

## **Making It Theirs: Literacy Teachers Use Reflection as a Tool for Shaping Practice**

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*Teachers are often faced with the difficult task of implementing programs in the development of which they had little input. However, we cannot assume that teachers use the programs without thought. This article presents an examination of the reflection that has taken place as teachers implemented a systematic, scripted phonics program. Teachers used both inner and collaborative reflection to examine their teaching philosophies, theoretical beliefs and student needs. The authors identify a continuum of program modifications related to literacy-teaching philosophies.*

Keeping track is a matter of reflective review and summarizing, in which there is both discrimination and record of the significant features of a developing experience. To reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings, which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind (Dewey, 1938, p. 87).

If we were to apply Dewey's definition of reflection to our teaching practices, we might say that by observing and recording significant behaviors and outcomes related to our teaching and students' learning, we can better understand how to teach more effectively and efficiently. Teacher reflection is a vital component of an educator's professional growth and context (Langer, 1999). Reflectiveness is essential to learning (Johnston, 1997). By monitoring and evaluating our teaching progress, we guide the process of learning about our students and *their* needs and about our teaching and *our* needs. This self-guidance provides a feedback system that gives our learning and our teaching direction. Without reflection, we lose this direction and become

dependent on something or someone else to guide us. We might envision this dependence in a scenario in which a teacher is following a scripted, "teacher-proof" program without thinking about and looking at the progress students are making in daily and overall goals.

### **The Researchers**

After reading Dewey's (1938) description of reflection, we became curious about how teachers in our building use this informative strategy to think about their teaching. How was this theory being applied to pedagogy in our district? By investigating this phenomenon in relation to a new scripted phonics program being used in grades K through 2 in our elementary school, we hoped to learn how various approaches to reflection had affected the implementation of the phonics program.

We wondered if and how teachers, through reflection, were adapting the phonics program to meet their needs and students' needs. What types of reflection were being used? We hoped to learn about effective reflection techniques that might improve our own teaching. We should note, however, that it was *not* our purpose to evaluate the application and efficacy of the

new program. The processes of reflection will merely provide the framework from which to view the phonics program.

### **The Setting**

Our school district has approximately 8,700 residents, and is a mixture of agricultural and residential areas. Agriculture (mostly dairy and vegetable farming) is the major source of income for many community members. Main Street is the site of our school district's solitary campus, which consists of two connected traditional-looking brick buildings. Kindergarten through grade 6 is housed in one building, while grades 7 through 12 occupy the other building. There are approximately 100 students per grade with the majority of students and teachers being of European-American descent.

In the spring of 2000 our school district, in light of new state standards, the New York State Fourth-Grade English Language Arts Test results, and the findings of a curriculum audit, sought to provide more consistency in our language arts program among and between grade levels while simultaneously improving student performance. Faculty and administration agreed to implement a school-wide phonics program.

A committee of teachers representing grades K through 6 was formed, and several programs were reviewed. After much discussion and investigation, a systemic, scripted phonics program was chosen for Kindergarten through second grade. In the fall of 2000, several teachers in grades Kindergarten through two were selected to pilot the program. Lauren, the second author, was one of the pilot teachers. Since its initiation, the new phonics program has opened conversations as teachers with varying teaching and learning perspectives

reflected on its use within their ideals of effective literacy instruction.

### **Components of the New Phonics Program**

Complete with a scripted teachers' manual, the program is based on an incremental approach to learning phonics. Its objective is to produce independent readers by providing them with the rules to code letters and letter clusters, thereby enabling them to read unfamiliar words. The program makes no claim to include quality literature but does provide readers (texts) for practicing skills.

The major components of the program include alphabet activities, language activities (second grade only), phonemic awareness activities (Kindergarten and first grade only), review of decks of cards (explained later), spelling activities, new learning, board work, worksheets, homework (first and second grades only), practice/games, readers, and assessments. Most components are included in each daily lesson. Lessons take approximately 45 to 55 minutes of instructional time per day.

