

# A Long Road to Recovery: Healing an Ailing Reading Program

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## **Abstract**

*This one-year exploratory case study attempted to discern which adjustments in culture, physical classroom environment, and instruction were needed to improve reading instruction in ailing K-2 classrooms at Lion Elementary School. A holistic approach was created to diagnose the problem surrounding poor early reading achievement. After proper diagnosis, a targeted professional development plan was created in order to provide a common language and experience within the teacher learning community. A Language and Literacy framework was crafted to include more time for integrated reading and writing. A matrix was prepared to show how skill instruction could be embedded within authentic literacy experiences. Initial anecdotal results have shown that the treatment plan increased teachers' knowledge of reading, produced more authentic classroom environments, and created a shift toward student centered literacy instruction.*

*Keywords:* professional development, literacy coaching, school reform

## **Introduction**

How does one begin to fix a school that is critically wounded in terms of reading instruction? That was the question I faced over and over again as I worked with Lion Elementary School (pseudonym) after an being approached by the principal to support campus change in literacy practices. It was not a case of simply providing professional development that would eventually change instruction. The root of the disease was much deeper than instruction. All the teachers at Lion Elementary agreed that readers learn to read by reading (Allington, 2002). Yet, despite the breadth of research that has been done to support this claim, most students spent less than 12 minutes a day engaged in the actual act of reading a book (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Students spent the majority of the reading block in isolated skill instruction as opposed to gradually becoming skilled, independent readers (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The

cognitive load for knowledge rested solely on the shoulders of teachers, and readers were denied an opportunity to shape and refine their thinking and learning (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2009). Like many ailing elementary schools in need of reading improvement, this deficit was the culmination of ineffective instructional decisions over time.

Upon my arrival, there was an immediate need for triage to determine priority of need for three areas: culture, physical classroom environment, and instruction. The principal asked me to diagnose the problem. In the medical field, iatrogenic disease is characterized as, "...the primary pattern of behavior that characterizes this is actually a result of the conditions created initially by the system..." (Hancock, 2013, p. 97). Lion Elementary School was dying from iatrogenic disease. The top down mandates for reading instruction at the district level failed to produce any gains after a six year treatment plan that included scripted programs, one-size-fits-all promises, over zealous assessing, and fidelity directives. The unintended consequences of district-diagnosed prescribed programs left Lion Elementary School with teachers whom had little sense of efficacy and a lack of expertise as to what constituted effective literacy instruction.

In desperation, Lion Elementary School realized a need for adjustment after scores on the state and district's assessments flat lined. Balanced literacy was brought back with renewed enthusiasm; however, its inception came too quickly, and rather than being transformed from a guiding belief about how readers and writers negotiate text (Parr & Campbell, 2012), it was implemented more as a rote routine during the reading block. The district believed centers were the answer to differentiated instruction. Using a district designed and prescribed schedule, teachers created a plethora of literacy centers including planning sheets for students to record their responses and activities. Little did the district or the teachers realize that differentiation was not when all students complete the same tasks, with the same expectations, as opposed to being responsive to individual student needs (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Teachers were spending every available moment creating materials to fill up time during the reading block. Suddenly, 90-minute reading blocks were broken down into 15-minute increments of time in which students rotated through centers and guided reading groups. Just like the previous six years of ineffective treatment, there was no professional development or research that led up to the curricular change.

Like many who look for quick fixes, Lion Elementary School had responded to the symptoms of their wounded early literacy instruction, but had explored the deeper root causes. Morale had plummeted and teacher efficacy waned even lower. To compound this problem, novice teachers who were hired during this long treatment phase had not received any quality professional development and were unprepared to teach reading in a way that was responsive to individual student needs.

### **Conceptual Framework**

When a school community builds a strong foundation of coaching, collaborating, modeling, reflecting, and support, teachers are equipped to adjust their instructional delivery to meet each child's specific reading needs. This type of model requires ongoing extensive professional learning that is individualized according to teachers' level of comfort, trust, and expertise (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Equipping classroom teachers with instructional resources and building a collective campus guiding principle about literacy can create optimal conditions for improved instruction (Fullan, 2010). "Reading instruction can be taught,

either by setting up learning conditions in the classroom so that growth in comprehension is enhanced or by teaching strategies for coping with text directly and explicitly” (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1990, p. 2). Gladwell (2002) states that there are relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes. I was interested in discerning which adjustments in culture, physical classroom environment, and instruction were needed to improve reading instruction in ailing K-2 classrooms at Lion Elementary School.

