

The Literacy of Teaching Literacy

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After spending thirty years teaching kindergarten in the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, Nevada, and now substitute teaching in central Oregon, there is no one who understands what it's like to be on the front lines of literacy better than my mom, Leslie Hauser. But that's just my humble and totally unbiased opinion. After graduating from Illinois State in the '80s, my mom worked in multiple elementary schools across the valley teaching five-year-olds not only the basics of reading and writing, but also how to enjoy it and feel empowered by it. Since we spend so much time growing our literacies in college and graduate school, for this interview, I wanted to look back and think about where our learning began. How does a teacher set their students up for a lifetime of success in reading and writing when they are only five years old? How does teaching literacy evolve over time and in different states? What literacies are necessary for teaching literacy?

1. What strategies did you use to teach children literacy?

I used a lot of different strategies. While teaching kindergarten, the most important strategies I used were direct and explicit instruction, modeling, and tons of repetition and independent practice.

2. What strategies did you have to learn for yourself in order to teach literacy?

Teaching literacy at the elementary level often involves separating literacy into different subjects/lessons (phonics, reading, writing, journaling, handwriting, shared reading, phonemic awareness, sight word instruction, fluency practice, etc.). But the big four to me are just reading, writing, speaking, and listening. And they should always be taught in a connected manner. A student who struggles with one of the four often struggles with

the others. I really saw this the most when students with speech impairments almost always had reading trouble, and hated writing, too. If they couldn't say it, they usually couldn't read it and had no idea how to spell it. Once I saw writing as putting words onto paper and reading as the opposite, taking them off—it's called decode and encode—I was better able to see that literacy subjects can't be taught in isolation. Students need to be shown their connectedness. And they need lots of repetition. And lots, lots, lots of time to practice.

3. What kind of texts, checkpoints, and activities did you use when teaching? Describe how they were used.

I used lots of big books and read alouds for whole-group activities. I used poetry and nonfiction as often as I could, but my focus was usually fictional stories. I read aloud every day for enjoyment and again at another time during the day to teach/model story elements and comprehension strategies. I used leveled readers for small groups and tried to consistently match the reading level to each individual student. It was hard to keep up as reading levels change/grow so rapidly for lots of students in kindergarten. I used my own form of assessments whenever I could (because they saved time and told me what I really needed to know), but there were so many required assessments that I needed to give which were basically pointless and told me very little about how to adjust my instruction.

4. Is there a specific strategy that you think was the most useful, productive, or powerful, and why?

Time for independent practice!

Too often in elementary school, parts of literacy instruction are broken down into separate areas such as phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, reading comprehension, handwriting, etc. I believe that young students do not always have the ability to transfer and use what they have learned in one lesson and then apply it and use it when reading or writing on their own. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to continually reinforce skills from one lesson to the next and to refer back to previous lessons when applicable, modeling over and over in real-time application the skills that students are working on. Most important is explicit instruction on how and when to use the skill along with lots of independent practice. I feel that what is missing most in elementary schools is more time for students to read and write on their own, such as "Drop Everything And Read" (D.E.A.R.) time. They don't often get to choose their own books and read for a sustained period of time. Or write just for fun.

5. What resources did you use to better understand how to teach literacy? What led to you finding these resources, and how did they impact your teaching? What other people were involved?

I took classes on how to teach phonemic awareness, and this really helped me break down all the pre-reading skills that a young student needs to know in order to be able to begin to read. I also used a lot of texts from New Zealand and the author Joy Cowley. New Zealand was way ahead of the US in figuring out how to teach young children to read.

6. How did your student teaching and education program prepare you for teaching literacy? How did you evolve your literacy strategies over your thirty years of teaching?

When I graduated from Illinois State University in the '80s, it was during the “whole language” movement. Phonics wasn't really being taught as often, and teachers were using whole-group shared reading lessons and the student's own dictated language as a starting point for writing. Language experience lessons were very big. Lessons would consist of providing students with “an experience,” and then using their own words, teachers would write for the students as they dictated their thoughts. Later in the '90s, phonemic awareness became the new hot topic. Phonemic awareness skills were taught as pre-reading skills and pre-phonics. Many textbook series deemed that if a student didn't have phonemic awareness skills, they were not ready to learn to read. I think phonemic awareness skills were developed from studies that looked at those students who entered kindergarten already reading without any formal instruction. How was it they had already learned to read without ever being in a classroom? Isolating, blending, segmenting, and substituting phonemes in words were skills these kids were good at, and so teachers began explicitly teaching these skills to beginning kindergarteners to get them ready to read. In the '00s, we realized as teachers that using a balanced reading program that incorporated all different approaches (whole language, phonemic awareness, explicit phonics instruction, teaching spelling through patterns, explicit teaching and modeling of reading comprehension strategies, independent practice, etc.) seemed to work best. This along with assessments which monitored reading fluency and miscue analysis to identify errors so reteaching of missing skills can take place. Unfortunately, while teachers were getting really good at teaching literacy, the No Child Left Behind Act happened, and too much time and focus turned to assessment and the tracking of student abilities, so much so that students were being assessed to death! It was done as a means of keeping teachers accountable and tracking students so they didn't fall through the cracks, but the “overassessment” failed to help and put lots of stress both on teachers and students. I think and

am hoping that pressure from parents and teachers has recently started to turn this overassessment trend around. It seems to be better in Oregon than in Nevada.