New skills and information are presented in small increments and reviewed throughout the year. The alphabet activities range from reciting the alphabet, learning facts about it (e.g., vowels and consonants), playing skill building/review games, alphabetizing letters and words, practicing and identifying accents on words, and learning syllabication. Language activities for grade two consist of brief lessons on the history of the English language from the Old English period to the present. The objective of these lessons is to teach students how our written language has evolved over time. They also help to explain exceptions to spelling rules (i.e., the silent *k* at the beginning of many words).

Readers are introduced to students every 10 to 15 lessons. Because the texts are designed to review phonics and spelling skills, the vocabulary is controlled. There are no words in the readers that students cannot decode based on the rules taught to that point. The main objective is to improve fluency.

The spelling component consists of a daily practice sheet with which students demonstrate their understanding of rules taught by correctly spelling dictated words and sentences. This activity remains the same throughout the year except for an occasional skill building/review game, such as Bingo.

Worksheets are provided to reinforce concepts and to help teachers monitor student progress on a daily basis. They also provide a model to which students may refer when completing the homework on the reverse side. Homework is assigned four days a week and consists of coding/spelling rules practice as well as a reading comprehension component.

There are several games and activities designed to provide extra practice for students who are weak in specific areas as indicated by the assessments, which occur after every four lessons. The assessments consist of both oral and written activities for first and second grades (oral only in Kindergarten) related to spelling, coding, reading, and comprehension. Teachers are encouraged to give as much partial credit as possible.

**The Interviews**

Eight teachers and two administrators agreed to interview for the study: two reading specialists, three kindergarten teachers, one first-grade teacher, two second-grade teachers, the elementary principal, and the district's superintendent. Table 1 lists each teacher

and administrator and their position or grade level. Pseudonyms have been used to provide anonymity. Our main purpose for interviewing the teachers was to initiate discussion about their philosophies of reading instruction and how these philosophies related to their interaction with the phonics program through teacher reflections. We designed the questions to trigger reflective thinking.

TABLE 1. Interview Participant Pseudonyms and Professional Roles

Participant	Role
Barb	Reading Specialist
Jane	Reading Specialist
Anna	Kindergarten
Marjorie	Kindergarten
Pat	Kindergarten
Helen	First Grade
Joan	Second Grade
Kit	Second Grade
Pete	Elementary Building Principal
Curtis	District's Superintendent

Participants were interviewed individually. Protocol questions were given to the teachers and administrators one week ahead of time. See Table 2. None of the participants developed written responses prior to the interviews. We asked participants to review the manuscript to ensure that their responses had been correctly interpreted.

TABLE 2. Protocol Interview Questions

Questions for Teachers	
1	What components do you think are essential in an effective reading program?
2	Which components of the phonics program do you find fit your ideas of a good reading program? Why?

TABLE 2 Continued

- 3 Do you modify these good components at all? Why? How?
- 4 Which components do not fit your idea of an effective reading program? Why not?
- 5 Do you use any of these components? Why or why not?
- 6 Have you modified any of these components?
- 7 How did you decide to make modifications? (Grade level decision? Personal reflection based on your observations of students' performance or needs?)
- 8 How do you use the assessments to inform your instruction?
- 9 When do you find time to reflect on your reading instruction?
- 10 How do you reflect? (Teacher journal? Discussions with other teachers? Planning lessons?)

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Questions for Administrators

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- 1 Do you think teacher reflection is an important component of effective instruction? Why or why not?
  - 2 In what ways do you think our school or district encourages teachers to reflect on their practices?
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## The Results

### *Types of Reflection Used by Teachers*

We found that teachers thought about their teaching in many ways. Some teachers' processes involved inner reflection preceding, during, and following lessons. Other methods included collaborating with fellow teachers and with the students. Teachers contemplated their teaching, the program, and student responses. They also reflected about new or alternate ideas and approaches.

Each teacher stressed a unique preference for the mode of reflection practiced. None of the teachers were

required or prompted to use reflection techniques. It was part of their regular practice to do so. We found the types of reflection they used fit into two categories: what we are calling *inner reflection* and *collaborative reflection*.

