

My Teaching Beliefs and Practices Paper

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## **My Incoming Beliefs and Practices**

### **Defining Reading**

In the beginning of fourth grade, students go through several lessons to build a foundation for our Reading Workshop. One of my favorite lessons asks students to open up their brand new reading notebooks to the first blank page and write down their own definition of reading. Students share several definitions, and most of them describe reading as saying words that are on a page and figuring out how to say words aloud. The teacher then reads a short picture book aloud and asks the students if what they just observed was reading based on their definition, and certainly it is. Next, the teacher takes out a picture only book that tells a story but has no words on its pages. The teacher “reads” the book aloud by thinking aloud, page by page, not truly reading any words, but building a story. Then, she asks the class if this was an example of reading, based on their own definition recorded in students’ reading notebooks. A great discussion erupts. The children quickly realize they should revise their definition of reading, and together we come to the conclusion that reading is more than saying the words on a page, reading involves making sense and understanding. “Reading is more than saying the words on a page, reading is THINKING!” is then posted in our literacy corner. This is how I define reading. A simple definition, however, a complex, difficult concept, and even more difficult when it comes to teaching it.

### **My Philosophy of Reading Instruction**

After graduating from Michigan State with a Bachelor of Arts in Education and beginning my first professional job search, I sat in a coffee shop and typed out my “Philosophy of Literacy,” thinking I was an expert at teaching reading and writing. I started my first job and

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since then I have taught two full school years in my own classroom. I quickly realized I certainly was not an expert and it was going to take an entire career long experience to become an expert. When beginning the “Teaching Beliefs and Practices Paper,” I decided to revisit this initial philosophy of mine and I reflected on what beliefs I still hold about reading and teaching reading at this point in my career.

I believe that the goal of teaching reading is to develop successful, lifelong readers. Reading is one of the five aspects of literacy, along with writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. It is composed of comprehension and word recognition. Comprehension is constructing meaning. Word recognition begins with phonemic awareness (being aware that the words we speak and hear are made up of individual sounds), then phonics (letter/sound knowledge), and continues with word study (suffixes, prefixes, root words, etc.). Reading should be integrated into all content areas. Teachers must expose their students to various genres and high-quality examples of each type of genre. Classrooms should include an extensive library and print-rich walls. Clear, consistent expectations and procedures must be in place in order for effective reading instruction and learning to occur. Teachers should use various participation structures such as whole group, small group, partner, and independent time when teaching reading. Students should have choice and input in their reading learning. Consistent assessment and record keeping of progress for every reader must be in place for effective instruction of reading. Teachers must make reading enjoyable and engaging. Teachers must differentiate reading instruction and set all students up for success. Students are never too old to be read aloud to. Teaching reading should not only develop successful readers, but writers as well.

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As an educator, I believe that I am also a life-long student. I believe that effective teachers must constantly seek out opportunities to better their practice. I truly want to improve the quality of my reading instruction, and I feel this course will allow me to do so.

### **My Outgoing Beliefs and Practices**

#### **Affirmations**

**Student motivation, engagement, interest.** During my first few experiences working with students I quickly learned that teachers must make activities, tasks, and lessons “enjoyable and engaging” as stated above, and reading instruction proved to be no exception. It is clear when students are bored, uninterested, and unengaged. When this occurs, misbehaviors arise, students become distracted, and most importantly students are not learning! If tasks are engaging and enjoyable, I have found that students exhibit certain behaviors and body language such as staying on task, asking further questions, producing quality work, and showing positive emotions and enthusiasm. During a discussion board post in Module 4, on Reading Motivation, I responded to a colleague’s post about how observation of the children in our classroom can be very telling about their engagement, motivation, and interest during a particular task. I am constantly assessing my students and looking for signs for motivation, engagement, and interest, and if I do not see those signs, I modify our activity to encourage these important aspects of teaching and learning.

This belief of mine was certainly affirmed throughout the course, mostly during the module on motivation. If students find tasks and instruction to be enjoyable and engaging, students are motivated. Also, “if students are able to be motivated readers and writers, we must give them the tools and reasons to read and write and allow them to discover the many paths to

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literacy” (Turner & Paris, 1995, p. 670). I believe it is the responsibility of the teacher to motivate students by choosing engaging and enjoyable tasks, and this was affirmed when I read, “the most reliable indicator of motivation for literacy learning is not the type of reading program that districts follow, but the actually daily tasks that teachers provide in their classrooms” (Turner & Paris, p. 662). In order for students to learn, tasks and teaching must be interesting, motivating, and engaging.

