

Literacy Teachers Make a Difference Program Transcript

D. RAY REUTZEL: Hello. This is D. Ray Reutzel. I'd like to introduce myself to you. I'm a former kindergarten, first grade, third grade, fifth grade, and sixth grade teacher. I've been working in the field of literacy now for over 30 years. I've written over 30 books and literally hundreds of research reports and articles in some of the journals in literacy education, and I'm glad to be with you today and to share with you some of my ideas about how you can become a better literacy teacher.

So what I'd like to do is quickly go over with you what I believe are seven pillars that make for effective literacy teachers. The seven pillars are teacher knowledge, classroom assessment, evidence-based teaching practices, response to intervention, motivation and engagement, technology and new literacies, and family and community connections. So let's look at each one of these seven pillars of effective literacy instruction, bearing in mind that it isn't the literacy program that makes for effective literacy instruction, rather the effective teacher that does so. The teacher makes the difference. Teachers do make huge differences in children's achievement and success in school. In fact, research shows more than anything else, once children enter school, it is the teacher that makes the greatest difference.

Pillar one, teacher knowledge, has to do with a confluence of abilities and knowledge teachers hold about how to teach and manage the classroom environment. Effective teachers are wonderful classroom managers. They know how to move children, engage them, use time well, design wonderful classroom environments with print rich classroom access to literacy. They're knowledgeable in evidence-based teaching practices, they hold high expectations for every child in the room, and they balance, integrate, and provide appropriate challenge in every literacy task that they teach and ask children to engage in.

Classroom assessment is the second pillar. This is the foundation for teachers in knowing how to teach and address the needs of children in classrooms. No teacher should just start teaching until they have assessed their children and know where, as a group, they need to be taught in relation to the curriculum and where individual children need special help as a result of doing testing and assessment in the classroom.

The third pillar, evidence-based teaching, has to do with teaching the essentials of literacy. Not all things in literacy are created equal, and there are certain parts-- ingredients-- of literacy instruction that are absolutely essential to the development and achievement of every child. These include such things as oral language, concepts of print, letter name knowledge, sight word recognition, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling

and writing. Teachers who neglect these essentials will find that they do it at their peril and the peril of their children's literacy achievement.

The fourth pillar has to do with response to intervention. It is here where teachers work with students who aren't doing as well as others. Now they must determine differentiated ways of addressing these students' needs so that they can make progress. Hence, we call it response to intervention. We provide an intervention, see how children respond to it, modify and adapt that intervention or instruction so that it is effective in the lives of every student in the classroom.

All of this, of course, takes place in the fifth pillar, and that is a classroom that's motivating and engaging. Students need to have the idea that learning to be literate and reading and writing is fun. They love to engage in science experiments, activities where they do read alouds and laugh over the jokes, and even the lyrics of songs that are sung in the classroom can be motivating literacy activities that engage children in reading and writing. Good teachers know how to activate children's interests and how to help them work with other children to learn and to engage in the classroom.

All this, of course, is dependent upon access to children having books and printed materials in their classrooms readily available for them on a variety of topics in different genres. Nevertheless, even when we have those kinds of materials available, we must be careful to understand these children are students who have come from a digital generation. They not only read print on the page, they read print on screens. This leads us to the next pillar, a discussion of technology and new literacies. We need to provide print in digital and traditional formats using the technologies of today and tomorrow to prepare students adequately for their future using literacy instruction in classrooms.

Finally, we need to do things that bring parents into the room, that involve businesses and other volunteer organizations to support children and the literacy instruction of the school. And so good teachers, effective teachers, make use of all of these community and family resources. So if you're focused in your classroom on these seven pillars of effective literacy instruction and continuously strive to improve your knowledge and practice as a literacy teacher, you will be one of those teachers who truly make a difference.

Giving children the gift of literacy enables them to think on their own, act as good citizens, increase their upward mobility economically, and participate in our civic life in civilized and productive ways. My belief is that teaching reading is one of the most powerful tasks of social justice that could ever be undertaken by anyone in this world.

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