*Inner Reflection.* The common thread of inner reflection is that in which the teacher thinks about his/her teaching in isolation, through a type of self-talk. During our interviews, we heard about many different kinds of inner reflecting that teachers practiced.

Barb stated that she reflects while planning her lessons:

When planning my lessons for my students, I try to reflect upon their strengths, weaknesses, and general diagnosis. These will determine the strategies and materials I will use. At the time of presentation, if students are confused about the task, I try to clarify and/or modify it in some way. I am continually reflecting upon how to help my students make connections to prior knowledge to gain understanding.

Anna told us the following about a time when she reflected on the results of a lesson:

When I did my oral assessments for Rr, I discovered that many children were giving /er/ as the sound for Rr. To review and reinforce the correct sound, I told them to remember the sound they hear at the beginning of *ruff*--using a word I thought they would put more emphasis on than a word like *rabbit*. We also made a list of Rr words and echoed them as another way to give practice in hearing the sound.

Barb's and Anna's comments about clarifying and/or modifying their lessons in some way remind us of what Johnston (1997) refers to as "reflection in action" (p.

31) in which teachers evaluate their literacy practices based on an unexpected outcome of their instruction. An example might be a student struggling with weekly decontextualized spelling assessments yet writing coherent, accurately spelled stories during free time. It is the unpredicted surprises or feelings of dissonance that make us step back and examine our consciousness. In turn, this examination creates an awareness from which we learn.

Pat reflects in the quiet of her own home, bringing lessons and evaluations home to read. While instructing, she makes anecdotal notes also. Table 3 illustrates a sample of her anecdotal notes. She followed up her own suggestion from 3/21/01, "want to include time for games," by using a series of letter games the following week.

TABLE 3. Sample of Pat's Anecdotal Notes

Date	Notes
3/21	Planning phonics lessons next week. Want to include time for games w/ Kid Cards... more practice ... practical application.
3/26	Plan to play Kid Game orange letter cards - matching letters 3 possible ways ... capital to capital ... lowercase to lowercase ... capital to lowercase.
3/27	Letter games went well ... played w/ 2 groups ... 9-10 children in group. Played game like Fish Card Game... 2nd group needs more time tomorrow... have them go first.
3/28	Played letter game again - went very well. ... children really enjoyed it.
3/29	Introduced new game red cards and purple cards ... spread out picture cards for everyone to see ... deal purple word cards. More difficult game ... sound blending for some ... children would practice sounding out word while waiting their turn. Went well ... new words tomorrow.

Using the "assessment composite," a single-paged class skills chart provided with the phonics program, Marjorie can view the whole class's progress at a glance and can determine which lessons she needs to re-teach and which ones she should reinforce. Marjorie also provided a sample of a passage from her teacher's journal showing how she records benchmark events that inform her instruction. See Table 4 below.

TABLE 4. Sample of Marjorie's Notes

Date	Notes
2/8	Students are beginning to blend sounds more easily. I see a big difference with the class. They seem...confident and at ease with word attack skills.

Finally, Kit told us she uses reading research and methods she has learned from attendance at conferences to reflect on her teaching:

I revisit, re-evaluate, and revise my teaching strategies through the readings of Regie Routman (*Invitations*) and through educational conferences given by Dr. Mary Howard, Cindy Marrison, and Cheryl Sweeney, just to name a few.

Our teachers reported using inner reflection while planning lessons, while teaching, while reviewing responses; in a teacher's journal; in anecdotal notes; while assessing; while attending conferences; and while reading research. Helen confided that she reflects "while driving, showering, constantly!" It seems that reflection can be a continuous experience in this profession.

*Collaborative Reflection.* Reflection in isolation or within the walls of one's own mind or classroom is an important step in professional growth, but by no means should it be the final step.