**Choice.** Along with the idea of student motivation, before the course I was aware of the importance of student choice and input in the classroom and that this influences motivation. This, too, was affirmed throughout the course. I found that teachers who foster motivation in literacy classrooms, “provide authentic choices and purposes for literacy,” “allow students to modify tasks so the difficulty and interest levels are challenging,” and “show students how they can control their learning” (Turner & Paris, 1995, p. 672). I noted, “Students who feel ownership of their reading are more likely to become more engaged in that experience” (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Choice is a teacher practice that affirms motivation, as it gives students a sense of ownership (McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Choice is one of the six main aspects for motivating children for literacy, as choice “encourages them to develop an interest in literacy” (Turner & Paris, p. 666). For students to learn, they need to be in an environment that is enjoyable, interesting, engaging, and motivating, and including student choice fosters this type of environment which in turn increases learning and achievement.

In my classroom, I provide opportunities for choice wherever and whenever possible, especially during reading. Students have many books to choose from at their “just right” level, of all different genres and topics. I try to provide choice about what students can create as a product in an assignment. I give students a choice on where they want to read during silent

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reading time. When administering the DRA, I give students a choice in which book they will complete the assessment with.

**Reading is thinking.** This exactly was my definition of reading, and after this course, I still believe that reading is thinking and we read to construct meaning. I noted several quotes throughout the course that affirmed this idea of mine. Reading comprehension was defined as, “simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning throughout interaction and involvement with written language (NCEE, 2010, p. 11 credited to Snow, 2002). Also, “comprehension could be called the “bottom line” of reading” (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 160). Simply stated, “comprehension is about *understanding*” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 27). As my fourth grade students concluded, “Reading is more than just saying the words on a page, reading is thinking!”

**Lifelong readers and learners.** In my philosophy, I stated that I believe the goal of teaching reading is to develop successful, lifelong readers. I have always believed that our responsibility of a teacher goes beyond teaching reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, but we teach students so that they can one day become successful, active, responsible individuals in society and generally good people. I believe that exposing students to all different types of books and texts helps children learn content as well as life skills and lessons. This idea was certainly affirmed throughout the course. One of my favorite quotes was, “Strong reading comprehension skills are central to not only academic and professional success, but also a productive social and civil life” (NCEE, 2010, p. 11 credited to Snow, 2002). It is clear that effective reading instruction in school is fundamental for creating active and educated members of society, and I believe this responsibility is so empowering to teachers.

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**Small-group work.** I truly believe in, and still do, in the use of various participation structures including small-group work. This belief was affirmed during Harvey and Daniels' discussion of small-group work and why using small groups in the classroom is important. They explain, "When you think about it, almost everyone in the nonschool world works in some kind of group, crew, office, team, line, shift, or staff" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 37). This idea goes along with the previous affirmation described about developing successful members of society. Some other benefits of small groups include: they generate energy for challenging work, they encourage building on each other's thinking, they help make engaging and interactive learning possible, they make differentiation easier and possible for teachers, they are lifelike and they help prepare children for the workforce and employment (Harvey & Daniels, p. 37-41). Most importantly, "well-structured small-group work enhances student achievement" (Harvey & Daniels, p. 42). I continue to believe that well-managed small-group work and meaningful, authentic tasks are essential for effective reading instruction.

## Questions

**Components of fluency.** At the beginning of the course, I stated that reading is composed of "comprehension and word recognition." I would now change this statement to, "reading is composed of comprehension and fluency." I now realize that word recognition is only one small component of reading fluency and that fluency has many components. This was clearly explained when I read, "Fluent reading should involve *accurate* and *automatic* word recognition, with appropriate *prosody*, or inflection" (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 148). Other aspects of fluency include expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, pace (McKenna & Stahl, p. 150 credited to Zutell & Rasinski, 1991), rhythm, flow, musical quality (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p. 334), timing, expressiveness, stress, and intonation (Worthy & Broaddus,

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2001, p. 335 credited to Dowhower, 1994; National Reading Panel, 2000). I used to believe that reading was comprehension and word recognition, after questioning this belief, I now see reading as comprehension and fluency and I understand that fluency has many different components and only one of those components is word recognition.

