Prompting with a Purpose: Preparing the Literacy Coach

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Abstract

Professors at one university have developed a continuum of graduate level courses (i.e., foundational course, clinical course, and literacy coaching practicum) that scaffold the development of purposeful prompts through reflection-based models. Prompts at the foundational level implemented small group instruction built upon goal setting, thinking in action and thinking on action. Prompts in the clinical course built on systematic, daily reflections to facilitate children's literacy development. Finally, graduate reading candidates transitioned to a literacy coaching practicum where purposeful prompting was used to guide teacher-to-teacher interactions. In addition to describing this continuum of courses, this chapter will examine the multiple perspectives of the classroom teacher, the clinician, and the literacy coach within the various course levels.

Graduate reading programs are often meant to transition candidates from a focus on classroom instruction to literacy coaching, and to make a change of stance from reflection-on-action to reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987). In order to support this transition, graduate candidates must experience embedded opportunities for reflection and continuous practice in developing and utilizing purposeful prompting. Purposeful prompting is a significant component because the use of effective prompts provides a lens for teacher envisioning and reflection (Denton, 2007). This chapter discusses one university's continuum of graduate level courses that was specifically designed to transition candidates from a focus on classroom instruction to literacy coaching. Each of the three courses embedded in the graduate continuum will be discussed in a separate section. In addition, each section will also feature the participants' perspectives.

Foundational Coursework

Graduate reading candidates, at the onset of their Master's program, have a variety of background experiences that shape their perceptions of effective literacy instruction, particularly as they become influential teachers (Ruddell, 2004). Rapp, Rhodes and Strokes (2006) recommend designing coursework to integrate teachers' background experiences while incorporating reflective practices to enhance their view of literacy instruction. Teacher talk or strategic teacher prompts can be evaluated within individual courses, practical teaching experiences, and among a Reading Master's program to monitor changes in reading candidates' reflection of the use of strategic prompting (Ruddell, 2004; Thwaite & Rivalland, 2009).

A snapshot of the foundational course. Research outlining reflective practices and teacher discourse indicate that teachers have varied views of effective teacher talk, which is meant to support strategic comprehension and communication (Rapp, Rhodes & Stokes, 2006; Ruddell, 2004; Thwaite & Rivalland, 2009). "The teachers' roles within a classroom are closely related to types of classroom discourse" (Madda, Griffo, Pearson & Raphael, 2011, p. 45). During course discussions, candidates shared their perceptions of effective strategic prompts or teacher talk used during literacy lessons. For example, one graduate reading candidate, a novice primary teacher in a rural, public school district in South-central Pennsylvania, had a comprehensive definition of strategic teacher talk used to prompt readers' comprehension behaviors in a small group setting. This teacher reported using this prompt with a struggling reader, "I noticed that you seem confused. When I am confused, I reread a sentence, phrase or word to help me understand." Whereas, another graduate reading candidate had limited prior knowledge related to effective literacy prompts. Her instructional experiences included teaching struggling readers in a learning support middle school classroom. Her definition of prompting students' comprehension behaviors was limited to teacher directed content questions, including "Who are the characters in the story?"

Since graduate reading candidates have a variety of definitions about strategic prompts (Almsi & Hart, 2011; Rapp, Rhodes & Strokes, 2006; Thwaite & Rivalland, 2009), a course assignment was designed to confirm candidates' perceptions through reflections. Working as a group, the graduate reading candidates planned a comprehension strategy-based lesson that included the following: identifying important information, monitoring understanding, and making connections. The candidates created a list of prompts to be implemented within the lesson. A lesson simulation with primary readers served as a practical experience to investigate the use of the prompts. Lessons were taped, and following the lesson, the professor printed the teachers' prompts on sentence strips. Graduate reading candidates sorted each of the sentence strip prompts into one of the following categories: content prompts, directional/procedural prompts or pedagogical/strategic prompts. Content prompts were identified as requiring the reader to relate efferent information from the text, including "What is a noun?" Directional or procedural prompts required the reader to follow a process or steps to complete a task, including "Find the topic sentence and look for a key word that explains the main idea." Pedagogical or strategic

prompts included statements that modeled expected literary behaviors used to scaffold readers, including "When I read that sentence, I thought of a connection."

Graduate reading candidates found that a majority of their statements could be categorized into content prompts and directional/procedural prompts. They noticed that the more effective prompts were those statements that included a model of best practice, thereby validating the importance of pedagogical/strategic prompts. These strategic prompts included reflective statements like, "When I read and I don't know what to do, I stop and think." They concluded that to support strategic readers, their prompts must explicitly direct readers' critical thinking through the comprehension process.

