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EDUC 320
Portfolio 12.3
8 December 2016

Philosophy on the Language Arts

Literacy is the most critically important, yet foundational skill for both children and adults. It is also a skill that will never be fully developed. There will always be new words to learn and new texts to engage with; no one will ever reach perfection in their writing or their analytical reading. However, by the time students leave the public school system, they must have adequate literacy and communication skills to go to college or into the workforce. Specifically, these skills include reading literature, informational texts, and other media, composing texts, and understanding and using the conventions of language in verbal and written communication.

While each of the components of literacy and the language arts require (at least to a degree) direct instruction, I believe that they are most successfully learned when taught in conjunction, with reading at the foundation of instruction. By having students read good literature, teachers provide the students with models for composition and the conventions of language (although some texts do stray away from these conventions). Literature also exposes students to a wider breadth of vocabulary, which will in turn strengthen students' composition. The content of most literature can also serve as a basis for rich discussion and the opportunity for students to develop their oral literacy and efficacy. Aside from helping students to develop these literacy skills, literature also helps students to gain a better understanding of themselves and the world around them, and it is one of the few academic areas that can serve an aesthetic purpose.

While my love of literature is far greater than that of informational texts, I realize that it is critically important for students to be able to read both of these types of texts. Students need to know how to engage with and analyze expository texts because generally speaking, after graduating, people are primarily exposed to nonfiction or informational texts. Reading informational texts should not only be practiced in the English classroom, but across all content areas, particularly science and social studies. Informational texts also act as models of quality composition, proper use of conventions, and extensive vocabulary.

Finally, students must be taught how to continue to develop these skills. Even if they meet every state standard and teacher expectation, even if they are very good writers and readers, students need to have the strategies in place to continue their development, either in college or their career. The key to this continued development, in my opinion, is simple: read, read, read. The same chorus that is heard in kindergarten classrooms will help everyone to continue strengthening their literacy. Teachers should help students discover not only how to read, but what to read, encouraging students to select works that interest and challenge them, and how to talk about what they are reading. Language is inherently human and the essence of language is communication. If the world looks for authentic and rich communication, teachers need to model and foster a love of learning and language among students not only in the classroom, but in all of life.