

More Than Just Hands On: A Partnership Between a University Reading Class and Two Second Grade Teachers

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Abstract

This oral history study looks into the collaborative relationship between a preservice teacher, the professor of a Reading Acquisition and Development class and two second grade teachers from a medium-sized elementary school. The impact of the collaborative relationship is told from the viewpoints of the preservice teacher, the professor and two teachers. Although all participants had a hand in crafting the retelling of this experience, in order to keep some control, each participant was asked to record answers to several questions. The key phrases were extracted from their interviews and categorized in order to discover the common assumptions and beliefs of each of the participants regarding the value of the experience. A descriptive relationship was established among the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of the participants. This study represents the experiences in teaching and learning within a partnership in the learning environment.

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“Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much” (Keller, as cited in Herrmann, 2013, p. 222). This quote by Helen Keller beautifully represents the powerful paradigm shifting impact the partnership between a university reading class and two elementary school second grade classes produced. This oral history study examines the individual stories and the changes that occurred in the perceptions and practices of the professor, a university student and two classroom teachers within the two institutions of learning. This experience began as a professor’s quest of an introductory reading course for preservice

teachers to create a learning environment which would produce permanent changes in the perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes of her students, as well as help them to develop a deep understanding of how to teach reading to young children. The quest resulted in a partnership between the university and two second grade teachers to provide the university students with a unique tutoring experience that impacted the university preservice teachers, the elementary teachers and the professor. To fully glean the wisdom from this partnership, the professor, one university student, and the two elementary teachers decided to record their experiences and analyze those recordings to determine the commonalities in their very unique personal experience of this common endeavor.

Literature Review

University and Elementary Partnerships

According to Zeichner (2010), “teacher educators have tried a variety of approaches to strengthen the connections between campus and field-based teacher education” (p. 91). Some of these approaches include creating campus-based lab schools (Fraser, 2007), smaller clinical laboratories on campuses (Berliner, 1985), and using partner schools (Osguthorpe, 1995). The partner school provides a venue for intensifying of the connection between campus and field based education in that it allows for the influx of college students to be able to work with the elementary students. It also provides a platform for structured and professor guided field-based teaching experience before the student teaching semester. The opportunity for the preservice teacher to refine and develop his or her theory, strategies and pedagogical practices through the act of teaching is powerful (Dawkins, Ritz & Loudon, 2009). Merrill (2002) suggests that real learning occurs in the application of knowledge to real world experiences. The partnership allows for active participation that enables the preservice teacher to develop one unified theory of teaching that embodies both espoused theory and theory of practice (Crowder, 2013). According to Argyris and Schön (1974), reducing the shadow or gap between theories-in-use, or theories of practice, and espoused theories is required for solid decision making. Haim, Strauss, and Ravid (2004) expound on the research of Argyris and Schön and, in connecting it with educators, demonstrate the need

to provide experiences that do more than inform but, through charged experiences, impact and shift the paradigms held to by the preservice teachers. The ability of preservice teachers to take responsibility for teaching students reading lessons provides that paradigm-shifting emotionally charged experience.

Reading Instruction

To effectively teach reading to a group of beginning readers, Cobb (2004) states the two most important aspects of the teaching environment include interacting and monitoring. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that the relationship between the student and the teacher is a vital component of the student's learning process. Along with building relationships, teachers must monitor students effectively do determine student need. According to Cobb (2004), the implementation of a variety of assessments coupled with teacher reflection regarding the monitoring of the student is nonnegotiable. These two skills are difficult to teach within the walls of a university classroom without a hands-on component. Along with the two aspects Cobb mentions, the concepts related to beginning readers and writers must be taught. These concepts include, but are not limited to: theory of and strategies for language development, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, comprehension, writing cycle, writing traits, and assessment. The challenge for the professor lies in developing a learning experience that fosters a deep enough level of knowledge for the preservice teacher to connect the theory with practice. Zeichner and Gore (1990) posit in their theory of teacher socialization that practice in context plays a vital role in assisting the teacher candidate to connect with the context and formal knowledge of the discipline. This concept of practice in context is part of the foundation for Hoffman and Pearson's (2000) idea that literacy education for preservice teachers must make a shift from teaching preservice literacy educators to training them. The foundation of this assertion is in the idea that training provides the type of learning experience that enables the preservice teacher to practice the skill, not just the knowledge.

