

Weaving a Balanced Literacy Framework by Jo-An Vargo

I love to weave when I can find the time. It's a wonderful form of self expression and gives me hours of enjoyment. Basket weaving can use many different types of materials. I've woven baskets using raffia, pine needles, bamboo reed, yarn, and even seaweed! There is a balance to using the right type(s) of fiber and also creating a form that is visually pleasing and communicates with the viewer. I can always find new ways to challenge myself in this art form.

Weaving meaning and skill into a child's understanding and application of reading and writing is another type of art. It's one that takes years to master all the nuances, and Primary School teachers are always seeking to improve their professional practice. Over the years, the faculty has understood the complexity of teaching reading and writing literacy. It needs to include word study (phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling), story time, small group work (guided reading and strategy lessons), interactive read-aloud with accountable talk, interactive writing, shared reading, and independent reading and writing workshops.

Holland Hall's Primary School faculty is undertaking a review of our language arts instructional content and practices this year. I'll be sharing some of our findings as the year progresses. This month's topic is word study. During the early years of childhood, word knowledge is aural. The oral language that surrounds children helps develop a rich speaking vocabulary. As their vocabulary grows, they begin to sort and categorize it. They compare one concept with another and also look at how these concepts are different.

Early phonemic awareness skills are practiced in our preschool classes. This continues through second grade. We work toward kindergarten mastery on many skills, including the identification of the number of words spoken in a sentence, and the patterns found in recognizing, completing, and producing rhyming words. As children move into first grade, we want them to be able to segment and blend individual sounds within words.

Once children gain the ability to manipulate units of sounds in words, it's time to unlock those patterns in printed words. Breaking the code of phonics is accomplished by associating letters and letter patterns with sounds and blending them within words. Word study activities include sorting pictures and words that require our students to examine, classify, and apply their knowledge of letters and sounds. I often tell children that we need to become detectives who find the clues in words.

We can't rely on just our visual memory to read and write. We must also teach our students how to become "word detectives" in order to read with sufficient accuracy and fluency and to write with stamina, an expressive author's "voice", and attention to mechanics. This level of skill then allows the human brain to focus on the important tasks of reading and writing - making meaning and conveying our thoughts effectively to others.

If we return to my basket metaphor, word study is just one of the types of materials necessary to form the foundation of literacy instruction in reading and writing. I'll return to the topic of reading and writing instruction periodically throughout the year. I hope that you will notice examples of word study in your child's classroom activities, the daily work in their folders, or in their homework. English is a tricky language, and, over the years, researchers have identified

clusters of relationships between words. Our job, as teachers, is to help children make meaning of sounds, letters, and word relationships.