### **Methodology**

This study was an exploratory case study. “Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case-based themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). This exploratory case study focused on a community of teachers (K-2 at Lion Elementary). Case studies of communities can be defined as, “The systematic gathering of enough information about a particular community to provide the investigator with understanding and awareness of what things go on in that community; why and how these things occur; who among the community members take part in these activities and behaviors, and what social forces may bind together members of this community” (Berg, 2004, p. 261).

### **The Journey**

In order to truly understand the learning context, rather than just diagnose the problem, I decided to utilize a holistic approach (Figure 1). I walked the halls, listened, observed, and casually interacted with students and teachers. I tried to informally assess the climate and tone of classrooms. It was fairly easy to accomplish this step since the K-2 teachers are all housed on one wing of the campus. There were three teachers in kindergarten, and four each in first and second grade for a total of 11 primary teachers. I took anecdotal notes about conversations that were occurring between teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, and student-to-student. I recorded how long each teacher talked during instruction and whether the talk was inquiry based or directive. These notes were used to determine teacher talk time versus student talk time. Next, I did classroom visits when the students were in music or Physical Education (PE), and took pictures of classrooms. I took pictures of what was on the walls, how the seating areas were arranged, the teacher’s space, the classroom library (or lack of), and any other pertinent areas or learning structures that were in the room. When students were present in the classroom, I watched and recorded instruction during reading time. I positioned myself as an observer in the classroom and merely took notes recording what was said, what students were required to do, what questions were being asked, and what outcomes of learning were evident. The last phase was examining student work. I looked at what tasks students completed as readers within the reading block. I wanted to see what evidence was being produced as a result of reading instruction. How were teachers tracking student progress and student needs? At this point, I was gathering information from field notes, observations, and photographs to see if there was a common thread that ran through all the areas of instruction, culture, and the physical classroom environment.

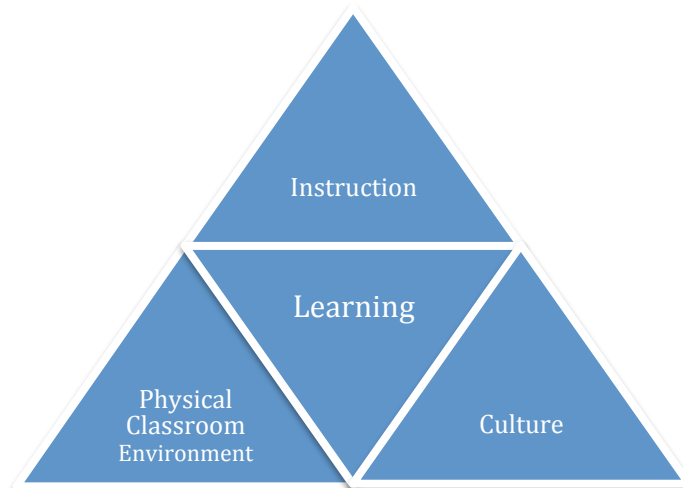


Figure 1. Holistic approach to diagnosing the problem.

### Setting and Culture

Throughout my 22 years in education and studying the literature on reading instruction, I firmly believe that literacy instruction is much more than just effective teaching. It is a belief in the capabilities of the readers and writers that permeates the entire curriculum. This belief is infused in teachers' conversations, actions, and non-verbal gestures throughout the day. Students learn in a risk free environment that supports their growing abilities and knowledge about themselves as readers and writers. Their thoughts are honored and students value what their peers' think and say. Mistakes are made, but together, the learning community constructs new knowledge and to move forward in a more productive manner. "Wonderful places are not that way simply because they are physically appealing. They aren't really wonderful until the people who live in them care about one another" (Hindley, 1996, p. 2).

The principal required that doors were to remain open during instructional hours, so each classroom was clearly visible from the hallway. What I observed and heard did not support this premise. Teachers barked orders loudly and sometimes in tones that were demeaning. Conversations that should have been private between teachers and students were broadcast in front of classrooms. Behavior charts were used with zeal and were displayed in the open for students, as well as anyone else who entered the room, to see. It became immediately apparent that systemic changes in the environment needed to be addressed before we began our instructional focus.

