

Dear Sarah,

So you want to be an early childhood teacher...are you crazy? The pay is awful, the hours are inhumanely long and those designer clothes you love to wear will hang unused in your closet. So why be a teacher of young children? Because you, me, we – are crazy about developing young minds and doing something meaningful with our lives. I can't think of any more intellectually or personally satisfying job. Helping a child learn to love books and read them with understanding is critically important; it's a competency that undergirds all other learning. When a child first comes to you with no knowledge of words, letters or even how books "go", then shouts with delight and wonder, "I can read this...I can really read this" – I cannot fully describe the joy and satisfaction we teachers feel.

A teacher's long-term effects on young children are not always easy to measure. We don't get profit/loss statements, productivity reports, a vote count or other tangible measures of success. We just have to trust that our efforts succeed. I came of age as an elementary teacher in the basal era: Buffy, Mack and Mr. Fig were the characters my children knew. (You may remember those books; everyone talked in sets of three – "Oh, oh, oh; Look, look, look; Down, down, down"). We were required to have three reading groups, do workbook pages and teach discrete skills. But I knew something was missing: those wonderful books that had captured my heart and mind as a child. I wanted my children to know Charlotte, Wilbur, Nancy Drew and the March sisters instead of fake, insipid talking animals. So I began sneaking books into the curriculum: non-fiction stories about our science topics, picture books that supplemented the themes in basal stories, a poetry reading at the beginning of each day. Gradually, I became bolder. Long before whole language came into vogue, I developed a thematically, organized, literature-based reading program for my beginning readers. We grew frogs, built hamster mazes, wrote mysteries and danced to phonics records (Yes, I taught phonics!). We kept "Frog Logs", wrote mystery stories and pursued independent study investigations. Everyday we celebrated literacy and life. And the children learned to read. More importantly, they learned to love books.

Some of the children from those years stay in my mind. I remember Misty who came to first grade not even knowing the alphabet. Her mom spent most nights in the town bars, leaving Misty and her sister huddled in the car. Misty hadn't even attended kindergarten or pre-school, so had little academic knowledge to bring to first grade. But all those months of being immersed in stories, songs, language experience charts and other literacy-rich tasks sparked her. She began writing stories: pages and pages of connected text in which exciting things happened, like a baby whale rescuing its wounded mother or a dandelion seed struggling to break through the earth so it could thrive. Misty taught me how becoming immersed in authentic literacy activities can empower children.

Then there was Mark, one of those pudgy third graders the other boys loved to tease. Withdrawn and miserable, he rarely talked. However, I noticed that he was secretly creating intricate pictures of super heroes and race cars all over his notebooks. Together we searched for books like Macaulay's Castle. I let him read Superman comics during SSR. He soon became an expert on how engines worked and became more accepted by the other boys. Years later, while driving to Springfield to make a speech, I stopped in London (where I'd taught) for gas. The attendant who took my credit card, looked up and grinned. "Remember me," said a grown up Mark, "You were my third grade teacher. I own this station." Mark taught me how important it was to be interested in what you read. I hope I had at least a small influence on helping him become an independent, successful adult.

It's a bit easier to gauge your influence on college students. They articulate when they feel successful and prepared as a result of your classes – and quickly let you know if they think you've failed. Many of my former students have gone on to graduate study. Some are now teacher educators themselves or work in book publishing. Others have won teaching awards, earned National Board Certification or been appointed to leadership roles in their districts. Those are possible ways to measure success. For me, however, it's the day to day small joys that really count – like Rob, my learning disabled student, who read his first whole book in my children's literature course; Chad, the physics major honor student who became fascinated with the Harry Potter books in my honors fantasy tutorial and still corresponds by e-mail about every new sequel; or Megan, who taught her first lesson to children in a barely audible voice, but developed into a straight "A" student teacher because she responded to careful coaching.

So what does it take to be an effective literacy teacher? First of all, it helps to be passionate about books and an avid reader yourself. I was one of those kids who read under the covers with a flashlight all night because I just had to know how the story ended. My sister and I catalogued all our books to create a neighborhood library to spread the joy to other children (although I don't recall having many patrons besides each other!) A teacher who loves books is likely to instill that same joy in her students.

Secondly, teachers need to articulate a philosophy of how children best learn to read. This undergirds how they structure their learning activities and classroom environment. I believe reading is an active process of constructing meaning. Thus, learning to read is not a matter of acquiring a narrow set of skills that one then applies with automaticity. Rather, emerging readers are active learners. They integrate what they know about letters, words, stories and the world with their evolving new understandings of language and texts. This means they must be allowed to use all the information sources available to them, including the meaning, structure and letter/sound relationships. Therefore, our goals as teachers of young children are to first, help them become what Marie Clay terms "strategic

readers,” i.e. able to use a full range of strategies for understanding text. Secondly, we want children to successfully use writing to communicate. Finally, we want children to appreciate the power of literature to transform our thinking and provide life-long pleasure.

I adhere to a similar philosophy in my teacher education classes. Learning to teach is an active process in which teachers integrate new knowledge with their current understandings. It requires lots of thought and reflection or what I like to call “conversations.” We converse with ourselves as we read about teaching and reflect on that reading. We converse with colleagues in classes, during observations and in late-night study sessions. I constantly prod my students to engage in these conversations, examining their beliefs about teaching and learning. I want them to understand the complexities of a process that is both a science and an art. Yes, I can teach you the “science” of the steps in a guided reading lesson or small group writing circles. However, there is an “art” to teaching that develops with experience and reflection on that experience: knowing when to intervene during guided reading versus letting the child wrestle with the tough part on her own; deciding when to provide specific guidance to a struggling writer versus holding back so she doesn’t end up, on what Donald Graves terms “writer’s welfare.” I can’t directly teach you all this and I readily admit I don’t know all the answers. The more I learn about teaching reading, the more questions I have about the process. There is so much we need to learn about literacy acquisition. I just try to establish a learning community in my classes in which we help each other discover the most effective ways to support children’s learning. There are no “cookbook” solutions. Our ideas of “best practice” or what a book “means” are constantly evolving. Thus, I try to give you the inquiring mind and theoretical understandings that will help you make informed, compassionate decisions that support developing readers and writers.

I am proud to call myself a teacher. I am awed by the community of professionals of which I am a part. We welcome you to our community.

With Warmest Regards,

Amy McClure