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Student Teachers' Experiences with a Preparation-to-Practice Gap in Reading Instruction: A Preliminary Exploration and Implications for Teacher Preparation Faculty

Abstract

Abstract

Teacher educators and practitioners can agree that there are differences between knowing something in theory and knowing how to do something in a real classroom. This qualitative inquiry is anchored in evidence-based reading instruction as described by the National Reading Panel (2000) which emphasizes systematic, explicit instructional and teaching enhancements to support diverse students' learning in multi-tier general educational classrooms. Specifically, this study investigated how student teachers applied their knowledge of research based reading methods in general education classrooms during their capstone field experience at the end of their undergraduate program, hereafter called student teaching.

Keywords

Guided Reading, Evidence Based Reading, Student Teachers, Preparation

Teacher educators and practitioners can agree that there are differences between knowing something in theory and knowing how to do something in a real classroom. This investigation evolved out of the author's experiences working with eight pre-service teachers in a dual licensure (elementary education and special education) program and the questions these experiences raised about what teacher educators, particularly methods instructors, can do to support the transfer of evidence based instructional methods from courses to preservice field experiences. The teacher preparation program emphasized methods for assessment, data analysis, and interpretation to facilitate differentiated reading instruction within K-5 general education classrooms. The program goal was to prepare teachers who would be licensed as general and special educators to work in inclusive, differentiated classrooms. The author was interested to observe what happens when preservice teachers go into field experiences where instructional methods they observe and enact in the field are not consistent with what has been taught in their reading methods course.

This exploration is anchored in a methods course that used Scarborough's (2001) framework for reading instruction that prepares teachers to make thoughtfully adaptive instructional decisions and emphasizes systematic explicit instruction in the five key areas of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (2001) for students who are at-risk for reading failure in elementary general education classrooms (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2009; Slavin et al., 2010). Systematic, explicit instruction is teaching that clearly identifies, organizes, and sequences a set of skills and teaches these skills directly to students. As Allingham (2013) points out, a critical shortage exists of teachers who are well-prepared to individualize instruction based on students' individual reading needs. Specifically, this project explored the extent to which the choices student teachers made about reading instruction in general education classrooms with a wide range of K-5 student needs during their student teaching practicum were consistent with the methods they learned during their reading course.

Importance of the Study

This investigation adds value to our understanding of preservice teacher education in several dimensions. First, more than 95% of students with disabilities receive at least some of their instruction in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Thus, it is critically important that elementary and special education teachers learn instructional methods that lead to measurable and meaningful learning outcomes in reading for all students. However, there is evidence to suggest that very few classroom teachers, including those classrooms where preservice teachers complete their student teaching experiences, have access

to evidence based reading instructional materials and professional development (Kretlow & Helf, 2013).

Second, current legislation that governs special education and general education (IDEA, 2004; U. S. Department of Education, 2003; NCLB, 2001) requires the use of scientifically based instructional practices. The statutes emphasize methods validated by experimental studies. The NCLB (2001) requirements are consistent with the guidelines from the National Research Council (2002, pp. 3-5). While neither NCLB (2001) nor NRC (2003) guidelines mandate specific research methodologies, many important research designs in qualitative, single-case and correlational research are not specifically discussed as options that meet the guidelines for acceptable research methods (Bach, 2013). This is a source of ongoing concern in the literacy, elementary education, and special education communities. Although the issue is beyond the scope of the current paper, the author would be remiss to not acknowledge the debate. And thus, teachers and teacher educators are required by NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) to provide research-based instruction, as defined by practices vetted in studies that meet research guidelines favoring experimental, randomized trial studies, including practices recommended by the National Reading Panel (2001) to all students. Yet, the entire process of operationalizing scientifically based research for classroom application is known to be prohibitively complex and time consuming for teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Third, it is a significant challenge for schools of education to find student teaching placements in which the cooperating teachers' methods correspond to what the student teachers have learned during evidence based methods courses (Perrow, 2013). Without this correspondence, student teachers are likely to abandon evidence-based practices in favor of the cooperating teachers' instructional practices regardless of instructional efficacy or student outcomes (Clift & Brady, 2005). Fourth, given the current social and political interests in accountability, teacher educators are under increasing pressure to demonstrate a return on investment related to the millions of taxpayer dollars that have been spent developing effective instructional practices for teaching reading to students who are at-risk for reading failure. Therefore, teacher educators must find ways to work within the constraints of the classrooms available for use as student teaching placements to help student teachers connect methods courses to classroom practices during their student teaching experiences.