Use of Stories as a Method

Why use stories instead of simple answers to questions? As the discussions of how to share our experiences began, we realized that the value of our experiences could not be adequately shared apart from the stories. Biott, Moos, and Moller (2001) explained the value of the personal story as a way to “try to interpret experiences and make their meanings explicit” (p. 36). The oral history interview is one means of collecting personal stories. According to Yow (2005), “in an oral history interview, narrators answer by telling stories” (p. 300). “These stories embody the narrator’s views of themselves situated within their own history. The identity situated within one’s memory is a way of making sense of oneself” (Crowder & Griffith, 2007, p. 168). It is within that situated memory that the narrator makes sense of the experience. The retelling of the university and elementary partnership experience reveals the value of the experience as well as the growth of the narrators.

The Partnership

History of How the Partnership Developed

It is a difficult task to help preservice teachers, in their first literacy education class, to understand the concepts of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension. Even more difficult is the job of helping those same students to make the connection between assessment and the selection of teaching strategies. After struggling through a semester of requiring students practice on each other, read, and memorize, the professor determined that the traditional college classroom did not allow for the emotionally charged, inquiry based, and authentic experience necessary to really learn this much difficult material. She sought help from a nearby elementary school. After meeting with the school liaison, she learned of a second grade teacher, Ms. King, who, with her class of struggling readers, was feeling overwhelmed. Ms. King was also discouraged by the fear of not being able to truly meet the needs of each individual student. The professor and Ms. King met.

Together, Ms. King and the professor created an eight week tutoring experience that brought the two classrooms, college and elementary, together. After the first year of collaboration, Mrs. King’s

colleague, Mrs. Mount, requested to be added. Each semester, Mrs. King, Mrs. Mount and the professor matched their students together. Generally, each college preservice teacher was matched with one or two elementary students. They were together the entire eight weeks. During this time, the college students met one of the two weekly class periods at the elementary school.

The Meetings

The first meeting between the students was a getting to know you meeting in which interviews and informal interest inventories are conducted. The preservice teachers were encouraged to use the Garfield Interest Inventory as well as a self-selected interest inventory. During the second meeting, the preservice teacher guided the student through a read aloud and a Language Experience Activity (L.E.A.). For the read aloud, each preservice was instructed to take a variety of books, based on the interests of their students. The books were to be high-quality narrative story books. Once the preservice teacher introduced the book using the picture walk, he or she read the story. Following the reading, the preservice teacher led his/her student(s) through a discussion of beginning, middle and end of the story. Following the discussion, the preservice instructed the student(s) to take a large sheet of paper and fold it so that the crease created a total of eight squares, four on the top and four on the bottom. The elementary student was then directed to number the squares. In the first square, the student was asked to draw a picture representing the beginning of a story; either a retelling or original. The last square represented the end of the story. The six squares in the middle sequenced the rise and fall in action. Once the pictures were done, the preservice teacher asked the student to dictate the story to go with the pictures. This dictation is recorded on a separate paper. Once the dictation was complete, the student was given the opportunity to make changes. The handwritten text was typed and combined with the pictures to create a personal book for the student. This activity may have taken many meetings to finish, however, there was only one meeting devoted in exclusivity to this project. The third meeting was a time for the preservice teacher to conduct at least one running record on the student and begin working with the student on writing. The expectation was for the preservice teacher to use the knowledge he or she had gathered

regarding the student and to use the Fry readability chart to select appropriate books to conduct a running record. The preservice teacher conducted a miscue analysis on the running record to determine student approximations for future lessons. The writing work involved the preservice teacher taking the student through a complete writing cycle. The fourth through eighth meetings were broken into three thirty minute lessons: oral reading and fluency, word knowledge and comprehension, and the writing process and 6+1 traits. The preservice teachers were responsible for providing a rationale for each strategy they selected to use with their students. The rationale may have included approximations derived from the miscue analysis, student interest, informal checks for understanding and observation. The preservice teachers were also responsible for submitting a plan for instruction. The plan, if not acceptable, was not be used with the students. For the preservice teacher to have the privilege to meet with the students, his/her plan must have been well written and supported by evidence. If it was not, it is redone until it was acceptable. Finally, the preservice teacher provided a recounting of what happened during the session and a personal reflection giving his/her theory for what happened during each meeting.