How did our teachers participate in collaborative reflection? Besides formal or

planned and informal or unplanned hallway conversations with fellow teachers, Joan and Helen offered unique methods of reflecting. During the interview, Joan reflected on her second-grade class meetings in which she collaborated with her students:

Student reflection is often a part of my [daily] morning meeting [with my students]. I want my children to feel comfortable with their celebrations and concerns about the curriculum. We talk about literature, our writing, the phonics program, and other areas of the curriculum.

[The students] must be made to feel that they are part of the process. (Why are we doing this? Why am I teaching this? How can this help us? Are you interested or bored? Can we help others with this learning?) These are the types of things that we discuss. My classroom is a strong community. The students and I trust one another. Therefore, they're usually very candid with their reflections about the curriculum...

On Monday I present the new coding from the phonics program along with the spelling words for the week. When I ask my class about their use of or interest in the coding, the response is minimal. Pete and Meg are my most positive thinkers in the room. Their glasses are always half full, and they live in homes where this type of thinking is nurtured. Pete tells others that maybe we could use our coding if we come across a "long" word when we're reading. Meg reminds the class to use their coding skills when they're sounding out words. [Yet,] Meg's inventive spelling indicates that she is not transferring the...skills to her writing. The rest of my class has very little to say about their phonics program, except that they consider

themselves to be expert spellers. I think that this has little to do with the coding practice....I am not enthusiastic about scripted programs.

I have included an exceptional first grader in my writers' workshop. Her teacher has done very little writing this year, due to the time devoted to the phonics program. Kelly's parents were concerned and requested the change. Kelly frequently uses inventive spelling, and I do not see any evidence that she is using the phonics skills. When I questioned Kelly about using the coding she has learned, she replied, "It takes too long to think about it when I write."

Joan and her students are struggling to understand the program's effectiveness. Students can verbalize the purposes of the phonics coding methods. Joan tells us Meg and Kelly are unable to transfer the skills to their writing. Reflection is initiated here as a struggle or a puzzle to be solved.

Joan's reflection is an analytic process prompted by her feelings of dissonance between her literacy objectives and philosophy and the expectations of the pilot program. Joan struggles with the program's perception of what reading is. She incorporates class meetings so students can engage in metacognition and articulate their learning. This dialog with her students helps her assess and reflect upon the students' understandings and needs. Following through this train of reflection, Joan determines that her next step is to scaffold transference and application of the learned skills and coding.

Moving on to Helen, we learn that she reflects through sharing with student teachers:

Although the opportunities are limited, I have found that having student teachers provides an excellent avenue for me to reflect on my own

practice. Engaging in conversations with them as we discuss their teaching forces me to examine the reasons for my teaching methods. They provide fresh ideas and unique perspectives. It is also helpful to talk to their supervisors. In their capacity as mentors, the supervisors are in and out of many classrooms and often provide wonderfully astute observations of my classroom as they confer with the student teachers.

Helen takes advantage of having teacher educators in her room to look at her own practice, using the opportunity for mutual learning and for university-school collaboration and synthesis. In Helen's case, reflection is initiated by a desire to continually improve and update her teaching practices. She is eager to learn from the perspectives of others and to increase the effectiveness of her teaching.

If we reflect by writing or speaking with others, we might end up questioning and revisiting our teaching from a different perspective. This process might take us out of our comfort zone as we look critically at our own teaching practices and invite others to look at our practices. It is this type of risk that we asked the kindergarten, first, and second grade classroom and reading teachers to take when we asked them to participate in our interviews. We asked them to share their philosophies on teaching reading and on reflection so that we could explore the many dimensions and perspectives that existed in the primary grades in our building.

#### *How Do Teachers Apply Reflection to Their Practices?*

Teachers initially assumed that they were to follow the scripted program verbatim. After just a few short weeks, however, teachers began to have concerns, particularly about the amount of time a

single phonics lesson encompassed. Administrators met with faculty to listen to their concerns and finally asked them to use their professional judgment to tailor the program for their grade level and their students. This may have led to a less consistent approach to teaching this phonics program, but perhaps one better suited to fit individual learners' needs and teachers' philosophies and strengths.