In response to the aforementioned challenges, this project explored student teaching, the first of two important stages of new teacher professional development. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, a brief overview of the

methods-to-practice gap in student teaching is discussed to provide the context for the study. Second, a popular approach to reading instruction in general education classrooms, *Guided Reading*, is described. Third, the conceptual framework and methods for the qualitative exploration are explained. Fourth, the outcomes are shared. Fifth, the results and implications for future, more formal research are discussed.

Preparation-to-Practice Gap

There is a significant body of research examining the preparation-to-practice gap in student teaching. Multiple studies report that of all the experiences and learning that occur in teacher preparation programs, the greatest influences on student teachers' instructional methods and instructional decision making are what they observe and practice during student teaching (Anderson & Stillman, 2012; Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2003; Clift & Brady, 2005). If the student teaching placement and the cooperating teacher do not support or model thoughtfully adaptive, instructional methods grounded in the NRP (2001) guidelines for research based systematic, explicit reading instruction mandated by the IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2001) it is unlikely that preservice teachers will retain the practices learned in their methods courses (Warford, 2011). The eight student teachers spent 10 weeks in inclusive (general and special education students receive the majority of their instruction in regular class through differentiated instruction) elementary school classrooms, hereafter called general education classrooms to distinguish them from pull-out or resource classrooms, as part of their student teaching experiences. In these classrooms, the student teachers were expected to use an approach to teaching reading loosely based on Pinnell and Fountas (2009) Guided Reading approach.

However, Guided Reading is an approach that is inconsistent with much of what the student teachers had learned about teaching reading in their methods courses during their teacher preparation program in that it is not systematic or explicit and relies heavily on teachers' expertise for instructional decision-making. And thus, the author was interested to see if the student teachers would abandon the methods learned in their reading course just the previous semester in favor of the less rigorous form of Guided Reading lessons enacted in their placements. The author was also interested to explore the need for building explicit instruction in how to modify existing instructional frameworks using research-based practices into her methods course. The author decided to use the Guided Reading lessons as a convenient place to start thinking about what kinds of additional preparations preservice teachers need to bridge the gap between methods courses and classroom practice. First, the author wondered if there is a need to explicitly prepare

preservice teachers is there something about the Guided Reading approach itself that is particularly problematic for inexperienced student teachers?

Guided Reading. Guided Reading (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009) is a widely adopted embedded code approach to teaching reading in general education classrooms. Every day, many children learn to read in classrooms that use Guided Reading. However, many children in these classrooms also do not learn to read and herein is a significant problem. Despite the fact that embedded code approaches to teaching reading are less effective for students who are at risk than systematic explicit phonics approaches (Foorman & Torgeson, 2001; Pullen & Lane, 2014), Guided Reading (GR) is the preferred instructional approach for teaching reading to diverse students in the general education classrooms where preservice teachers enact student teaching. There is little available definitive information about how a model Guided Reading lesson should be structured and implemented. A search of the literature using the search terms “guided reading” and “lesson” and “plan” in varying combinations yields a multitude of results but the author has been unable to find a “how-to” primer or standard against which to measure any particular teacher’s guided reading lesson. Even researchers’ attempts to quantify and measure the quality of GR lessons such as the Reading Lesson Observation Framework checklist (2000) by Henk, Moore, Marinak, & Tomasetti are based on subjective judgments that require the observer to determine (without explicit criteria) the extent to which teachers’ instruction is “appropriate” or “meaningful” or “high quality” (Henk, Moore, Marinak, & Tomasetti, 2000). In general, a Guided Reading lesson plan begins with a teacher directed preview of the book. Next the teacher and students read the book together while the teacher asks questions to guide students’ comprehension of the story. Finally, the teacher asks children to review the story and demonstrate comprehension through teacher directed questions and answers discussion (Anderson, Wilkinson, Mason, 1991; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009; Henk, Moore, Marinak, & Tomasetti, 2000).