What was learned from this experience? It appears that in a foundational literacy course, both the professor and graduate reading candidates must recognize prior knowledge as a starting point for constructing a unified approach for prompting. Guiding graduate students' knowledge of effective teacher talk can support the graduate candidates as they transition from foundational knowledge into practicum experiences.

Clinical Course

After completing the foundational course, candidates transitioned into a clinical setting where purposeful prompting was incorporated into tutoring sessions. Assessment and instructional strategies were also practiced and discussed to build insights about literacy processes related to individual developmental needs. This promoted an understanding of the relationship between assessment and instruction that included purposeful prompting to adjust and strengthen literacy behaviors. The experience necessitated decisions that need to be made within a clinical setting with struggling readers.

A snapshot of the clinical course. At this point in the continuum of coursework, candidates were provided experiences in facilitating children's literacy development in a clinical setting with guidance and support from the course professor as well as feedback from peers. The candidates, now clinicians, delivered one-on-one literacy lessons that were based on observed student need. The clinical experience provided a supportive context in which to explore understandings about the teaching and learning process. The clinicians were expected to articulate an understanding of the foundations and processes of becoming literate. They were also expected to articulate an awareness of the reading-writing connection with the use of purposeful prompting to adjust literacy behaviors that have shown to be obstacles in literacy development. Clinicians were required to plan and participate in meaningful instruction including purposeful prompting for the development of proficient literacy. This clinical framework was a four-week program. Clinicians met with two tutees individually for five, 60-minute lessons each week. The lessons reflected a balanced literacy framework.

Within this setting, an action research project was set up around a specific identified need of the tutee based on observed reading behaviors. Prompts are chosen to adjust the reading behavior and strengthen the tutee's literacy development. Candidates had the opportunity to look carefully at the development of each child, observe gaps and weaknesses, and ultimately make decisions about appropriate instruction. Once critical behaviors were identified, choices were made about purposeful prompting to adjust the identified behavior. The source of the prompting came from *The Fountas and*

Pinnell Prompting Guide Part 1. A Tool for Literacy Teachers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

There were five critical steps in the action research process. Clinicians identified a problem area after working one-on-one with the tutee for four days. The clinician began a daily collection of data. The clinician also interpreted the data daily. After reviewing the data collected, a plan of action was designed and implemented using purposeful prompting. Finally, the clinician evaluated the results. Adjustments to the plan of action were made and maintained for the remainder of the clinical experience.

Areas of focus by the clinicians in the tutees' individual literacy development vary from clinician to clinician based on individual needs. One clinician discovered her tutee did not read for meaning; therefore, she chose to respond to the reading behavior with the prompt, "You said _____. Does that make sense?" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 13) or "Try that again and think of what would make sense" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 7). Another clinician chose to focus on the tutee looking through the entire word while reading. The clinician's prompt chosen was, "Does that look right?" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 7). Similarly, another tutee demonstrated proficiency at using picture clues to determine unknown words when reading but needed to check visual clues in the word. In addition to using the prompt, "You said _____. Does that look right?" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 13), this tutor also chose to prompt with "Does the word you said look like the word on the page?" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 13). One tutee was not making any attempts when he came to an unknown word, but he would verbally appeal to the clinician each time he came to an unknown word. That clinician chose to prompt with, "Try something" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 15) and "Say the first sound" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 11). A related issue appeared when a tutee came to an unknown word and he did not attempt to figure it out; instead, he waited for the clinician to tell him the word. His clinician chose to say, "What can you do?" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 15). After first working to teach him to get his mouth ready to attempt the first sound, eventually the clinician worked to prompt him to look through the whole word. Another clinician chose to focus on her tutee reading word endings. Her prompt was simply, "Read to the end of the word" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 7).

When it came to fluency, one clinician was concerned about her tutee having difficulty in this area, often ignoring, skipping, or misusing punctuation when he read. In addition, his reading rate was much slower than what is expected for his grade level. His fluency seemed to be impeding his comprehension of the text. This clinician chose to prompt him with, "Read it again and read the punctuation" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 17) or "Read this part again, faster" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 17), or "Put your words together so it sounds like the way you talk" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 18).

What was learned from this experience? Reports consistently indicated a decrease in the number of prompts needed for tutees to read for meaning; look through the entire word; check visual clues; make attempts at an unknown word; get mouths ready to attempt the first sound; look through the whole word; read word endings; read faster; and read with prosody. In addition, clinicians consistently reported that the choice of prompts impacted literacy development overtime. Ultimately it was the responsibility of the clinician to determine appropriate literacy instruction; however, it was purposeful prompting that appeared to assist the reader in becoming a more strategic reader and the clinician in becoming a more effective teacher.