7. Now that you are subbing and in a different state, how do you see others' teaching literacy? Are there any strategies or activities you see now that you wish you had known then?

Oregon schools seem to be much more child-centered, and assessment in the early grades has not become an issue. Teachers at the school I work at are using similar strategies that I did and using a balanced reading approach. However, the district I'm working in has recently adopted a new reading program, and teachers are being asked to follow it with fidelity this first year. This raises a red flag for me. Anytime a teacher is asked to follow a program designed by a company that has no knowledge of their students—a one-size-fits-all program—and does not take into account the individual needs of the school, students, or teachers—for example, teachers are grumbling that the new textbook series doesn't even come with enough texts for each student! And it takes up so much of their day that they wouldn't have time for math if they followed the lessons exactly as written—then it will not serve them best.

8. What were some moments in teaching literacy that were troublesome, difficult, or negative in any way?

Too much focus on assessment was always an issue. Just as students were beginning to make progress, we'd have to stop the flow to test for several days at a time.

Every year there were students who had an extensive vocabulary; had traveled; had visited places like libraries, zoos, museums, etc.; and had been read to as babies almost since birth. Their parents supported their learning at home (like yours), and they just learned to read easily, almost effortlessly, like magic. Then there were other students who hadn't been read to by parents, had very poor vocabulary skills, had never been exposed to stories, and had no sense of story structure. For some students, kindergarten was their first experience with books, rhyme, songs, poems, and so on. They struggled in kindergarten and were already so far behind their peers academically. They had such little previous language experiences.

9. Who had the most "control" with teaching literacy? What was the dynamic between you and your students when teaching them to read and write?

I was lucky to work at a school where I was able to use my own expertise and pull from many different sources to develop my early literacy program.

I worked really hard to make sure my students saw reading and writing as fun by modeling writing in a fun way and reading stories to them to see how enjoyable reading can be. I tried very hard to get them to see themselves as authors even if they could only write a few words. I made sure that there was something, even a sentence or two, that every student could read right from the very start. I taught and helped them memorize simple sentences such as “I see a . . .” or “I can . . .” in the very first weeks of school to help them see themselves as capable readers. If students have no confidence in their abilities, it is very hard to get them to persevere and keep trying as the year goes on.

10. What do you think about the ways that you were required (or decided) to measure your success with teaching literacy? Was this fair and accurate? What would have been a more effective way?

(See end of question 6.) I don’t think there needs to be any formal district-required assessments done until third grade. Until that time, teachers should assess students individually and informally as needed to guide their instruction.

11. How does your experience teaching literacy to young children affect your everyday, personal literacies?

I don’t know. I enjoy books and songs, I do a lot of crossword puzzles. I’m pretty good at phonics skills having taught it for so long. I can sound out a lot of plant names but those are mostly Latin roots, so I’m not sure if I’m really pronouncing them correctly or not.

I know that if I ever have grandbabies, I will buy them tons of books and make sure their parents read to them every day from birth!!!!!!

12. How have you transferred your teaching methods to other aspects of your life?

I’m not sure. I probably overexplain stuff like I’m talking to a child sometimes.

13. What advice do you have for new teachers trying to teach literacy now?

Use a balanced approach. Don’t use the district-adopted reading series as your only tool. But do read the manual because it will have lots of good ideas in it. Don’t be afraid to go faster or slower, or to add in or pull out lessons. You know your students the best. Do what works for your class. The authors don’t know your students’ needs. You do.

14. How did teaching children alter how you view the skills of reading and writing? Do you feel you have a unique perspective on it because you've seen it develop at such an early level?

I see how important the early years (birth to age five) are in setting a child up for success in elementary school. Literacy is huge in elementary. Since kids learn speaking and listening literacy skills first, parents need to be good first teachers. Vocabulary and experience with language is crucial. It's amazing when I meet a kindergarten child who can speak two or more languages already. And others who have no language skills at all. When a child struggles with literacy in early elementary, it can be devastating to their self-esteem, their confidence, and how they feel about school. And that can take years for them to overcome, shaping their lives in a lot of ways.

Having been a literate person for the majority of my life now, I rarely take a moment to pause and reflect on where this skill came from. I take even less time to think about who helped me get here, and I have never even considered how political my learning of literacy might have been. Of all the wonderful things I learned about literacy in this interview, a few points truly stand out to me. First, reading, writing, speaking, and listening all go together. Literacy is not something that we lock away in a box to take out when we need it; it is happening all the time, in all that we do. Second, when we are sitting in a classroom to learn, we are still being influenced by policies and laws, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and required assessments. This can be for the best or for the worst, and it's up to teachers and educators to do what is best for their students, not what the books tell them they have to do. Finally, whether we know one single sentence like "I can . . ." or we are able to read and write fluently, we are all capable authors.

Leslie Hauser taught kindergarten in Las Vegas, Nevada for twenty-nine years before retiring to Corvallis, Oregon last year. She enjoys gardening, nature, knitting, and spending time with her family.

Allison Hauser is a PhD student at Illinois State University focusing on gendered language. She loves to talk about tv shows, Harry Styles, the patriarchy, and is obsessed with her little Chihuahua named Maggie Gyllenhaal.