A typical GR lesson emphasizes increasing students’ oral reading fluency through independent reading, comprehension, and vocabulary. There is little to no emphasis on phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle. Students learn to attend to multiple features of text to increase comprehension including background knowledge and pictures. All of these can be highly effective instructional practices in the hands of expert practitioners because these teachers know enough about reading and students and differentiation to engage in thoughtfully adaptive instruction literacy teaching that incorporates systematic, explicit techniques where needed. But, for all of the reasons listed previously, it can be (a) difficult if not impossible to articulate and document the behaviors and decisions these experts make as they go through their instructional day, (b) it is equally as difficult, if not

more so, to learn to support ongoing thoughtfully adaptive practices among preservice teachers who are not working with these experts, and (c) experts are few and far between (Kretlow & Helf, 2013).

The researcher used informally a qualitative exploratory research approach (Spradley, 1980) in order to help the author develop a more thorough understanding of what actually happened to the interns' instructional skills and philosophies during the ineffective Guided Reading lessons the student teachers observed and enacted during their elementary school placements. A secondary purpose was to use this understanding to improve alignment between the methods course and student teachers' experiences in their placements. To explore these issues, the author collected data on the use of research based instructional strategies during Guided Reading lessons (Bursuck & Damer, 2009) that had previously been taught during the methods course. Although this project was based in a qualitative exploratory framework, it is important to note that this was an informal inquiry by a novice college instructor and academic, not a formal case study. All ethical and legal requirements (i.e., institutional research board) associated with a more formal research project were enacted to ensure adequate protections for the student teachers and the cooperating teachers and elementary school students.

Conceptual Framework

The idea for this project originated in observations and interactions with a cohort of students working toward a dual major in elementary education and special education. Those pre-service teachers had training in evidence-based reading methods in the semester immediately prior to their student teaching placements in general education classrooms.

Researchers and teacher educators know a great deal about what effective reading instruction for diverse students looks like-systematic, explicit reading instruction works for the vast majority of students in the general education classroom (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; Lyon, 1998; Kennedy-Manzo, 2003; NRP, 2000). Since the later 1990's, researchers have explored many aspects of reading methods coursework (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; Kennedy-Manzo, 2003; NRP, 2000). None of these reading methods studies consider what we know about preservice and early career teachers: When preservice teachers experience dissonance between methods coursework and the student teaching environment, they will nearly always abandon their theoretically based knowledge and adopt the attitudes and practices of the cooperating teachers (Anderson, 2007; Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum; 2003; Cook, L. 2007; Madsen & Olson, 2005; Clift & Brady, 2005; Meyer, Flores-Duenas, & Rossi, 2000; Ranson & Weisenbach, 1994).

Research Questions

The purpose of this exploration was to learn what the dual majors would do to teach reading to general education students during Guided Reading lessons in their elementary education student teaching placements. This was an exploratory project and addressed the following questions:

1. What happened during the student teachers' Guided Reading lessons?
2. What did the student teachers think about reading instruction in general education classrooms?
 - a. How did they make instructional decisions?
 - b. How did their practice relate to their methods training?
 - c. What did they think about the relationships between coursework and practice?

We must understand the meaning of the student teaching experience from their perspectives in order to examine the contexts in which they make instructional decisions (Grossman, 2005).

Methods

Setting

The student teachers were observed in their general education elementary student teaching placements in eight inclusive K-5 classrooms. The author took descriptive observation field notes of the student teachers' instructional behaviors during guided reading lessons. Five of the student teachers participated in a group interview that took place in a classroom on campus at the end of the Spring 2010 semester.

