Ask any teacher and they will tell you that the teaching profession is difficult but rewarding. One of the most difficult (but rewarding) responsibilities of this profession is teaching children to read and write. These essential skills are now the expectation for every child in kindergarten and above, but how to actually teach those skills is a part of a very complex process that still mystifies many a teacher. There have been volumes written, scores of training sessions, and conferences dedicated to sharing new and improved methods and strategies on this topic. However, nearly one-fourth of all Texas students in grades 3-5 did not pass the mandatory assessments. So, if state scores are any indication of teacher effectiveness, there still seems to be a definite disconnect between theory and practice.

Why is it so difficult for teachers and students to master this content? Part of the reason is that there are so many moving parts under the big umbrella we know as Balanced Literacy. Reading and writing each have many components. Within each component, there are variables for success and failure, many which the teacher has no control. The student’s background knowledge and experience with literacy, state mandated standards, assessments and scope and sequences that may not align with student readiness, available resources are just a few of these variables. Effective instruction also depends upon the teacher’s knowledge about literacy education, clarity of what is to be taught, best practices, and the ability to feel comfortable and confident about teaching the subject. In addition, knowing how to organize, sequence, and present the content to young learners further complicates the process.

So, how can we make this process a little easier, yet more effective for students? Research shows that students who learn to read and write together, can excel in both. By integrating reading and writing instruction together as much as possible, it provides students an opportunity to flow from one cognitive process to another. This approach also helps secure the image for the student as being both a reader and a writer (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). What teachers must understand is that the components of literacy are not separate entities, but rather they hinge upon the other. For students to be able to improve in one, they must also understand and practice the other.

Students begin to see themselves as readers and writers by reading and writing - often. The children’s author Madeleine L’Engle once said, “Readers usually grossly underestimate their own importance. If a reader cannot create a book along with the writer, the book will never come to life. . . . The author and the reader ‘know’ each other. They meet in the bridge of words.” By reading and writing about what they have read or have had read to them, the student strengthens their comprehension of the text and helps them make connections at a variety of levels. Using reading passages as mentor text, the student can better understand the author’s purpose for writing and can utilize those skills...
in their own pieces of writing. This is very different from the whole language approach of teaching that was popular in the 80’s and 90’s, and none of it occurs without the support of the teacher. Here the teacher is using carefully selected mentor text for shared reading experiences and writing examples as a way to cement the student’s understanding of reading and writing. These skills are applied by having the student think, talk, write, and reflect about mentor text and original pieces.

What might that look like in a classroom? Traditionally, teachers might feel it necessary to teach all things “literacy” in isolation and once the student has mastered the individual parts (phonological awareness, phonics, letter formation, etc.) the student is allowed to begin to write and sound out words. A more effective and real-world approach is to provide students with the confidence that they are a reader and a writer. This is accomplished by submerging them into a print-rich environment, one that includes environmental print and symbols they can recognize. In his book, Already Ready, Matt Glover states, “Another issue that impacts so much side-by-side teaching with young writers, especially when they’re just getting started, is helping them believe in their own abilities. While not a specific dimension of composition development, a growing confidence in one’s ability to make something with writing is essential to all other development” Glover & Wood (2008). Students who are immersed in a print-rich environment identify the importance of print and, more importantly the connection between what is said, what is read, and what is written can all be the same thing.

Here is a short list of suggestions for deepening children’s understanding and proficiency of the reading and writing process:

- Read often - both teachers and students.
- Choose mentor text that is engaging and interesting to students. Know your students and what they are passionate about.
- Model what good readers do:
  - Question
  - Think aloud
  - Talk about
  - Make connections to self, text, and world
  - Write about it and reflect
  - Point out concepts, skills, strategies within the mentor text
- Build confidence in student as a reader by providing opportunities to read independently – books they have read with support
- Write often – both teachers and students.
- Model what good writers do
  - Question
  - Think
  - Talk about
  - Make connections to self, text, and the world
  - Create and share original pieces of self-selected topics
- Build confidence in student as a writer by providing opportunities to write books of their own – from day one
• Support, encourage and nurture all learners as they move forward

This is not a complete list, but all components should be done together to allow the student to flow seamlessly from one cognitive process to another. This provides the student with the ability to think, process, create, apply, and comprehend all at once. This doesn’t happen overnight, but by making it a part of the daily routine, the student will internalize the process and it becomes a natural part of reading and writing. Matt Glover says it best in his book, Engaging Young Writers (2009).

“Young children are capable of remarkable thinking, especially when they are engaged in experiences that foster their intellectual growth as well as their academic growth. Much of what is written about supporting very young writers (and readers) focuses on the academic aspect of writing through topics such as phonemic awareness, letter-sound relationships, and letter formation. Much less is written about the thinking aspect of writing. While the conventions are important, teachers must also look at the intellectual, thinking side of writing.” Glover, Matt (Kindle Locations 283-286).

While everyone can agree that teaching reading and writing is a huge responsibility, teachers can approach and present that content in a more natural way. Is it possible that the difficulty of we have with teaching literacy has been of our own design? Because we have dissected the reading and writing process into so many parts, it has fragmented student understanding as well. Instead, we should have presented the two, as they should be – together. Perhaps by providing students the support they need while immersed in reading and writing, we will in turn be building better readers and writers.

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References