All the teachers we interviewed use discussions with other teachers and lesson planning as ways to reflect about their teaching. They each spend a great deal of time thinking about ways to improve their reading programs. Each teacher interviewed made modifications to the scripted program to varying degrees, indicating their use of reflection in this process. These teachers were somewhat divided in their opinion of the program, perhaps because of their philosophies of reading instruction, their grade level, or their student expectations. The use of the program had teachers thinking about their instruction in a critical manner.

Teachers interviewed who highly value skill mastery (sight word recognition, letter recognition, sound recognition, controlled vocabulary, word/spelling lists), decoding, and successful scores on high-stakes standardized tests made fewer modifications to this scripted program. Their philosophies of the teaching of reading focus on pre-reading skills, and they feel the repetition and continual review of letters, letter sounds, and word lists beneficial for their students.

The scripted phonics program has an effective routine. Marjorie states, "All of the kids know all their letters at this point in the year. Their overall progress is much greater than last year at this same time." Her class composite sheets are evidence of this success. Because of this, she modifies few of the components of the program. Pat

indicates, “Students know what to expect and like the routine. The weekly word lists provide practice and allow children to work on reading and blending of sounds, a skill that is so important to beginning readers.” Both Marjorie and Pat use the weekly assessments as a reflection tool to inform their instruction and to communicate with parents.

Jane uses the program to support classroom teachers' goals. The program provides opportunities to re-teach skills and to practice new concepts. She also agrees that phonics and decoding play major roles in the emergent reader. The games, practice, and repetition provided in this program are valuable components of a reading program. Her time with her students is limited, so she uses observation of students' work as well as time constraints to make decisions about modifying the program. Jane occasionally uses the assessments to monitor more closely the progress of her "weaker" students.

Some of those teachers who view children's literature, integrated phonics, and an overall immersion in literacy as the most important components of reading instruction made the most modifications to the program. These teachers expect their children to make meaning as they read and to develop an enjoyment of literature. The scripted phonics program does not reflect their ideas of an effective reading program. Consequently, they have taken the professional liberty they were given to make changes in its implementation.

Anna values exposure to literature and functional print. She uses a morning letter through which she integrates much of her phonics instruction (See Figure 1). She is more comfortable with this approach than teaching skills in isolation because she believes in a more holistic philosophy of reading. She is concerned with the intensity of instruction and the overwhelming amount

of paperwork that dominates the phonics program. She wants students to see reading as purposeful, meaningful, and valuable rather than stressful and tedious. She has used “kid watching” to help her make decisions to incorporate more games into her instruction and to shorten many activities.

Figure 1. Anna's morning letter.

<p style="text-align: right;">__pril __, 2001</p> <p>Dear __irls and __oys,</p> <p>Jason __ __ Thumper today. __rs.</p> <p>__inton will be __ __ ater __or __usic.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">rs. __avin</p>
<p>Corrected letter is shown below:</p> <p style="text-align: right;">April 9, 2001</p> <p>Dear Girls and Boys,</p> <p>Jason is Thumper today.</p> <p>Mrs. Linton will be in later for music.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mrs. Slavin</p>

The letters that are missing are the ones that have been introduced in the phonics program. Anna uses the morning letter as part of the spelling component of the program. First, students help her read the message with the letters missing and try to figure out what it means and what letters are missing. Then they go back and fill in the letters. The two words that are missing, *is* and *in*, are spelling words.

Helen told us that the time children are required to sit for the structured lessons is too long for her age group. She has used observation of students and other teachers as well as discussions with other teachers to make decisions about her instruction. She has eliminated the spelling sound sheets. She reviews periodically rather than daily to cut down on the amount of time children concentrate. She does not like reading from a script, as she prefers constant eye contact with her students. Because she knows her students' strengths and weaknesses, she finds the worksheets helpful for only some of her students and plans to use them as

review. Helen administers the assessments, but she does not use them to inform her instruction as much as she would like “because there just isn’t time!”