Sample and Sample Selection

Student teachers were a convenience sample of eight student teachers in a cohort of dual majors. The researcher taught the student teachers' reading methods course during the previous semester. The observations of the student teachers were non-evaluative.

The cohort was comprised mainly of White females in their early 20s. Like many programs in teacher education at the university and across the country, the dual major program is imbalanced regarding gender and ethnicity but that is beyond the scope of the current study. All student teachers were traditional undergraduate students and were not previously licensed teachers. This distinction is important

because the researcher was primarily interested in the traditional student teaching experiences of people who have never worked in a classroom.

Student teachers were recruited during a practicum seminar at the beginning of their student teaching semester before the beginning of their 10 week general education student teaching placement. All members of the cohort (18 students) were invited to participate. Eight student teachers volunteered to participate in the study.

Data Collection

There is a substantial body of research exploring the preparation-to-practice gap in student teaching. Clift and Brady (2005) reviewed over 100 studies of methods courses and field experiences in an attempt to describe pre-service teachers' decision making related to the methods-to practice gap. The emphasis in these studies is on changing the student teachers' behavior, the cooperating teachers' behavior or both. Outcomes suggest that the cooperating teachers' behavior is resistant to change and that their behavior shapes the beliefs and practices of their interns to a great degree than coursework or other university-based learning experiences. The project questions were very specific and attempted to isolate teacher characteristics in order to explain their behaviors. Much of the data were collected through written surveys or through structured interviews.

This project is different from previous studies in that it used a pragmatic (Creswell, 2009) case study approach to frame the inquiry. The project included descriptive observation (Spradley, 1980) of what student teachers did to teach reading in general education elementary field placements and participant interviews (Spradley, 1980). The author conducted a total of 13 observations across the middle 6 weeks of the 10-week placement in the 8 inclusive general education classrooms (1 student teacher in kindergarten, 2 student teachers in first grade, 2 in second grade, 1 in third grade, 1 in fourth grade, 1 in fifth grade). The original plan was to observe each intern teaching 2 GR lessons over the middle six weeks of the placement. Unfortunately, in three classrooms (2 third grade classrooms and 1 fifth grade classroom) only one observation each was possible due to conflicts with benchmark testing and test preparation. The observations helped the author to understand what the student teachers were doing to teach reading in their field placements and to begin to develop a deep working knowledge of how the context deeply influences their practice and beliefs, regardless of how they have been trained during their methods courses. The information from the project will inform the design and purpose of future research and has informed design and implementation of the methods courses.

Descriptive observation. The purpose of descriptive observation is to determine what happens in a particular situation (Spradley, 1980). A benefit of the descriptive observation that is particularly relevant to this project is its power to guide the researcher when the researcher is “most ignorant of the culture under consideration” (Spradley, 1980, p. 76). The project used Spradley’s (1980) “grand tour” approach to gather descriptive observation data that helped the researcher understand student teaching from the student teacher’s perspective. Most studies of student teaching are also evaluations of the teacher preparation program. This project was different in that the author was not using the information to learn about the quality of the teacher education program or the dual major program. Instead, the purpose of the project was to understand what happens when our students went into their student teaching placements after receiving training in research based instructional practices and how the experience in the placement changed their instructional practices and their beliefs about what constitutes effective practice.

Although this was not a formal research design, observation data collection was organized around the principles of Spradley’s (1980) mini-tour descriptive observation of the student teachers’ GR lessons. The author initially used an informal observational protocol (Creswell, 2009) to take field notes during each observation. The field note observational protocol was organized according to the researcher’s initial high level understanding of a basic GR lesson plan, and research based instructional strategies in reading (Bursuck & Damer, 2009). The field note observational protocol was only to organize the researcher’s personal note taking. It was not validated for wider use and eventually the researcher simply made running notes on a legal pad to document what was happening during each observation. The field notes document both what the researcher observed as well as impressions or reactions to those observations in situ (Shank, 2006). The raw field notes were examined and organized around Spradley’s (1980) mini-tour descriptive observation approach after each observation to ensure that each of the following essential aspects of the mini-tour descriptive observation protocol were addressed in the observation. According to Spradley (1980), when conducting descriptive observations researchers must be able to describe in detail all of the following: events, time periods, actors, goals, feelings, places, objects, acts, activities (Spradley, 1980).