### Physical Classroom Environments

Lion Elementary School was 50 years old and had very little remodeling to its physical structure over the years. Interactive white boards were installed in the front of each classroom as a way to provide digital learning experiences. Classrooms varied in size and unused metal lockers lined the back of each classroom. Each classroom had a row of windows along a long side of the rectangular room. Instead of countertops being areas where children could manipulate math tiles, piles of clutter were on every available countertop taking up valuable learning space. There were large rugs for students to gather on for whole group lessons and in the first and second grade classrooms desks are

clustered together to form tables. The kindergarten classrooms all had tables for children workspace.

Each classroom had a designated classroom library of varying adequacy and efficiency. One kindergarten class had a selection of less than ten books for a class of 22 students with duplicates of the same books. For classrooms that contained more substantial libraries, books were haphazardly placed on shelves or cubbies. Additionally, all kindergarten classrooms had lofts that were intended as an independent reading space. Out of three lofts in kindergarten, none were safe for student use. Instead, the lofts were used as storage for teacher materials, extra school supplies, or general storage. Even the space below the loft that was the perfect cozy spot to curl up with a good book was inaccessible due to an overflow of teacher supplies and tubs of classroom materials.

Rather than displaying children's work or co-constructed anchor charts, walls were covered in commercially mass produced posters. These posters were hung up to the ceiling with no sense of division among content areas. Ten of the classrooms chose to close all of their window blinds thus necessitating the use of overhead florescent lighting. Only one classroom had the overhead lighting turned off and the window blinds opened up to provide a nature extension of the classroom to the outside environment. The pictures below represent a beginning point for moving forward with our transformation process (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Classrooms prior to professional development.

## **Instruction**

Instruction tended to be very traditional and teacher centered. Although desks were grouped together to form collaborative groups, there was still a strong teacher presence at the front of the room and the teacher was viewed as the sole provider and holder of information. The teachers shared that in the previous year's effort to move toward balanced literacy, literacy stations had been set up and students rotated through the stations while teachers met with guided reading groups. Unfortunately, this left students having to be engaged and exhibit self control for almost an hour during the reading block while teachers were busy with small groups of students. This independent learning was not being scaffolded, and students wanting to further their own learning were not being challenged or encouraged to go deeper with their thinking.

Teachers were still the only ones asking questions and students were only answering questions that they did not ask. Comprehension instruction was limited to asking literal level questions about story elements that were explicitly stated in the text. Round robin reading was still a common practice for reading. All students were reading from the same text unless they were meeting with the teacher in small groups. Small group differentiation consisted of grouping students around a text that was determined by instructional levels. While the teachers found this small group time to be valuable, they admitted that students who were not meeting in the small group were not being engaged as much as they would like them to be. During planning, teachers pulled isolated skills from the reading curriculum and taught them apart from an authentic context rather than keeping comprehension as the focal point (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000, Keene & Zimmerman, 1997, Miller, 2013, Pearson & Fielding, 1994). Skills were still being taught with flashcards, isolated skill worksheets, read and respond drills, and phonics drills. When resource materials were provided to assist in their planning, teachers saw it as 'one more thing to add to their lesson planning' rather than as aids to complement teaching. The idea of teaching according to individual readers' needs was a foreign concept since a 'one size fits all' curriculum had prevailed for so long.

There was not a space for students' voices to be heard and students were passive participants in a teaching process (Freire, 2000). The main voice in the classroom was the teacher's and it was usually in the form of declarative sentences as she imparted the information onto the students. The main lesson structure was teacher talk then student independent work. Independent work was in the form of worksheets that were literal level questioning and low engagement. It took minimal time and effort for students to complete the worksheets. When students finished their work, they were told to 'color' the worksheet if there were any drawings on it or to draw on the back of the worksheet if it did not lend itself to coloring in pictures. The average time spent on the coloring aspect of the worksheet was fifteen minutes. This form of pseudo-reading clearly had not served Lion Elementary School well over the past several years.