Literacy Coaching Practicum

At this juncture, the candidate transitioned from the stance of a clinician to that of a Literacy Coach. This necessitated two changes. The first transition is from a focus on pedagogy to a focus on andragogy. The second transition is viewing one's self as possessing a sufficient level of expertise to facilitate reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987) in a peer.

A snapshot of the literacy coaching practicum. Candidates in the literacy coaching practicum utilized Lyons and Pinnell's (2001) framework to examine high-quality professional development. They developed professional development experiences intended to scaffold the introduction and implementation of instructional strategies for the teaching of literacy based on a language and literacy framework. The literacy coaching practicum included three components—personal interviews, videotaping of sample lessons, and coaching rounds.

Personal interviews. While the graduate students had previously participated in professional development as a learner, they had little experience in planning and delivering it to fellow educators. Lyons and Pinnell's framework consists of an interview for educators, which uses questions to gather information regarding perspectives about personal efficacy and willingness to work in collaborative settings. This interview seemed to be one of the challenging aspects of using the framework. One student reported that she had never had to think about what she knew or needed to know, that someone told her what training she would attend. Another student stated that she didn't feel that she knew enough personally to be preparing and offering professional development even though she was in the final course in the program. This inception, preparation and delivery of a professional development experience required scaffolding and prompting by the professor.

Videotaping of sample lessons. In order to make visible the experience of coaching a peer, class members recorded themselves teaching three reading lessons in their own classroom. Students were directed to select either a typical large group or small group lesson that they taught and recorded. Teacher behavior and language was the focus of the recording rather than student reactions or interactions. The recordings were used as an artifact for simulated coaching rounds.

Coaching rounds. The intent of the coaching rounds and collaboration was to offer guided practice in coaching behaviors. This was in preparation for the experience of coaching a peer. Students, performing as literacy coaches identified a peer in his/her own district and asked the peer to participate in a coaching session on-site. The coach prompted the peer to determine an area of instructional need and to do the analytical preparation for a classroom observation. The coach completed a classroom observation using the pre-determined parameters to collect data. The coach analyzed the data and prepared a plan for sharing it. The coach and peer met to have a conversation about the lesson and the coach used questions to prompt the peer in analyzing teacher and student behaviors. The coach offered suggestions and resources related to his/her expertise in teaching reading developed during the graduate program. This process was detailed in a case study paper along with the coach's reflection-on-practice (Schon, 1987). What was learned from this experience? The findings can be organized into three categories— a feeling of intimidation, the development of empowerment, and the growth of prompting.

A feeling of intimidation. Students commented that the role of the coach was the most difficult. They said that asking another educator about the intention of a lesson or about the reasoning behind a particular instructional choice made them uncomfortable. One student stated that she just didn't know

what to say that would lead teachers to make judgments about their own teaching. When coaching the coach, students stated that they didn't know what to say when sharing observations because they didn't know what to suggest for the coach to say or do differently. It appeared that the dissonance they experienced during the rounds involved them building a schema for creating actual coaching prompts. The professor also noted that the tendency of the students assuming the role of teacher or coach was to move off task when they became uncomfortable. During the observations, the professor prompted participants back onto task when overhearing them discussing classroom decorations or specific students rather than the teacher behaviors exhibited.

The development of empowerment. Students commented in the reflection section that they were able to draw on the experiences from class to assume the role of a coach. Students' comments have included that they felt empowered by the experience, that they were amazed by their own level of expertise about teaching reading, that they felt they were ready to become a coach if the opportunity would become available. Students have also reported a high level of support by building and district administrators for the concept of literacy coaching and peer led professional development and collaboration.

The growth of prompting. Most importantly, the fledgling coaches reported that the opportunity to conference with another teacher allowed them to refine their prompting skills. Not only were they able to use professional prompting to guide the conversation during the pre and post conference conversations, they were also able to clearly articulate the effective use of prompting as a strong addition to instruction and could recommend it to their peer. As a result, when they returned to their own classroom, their heightened awareness of that effectiveness allowed them to improve their own instructional decisions.

Final Thoughts

The graduate program described here has been developed on a continuum (i.e., foundational course, clinical course, and literacy coaching practicum). This model was designed to facilitate the development of purposeful prompting through reflection-based models. Prompts at the foundational level implemented small group instruction built upon goal setting, thinking in action and thinking on action. Prompts in the clinical course built on systematic, daily reflections to facilitate children's literacy development. Finally, graduate reading candidates transitioned to a literacy coaching practicum where purposeful prompting was used to guide teacher-to-teacher interactions. The concept of prompting is purposefully built into each course because the professors in the program view it as a needed element for facilitating intellectual growth, both with children and adults.

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