

Running head: EDUC535 LT3

Enduring Understandings in English Language Arts

Reflective Essay

EDUC 535

Alisha Brignall

273222

Professor Elizabeth McNeilly

Werklund School of Education – University of Calgary

July, 26, 2019

Enduring Understandings in English Language Arts

The image of an English Language Arts teacher brings to mind someone proficient in grammar and spelling, who deeply understands literature, and who wishes to instill those characteristics in their students. A year ago, this was also my image of an ELA teacher, complete with a library of classics in their classroom. However, throughout this program, I have come to understand that English Language Arts is much more than classics, spelling, and grammar. To teach ELA is to emerge students in literacy, and expose them to a “variety of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing experiences” (Alberta Education, 2000, p.3).

Literacy is the way that we make sense of the world. It is a “multifaceted and complex practice which today includes much more than the ability to read and write” (Bainbridge & Heydon, 2013, p. 28). Reading and writing are the tools that ELA teachers use to assess students’ progress in their “ability to use language effectively enhance student opportunities to experience personal satisfaction and to become responsible, contributing citizens and lifelong learners” (Alberta Education, 2000, p.1). However, students can use a variety of other ways to also show understanding and proficiency in their use of language.

Understanding how students acquire language and the processes of how an individual learns how to make sense of words is the first step that we need to take to support our students. Learning the strategies that can be utilized to teach students how to read, comprehend, and make sense of the world around them is an important skill for every teacher to have. In my practicum, I was fortunate to be placed in a school that focused on literacy for the first 4 years. I was able to see direct instruction of reading first hand and how different methods can be utilized to improve decoding, spelling, and fluency. It was this experience

with *The Writing Road to Reading* (1986), that I started understanding that direct phonemic instruction is fundamental for some students.

Reading is a complex process where individualization is key. As “reading is a constructive process of creating meaning that involves the reader, the text, and the purpose within social and cultural contexts” (Thompkins, 2018, p. 39), it is important for teachers to have more than one strategy available when teaching students how to read. Through discussions with my fellow pre-service teachers, we concluded that most reading programs talk about language acquisition in terms of neurotypical students and not those who may be outside of the bell curve. Keeping in mind that reading acquisition can be as complex as the individual, it is important to always “use varied types of assessments that involve different language and literacy tasks and ways of demonstrating proficiency” (Thompkins, 2018, p. 91).

We know that “stronger literacy skills are associated with higher income, better health and greater social and civic engagement” (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 1). By differentiating strategies and instruction in our classroom, we will provide all of our students with these opportunities. Focusing on that fact that “literacy is about communicating, and the expressive and receptive dimensions of the language arts are all about constructing meaning within a particular situation” (Bainbridge & Heydon, 2013, p. 8), special care must be taken to make sure that all students are connecting with the material that we are teaching.

Designing lessons and performance tasks for students that are meaningful, authentic, and valid is a concept that has followed me throughout my first year. For students to retain information and understand our lessons must “not only to make learning more interesting and motivating to students but also to develop the ability to use knowledge in real-world settings” (Shepard, 2000, p.6).

Using essential questions and strategies for lesson planning from Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), is one way in which we can promote this in our classrooms. We must also be mindful however that “the performance criteria in a classroom rubric should reflect a positive learning continuum, [if not] they may perpetuate low expectations for certain students rather than promote learning” (Tierney & Simon, 2004, p. 5), which means that our demeanor and pedagogy are just as important. Teaching is about relationships. Students that feel the classroom is a safe place to take learning risks with a supportive teacher, will have more enduring understandings.

Enduring understandings are the main goal in education. Not only must the lesson be designed to engage students, but assessments must also be authentic, valid, and purposeful. Taking special care not to “focus only on what can be reduced to numbers, such as how many grammatical errors are present in a composition or how many mathematical algorithms have been committed to memory” (Kohn, 2011, p. 30), is essential for 21st-century competency mastery.

The opportunity to participate in both a Socratic Circle and a Sharing Circle this summer allowed me the ability to practice “Critical Thinking, Communication, Problem Solving, Collaboration, Managing Information, Cultural and Global Citizenship, and Personal Growth and Well-Being” (Alberta Education, 2016). I felt that being able to participate in the sharing circle I could “reflect, rehearse ideas, and respond to others in a context that [was] safe from criticism” (Mills, Sutherland, & Davis-Warra, 2014, p. 289), where my colleagues and I could delve into the difficult topic of Indigenous experience more critically. While the mandate for education is “committed to rebalancing the education system by including Indigenous ways of knowing in curriculum to advance reconciliation for all Albertans” (Alberta Education 2017, p. 10), many

teachers, including myself struggle when trying to teach about Indigenous peoples in the “right way”. Through our discussions, I strongly feel that it is important for teachers to have ongoing professional development and not become complacent on what we “have to” teach.

Understanding my role in reconciliation by becoming an ally instead of an advocate (Clemens, 2017) and having those difficult conversations with others who may be "rooted in privilege and functions to legitimize inaction on equity [and allowed] paralysis due to guilt[that] ultimately protects out positions and holds existing oppression in place" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 197).

Remembering that “both development and learning are social processes” (Shepard, 2000, p. 7), I look forward to my continued growth in the following months. My experiences in my classes over the year have changed my perspective regarding my specialization, and I am sure that my enduring understandings will be refined throughout my career. I know that I have much to share with my students, and they have just as much to share with me.

References

Alberta Education. (2010). Literacy First: A Plan for Action. Retrieved from:

<https://education.alberta.ca/media/1626397/literacyfirst.pdf>

Alberta Education. (2016). Competencies Overview. Retrieved from:

<https://education.alberta.ca/media/3115408/competencies-overview-may-17.pdf>

Alberta Education. (2017). The Guiding Framework for the Design and Development of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Provincial Curriculum. Retrieved from:

<https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460130971>

Bainbridge, J., & Heydon, R. (2013). *Constructing meaning: Teaching the language arts K-8*. Toronto: Nelson.

Clemens, C. (2017). Ally or Accomplice? The Language of Activism. Teaching

Tolerance. Retrieved at [https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/ally-or-accomplice-the-language-of-](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/ally-or-accomplice-the-language-of-activism?fbclid=IwAR35rd9wm36729f_nzh2OjFqooljtH3dFPTj46dXBS5Bv80vJ9ZKt_u8KXI)

[activism?fbclid=IwAR35rd9wm36729f_nzh2OjFqooljtH3dFPTj46dXBS5Bv80vJ9ZKt_u8KXI](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/ally-or-accomplice-the-language-of-activism?fbclid=IwAR35rd9wm36729f_nzh2OjFqooljtH3dFPTj46dXBS5Bv80vJ9ZKt_u8KXI)

Kohn, A. (2011). The Case Against GRADES. *Educational Leadership*, 69(3), 28-33.

Mills, Kathy A., Sunderland, Naomi, & Davis-Warra, John. (2014). Yarning Circles in the

Literacy Classroom. *Reading Teacher*, 67(4), 285-289

Sensoy, Ö., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Shepard, L. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher*, 29(7),

4–14. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/stable/1176145>

- Spalding, R., & Spalding, Walter T. (1986). *The Writing road to reading : The Spalding method of phonics for teaching speech, writing and reading*. New York: Quill.
- Tierney, R., & Simon, M. (2004). What's still wrong with rubrics: Focusing on the consistency of performance criteria across scale levels. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 9(2). Retrieved from <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=9&n=2>
- Tompkins, G. E. (2018). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach* (7th ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson.
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (Expanded 2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.