## **Moving Toward Change**

The first step toward changing the lens in which the teachers viewed reading instruction was to begin a voluntary book study after school. The principal and I met frequently to discuss the direction of her campus, the needs of her students, and the support that was needed for her teachers before deciding on a text that would be a good



fit. In May, the principal and I gathered all of the primary teachers together and I gave a book talk over our text for the book study. The touchstone text that we utilized was *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Miller, 2013). Our key focus was comprehension instruction and how to plan, model, provide time for practice, and conferencing, within a Reading Workshop. The principal purchased the book for all the teachers prior to the end of the school year with the expectation that they would read it over the summer and be familiar with it when they returned in the fall. We did not expect them to launch reading workshop since they did not have training, but we wanted them to have some schema to draw from when we started our book study.

During the summer, I purchased a Choice Literacy© web resource subscription for all of the primary teachers, the principal, the curriculum coordinator, and the reading coach with grant funding from a university grant donor. This online site was invaluable in providing professional development videos and articles related to literacy. It provided a common space for everyone to view the same video then discuss the instructional implications. Every other week I sent the teachers a new link with a video title or an article title for them to read. All of the extra readings and videos tied into our touchstone text that we read in the fall as springboards for conversations.

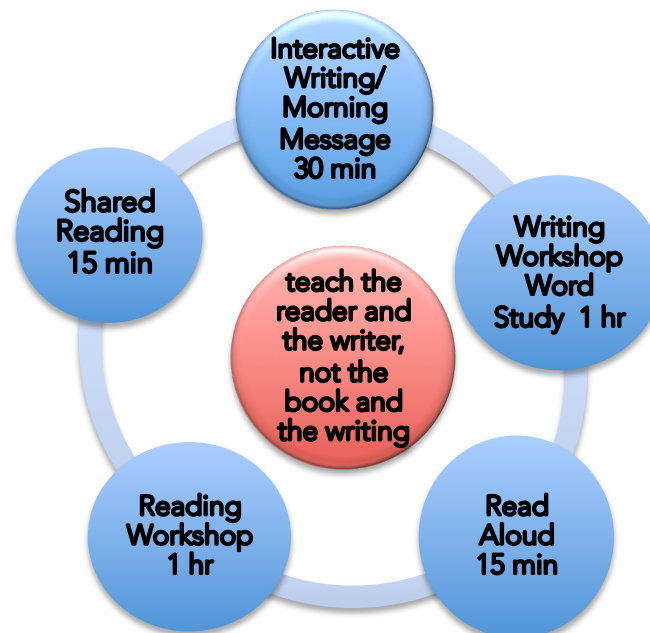
When school started and we began meeting, the book felt familiar and the content did not seem so overwhelming as it did in the spring. My goal was for each teacher to begin to see reading instruction through a completely different lens and consider the possibilities of greater student success in their own classrooms in terms of reading achievement and developing readers as opposed to teaching students to read. We met once a month, for an hour and fifteen minutes, and the principal provided refreshments and a casual atmosphere for our dialogue. During our after school book study time, the teachers responded to a guiding question posted on chart paper and posted their thinking about this question. After our discussions, they posted any revisions to their thinking by the end of our time that day. Although it was voluntary, every K-2 teacher participated and engaged in the process (Figure 3). This effort was greatly enhanced by the principal's encouragement and active participation during the book study. She did not serve in the role of the leader; she served as a learner and that made a very large learning impact on the rest of the participants.



Figure 3. Voluntary, after school book study professional development.

### Conference Periods

In addition to the after school book study, I met with each grade level, once a month, during their 45 minute conference period. Also, this same group of primary teachers was receiving professional development from another literacy coach, once a month during their conference period, on writing workshop that mirrored the reading workshop they were learning about in our after school book study. During this 45-minute conference period time, each grade level began to explore how to integrate the teaching of reading skills into writing and other content areas. The teachers expressed concern over how to continue teaching all the reading skills they have been teaching while now trying to ‘add in’ comprehension. In the early grades, comprehension was not seen as the goal of reading. Students were being taught isolated phonics in order to blend sounds to decode words resulting in the development of word callers. They did not expect books to make sense. Teachers were still seeing each reading skill as a separate, isolated teaching unit and not seeing how they could be integrated together. Metacognition was neither an academic vocabulary term nor a professional term within the school culture. Over the course of nine months, we worked to craft a Language and Literacy framework that encompassed three total hours. These three hours were not intended to occur altogether and the five components could be taught throughout the day. The components included: interactive writing/morning message, writing workshop/word study, a read aloud, reading workshop, and shared reading (Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* The Language and Literacy framework components.

