

Book Review and Personal Reflection

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TE 842: Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction

Section A: Book Review

For my book club assignment for TE842, I chose to read the book *Letter Lessons and First Words* by Heidi Anne Mesmer. I chose to read this book because I felt it would assist me the most with my literacy instruction in my classroom. I teach first grade, and I feel that having a solid phonics foundation, is one of the most important skills a young learner can have when beginning to read. This book has guided me in bettering my instruction with phonics assessment and instruction.

The book starts out with an introduction that explains what “phonics” really means. Phonics is “discovering the purpose of letters, how letters can work alone or be combined to symbolize sounds, and later in the journey, how the spelling of words intersects with their meaning” (Mesmer, 2019, pg. xiv). It is extremely important for students to learn because it connects speech and written language and children require knowledge of phonics and skills to be efficient readers. This book provides a framework for teachers to assess, instruct, and guide their students through phonics skills to become overall better readers. First the book discusses the importance of assessing your student’s phonics knowledge and provides several assessments a teacher can use with their students. It says that assessing your students helps the teacher to organize the content, specifically with pacing and how to present it. Assessing a student’s knowledge helps a teacher know where to begin and what the student’s strengths and weaknesses are. Next, the book presents a scope and sequence for how students should be presented phonics skills like alphabet knowledge, phonemes, first words, short and long vowels, and many more. Young readers must start out knowing the alphabet by recognizing letters, naming letters, naming the sounds associated with letters, and being able to form letters. Young learners must understand that the smallest word units called phonemes and graphemes. Once these skills are mastered, students are ready to begin learning how to read their first words with short vowels, consonant digraphs, and blends. Lastly, long vowels are

introduced with the concepts like silent e, vowel teams, r-controlled vowels, diphthongs. This book provides a plethora of lesson framework, routines, resources, and activities that can be provided to your students to create high-quality instruction.

One thing I learned from reading this book is that phonics lessons should be active. In order to understand how words work, students should be encouraged to understand the parts of the word, put words together, and break them apart. Phonics practice should include reviewing, hearing, decoding, spelling, and reading to fully understand the parts of the word and be able to read it.

Next, I learned that providing useful feedback is essential in phonics instruction. The teacher should provide feedback that expands on the reasons an answer was correct or points to the correction needed to get the answer correct (Mesmer, 2019, pg. 50). Feedback can not only help the student who is receiving the feedback but can also be useful for other students who are a part of the lesson. The book suggests that sometimes small group instruction can even be more useful than individualized instruction because it allows for these opportunities of growth and learning one can receive from their peers.

Lastly, I learned that it is extremely important for a teacher to have a well-developed, well organized, and detailed system to teaching phonics instruction. A developmentally appropriate scope and sequence that is clearly organized and logical, is essential for students to learn phonics, and overall, be able to read effectively. Phonics instruction is not something that should be rushed. Students should constantly have opportunities to review content previously learned, to retain it. I felt that this book did a great job with laying out a scope and sequence that makes sense for teach pre-kindergarten through second grade phonics instruction.

There are many concepts I learned in this book, that I plan on using in my classroom in the fall. The first thing I would like to implement would be the “Letter Lessons and First

Words Placement Test” to find my first graders strengths and weaknesses. Like I mentioned earlier, a teacher must know what level their students are at so they know where to begin, how to present the information, and how to pace the instruction.

I also plan on using many of the activities this book mentioned, to make my phonics instruction more engaging and rigorous for my students. For example, the book mentioned having a group interactive writing activity where the students and I work together on a writing piece. I think this activity would be a great way for students to apply letter-sounds to spell words and observe how a teacher can model the activity. The book also mentioned many other activities I would like to implement in my classroom such as matching games, scavenger hunts, unifix cubs, and many more. Having these hands-on activities available to my students is a great way to get them engaged and actively participating in putting words and breaking them apart, like discussed earlier.

I thought this book did a great job explaining the most important concepts in teaching phonics assessment and instruction. The book flowed in a way that was easy to understand and did a great job diving into the scope and sequence of teaching phonics to young learners. In my opinion, the most useful part of this book was being able to look over the many charts that provide an overview with the layout the lesson part, content, sample language, and activity choices. I would recommend this book to other teachers who are teaching young learners how to read. Specifically, I would recommend this book to veteran teachers because I think it challenges many of the practices that are currently used in literacy instruction in classrooms today. The book mentioned activities like rainbow writing, search and find puzzles, and writing sentences for each word, that I see teachers use daily, and are things that the book recommends should be avoided in every day literacy instruction. This book has a modern approach to literacy instruction that I think veteran teachers could learn from to update their practices.

E., M. H. A. (2019). *Letter lessons and first words: phonics foundations that work, PreK-2*.
Heinemann.

Section B. Professional Reflection

Throughout the TE842 course, I have learned so much and reflected on my own teaching practices I used in my classroom. One of the most valuable things I learned from engaging in this course and reading my book club book, is that many practices I currently use in my classroom, may not always be the best for my students. As educators, we may have learned a certain way to teach something in undergrad, developed bad habits or methods from other teachers, or even assumed what we were doing was effective, but in all reality it wasn't. From this course, I have learned that it is important for educators to continue to educate themselves on best practices, constantly reflect on their methods, understand what may be effective or ineffective, and be confident or courageous enough to make the changes needed in order to help our students grow. Not only students, but teachers should constantly be learning and evolving ourselves, in to better help our students and give them what the need to thrive.

Before taking this course, I did not realize the importance of planning phonics and reading assessments for my students that would tell me the information I needed to guide my instruction. I would give my students a short phonics assessment I found on a website called "Teachers Pay Teachers" and then find their reading level with a reading assessment called "Fountas and Pinnell." This course taught me how to pick assessments for my students that tell me the most useful information about their reading habits and behaviors. Then it taught me how to take these assessments and analyze them to find the strengths and weaknesses. There are so many factors that contribute to a students overall reading comprehension whether it be decoding, vocabulary knowledge, word recognition, fluency, and many more. After taking this course, I feel that I have a better understanding of how to pick useful assessments, conduct the assessments, analyze the assessments, and be able to plan and pace my instruction for the future.

Before taking this course, I did not realize the importance of having a well

developed and organized system to teaching phonics instruction. Before, I followed the dry curriculum I was used to, and did not feel it was necessary to supplement it with activities and content that would give my students a deeper understanding of the phonics instruction. After reading my book club book, I feel I have a way better understanding for planning my phonics instruction, and the activities I can use to make the learning more active for my students.

Lastly, before taking this course, I did not realize the importance of teacher language when teaching phonics to my students. This course taught me many ways to teach literacy instruction in ways that make the most sense to young readers. In my book club book, it discussed the idea that we should remind students that phonics “rules” should actually be presented as “patterns.” This was a big light bulb moment for me because I use the word “rules” in my classroom, and I never thought about the confusion it may bring to my students. The word “rules” implies that the rule will always apply and can cause confusion for a young reader. Another idea that the book suggested was decreasing the amount of verbal clutter while teaching phonics. This can be not meaningful, not focused, and will not give the child a chance to process information. I know I tend to add verbal clutter at times and is now something I will be conscious of when teaching my students in all subjects.

After this course, I plan to continue learning about effective reading instruction by continuing my master’s classes and continuing to attend professional development in my district. I love attending professional development because it provides me with the opportunity to engage with and learn from other educators who are teaching and experiencing the same challenges I am. I also plan to continue to be bold and try new things in my classroom. Sometimes I can get in a routine and continue to teach the same way. I really want to push myself to doing what is best for my students, rather than

teaching the easiest way for myself.

