Annika Schul

Professor Reames

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Philosophy of Reading: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and Fluency

The teaching of effective reading in the early elementary years is an extremely important undertaking, because reading forms the foundation for each child’s development and equips each child for lifelong learning. Reading is a fundamental skill that we use in nearly every aspect of everyday life. Without skill in reading, one cannot fully participate in public life because one cannot read a newspaper. Imagine the difficulty of something as essential as shopping if one cannot read labels at a grocery store. Consider the communications difficulties one would experience if one could not read a text message or webpage. And ponder how driving would be difficult and perhaps even dangerous if one were not able to read road signs. Accordingly, I believe that teaching and spending significant classroom instruction time on reading is very important. As an early elementary teacher, this paper will outline how I will teach and incorporate phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency into my classroom teaching.

Phonemic awareness is one of the five components of a balanced reading program, and is the first prerequisite of phonics. It is the basic knowledge of sounds represented by the alphabet, namely, 26 letters/44 sounds. Specifically, it should develop naturally as children develop oral language. Additionally, children become aware of the alphabetic principle, which is the ability to identify the letters of the alphabet, which then leads to the child’s ability to identify phonemes and morphemes. Other important skills include understanding and recognizing different kinds of phonemes; knowledge of segmenting/blending/manipulation; and onsets/rimes. One of the most important things to keep in mind regarding phonemic awareness is that it is only a tool! Not every child is going to need it. In my classroom, although I plan to have activities where my students can practice phonemic awareness skills, I would only give direct phonemic awareness skills instruction to those who absolutely need it.

I plan to make available a whole array of activities in my classroom to continually work on phonemic awareness skills. Students in my classroom will know the different kinds of phonemes: consonants, vowels, vowel diagraphs, consonant diagraphs, blends, and diphthongs. In order to practice these, I will have matching games available to my students that they can make use of during appropriate times. Additionally, on my walls I plan to have sound cards to help build and maintain awareness when the students are writing. It will likewise be important that I provide my students with continued practice opportunities for segmenting, blending, and manipulating. I plan to offer activities for my students that allow them to take words apart, put them back together, and so on. This will also help improve their writing and vocabulary, because those activities will expose them to more words. Finally, I will offer my students activities involving onsets and rimes. They will get to do the same kinds of activities involving pulling words apart as we do in the segmenting/blending/manipulation exercises, except that the students will be specifically identifying the onset and rime. I plan to make all of these activities available for my students to use with clear, specific directions, and I will continually refresh those activities so that they continue to stimulate and excite students and not become boring or stale.

Phonics describes the relationship between letters/sounds/exact letter patterns/sequences that represent speech sounds. The critical importance of phonics can be simply demonstrated by a little-known fact about word families: take 37 rimes, change the onset, and you can make 500 words. This offers a huge advantage for students who are not strong readers, because it multiplies a few dozen rimes into hundreds and hundreds of words! Phonics is so important because in order to read, one must be able to quickly and accurately identify words. Nevertheless, as with phonemic awareness, phonics is still just a tool. A student who already is a strong reader does not need direct instruction in this area. But for students who are not strong readers and who have a clear need for phonics instruction, I would take one of the following approaches: synthetic, analytic, embedded, spelling, or linguistic. Which approach I would use for a student would depend upon that student’s particular needs and my evaluation of what will constitute the most effective pedagogical method for that student.

Similar to phonemic awareness, I plan to have an array of activities in my classroom for students to practice skills relating to phonics. My array of activities would satisfy all the different approaches to teaching phonics as well, while additionally giving specific activities to students who need a specific kind of activity to improve their phonics skills. Most activities in my classroom would piggy-back and reinforce my phonemic awareness activities. For example, I would take words they had constructed from one game and encourage the students to use those words to form a song or poem. One of my personal favorite activities is word ladders because that simple activity offers so much variety and adaptability. Finally, I will have different types of games available to my students during appropriate times.

The last component I will discuss is fluency. A student can be a strong independent reader and have strong comprehension, but lack fluency skills. Consequently, fluency is just as important as is phonics and phonemic awareness. I want my students to be able to read aloud, with no errors, and have mistake-free comprehension. In order to get to this points, they must hear me modeling what good fluency sounds like, experience repeated readings, be reading books at their level, be given lots of practice, have lots of books around at their disposal, and have set goals that are achievable. It is my goal to have a massive classroom library, filled with books for my students at every level, and which cover a wide variety of concepts/topics/themes.

It is very important to me to have interesting and fun activities for my students to engage in fluency practice other than simply reading to a partner, being read to, or me reading to the class. These are all important activities, and my students will experience all of them, but I hope to make it more fun through other engaging activities. For example, I plan to have fluency games in my classroom that will feature a sentence/paragraph that I have made, all separated and cut into pieces. Students will be able to try and reassemble the sentence/paragraph and read it back aloud. Other times, I will change the way the game is played by, for example, having the students read back sentences for their peers. Variety will be key to keeping the activity fresh and stimulating.

The three (of five) components of a balanced reading program that I have discussed, namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, are all equally important to me as a teacher, and all will be critically important components to my students’ success throughout their school years and even into their adult careers. I hope that all my instruction is effective enough so that when my students walk out of my classroom on the last day of school, they do so as better readers than when they first entered that classroom. I will also strive to make reading fun through engaging activities and games so that my students want to become better readers. Reading is one of the most important skills a person can learn. It should be something that is fun and enjoyable for my students, not something hey dread.