Interviews. Interview data were collected during an open-ended group interview with five student teachers at the end of the semester after the student teachers had completed their placements. The student teachers were asked to discuss their experiences teaching the Guided Reading lessons. As the student teachers talked, the author used probes to elicit information about how they planned GR lessons and how they made instructional decisions regarding GR lessons. The

author also probed to elicit information about their student teaching experiences, how they felt about their cooperating teachers' approach to teaching reading, what they learned from the student teaching experiences around reading and why. The interview questions also allowed student teachers to discuss themes that emerged during the individual interviews and over the course of the study. The student teachers each brought their own personalities and beliefs to the interview process and privileged certain experiences differently which required differing intensity and types of probes to get at the author's central purpose (Maxwell, 2005) which was to look for evidence in practice and behavior that offered insight into the meaning they made of teaching guided reading as a complex experience.

Methods of Data Analysis

Field notes were organized and prepared for analysis by placing them in order, reviewing the details of each set of notes, identifying themes, and checking for accuracy (Creswell, 2009). Using techniques based in but modified from ethnographic analysis and case study analysis (Creswell, 2007; Wolcott, 1994) the observation data analysis included description, analysis, and interpretation. The observation data were used to generate an overall narrative for the aggregated observations that describes what occurred during guided reading lessons. Emergent topics were listed and clusters of these topics were arranged into themes and codes. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Interview transcripts were searched for emerging themes. Finally the author attempted to bring all of the information together to explore of the meaning student teachers made of student teaching (Miles & Huberman in Shank, 2006).

Results

Observation Data Analysis

Across the eight classrooms there was much variation in the size of the groups for guided reading. One school followed a whole class model that includes 20 students, other schools tended to have 3-6 children in each group. The K-5 students were placed in groups according to DRA results which means that students are not grouped based on similarities in phonemic awareness skills or phonics knowledge. Across the 8 classrooms, students were reading in leveled readers that were not decodable or controlled text books. Overall, 13 GR lessons conducted by student teachers were observed and seven themes emerged: amount and quality of teacher talk; instructional approach; feedback; behavior management; student time on task; phonics and phonemic awareness instruction; vocabulary instruction. Each of these is discussed below. The terms "teacher" and "student teacher" are used interchangeably.

Amount and quality of teacher talk. Across all student teachers, the student teachers never stopped talking. Student teachers talked throughout the entire lessons. They talked while students were reading and writing. The teacher talk was not systematic or explicit and frequently led students off-task into tangential topics. The amount of teacher talk interrupted students while they were attempting to read silently and also appeared to be related to low student attention.

Instructional approaches. The student teachers used questioning strategies instead of systematic, explicit instruction. Students were encouraged to use the pictures on the page, initial phonemes, and prior knowledge to “guess” when they were unable to read words. When student teachers attempted to use unison responses or choral reading, they did not use signals to coordinate the students’ reading. The result was a cacophony of all students reading aloud at the same time at different rates without teacher monitoring or feedback. Student teachers also used partner reading but it was unmonitored and the researcher observed that many students in the pairs were reading at their frustration level or their independent level so the value of this activity for individual students is questionable. Across all the observed lessons, much instructional time was given to determining if the texts students were reading were fiction or non-fiction and how did students know? The criteria for non-fiction across all classrooms were that these books included photographs whereas the fiction books included drawings.

Feedback. The amount and quality of student teacher feedback was very much related to student behaviors. When students were well-behaved, the teachers tended to give more praise related to reading. When students’ behaviors were challenging, little to no feedback related to instruction was given to students. Even when student teachers were giving positive feedback, the feedback was non-specific and was not instructive or corrective. Behavioral feedback was often indirect and generally not effective. No student teacher maintained a 4:1 ratio of positive to corrective feedback.

