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Profile of an In-Service Teacher: Meredith Labadie

Kathryn Pole

Meredith Labadie is the kind of kindergarten teacher who understands the role balanced literacy plays in quality early childhood classrooms. Meredith invited me to observe and co-



analyze her teaching many times over the past several years; I have spent parts of about 40 days in her classroom, and have observed first-hand her approach to teaching. Meredith's teaching demonstrates her belief that balanced literacy is more than a set of routines and practices, and illustrates the ways that artistry

intersects with routines and practices in ways that support a culturally relevant and supportive early literacy environment.

From the very beginning of the kindergarten year, students in Meredith's class are immersed in literacy. Her classroom is filled with books, print, and opportunities to write. Students lead discussions on books, and create artifacts that illustrate cross-textual connections. Cultural and linguistic diversity is common in her class; in one year, her 21 students included immigrant students from Bosnia, India, Iraq, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Meredith uses diversity as a springboard for deep engagement with developing literacy. She understands that there are many pathways to literacy; children experience literacy activities and events differently, depending on their own development.

AUTHENTICITY AND TEACHING BASIC SKILLS

In Meredith's teaching, phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary instruction are balanced with authentic experiences that build understanding of increasingly complex concepts through reading, writing, and oral language. She organizes her

units around big themes that are relevant for the children in her class. These themes change somewhat from year to year, depending on her students, but draw on critical literacy as a way to engage young children. Her students have grappled with important social issues including justice and equity (Labadie, Pole, & Rogers, 2013) as they learn both the purpose and the skills needed to develop as readers. In Meredith's classroom, children are read to, work in small guided reading groups, have independent reading time, participate in shared writing activities, write with peers, and write independently as they participate in meaningful and relevant learning. During the course of a day, Meredith's students fluidly move in and out of grouping arrangements, from whole-class meetings and mini-lessons, to small group activities that rely on cooperation and collaboration, to independent work. Her students work together in literacy centers, and in partner reading and writing activities.

Meredith chooses authentic texts with complex vocabulary and themes that provide the framework for deep and thoughtful discussions, and because these complex texts do not offer the scaffold that helps students learn the skills to become independent readers, she also uses leveled text as she works with small groups of students on specific reading skills. She knows that kindergarten leveled texts are not complex enough to develop critical thinking, but are an important component of instruction that lets children fine-tune their independent reading skills. She also provides an extensive and revolving classroom library of books that students may choose to read independently, knowing that engagement with interesting books is motivating, and that children need experience in handling books, lingering over words and illustrations, and making choices about what to read.

She also recognizes the importance of play. Her students spend time each day in literacy learning centers where they use language in pretend play (housekeeping, veterinarian, bakery), listen to books on tape as they follow along in print books, explore the sounds of language in games that have them matching sounds to letters, and practice forming letters.

OPPORTUNITIES TO RESPOND TO LITERATURE

Even young children can think big thoughts. Meredith believes that her students learn more when they are invited to engage with

books by participating in critical discussions – students analyzing images and words, and applying it to their own lives. Meredith balances typical children’s books that appear in curriculum guides with books that encourage children to draw on their own experiences, family stories, and sense of fairness (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012) through themed text sets of books that she chooses based on the backgrounds and interests of her students. Her classes are usually multi-ethnic, with immigrant English-language learning students. She chooses books for read-alouds that connect to her students’ heritages and that lets students share some of their own cultural stories with their classmates. On the other hand, she also reads books that appear on standard kindergarten reading lists, knowing that there are classic stories that shape the American experience and are a part of American culture.

BASES FOR INFORMING INSTRUCTION

There is an increasing amount of control coming from outside the classroom. From federal guidelines that are reinterpreted as state and local mandates, to purchased curriculum that teachers are expected to use, teachers feel the control coming from agencies and people who will never enter the classroom. Teachers are partly evaluated and held accountable to how well they meet these external controls. On the other hand, much of the art of teaching happens in the moment, when teachers listen to their students, pay attention to what they can do and what they will be able to do next, and what kind of support they need. Meredith has found a balance that lets her use her state and district curriculum; she understands that literacy curriculum really does need to be covered, but she also understands that classroom communities are unique. She recognizes that even her own classes vary widely from one year to the next, and understands that her teaching needs to shift so that she is responsive to the needs of her students.

FOCUSED ON HER OWN DEVELOPMENT AS A TEACHER

One of the most notable things about Meredith as a teacher is her constant and consistent interest in her own development as a teacher. She is in her ninth year of teaching, a time when many teachers are content with their learning. Meredith, however, continues to learn more about teaching and about her own practice. She is enrolled in a doctoral program in literacy education, where she learns theory that informs her practice. She also regularly invites researchers and colleagues into her classroom, not to learn from her, but to reflect with her on her practices and how children in her classroom are learning. She presents findings from research into her own practice at national and local conferences, and she has published articles and book

chapters (Jenkins, Kramer, Labadie, Mosley, Pole, & Yavitz, 2009) that flow from her work as a teacher. In addition, she actively participates in a local teacher researcher group where she meets with peers to deeply study classroom practices.

CONCLUSION

In Meredith’s version of balanced literacy, one does not get the idea that she is pitting any one aspect of literacy development against another, but rather, she weaves together a classroom experience where she intentionally includes many components, held in equilibrium in a way that provides her young students a multi-dimensional experience that teaches them how to participate, how to think, and how to do those things that enable skillful reading and writing. She exemplifies balance as a teacher and as a teacher-researcher willing to open her classroom and to share what she has learned.



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