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Print Rich Environments: Our pre-service teachers' report of what they observed in their field experiences

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This study examined teacher candidates' observations and perceptions of classroom print-rich environments during field observations. The focus is on what the teacher candidates report and believe they have observed in classrooms regarding print-rich environments. The subjects were 35 undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in two language arts and arts methods classes requiring 36 hours of field observations in an urban setting. Pre-service teacher candidates' weekly reflective journals and semester-end descriptions provided data sources. A qualitative method was used to examine patterns of observations and descriptions concerning print-rich environments. Results revealed that most teacher candidates did not realize and observe the dynamic nature of print-rich environments. Suggestions are offered for future improvement of field observations for pre-service teachers.

FIELD OBSERVATIONS ARE an important component of teacher education programs. Through efforts of professional associations such as American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), as well as mandates by government educational agencies at the state level, requirements for field observations and student teaching have been written into most state teacher certification requirements. Teacher education programs have retained field experiences as an essential component of pre-service teacher educational programs. The International Reading Association's research report (IRA, 2003) also emphasizes the need for apprenticeship models and concludes that excellent modeling in the field would enhance teacher candidates' learning and consequently the quality of teacher education programs.

In New York State, it is now mandated that 100 hours of field observations should be accomplished before beginning student teaching experiences. This is consistent with teacher education programs in other states (Keehn, Martinez, Harmon, Hedrick, Steinmetz, & Perez, 2003). While certain requirements have to be met for these 100 hours, the purposes and activities may vary across institutional and professorial differences in course combinations and content delivery as stated in some early literature (Watts, 1987; Zeichner, 1987)

This study focuses on teacher candidates' field observations and perceptions of a literacy instructional concept we dealt with in our literacy and arts methods classes: a print-rich environment in the classroom. We intended the study to inform us whether our pre-service teacher candidates were able to see the connections between what we taught in our teacher education methods classes and their field observations regarding print-rich classrooms.

Review of literature

Field observation

Field experience literature usually encompasses field observations and student teaching. We are focusing on the former. We firmly believe these two should not be conceptually separated and should be conceived

as naturally continuous in pre-service teacher experiences in teacher education programs. However, we understand that in practice such differentiation can provide for easy operation and smooth coordination of the two experiences. For the purpose of the present study, this differentiation also allows us to focus on the issues we are encountering in our courses and may yield implications for subsequent student teaching experiences.

As an important component of teacher education programs, field experiences have a vital role in teacher candidates' training to become teachers (IRA, 2003). There are consistent reports that teacher candidates claim that they have learned most from their field experiences, even to the extent of excluding the influences of methods classes and foundations classes in teacher education programs (Richardson-Koehler, 1988). The effect of teacher education programs as well as teacher candidates' evaluation of what and where they have learned how to teach can be important input as to where and what teacher education programs should enhance. However, giving consideration to such evaluations does not demand program focus shifts and pedagogical adjustments. In fact, some researchers argue that teacher candidates' perceptions can't be interpreted simply on surface value. They suggest that perceived ineffectiveness by teacher candidates of the foundations and methods classes could be due to two possible causes:

- the inconsistency between the theories in our teacher education classes and the realities that teacher candidates observe in classrooms and
- the heavy classroom management focus in the classes observed.

The noted inconsistency may fly in the face of theories and their usefulness in real classrooms (Copeland, 1986; Gomez, 1996; Haberman & Post, 1992). Regarding the emphasis on classroom management, when bogged down by daily classroom management routines, teacher candidates may be overwhelmed in thinking from moment-to-moment than considering the classroom learning from a sound pedagogical viewpoint (Fuller, 1969; Moore, 2003; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981).

Classroom observation reports confirm that classroom management focus and incompatible teaching behavior issues do exist (Richardson-Koehler, 1988). Some researchers even go so far as to suggest that teacher candidates should not be exposed to inconsistent teaching practices that are contradictory to what they are learning in methods and foundations classes (Copeland, 1986). Using a more proactive approach to such problems, recent research provides evidence that such teaching in the field could enhance teacher candidates' learning and professional growth (IRA, 2003).

Despite the arguments about the causes of and possible solutions to teacher candidates' evaluations of field experiences and methods classes, it is paramount that teacher education programs establish what we expect to achieve in teacher candidates' observations. In addition to the state certification requirements, we need to understand what our teacher candidates actually observe in the field and what gaps might exist between our teacher education program courses and field classrooms. The disparity needs to be examined in order to clarify our expectations based on classroom reality and to enhance our sound theory-building regarding field experiences.