This monthly conference time was invaluable for checking in and clarifying teachers’ understanding during this year of rapid growth and understanding of reading instruction. Again, the principal showed support by attending the monthly conference times as she attended the book study, with a learner’s stance, rather than with administrative oversight. Her teachers witnessed her vulnerability, and her sense of



eagerness and excitement fueled their motivation. Teachers were encouraged to try new instructional methods, to observe each other’s attempts, and to invite me to model in their classroom if desired or needed. In addition to creating the Language and Literacy framework, we explored issues such as classroom environments, child centered instruction, language and literacy, documenting readers’ thinking with anchor charts, and organizing and maintaining classroom libraries. Each 45 minute conference time began with a two minute entrance ticket reflection activity, followed by a brainstorming session focused on an overarching needs-based question stemmed from my observations and our discussions over the past month. We explored instructional implications for students from each of their classrooms.

Even though we began crafting the Language and Literacy framework early in the year to show the integration of literacy skills, the big question that continued to surface during our 45-minute conference time was, “How do we approach individual skill instruction?” Teachers were still very nervous about the perceived lack of focus on the individual skills (i.e. phonics) and wanted to know where these skills would be embedded within the Language and Literacy framework. In order for the teachers to see that the Texas standards were still a part of the curriculum, I created a matrix showing all of the individual skills and how they were now embedded within an authentic context for learning (Table 1). This matrix provided a visual for them to see how all the skills would fit into the bigger context of the framework.

Table 1  
*Skills Matrix to Show Skill Integration within Language and Literacy Framework*

Language and Literacy Framework Component	What the Teacher <i>might</i> be doing	What the Student <i>might</i> be doing	Skill (correlated to K-2 Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills TEKS)	Min/180 %
Interactive Writing/ Morning Message	writing	writing	phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding, sight words,	30 min
	sharing the pen	sharing the pen	punctuation, oral language, print awareness, vocabulary	18%
	modeling	listening	development, poetry, oral and written conventions, spelling, handwriting, letter formation,	
	speaking	speaking	written and oral academic language, parts of speech	
		individual whiteboard writing		
		in the air (sky) writing		
Writing Workshop/ Word Study	teaching mini lesson	writing	writing process, working with words within context, poetry,	60 min
	modeling	conferring/teacher	language experience approach, handwriting, punctuation, writing conventions, spelling, media literacy, research	33%
	conferring/writers	working in small group		
	informal assessments	sharing writing		

	observations			
Read Aloud	Reading	active listening	modeling prosody, think-alouds, metacognitive strategies,	15 min
	modeling prosody	turn and talk	increasing vocabulary, access to various themes and genres, poetry,	8%
	conducting think aloud	stop and jot	listening, ask and respond to questions, prediction	
	questioning			
sharing joy of reading				
Reading Workshop	teaching mini lesson	reading	comprehension, flexible range of metacognitive reading strategies,	60 min
	modeling	responding	purpose for reading, question the text, fix-up strategies when meaning breaks down, inferencing,	33%
	reading mentor text	conferring/teacher	retelling, making connections, critical reading, exposure to various genres	
	conferring/readers	meeting in literature circles		
	meeting/focus groups	meeting in book groups		
	anecdotal records			
	informal assessment	sharing response to reading		
observations				
Shared Reading	using big book	holding individual book	fluency, vocabulary development, literary genres, parts of speech, listening and speaking,	15 min
	small book/magnified	looking at big book	recognizing capitalization, punctuation, dialogue, concepts of print, sight words	8%
	modeling prosody	reading with teacher		
	using pointer	reading with expression		
	sweeping finger			
	using text as examples for teaching points	using Wikki Stix® using highlighting tape		

*Note.* Components can be done in any order throughout the day.