**The role of fluency in comprehension.** In my initial definition of reading, I stated “reading is more than saying the words on a page, reading is thinking.” Indeed, I do still agree with this definition, but I am questioning the importance of fluency and the large role that fluency has in developing meaning that I have developed an understanding about during this course. At the beginning of the course, I saw fluency (or word recognition as I had stated) and comprehension as two separate entities of reading instruction that are taught separately. Throughout the course, I have learned that fluency fosters comprehension as much as comprehension fosters fluency. The two aspects work together rather than separately. During course readings, I noted “if children cannot read text relatively accurately, their comprehension will suffer” (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 148). I also noted that, “Fluency contributes to comprehension and enjoyment” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p. 334). When students read fluently, they comprehend, as stated, “When students are able to interpret and read texts with expression, their comprehension improves” (Worthy & Broaddus, p. 337). Rather than teaching students that reading is only all about making meaning, I have thought about the part fluency plays in this, and I think it is important for teachers and students to understand that their comprehension will improve if they are fluent readers.

**Assessment.** I believe in using consistent reading assessments to track student progress and gauge understanding. I am questioning the informal assessments I use throughout the week with my students, specifically comprehension assessments. I listen to my students read aloud



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frequently throughout the week, so I feel that fluency is easier to assess informally and gauge, but comprehension is not as observable. Am I asking questions of students that are truly assessing comprehension? I highlighted, “Comprehension is not about answering those literal questions at the end of a story, chapter, or textbook section. Comprehension is not about spitting out facts and filling in blanks” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 27). This statement was alarming, “Most frequently, students can easily answer a literal question, but they don’t understand the concept” (Harvey & Daniels, p. 27). Sometimes, I depend on the literal questions and restating of facts to decide whether or not students are comprehending during reading and this concerns me. During our study of comprehension assessment, I came across three types of questions that can and should be used to gauge understanding. These types of questions include, literal, inferential, and critical. Literal questions ask students to recall specific facts that were explicitly stated in the text, inferential questions have fact answers but were not directly shared in the text, and critical questions can be answered after students make judgments about what they read (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 161). McKenna and Stahl explain, “a teacher’s judgment of how well a child comprehends may depend in part on the types of questions asked” (McKenna & Stahl, p. 162). I am questioning the types of questions I ask my students and whether or not I am getting a true assessment of their comprehension.

**Vocabulary.** In my initial philosophy I stated nothing about vocabulary. I am questioning just how aware I was of the importance of vocabulary in reading instruction prior to this course. I now know that vocabulary is very important in reading instruction and assessment. Duke explains that one of the essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension is vocabulary and “the relationship between language and vocabulary to reading comprehension is well established” (Duke et al., 2012, p. 14). Stahl & Bravo stated the

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importance of vocabulary best when they said, “vocabulary knowledge is extricably linked to reading comprehension and conceptual knowledge” ( Stahl & Bravo, 2010, p. 566). I now know that vocabulary deserves a lot of focus and emphasis during reading instruction.

### **My Plan of Action**

After a thorough reflection of my affirmations and questions that arose throughout the course, I have decided on what I will continue to do and what I will change with my reading instruction.

#### **Affirmations**

**Student engagement, motivation, and interest.** At the beginning of the year, I will collect information about my students about their interests, motivations, and engagements. I plan to do so by asking my students to complete questionnaires about what they like to read, about their favorite books and authors, and topics they would like to learn more about. I will also interview my students and take notes on their responses because they may communicate even more specific information through spoken language. I will consult students’ parents and possibly previous teachers to gather as much information as possible and consider this during my planning.

In a previous course I took, I learned a lot about learning styles and multiple intelligences. I have collected a variety of resources about different types of learners and how they learn best. I plan to assess all of my students at the beginning of the year to get an idea of what kind of learners they are and consider this in my planning. For example, some students are kinesthetic learners, and they learn well with dances, skits, and motions and some students are visual/spatial learners and they may learn best by using graphs, charts, illustrations, and graphic

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organizers (Jones & Jones, 2010, p. 251). If students' learning styles and multiple intelligences are being reached in the classroom, they are more interested, engaged, and motivated, and in turn they learn more. I would like to share the resources I have collected with other teachers in my building and I will research an assessment that may work best with students at my grade level to identify what type of learners they are and what intelligences they relate with most.

Another important part of motivation has to do with students being successful with reading in the classroom. Allington states, "motivation for reading is dramatically influenced by reading success" (p. 743). Allington also discusses ways that teachers set their students up for success, by having a large amount of texts that students are successful reading on their own. This is important to take note of for setting up my classroom.

I will continue to assess student behaviors and signs of interest, motivation, and engagement throughout the day and modify tasks as necessary. I believe that adding a reflective piece to all lesson plans at the end of the week every week, recording what students found interesting and engaging, and saving these notes for the next time that I implement the lessons so I can continue to improve interest, motivation, and engagement through experience.