How to effectively guide teacher candidates through foundations and methods classes, field experiences, and student teaching is key in the apprenticeship model. According to Guyton and McIntyre (1990), the apprenticeship model assumes that our teaching in the methods classes would model for our teacher candidates the pedagogically sound practice and ensuing experiences in the classrooms by mentor teachers who should further candidates' understanding of teaching learned from methods classes. This focus on consistency between teacher education program classes and real school experiences originates from Dewey's argument for experiences (Gallego, 2001) and would provide a smooth transition moving pre-service teachers from theories to desired practices. Recent research in reading education echoes the strength of apprenticeship model in preparing reading teachers (IRA, 2003).

In most cases, teacher education programs have very little control of what goes on in school classrooms (Watts, 1987), an important factor often interfering with transition from theory to practice. This is

particularly true for field observation experiences that usually precede culminating student teaching internships usually done out of the courtesy of available local schools. This lack of control could exacerbate inconsistencies between methods classes and field practices. While we acknowledge the limit of exercising control over classroom and teacher selections for candidates' field observations, we could nevertheless try to understand what happens in classrooms so that our instruction could match classroom practices. One way of understanding classroom practice is through teacher candidates' varying reports of the classrooms in which they observe teaching practices.

Print-rich environments

The emergent literacy perspective has provided insightful understanding of the continuing growth in students' literacy abilities (Fields & Spangler, 2000; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Children perceive and develop literacy through exposure to its functional and meaningful uses in their daily contexts (Fields & Spangler, 2000; Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Hall, 1987; Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1982; Sulzby, 1994). For example, long before they come to school, many children have acquired print concepts, story concept, and can identify many signs and print close to their life (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1996). To nurture beginning readers in literacy growth, the emergent literacy perspective advocates the continuation of functional literacy through print-rich environments in schools (Smith, 1994). Print-rich environments are usually recommended as part of instructional efforts that schools can support for functional literacy for children.

While the nature and degree of its impact on students' literacy development could be debated, print rich environments offer valuable nurturing within an instructional context in primary grades (Bowman, 2003; Roskos & Neuman, 2001; Strickland, Snow, Griffin, Burns, & McNamara, 2002). Most literacy methods textbooks include a section on print rich environments in primary classrooms. Print-rich environments would include all print and writing tools as well as pedagogical use of these. One of the instructional and learning features of print-rich environment is the active participation and use of these tools in the

process of children's education (Gunning, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In other words, in order for the print rich environments to facilitate students' literacy growth and become a true part of print-rich environments, print materials in classrooms need to be actively used. Teacher candidates are exposed to this pedagogical concept of dynamism in their reading and language arts classes, at least in theory. Such practices in classrooms in which our teacher candidates observe would offer a further and continuous opportunity to consolidate their understanding of instructional use of print-rich environments facilitating children's literacy growth. However, as Copeland (1986) argues, some classroom instructional practices may not always be the ones consistent with what we advocate in teacher education programs.

To make teacher education programs effective, we need to find out what's going on in classrooms where our teacher candidates observe. Consequently, we need to communicate the pedagogical and educational purposes for effective field experiences to the concerned school teachers (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990) and make adjustments in the teacher education programs to meet the needs of the reality in schools. One way of finding out what's happening in field experiences is to probe our teacher candidates' perception of pedagogical issues in the classrooms. We chose the print rich environment as the focus in our reading and language arts classes' field experiences.

We offer the following research question guiding this study: What did our pre-service teacher candidates report as to what they observed in urban elementary school classrooms pertaining to the pedagogical use of print-rich environments fostering students' literacy growth?

Methodology

The present study attempts to look at teacher candidates' observations and perception of print-rich environments in classrooms during field observations. In particular our focus is on what the teacher candidates report and believe they have observed in classrooms regarding print-rich environments.

Methods

The subjects were 35 undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in two language arts and arts methods classes for an entire semester in urban areas. In these classes, teacher candidates were required to have 36 hours of field observations over six weeks in three Title I local elementary schools. Weekly reflections were required for the instructional procedures of reading and language arts in classrooms, including print-rich environments and their use in the classrooms. To avoid possible bias, we gave only general directions rather than laying out a checklist for their observations. By the end of the 36 hours of observation, teacher candidates were also required to describe their perceptions of print-rich environments in a classroom. Both the weekly reflections and the focused description of a print-rich classroom were used as the data sources for the present study.