### Classroom Environments

The most visible change in teachers' growth was classroom environments. With the assistance of two professors who specialized in Home Interior, years worth of Rubbermaid bins, juice boxes left over from prior years' field days, paper clutter, outdated textbooks, wall mounted televisions, and distracting commercial posters, were cleaned out of classrooms. While this exercise was extremely difficult for the teachers to

discern what was valuable and what needed to go, it became the catalyst for the bigger change. Once the big obstacles were moved out of the way, teachers seemed to be able to focus on instruction. The biggest surprise during this process was how many teachers had quality children's literature stored in Rubbermaid bins. They had been stored on top of the lockers for years because the teachers had no idea as to where to start with organizing them. Rather than just making them available to students in an unorganized fashion, they had chosen to keep them stored. We chose to organize them according to the system described in *The Daily 5: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades* (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Although we did not utilize the structure outlined in the book for instruction, we found the classroom library planning tool a perfect fit for the primary grades. Once the classrooms were cleaned out, the principal bought tubs for uniform storage of all their classroom library books since we were sorting them according to genre, topics, and series (Figure 5). As an added surprise, she provided them with new large group rugs for the students to gather on for Reading Workshop. The difference in classrooms from the start of the year to the end of the year was astonishing! Teachers began to slowly transform their classrooms from cluttered, traditional classrooms that once showcased 'teacher space' to ones that were inviting, warm, child centered, and conducive to curling up with good books (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Uniform tubs that were purchased for classroom libraries.



*Figure 6.* Warm and inviting environment that invited children to curl up with a good book.

### ***Findings***

Because Lion Elementary School needed a new direction quickly and wanted deep and lasting change, we implemented many new goals simultaneously. While this is not typically the best way to implement lasting change, we did not want another quick fix. We wanted best practices done well, so we jumped in with both feet. Although this healing process is still in the initial treatment phase, the transformation of three key areas - culture, physical classroom environment, and instruction - was evident.

The academic discourse professional development style, as opposed to a “sit and get” style, supported teachers as active participants in their own learning. For the first two months of my work at Lion Elementary School, teachers did not ask any questions and did not seek out additional resources other than what I gave them to read or watch. However, the year ended with teachers who emailed me with specific questions regarding students’ learning and questions about where they could find more information regarding literacy topics. They became advocates for their own learning and advocates for their individual reader’s needs.

While it is only anecdotal at this point, I believe the added space for the reading of professional articles, videos, discussions, and readings played a large role in teachers evolving in their professional dialogue with each other and with children. Children are now invited into classroom libraries that contain multiple areas for relaxing, comfortable chairs, soft natural lighting, and organized book bins to choose books from. Students know how to select books that are interesting, relevant, and challenging from the classroom library. Students, who had not previously been successful in reading, are choosing books and staying with the same book since they are motivated and engaged. Students now read for meaning as opposed to being word callers. They recommend books to each other and ask for more independent reading time. Scripted reading instruction has been replaced with a beginning reading workshop approach.

The goal for the first year was to have teachers try and facilitate a whole group mini lesson followed by students reading independently for increasingly extended periods of time. Guided reading was replaced with individual conferring that was targeted toward individual student needs. Teachers developed closer relationships with their readers as a result of the one- on-one conferring. A veteran teacher summed it up by stating, “I always prided myself on knowing my students, but I’m embarrassed to look back and realize that I never knew them as readers. I now think of specific readers when I find a good book for our classroom library.” Literacy centers were replaced with extended time and opportunities to read and write in authentic contexts. When I walk the halls during reading instruction, I now see and hear students reading as opposed to teacher talk. Further work is still needed to assess long-term implications as to whether or not the students (and teachers) will continue to be avid readers and experience reading growth.

### ***Summary***

Primary students deserve teachers who are reading experts. The teachers at Lion Elementary learned to recognize themselves as readers and use their own reading experiences to assist and model strategies for their students. There are no one-size-fits-all

approaches to the teaching of reading. Reading is highly individualized to the needs of each student. Lion Elementary School teachers added breadth and depth to their teaching of reading repertoire and now have the decision making ability to discern which instructional strategies to use and why. Professional development will continue to provide frequent opportunities for practice and refinement of new skills, ways to create and maintain a literate environment, and increasing respectful and accountable dialogue. The primary teachers of Lion Elementary School have expressed a desire to continue learning about effective and evidence based reading instruction. It is their goal that the reading program will continue to heal and flourish over the next several years as a result of sound instructional decisions.

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