stahl & Bravo, 2010, p.575). I do believe that time was a major concern that I had with regards to vocabulary teaching; however, it makes sense that actually spending some time explicitly teaching vocabulary in clear ways can save instructional time and increase student knowledge. In addition, I will use the divide and

conquer and the word spokes activities in my classroom next year that were presented in an article by Rasinski. I will use the word spokes as a work station / center activity for students as they work in their small groups. It will be a review from the previous weeks learned root. I think by placing activities like this one into work station / center work will allow me to “fit” in vocabulary instruction and also provide practice opportunities with small group work.

Having the opportunity to reflect on many of the course ideas presented has been extremely beneficial in my growth as a teacher. I am excited to continue growing professionally with specific affirmations and questions of my teaching being thoughtfully considered.