We employed an analysis approach to examine teacher candidates' weekly reflections on observations as well as focused descriptions to corroborate their reflection analysis. A constant comparison method was employed to explore patterns of teacher candidates' observations (Merriam, 1988). The first author read both the reflections and the focused descriptions repeatedly for emergent themes and categories. While the emergent themes and categories were consolidated against the data, the second author randomly chose half of the reflections and descriptions to confirm the categories established through repeated examination by the first author. Any discrepancies were resolved through face-to-face conferences.

Results and Discussions

The results are reported in the following section and followed by discussion. Two categories emerged from our teacher candidates' perceptions as to what comprised print-rich environments in classrooms: 1) teacher-made/commercial prints of the environment, and 2) student-created print in the environment. The teacher made/commercial prints included posters, charts, alphabetic list, word walls, books, magazines, calendars, and bulletin boards. The student-

created print encompassed students' writings, story maps/webs, and object labels.

Teacher-made/commercial prints of environment

Teacher-made/commercial materials are usually done with a pre-set concept or meet the standards in subject areas. A typical example would be the following quote from a second grade classroom observation: "several charts encompassing language arts grammar facts were clearly displayed for the children to see daily: pronouns, homophones, irregular nouns, contractions, and 'reading words.' A math chart was also prominently displayed." Some teacher candidates mentioned word walls, libraries in classrooms, bulletin boards. However, some observations were very ambiguous about the print permanence. For example, one observation in a fifth grade classroom stated: " [the teacher] had a chart of what a writer's note book is....there is also a chart which was labeled what's in your heart." We could not be certain whether it was a moveable chart used for the time being or it was to stay on the wall. Given the purpose of such charts, we would assume they would stay in the place for a considerable period of time for students to consolidate their learning and to which they could make quick reference.

Among all the observations about the print-rich environments, there were only two statements that seemed to capture the essence of the pedagogical utility of these printed materials: 1) the dynamic nature of such prints

"she has many wonderful posters and charts that she created to help students learn. After the students read the story, the teacher asked if anyone could tell her why the story was a folktale and not a fairy tale. When some of the students had difficulty with this, she referred them to the chart on the wall that identifies the elements of a folktale,"

and 2) a negative statement, similarly insightful about the non-use of the print in a first grade class

"One portion of the wall was also filled with a word wall. The only problem with this was that the word wall should have been displayed where the children actually did their writing. It was off on the side and they would not be able to see it when they are doing their writing. It would have been more helpful in the reading area if it were in front of the children instead of behind them."

Both statements highlighted the reason why the print rich environments are important to students' literacy learning. The first one focused on the active instructional use of the print. Teachers need to incorporate prints in the environment for instructional processes to use and model using printed materials constantly to gradually move students into strategically using these materials on their own. Students will not become strategic literacy users if not gradually engaged in the value and function of printed materials on the wall. The second statement went directly to the non-use of the printed materials involving students' independent learning for which it was designed. Putting word walls behind students when they need to see them is not effective.

These two contradictory statements made about the pedagogical functions of the print-rich environment raise concerns about our teacher candidates' observations. The majority of the classrooms our pre-service teacher candidates were in did not seem to offer what candidates were taught in the methods class where instructional use of print environments was one of the focal issues. However, due to the nature of observations, it is not clear as to whether this inconsistency is due to absence of print-rich materials or simply a perception of our teacher candidates. Yet, the observations show a gap between what we, teacher educators, intended and what teacher candidates in field placement perceived.

The student-created prints

Most of the reported instances in the category of student-created print involve displaying students' writings. Student' observations in this category are mentioned briefly. An example would be: "Mrs. B uses all four walls to display the children's work." A more lengthy mention would be the following. "The children's numerous, seasonal work was

prominently displayed on every wall in the classroom, serving double duty as wonderful decorations as well as a proud display of their hard work." Yet, our teacher candidates did not seem to go into reflection on the pedagogical reason why they were displayed. For example, how long the work would stay displayed, or how often students and any one else would go and read them was not reported.

Teacher candidates also observed students participating in labeling objects in the classroom. Such active participation by the students was what we hoped the teacher candidates observed and reflected upon. However, only two mentioned the existence of labels and only one mentioned students' participation in labeling objects in the classroom.

Teacher candidates also observed students participating in creating story maps and character webs. For example, one observation reads: "When I arrived in the class, I noticed a new display consisting of two character webs, which spun off key ideas and thoughts about the book's two main characters.... students were now creating their own individual web or map." Though it was not clear whether the students participated in making the displayed character webs, it implied that they made a class web the day before and now were making an individual one.

Students also observed a calendar in the process of being created. "A large, interactive calendar was next to the teacher's chair, and this activity was also done as a group while the children sat on the rug around the teacher. The calendar made effective use of colors, numbers, shapes, and patterns, as it promoted the understanding of concepts such as weeks, days, and months, as well as essential math skills. Following a discussion of patterns, days, and weeks..." Students had to fill in the right order of the dates, days, and months.