Joan and Kit both value full works of literature with responsive writing. Kit finds decoding skills necessary for students to be successful when reading independently and that the repetition of more difficult phonemes helps promote long-term memory. Although they like the spelling component of the program, these teachers think there are too many rules for students to remember. As a result of observing students and time constraints, these teachers have eliminated the history of the language component and some alphabet activities.

Kit and Joan use personal reflections to make decisions about what to include, what to abbreviate, and what to eliminate. Joan does not use the assessments but does use class meetings (described previously) in an attempt to encourage students to articulate what they like, what they don’t like, what helps them learn, and what does not help them learn. Kit finds the spelling portion of the assessment, in particular, a valuable indicator of students’ abilities to represent sounds. She also thinks that the comprehension portion shows whether or not they are using decoding skills to make meaning or simply to “word call.”

Barb is a reading specialist who supports the classroom teacher regardless of the program used. She finds decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary development essential to an effective reading program. Barb’s main concern with the scripted program is that it is only one part of a balanced reading program, yet takes up most if not all of the time allocated for reading instruction. She reflects on her reading instruction “every minute that I’m not teaching!” Personal reflection and observation of students’ needs form the basis for the modifications she makes.

These teachers used different ways to reflect to make modifications in a scripted phonics program based on their particular grade level, their students’ needs, their own philosophies of teaching reading, and their visions of an effective reading program in action. What is important is that they did reflect, and they did make changes to improve their instruction.

### *How Do School Administrators Encourage Teacher Reflection?*

Effective schools encourage and provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice and collaborate with others. What is our school doing to encourage teachers to think about their implementation of this program? We asked our elementary building principal and our school superintendent for their perspectives. Our principal, Pete, had this to say:

Teachers are encouraged to pursue professional development activities. Committees can be formed to work on almost any aspect of curriculum development. This has gone way beyond the old textbook adoption committee and can be quite exciting. Our move to the phonics and math is a perfect example....

Teachers are encouraged to plan one day during the year to devote entirely to an aspect of professional development they are interested in. There is a monetary stipend as well because for every 15 hours of in-service time...an amount of money [is added] to the base pay of that staff member.

Pete is referring to the fact that it was a committee of teachers and administrators that selected this particular phonics program. A trip was recently planned to a local school district that had been using the same phonics program. Initially our teachers were going to observe the lessons being taught, but it was

decided it might be more beneficial instead to share information and experiences with the other district's teachers in an informal meeting after school. Pete encourages inter- and intra-district collaboration between teachers as well as shared decision-making approaches.

Curtis, our superintendent, offered more insight regarding administrative perspectives on the prime consideration given teacher reflection.

I think that teachers and administrators should constantly be reflecting on what they do each day. I believe that it is important that teachers have time to reflect individually as well as with others. The time that some larger school districts have set up as common planning time is used in part to do this.

We encourage professional development, both in house and out, as a way for teachers to analyze their instruction, presentation of materials, and determining if the students are grasping the point of the instruction. We have for the last several years, provided time for teachers to reflect together by grade level or by discipline.

I believe that it [is] a positive effort [toward] eliminating the isolation that is felt by many teachers. We teach in a vacuum and we need ways to share our concerns, ideas, frustrations, and successes with others. After having the time to do that, we all can sit back and reflect individually on all the information shared.

Curtis points out that collaborating with others can take us out of our isolation and help us work toward solutions to our frustrations. Eventually, however, we filter through others' suggestions and information that we gather to make informed decisions on our own.

## Our Reflections

Participating in this project by talking with each other, peers, and administrators, as well as by reading current research regarding reflection, has taught us a great deal about reflection and about our own teaching philosophies. If we look back at the quote from Dewey that we used at the beginning of this paper, it seems that we have extracted "net meanings" with which we can deal with future experiences. Here are our thoughts.

### *Reflections from Cindy*

Two main themes have dominated my thinking about the conversations we have had as a result of this project. They are *isolation* and *accommodation*.