Participants

The participants of this study were self-selected. The professor was a white female with a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in reading. The preservice teacher was an African American female working on a BS in Interdisciplinary Studies with teaching certification for EC-6th grades. One teacher was an African American female with a first career in the military. The other teacher was a white female with a first career in social work.

Method

Each participant was given a digital recorder and a list of questions. The list of questions for the teachers and the professor were slightly different from those posed to the preservice teacher. To mitigate the influence the responses of one another, the participants chose to record their answers in isolation, rather than interview one another. The expectation for the answers to be supported by stories from the experience was noted before the participants dispersed to make their recordings.

Table 1

Questions for Teachers and Professor

1. When we started this endeavor what did you expect or hope to happen in your class with your students?
2. How did this impact your students? Motivation? Reading levels? Behavior? And why do you think so?
3. Did this impact you? Motivation? Professional Development? Aspirations? And why do you think so?

Table 2

Questions for Preservice Teacher

1. What was your perception of this project when we started?
2. What did you learn about your students? Motivation? Reading levels? Behavior? And why do you think so?
3. Did this impact you? Motivation? Professional Development? Aspirations? And why do you think so?

Once the answers to the questions were recorded, the recordings were transcribed and analyzed using a method developed by Yow (2005). This method requires the transcripts be read, general themes or messages in each of the transcripts be noted and then compared among the interviews. The supporting information from the interview transcription is included in the discussion of the groups. The names of the children discussed in the following stories have been changed to protect their identity.

Student Interview

The first interview recorded was that of Erika Bolden. At the time of this interview, Ms. Bolden had completed the semester in which the course was situated. Once Ms. Bolden's answers were transcribed, we had five double-spaced pages of responses. Her responses were a combination of student speak, those things she would expect the professor to want to hear, and genuine stories of her experience. An example of "student speak" is, "I tried to accomplish this goal by championing the cause of improved

reading that met their individual...” One of her stories was based on her first day in the second grade class:

Standing at the entrance of Mrs. King’s class, I experienced joy and nervousness of meeting my two new students that I had just been assigned. I was extremely lucky to be assigned a bright girl and a charming boy. I decided to start my lesson plan with an activity strategy to get both of my students motivated and engaged in the reading lesson.

This strategy actually killed two birds with one stone because, not only was my students inspired to learn, but they also gained the opportunity to get to know me.

Following the method devised by Yow (2005), and, after several readings of the transcript, the investigators created categories to lend understanding to the words of the interview: I am a learner; I am confident; and I adore my students.

Teacher Interview 1

Although Mrs. King had been given a list of questions and a digital recorder, she chose to write the answers to her questions and point to discussions that she and the professor have shared over the years of working together. In reference to the first question regarding expectations, she wrote two bulleted statements: “When we began, what I was expecting was more intense small group reading instruction.” and “The preservice teachers would provide additional support for the classroom teacher.” Her information was more abbreviated than the information of the other participants. Her interview was three typed pages. Although her statements were more succinct, Ms. King focused on concepts that are important to the understanding of this experience: “I know what my students need; and I care about my students.”

Teacher Interview 2

The second teacher interview was submitted by Ms. Mount. Where the other two interviews were mostly statements with stories, Ms. Mount’s interview consisted of mainly stories with statements. Her

response to the first question, “When we started this endeavor, what did you expect or hope to happen in your class with your students?” is an example of the style typical to her answers:

When I saw what was going on in Ms. King’s class I was so excited! Because what I saw was more one on one attention. It is very hard for a classroom teacher to really give forty-five minutes to an hour to one or two people. There were so many hands-on activities and I saw excitement on the children’s faces.

Ms. Mount recorded her answers as the preservice teachers were visiting her class. Her answers reflected what she had experienced in the past and what she was witnessing at the time of the recording. The main focus of Ms. Mount’s answers appeared to be a concentration on the emotional needs of the students. This could be a result of her experience as a social worker.

