

Lifelong Literacy:
Synthesizing My Knowledge into My Roles and Responsibilities

Prior to beginning my program, I knew that my strong subjects as an elementary teacher were reading and writing. Although I would need to carefully craft science lessons to make sure my students would arrive at discovery and make notes in my teacher manuals so I would forget essential mathematical concepts, literacy instruction came naturally to me. I was passionate about this area of learning and I knew that passion just flowed from me. My students could sense it too, and I found that my love for reading and writing became their favorite time of the day. As I started taking courses for my Master's program, this love for literacy did not fade but continued to grow stronger and has given me different approaches to my instruction. I now feel that I have a heightened awareness for identifying problem areas of reading for my students and what's more, have an understanding of how to help them. In addition, I feel the responsibility of placing quality literature in front of my students and have built up a canon of texts that will engage, challenge and help my students appreciate literature. One final change is my understanding now of what planning meaningful instruction looks like and why this is essential for improving the quality of education I provide for my students.

As I begin to reflect on how this program has changed the way I view my job and it's responsibilities, I'm reminded of this analogy I thought of after a recent conversation with a parent: Each April as winter continues to slip away and spring comes, I find myself under the weather. Sometimes, it begins with a sore throat and other times I'm running a fever. Other times still I might initially have a runny nose or bad cough. Whatever the problem starts out to be, by the time I go see the doctor,

I'm often suffering from all of these symptoms. The doctor's role is not just to treat my runny nose or sore throat, but to find a way to treat everything that ails me. After follow the doctor's instructions, I find myself quickly return to normal and my cold is cured.

When I think about my role as a reading teacher now, I often relate it to the role of a doctor. When I see students who struggle with reading, I feel called to "cure" the problems that they face. Sometimes, it might begin with phonics and their decoding. It could also be the result of a lack of vocabulary or background knowledge. Other times still, it could be their ability to full comprehend what they are reading. Through courses in my Master's program, like Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners and Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction, I now feel confident in my ability to identify what "ails" my students and put them on the path toward recovery. Through these courses, I have gained an understanding to holistically cure the reading problems they face.

In both of these courses, part of our work involved not only determining strategies to help students improve in the area of reading, but also informing parents of what they can do for additional support at home. Recently, my school put on a curriculum night and I had a few parents stay back to discuss reading with me. I could tell they felt overwhelmed because their child wasn't reading at grade level and they didn't know what to do to help. I've also encountered these fears from parents at conferences and one change in the approach toward my job is that I feel that I can now ease some of their worries. I see that it is my responsibility to be honest with them about their child's performance, but also to assure them that a

solution can be achieved. Furthermore, after putting together this information for my classes, I now feel more ready to speak knowledgably with the parents of my students about the specific ways their child is struggling and what I am doing to help, but also what they can do to support them outside of the classroom.

As I see the importance in my role of helping struggling readers, I also see how this program has shaped my approach to selecting quality literature in my classroom. As a teacher of reading, I see the responsibility I have for placing meaningful texts into the hands of my students that will engage, challenge and help them appreciate reading. *Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature* was one of the most influential courses for changing my approach to selecting engaging books for my classroom. In this course, we studied children's non-fiction texts on a variety of topics that had been recognized for the literary merit. Had it not been for this course, I feel as though I would have been closed off from the potential of finding these engaging works that would allow my students to learn more about science, history, notable persons, and technology. In *Children's Literature and Film*, I saw my responsibility to engage students in literature in a different way. By examining both the book and movie versions of a story, I am now able to create additional interest in my students in the ways they view some of their favorite films. While I initially saw how my contagious passion helped my students grow in reading, I now see ways in which they can discover literature that will increase their own passion for reading as they grow up.