**Choice.** I will continue to allow students to make their own choices throughout the day as much as possible, especially with reading. I will create an environment that allows for choice, including an organized and labeled level classroom library. I will make sure to acquire even more books at all levels, of all genres, and on as many topics as possible. When presenting a task, I will prepare about three options that students can create as the final product to represent their responses and learning and students can choose; I will make it a goal to do so at least once per day, every day.

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**Reading is thinking.** The lesson outlined in the introduction of my paper is one that I have seen to be truly effective. I will continue to implement this lesson in my classroom, and modify the lesson as necessary depending on my grade level. This lesson should be taught during the first few days of school, to define reading and set the expectation for what the teacher expects during reading time throughout the year. I would like to model this lesson to fellow teachers at the very beginning of the year so they, too, can teach this lesson to their students.

**Lifelong readers and learners.** Oftentimes, I begin a lesson by giving a story as an introduction, usually about a time in my life when I used the concept we are about to learn in my own real life. My students truly enjoy hearing my stories and they look forward to them. I share stories because they encourage students to see their learning as valuable and relevant. I will continue to share these types of stories and allow students to share their own personal stories, especially during reading time. If students can make the connection that what they are learning right then and there during a particular school day truly will benefit them down the road, they see themselves as lifelong readers and learners. I frequently share my own reading and learning experiences with my students, so they see that reading and learning does not stop when you finish grade school.

An activity that I will do with my students that encourages them to develop the understanding of lifelong learning and the importance of reading for the future involves thinking about a dream job of theirs. Students write down what they want to be when they grow up. In partners or in small groups, students brainstorm what kinds of materials one may need to read in order to be successful in that role and how reading can help them down the road with that job. If students see their learning as valuable and relevant, they will be more engaged and they will gain more from every lesson.

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**Small-group work.** I plan to continue implementing small-group work. Early in this course, I explored the idea of implementing even more small-group work as well as inquiry groups of during discussion board posts in Module 1. I had noted that I do have student involved in small-group work, and I plan to now increase the quality of the group-work tasks. I plan to do so by including principles of inquiry circles in my classroom; these principals include: “choice of topics based on genuine student curiosity, questions, and interests, digging deeply into complex, authentic topics that matter to kids, flexible grouping, featuring small research teams, groups tasks forces, heterogeneous, nonleveled groups with careful differentiation, student responsibility and peer leadership, use of proficient-reader/thinker/researcher strategies, drawing upon multiple, multigenre, and multimedia sources, going beyond fact-finding to synthesizing ideas and building and acquiring knowledge, actively using knowledge in our schools and communities: sharing, publication products, or taking action, matching or “backmapping” kids’ learning to state or district standards” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 13). Perhaps I will choose one to two principles listed per week and include them in reading activities to increase the quality of small-group time.

The first few days of school will be dedicated to establishing and teaching behavior standards that are expected throughout the school day, including small-group work time. If these expectations are clearly set ahead of time, the amount of misbehavior and off-task behavior decreases, increasing the quality of small-group time. A great lesson to teach this and to model to fellow teachers comes from McKenna and Stahl’s *Comprehension & Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action*. The lesson is titled: “Practicing the Skills of Effective Small-Group Discussion” and it teaches students how to have sustained, focused, and balanced small group discussions by listen carefully, taking turns, and monitoring participation as “few of us are born

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with these skills, we must teach them explicitly, early, and often” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 130). Taking time during the start of the school year to establish behavior expectations and teach social skills is fundamental for effective small-group work and inquiry circles throughout the year.

## Questions

**Components of fluency.** From now on, I will no longer think of fluency as just word recognition, but rather as word recognition and how the reading aloud sounds while considering the other components that I identified as I explored this question. When working to build fluency, I will not only focus on teaching word decoding strategies and accurate word recognition strategies, but I will also create tasks that focus on expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, pace (McKenna & Stahl, p. 150 credited to Zutell & Rasinski, 1991), rhythm, flow, musical quality (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p. 334), timing, expressiveness, stress, and intonation (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p. 335 credited to Dowhower, 1994; National Reading Panel, 2000). Throughout course readings, some activities that help build oral fluency I have learned about include: echo reading, partner reading, buddy reading, repeated readings, performances, reading aloud, listening to reading, choral reading, and paired reading.