Professor Interview

Dr. Davis’ interview included stories referring to all of her experiences with preservice teachers and reflected changes in perceptions and attitudes. An example of this is found in her answer to the first question:

Originally my expectations were simple and very one dimensional. I remember my initial visit with Ms. King. My biggest concern was the inauthenticity of my course regarding the instruction of my preservice teachers. I wanted them to be able to work with students. Ms. King just needed reinforcements. Her students were fairly low readers and she was finding it difficult to have enough time to meet each student’s needs.

Reading through the transcripts, we found Dr. Davis showed a focus on two areas: developing strong ethics and skills in her preservice teachers; and the desire to do no harm to any student.

Results Discussion

This oral study emphasizes the stories of change for four individuals who encountered the same learning experience. Although each faced the experience from different vantage points, the stories demonstrated unique areas of growth for each as they went through the process. All of the participants,

through individual processes and paths, shared several commonalities: concerns, personal change, and student growth.

Concerns

According to Davis and King, this endeavor was born out of concern. Davis, “I was concerned that my students were not able to understand ...” and “The night after we secured the appropriate approvals, I was unable to sleep. It was going to take a lot of teaching and monitoring to keep my students on track.” Ms. King’s original concern, “I was worried that my students were not getting enough personal instruction.” Ms. Mount’s concern centered on her desire for each student to develop a healthy relationship with an adult, “So what I hoped to happen was just to have relationships happen.” Ms. Bolden’s concerns were based on her lack of experience, “While I know I can figure this out, I just hope my students will learn.”

Personal Growth

The personal growth that occurred as a result of this experience is expected in the preservice teacher because they are learning and expected to grow. However, the changes that occurred with the professor were somewhat unexpected. Dr. Davis stated:

I am really not surprised that this worked. I am, by nature, a social constructivist. This experience had to work. What changed in me is my understanding of the way I can create deeper collaborative relationships with my students. What is being created is a collegial environment that enables me to write research with my students. It is incredible. The other thing that changed is my perception of my students. This endeavor forces me to see them as the teachers they are becoming. It allows me the opportunity to model, correct and complement in real time. That is powerful!

Dr. Davis went on to describe the impact that being in the public school, working with the students and the teachers, as well as the preservice teachers, enabled her to really see how education has changed since

she left the classroom. Ms. King and Ms. Mount both expressed gratitude for all of the new ideas for teaching the components of literacy. Ms. King stated,

This experience impacted me in so many ways... There were things happening that I was unable to explain... there was a paradigm shift. I was able to see how it is better for the students to get small group instruction, and learn through fun activities.

Along with her growing knowledge of the tenants of reading instruction and pedagogy, Ms. Bolden wrote in her reflection, "I've learned that I have to continue to grow professionally because I can never learn and know enough when it comes to teaching." All four of the participants believed they were changed by the relationships they developed with each other.

Student Growth

Without student growth, this endeavor would have been an utter failure. Ms. Mount spoke of student growth in terms of personal growth and academic growth:

How has this impacted my students? Oh my, its impacted all of them. For one thing personally, I had one little girl that had just some bad experiences with men... She had a male tutor that was just so good and it was nice to see her with a positive male role model... reading levels did improve. Last year when I had tutors for both semesters, I didn't have a child below an L they are supposed to be an M but you can pass a second grader on to 3rd grade at an L.

King reiterated the impact of the relationships:

My students were impacted by the connection that was created between the student and the mentor teacher... The students became invested in the relationship with their mentor, and as they became more invested in them, they became more invested in the materials that were taught.

Ms. Bolden spoke to the specific growth in her students: "Jill is noticing that her accuracy, rate, and fluency in reading have truly developed and Bob is impressed with the results of him becoming more fluent in his reading." Davis spoke more generally of the changes in her students: "I know this

experience has impacted my students; semester after semester, they return to thank me for the experience.”

Conclusion

The stories recounted demonstrate the power of the experience. The answers themselves point to the changes that are took place in some of the participant; thereby validating the experience. In each of the narratives, powerful examples of growth are found; both the acknowledgement of personal growth and the witnessing of growth in others. The overcoming of concerns by addressing them and working to alleviate them is transformative in the education process. These stories do demonstrate the power and possibilities that are presented through the partnership between the university reading class and the second grade classrooms.

TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR LITERACY EDUCATION YEARBOOK

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