As teachers, we are often caught in the day-to-day concerns and demands of doing our jobs. Isolation settles in. There are materials to gather, papers to correct, requisitions to hand in, parents to call, and report cards to prepare.

Reflection can start as a simple observation of a student's response to his or her work. Then we might see patterns of similar behaviors occurring. We come to a realization and decide we need to adjust what we're doing. Or, it might begin as an inner struggle of some kind, such as feeling dissonance between one's practice and philosophy. Reflection might even bud from the implementation of a new school-wide program, such as this phonics program.

I view the conversations that have begun as a result of this program as healthy and beneficial for instruction and learning in our district. Teachers are examining their minds and the minds of their fellow teachers and considering what type of philosophy of literacy learning they support.

Teachers have worked hard to incorporate the new phonics program. In some cases, they matched the program to

their philosophies. In others, the program has prompted them to adjust their philosophies because they saw value in the components of this systematic phonics program. They have noted the strengths and the weaknesses of the program through observation and reflection, and they have put the students' needs first. Teachers have explored multiple ways of reflecting that I had not previously viewed as reflection, such as sharing methods with a student teacher and class meetings with students.

Through reflection, teachers had found a way to create ownership of what could have come to own them and to interact with each other, thereby breaking their isolation. Rather than blindly following a scripted, teacher-proof program, they have made it theirs. Importantly, teachers are making informed decisions based on their conversations, observations, assessments, and reflections.

#### *Reflections from Lauren*

We found that teachers often choose to discuss concerns of academia with colleagues (usually at or near their own grade level). This is a valuable reflection practice but needs to be expanded to include discussions between teachers of different grade levels, different instructional philosophies, and different schools. Good, reflective teachers strive to be life-long learners. When they attend classes and workshops outside of their school buildings and environments, they have an opportunity to learn new things and converse with educators from diverse backgrounds with similar problems and concerns. This awareness leads to a form of collegiality that is important to the teacher as a learner. This type of sharing can then be brought back to school.

We strive daily to provide a classroom environment where students are encouraged to and praised for taking risks in

their learning. Couldn't we, as teachers, benefit from similar experiences with colleagues?

I have been teaching this phonics program for three years now, and have many of the concerns voiced by those interviewed. The program is a strong, intensive phonics program. Yet my own philosophy of teaching reading includes four other major components: reading real literature; writing responsive and creative pieces; listening to high-level, quality literature; and shared reading of poetry, songs, and short stories. I feel each component deserves equal time each day.

As with so many other teachers in our building, this inquiry project has forced me to examine more closely my own teaching and the ways that I choose to reflect. I have had numerous conversations with both faculty members and administration concerning different aspects of the phonics program. I have used observation of students and their work to decide that my students need more time reading and writing.

The overall results of the phonics assessments do not correlate well with the reading abilities of many of my students. I tend to question their use as assessment tools. If a child is a fluent reader with good comprehension yet scores low (below 80% is considered unsatisfactory) on nearly all phonics assessments, what does that tell me? This child probably does not need explicit phonics instruction and may very well have difficulty working backwards, breaking apart words that he has no trouble reading. I have students who are excellent at coding and breaking apart words because they have the rules memorized. However, when asked to read the words they fall short. Is this program helping all students become efficient readers?

We must not lose sight of our goal to develop lifelong readers and writers. Every

facet of our instruction should be steadily aimed at this goal. I have cut out or minimized the language history and alphabet activities to save time. I review less frequently than prescribed by the program and have been able to shorten my lessons to thirty minutes. The new learning and practice components now form the core of my daily phonics instruction. In this way, I am able to include all of what I believe is a balanced literacy program.

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### **Department of Curriculum and Instruction Partnership with Henninger High School in Syracuse, NY**

Henninger High School has a unique program for high school students that focuses on the arts.

Adolescence Methods Practicum Students have been placed in classrooms at Henninger and SUNY-Oswego faculty members have conducted professional development workshops and study groups in literacy and science.