Many of the fluency building activities I learned about throughout this course are activities that can be done independently and in a short amount of time. I plan to implement a quick fluency building activity at least three times every week, and up to five times per week for students that need extra fluency building practice. I will stock my room full of premade cards, games, activities, scripts, and books that can be used for fluency building and make them readily available to students. I will make sure to model how to do every activity and open these

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activities up for students to use if they have extra time during independent work time or these activities can be used during literacy centers. I will continue assessing fluency using the DRA three times during the year in the fall, winter and spring, and identify which students are in need of extra fluency practice, and use small-group intervention session to do so. For my focus project, I created a presentation about fluency building and suggestions on how to do so. I would like to show this presentation to my colleagues so we can all understand all of the components of fluency and how to improve the reading fluency of our entire student body.

**The role of fluency in comprehension.** After learning about the important role fluency plays in developing and increasing reading comprehension, I am now planning on including more fluency building activities, more often, alongside comprehension instruction. I will try to teach comprehension and build fluency simultaneously. Some suggested activities for this include repeated readings, as they are explained to be “effective with attention to text comprehension” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p. 336), and small-group problem solving as a large part of this activity involves finding the meaning of a text, and oral recitation lessons as this activity can include questions and story maps during the Direct Teaching phase (McKenna & Stahl, 2009, p. 157 credited to Hoffman, 1987). If students are not developing their fluency, they may begin avoid reading due to “fear of failure and negative attitude,” and in turn they receive less exposure to ideas and vocabulary in books (Stanovich, 1986; Worthy & Broaddus, 2001, p. 335). During comprehension lessons, I will explicitly teach and model fluency, as “modeling and reading aloud helps students understand what fluency sounds like and is essential to its development” (Worthy & Broadus, p. 337).

**Assessment.** Informal comprehension assessment was an area of concern for me and my reading teaching. I will increase the quality of the questions I ask and the types of questions I

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ask. I ask a lot of literal questions during my lessons, where students recall information that was directly stated in the text. I ask some inferential questions, when the answers are not clearly stated in the text and require more thinking and drawing inferences. I would like to ask more critical questions that require students to form judgments about what was read. When writing lesson plans, I always have a list of questions prepared ahead of time. From now on, I will identify every question on my list as literal, inferential, and critical, and make sure that I have at least one of each type of question and at least two critical questions in every reading comprehension lesson.

Another useful tool I plan to consult during reading instruction planning and during teaching and assessing reading is Harvey and Daniel's Comprehension Continuum (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 30). The level of thinking and constructing meaning increases as one asks questions further down the continuum. The continuum begins with literal questions, then moves to retells, merging thinking with content ("true comprehension *begins* here"), acquiring knowledge, and actively using knowledge (Harvey & Daniels, p. 30-31). Being more aware of and evaluating the quality of the questions I am asking during informal comprehension assessment and reading discussions will help me gain a better, truer understanding of my students' comprehension as well as an evaluation of my teaching.

**Vocabulary.** I plan to be even more conscious about using writing to foster word consciousness, as writing is a "very powerful and convenient setting" to do so (Graves & Watts-Taffe, p. 189). Using thematic reading to support vocabulary development was another suggestion I noted, as "thematic materials provide repeated exposure to challenging vocabulary, sophisticated concepts, and important details" (Worthy & Broaddus, p. 341). I plan to focus a lot of thematic materials in the different content areas as I approach vocabulary instruction next



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year. For assessing vocabulary in my classroom, I like the idea of the continuums. I plan to use Dale's continuum and four levels of word knowledge to try to gauge students' understanding of important words and instruct to move them further along the continuum (Dale, 1965). Along with this, I plan to use the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale which goes along with Dale's ideas (Stahl & Bravo, p. 571). I also like the idea of the Vocabulary Recognition Task (Stahl, 2008) for content specific vocabulary and I like that it can also "assess our teaching" (Stahl & Bravo, p. 575). The Vocabulary Assessment Magazine will be helpful to use during science (Stahl & Bravo, p. 575). With taking on a the position of teaching a new grade level that I have little experience with next year, I am not entirely sure of the vocabulary expectations for second grade. The first thing to do will be to make a list of words with other second grade teachers while looking over all units in all content areas for the year. Stahl and Bravo explain, "this list should include words that are essential for understanding the conceptual ideas and engaging in disciplinary activities within the unit" (Stahl & Bravo, p. 577). After that, I can begin creating vocabulary assessments specific to every unit and the most appropriate type for every unit.

Throughout this course I have changed significantly as a professional and in my beliefs about teaching and assessing reading. As a professional and as an educator, I value continued education and research and I truly appreciate opportunity that the Elementary Reading Instruction and Assessment course has given me to reflect on my practices and evaluate my beliefs about teaching. I am looking forward to implementing changes in my classroom based on what I have learned during the past six weeks and also sharing my newly acquired knowledge with the teachers in my building.

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