Placing texts that will challenge my students is another responsibility I now see that I hold. Through *Critical Reading for Children and Adolescents*, we were

introduced to literature that helps break down barriers of social classes and norms, worldviews, and our understanding of the past. While I believe reading is meant to help student gain information, I also believe it is meant to challenge their perspectives and the perspectives of others, and part of my responsibility is presenting literature that will cause this to occur. This course allowed me to consider what books are most essential for my students to read and why these books are sometimes ones that are not included in a traditional canon of literature. In Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature, we were challenged to examine more texts that fall outside the normal texts supplied to children. By viewing books that include characters with disabilities, are from an array of cultures, and question their identity, I found new ways to reach out to students who may find ways to relate to the characters they read about or find ways to challenge students to learn more about people vastly different from themselves. In these two courses, I gained a better understanding of how valuable literature can be for shaping the way our students think and why my role of selecting critical and challenging literature is so important for accomplishing this.

As I work toward finding engaging and challenging material for my students, I also see that developing an appreciation for literature is a new responsibility that I feel that I hold. Methods and Materials, again, was a key player in this perspective for me as we examined the role of discussion for understanding works of literature. We modeled this within class and then used strategies to incorporate discussion into our classrooms. Along with this, I also find that my role as teacher should be to facilitate discussions to help students gain an appreciation of literature that is

authentically their own, rather than leading the discussion with my views and opinions. In this course, we also worked with story elements, text features, and illustrations for helping students get more out of what they read. I find that now my goal when reading with my students is not simply to get through story after story, but instead to make sure my students dive deeply into a text and appreciate what the author has created.

In addition to a new appreciation for selecting quality literature for my students, another change in my role as a teacher that I see is how necessary it is to be intentional about planning meaningful instruction. One of the themes that I have heard in several courses is the need for teachers to divert from scripted teacher's editions and textbooks and seek out alternative methods for creative instruction to engage students in learning. In *Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction*, I had the chance to examine Inquiry Circles as a way for students to gain knowledge. After practicing this method in my own classroom and discussing its advantages with other teachers, I see how beneficial this best practice can be. I saw first hand that allowing students to be in the driver's seat gives them responsibility over their learning.

This idea was also supported in *Concepts in Educational Inquiry*, as we examined many different forms of inquiry. By learning more about the different ways that we arrive at knowledge and understanding of a topic, I saw that discovery is an essential aspect of education. As part of my teacher responsibilities, meaningful instruction should allow my students the chance to discover knowledge through experience and observation.

Additionally, meaningful instruction should also help prepare students for life after leaving the classroom. While I believe I've known this important role prior to my program, I now see the responsibility of preparing students to be successful in society in a different way as the presence of technology looms more and more each day. Although technology was incorporated into each of my courses in some capacity, I felt that I gained a very applicable way to incorporate it into my own teaching in Writing Assessment and Instruction. In this course, we interacted with digital writing as a method for students to use for publishing and sharing their writing. Though playing around with different programs to accomplish this was a fun and interesting experience, the work in this course reminded me that technology allows students to gain access to new realms of writing and reading. It also allows anyone to become an author. In knowing this, I saw a new responsibility to take shape: to ensure that my students are literate in the digital world. To me this means preparing them to be able to create new forms of sharing their ideas, argue thoughtfully and intelligently in online discussions, and present research and information in a knowledgeable way.

In closing, my Master's program has been influential in the way I view my role and responsibilities as a teacher, but especially in my literacy instruction. As I continue on in my career, I believe the knowledge I have gained and the experiences I have endured will greatly impact my instruction and what I can provide for my students each year. I now feel confident in my ability to assess students in reading and diagnose any struggles they may be facing. What's more, I feel like I can

intelligently discuss their struggles with parents and let them know what I am doing to assist their child and what they can do for additional support. I also see it as my responsibility to place quality literature into the hands of my students. With the knowledge I have gained from my courses, I now have a wide range of texts to select that will engage and excite them to read, cause them to think critically about their beliefs and the beliefs of others, and will offer them an appreciation for literature. Lastly, I have a new creative approach to instruction that is the result of careful planning and placing importance of preparing students to be contributors of a modern world. I am grateful for a program that has strengthened my love of teaching and literacy and has impacted the way I view the important role I play each day.