Behavior management. Behavior management was one of the biggest challenges the student teachers faced. Much of the undesirable behavior were low-level behaviors that emerged when students appeared to not understand the work they were asked to do, during long periods of unmonitored independent reading time, or during long intervals of much teacher talk, all of which occurred often. Student teachers did not use instructional modifications to address problem behaviors. All student teachers used a required advance organizer activity that appears to be prescribed by the school system. The activity consists of the teacher holding up a card and having the students repeat a statement that begins with “As learners, we will...” and then students repeat the standard course of study objective

that is the focus of the lesson. There is no adaptation for student friendly language and few attempts are made to connect this rote exercise to the activities students actually engage in during the lesson.

Student time on task. Students spend very little time reading during guided reading lessons. In one classroom where behavior management is a concern, students did not get to read at all. On average, students spent between 10% and 30% of a guided reading lesson interacting with text or reading. Most of the time during the average observed guided reading lesson was spent listening to teachers talking, modeling, thinking aloud, reading aloud, etc. Even in classes where substantial amounts of time were spent partner reading, students were frequently interrupted with teacher talk, other activities, comprehension questions, or procedural interruptions such as homework checks, field trip forms, etc. This was interesting because GR is a model that relies on students reading independently to develop fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Students were frequently off task during guided reading lessons.

Phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. Very little phonics or phonemic awareness instruction happened during the GR lessons. When these did occur, the instruction was not systematic or explicit and did not connect to letter-sound patterns in the books students were reading. Students were instructed to sound out irregular words that they could not read and teachers prompted this sounding out by slowly repeating the initial sounds or syllables in the word until students guessed the word based on other cues, including context or pictures in the text. Student teachers did not use systematic, explicit, direct instruction to teach phonics or phonemic awareness to children. There were occasional instances of cumulative review but these were not explicit and did not ensure that all students had mastered all patterns.

Vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary instruction was limited. Students in grades 3-5 were required to copy dictionary definitions and write sentences with these definitions. Students in K-2 were guided through series of questions or given verbal or visual prompts that did not capture the essential meanings of the words. In one kindergarten classroom students were told to talk to their partner or look back in their story to figure out the meanings of words. In no instances did student teachers explicitly tell students the correct definitions for the words they were being asked to learn.

Interview data. The high level findings from the interview data indicate that these student teachers did not connect what they learned about systematic, explicit instruction during their reading methods course to the reading instruction

they enacted during their student teaching. During the interview, the 5 student teachers repeatedly discussed GR as an explicit instructional format and discussed the importance of the DRA assessments. The student teachers did not discuss multi-tier instruction, progress monitoring, or other characteristics of EBP in reading. The student teachers also did not indicate that they observed any EBP in reading during their general education elementary education placements.

Discussion

Overall, these results are consistent with what is known about student teachers. The student teachers in this study did not have opportunities to apply what they learned about EBP in reading during their capstone student teaching experiences. Also, although Guided Reading is a widely accepted instructional practice for teaching reading in general education classrooms, the student teachers did not observe their cooperating teachers using instructional methods consistent with what is known about EBP in reading to differentiate the GR lessons based on individual reader's needs. It was not possible for the author to discern if the issues had more to do with Guided Reading as an instructional approach or with the poor implementation of the GR model that occurred in these classrooms. This is a topic for future inquiry using a more formal research design. However, for the author, the important and distressing point that emerged was that the student teachers fully accepted the GR lessons that were the norm in the classrooms where they conducted their student teaching and adopted beliefs about the GR instructional approach that were likely to support their ongoing use of these methods when they started working in their own classrooms the following year. A clear and readily apparent disconnection emerged between the methods class and the student teaching placement. One lasting impact for the author has been to redesign the methods course to include explicit instruction and practice about both (a) well-implemented GR lessons and (b) using research based practices to differentiate GR lessons to make them more likely to be effective with struggling readers. And finally, the project adds incrementally (albeit informally) to the growing body of literature exploring the preparation-to-practice gap between methods courses and field experiences in teacher preparation programs.

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