

Philosophy of Literacy Instruction

I received a minor in secondary education during my years of undergraduate studies. The classes provided me with a solid background on the history and theories of education. They did not however, prepare me to be a classroom teacher. Teaching is something I feel is as much innate as it is learned. The environment in which I teach is unusual to most people. At my school, we educate children whose needs were not being met at their previous school be it public or private. These children have varying exceptionalities but for the most part, they have learning disabilities. In my four years of teaching I have seen children whose past teachers believed would never learn to read, write or perform the most basic math skills. I find myself wondering if those teachers ever got to know my students as I watch these children surpass all expectations. I am flattered when parents tell me I have “worked a miracle” with their children but I have worked no miracles. It all comes down to what, in my mind, is a simple philosophy of literacy instruction: be flexible, be determined, and accept nothing as being impossible.

Literacy instruction for students with learning disabilities reminds me of the type of delicious meal that takes every pot and pan, dozens of different ingredients and all day to prepare. There is no simple answer or solution, no “quick fix” for a struggling reader or writer. Competence takes practice, determination and dedication on the part of the student as well as the teacher. Often when my students leave my school, they are not “cured” of their disability but are compensating well enough to make it seem as though they have been. Teachers provide them with the tools they need to survive. Our goals for our students are different than those of some teachers. We do not define success by the number of students who return as Ivy League graduates. We define success by the number of former students who return to us holding a job they enjoy and that allows them to support themselves or a family. Some people consider this to be a lowering of expectations. I consider it to be setting realistic expectations that are achievable. Using this as a measure of success, my school has experienced much success in the 50 years since it opened.

Getting from point A to point B can be a true struggle. Children with reading or language disabilities enter school at a dramatic disadvantage. Thankfully, technology can play a vital role in leveling the playing field for these students. The problem comes when parents or society stand in the way. Here is an example. I have several students who are struggling readers. One student in particular stood out to me from the beginning as a unique case. His fluency and decoding skills were very poor but his comprehension was far above average. At the beginning of the school year, I tested this 11 year old and discovered that placement, even in a first grade reader, would be a challenge. However, in listening to him speak I knew the stories in a first grade reader would frustrate him and further damage his self-esteem. I started giving him books on tape. Using a very simple piece of technology, he was able to follow along in a book while listening to a story on his interest level. He flew through the books and comprehension testing revealed that he understood every word. The problem was that parents felt this student was cheating by listening to the stories on tape. Friends who are teachers in mainstream classrooms also felt that audio books were unacceptable and that he should simply not receive credit for any of the stories he listened to as he was not doing the work of reading the words on the page. I disagree wholeheartedly that any sort of cheating occurred. I simply had to evaluate the situation and determine what method would be most appropriate for that individual student. What worked for him as

it turns out, did not work for a few other students with whom I attempted to implement this reading structure. Furthermore, end of the year testing revealed that the original student had improved three grade levels in reading which is truly remarkable and indicative of the success of audio books and basic technology. This example outlines my belief that flexibility, determination and commitment to positive beliefs are vital.

Since I was not taught how to teach, I went into my first year of teaching knowing that I would have to create many of the necessary materials, learn as I went, connect with my colleagues and listen to my intuition in order to be successful. Materials were of particular concern. Textbooks are seldom written for the special needs learner. I have found that the textbooks used in my school provide no more than a paragraph per lesson on how to adapt the plans for special education instruction. These adaptations do not reflect the true needs of my students and seldom work as well as they could or should. Textbooks for me, serve simply as a guide. They provide good example problems when I am unable to come up with one off the top of my head and they help me stay on track with my instruction of reading and language skills. The reading textbooks also provide a diverse selection of quality literature for my students to read and explore. However, most materials that I use in my classroom are those that I created myself, not just for my students in general but for the particular class I am teaching that particular year. In this sense I strongly believe in a Literacy Framework, one that combines the use of published materials of a Material Framework with the suggested processes of a Method Framework. There is no one answer to solve any problem and there is no one way to educate students. I do not teach my entire class the same way, I seek new tools and new solutions to meet the needs of individual students. I look for resources, discuss difficulties with other professionals and continue trying to find a solution until one is found. In order to be successful, my framework must be as diverse and adaptive as the students I teach. After each lesson, I reevaluate the process and make changes as needed. Each year is different and with each year I find myself returning to my commitment to flexibility, determination and belief that nothing is impossible.

Because my students must first jump the hurdle of understanding basic reading and language skills, it makes technology instruction difficult at times. However, technology is a vital piece of the puzzle and without solid technology instruction, my students will not be as successful as they could be in the real world. As I mentioned previously, technology in a special education classroom may differ somewhat from technology in a regular education classroom but it is every bit as valuable. Dictation software, text readers, audio books, OCR pens, multi-function calculators, instructional software programs and even basic word processors just to name a few, are critical devices for my students not just to use but to master. With this in mind, it is every bit as crucial that teachers are well versed in how to use these tools. Since these are tools that one may not come across every day, it is even more important that my school make a proper expenditure from the technology budget to educate teachers. It is also our duty as teachers to stay well informed about what is available to meet the needs of our learners. Access to the Internet and other now common features of technology in American society is even more important in a special education classroom because students do not grasp new concepts as quickly and easily as regular education learners. What takes one student a week to master may take a child with learning disabilities 3 months or more. Teachers must expose students to computers and the Internet at the earliest age

possible. Even more critical is the need for teachers to help students understand the concepts of fact versus opinion and bias. Once a child is able to fluently read and understand what he or she is reading on the Internet, they then must be able to evaluate the credibility of the material. It is easy for a teacher of students with learning disabilities to ignore technology, claiming it is more important that a student know how to read and write before having the luxury of knowing how to use a computer. I believe that literacy and technology go hand in hand. Without both components, students will be ill prepared to live, work and learn in the larger global community. Without educating students to be fluent readers, speakers, writers and users of technology, I am not doing my job as an educator. With flexibility and determination it is possible to achieve all of these things in my classroom.