The pedagogical function of such displays fostering student learning was obvious here. Students created or participated in print, the displays capture more the dynamic functions of the print-rich environments; they were limited in the observed classrooms in comparison to the teacher-made/commercial prints in classroom environment. At least in our teacher candidates' observations we have analyzed, such observations constituted only a small fraction.

In a related note about the print-rich environment classroom, we noticed that our teacher candidates could list in great detail the needed print-rich materials in their focused descriptions of an ideal classroom. Such detailed items would include morning message board, spelling list, word pattern walls, alphabetic list, class rules, and a plethora of children's books. However, out of 35 focused descriptions, only four of them touched upon the active and dynamic nature of the print-rich environments. While general mention of the active role of the teachers in directing students to the print-rich environment is available in these four descriptions, we found this only constituted a small portion of their descriptions and still needed more elaboration. The following are some examples to illustrate our point. One teacher candidate stated that:

"A word wall is a tool to use, not just display."

Another wrote:

"The word wall is a great resource for teachers to use in their classroom because it helps children to refer to the wall when they need to spell a basic sight word."

Still another said that:

"A teacher creates a word wall by choosing key and/or sight words from the curriculum and writing them, in alphabetical order for younger grades, on paper in a location in the room clearly visible for all students to see.... The word wall is never-ending and can constantly be added to."

"New words from a story can be placed on a wall. Students can refer to the walls for spelling suggestions. New words may be added to the walls every week or changed for a new story."

These quotes from the four focused description offered a glimpse into their understanding of a print-rich environment. Such quotes also implied an active role for teachers in directing students' attention to the

print, making the print accessible, and making print environment part of students' learning experiences in classrooms. However, we would like more elaboration as to how a teacher can use this to enhance students' learning experiences. For example, we are not clear from teacher candidates' descriptions how a teacher can use a word wall as a tool in her instruction. Also, we don't know what role a teacher's modeling use of the word wall played in their descriptions.

In the majority of the focused descriptions by our pre-service teacher candidates, we noticed a similar pattern in their observations and focused descriptions regarding print-rich environments in classrooms. The dynamic nature of instructional use of environmental print was not reported to have happened and was not perceived by our pre-service teacher candidates in their observations, nor presented in their focused descriptions. This pattern was disconcerting for both practical and research reasons. The research concern arises from the possible bias of the teacher candidates' perception that might have colored their observations. In other words, they might have not reported what they did not perceive to be important even though instructional use of print-rich environmental did happen. Practically, it also pointed towards a gap between what was taught in the methods class and the candidates' conceptualization of literacy instruction issues. Apparently, field observations did not channel or help to channel their conceptualization of the instructional use of print-rich environments.

Conclusions and Suggestions

In summary, our study found that teacher candidates did not, on the whole, report print-rich environments as being part of the school atmosphere in which students learn as well as part of instructional structure that makes them functional and useful. Only a very small portion of teacher candidates regarded the dynamic nature of print-rich environments as being a pedagogically important element of the school learning environment. This does not fit with what we intend in our reading and language arts methods classes.

Given what we know about the literacy acquisition process of children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), the findings in the present study can be alarming for teacher educators. We would expect our

teacher candidates to grow conceptually and have a clear understanding of why print-rich environments are important to student learning and teacher instruction. Our teacher candidates should be able to pay attention to the dynamic nature of print-rich use in classrooms, and should consequently be able to reflect on them. Yet, in the present study we have not seen such evidence. While we could not pinpoint why it was not observed in the present study, we speculate that this lack of growth could happen in any of the three key contexts: in methods classes, in school classrooms, or in the inability of students to see the dynamic function of print-rich environments. Our teacher education programs should in theory affect all of the above three key situations. Direct teaching and emphasis on the dynamic nature of print-rich environments should have some impact on teacher candidates' attention to classroom print use when they see it. Successful teacher education classes should also be able to heighten teacher candidates' sensitivity to understand and appreciate the function of print-rich environments in classrooms and be able to reflect on them. Teacher education programs should have direct and indirect impact on classroom instructions when classrooms are staffed with graduates from teacher education programs.

1. The present study, therefore, points to some practical issues and implications for our teacher education programs. Teacher education methods classes would need to help teacher candidates establish connections between what they are taught in methods classes and what they observe in the field. It is not sufficient to merely espouse relevant literacy development theories in teacher education programs. Examples through case studies or other means of demonstrating the theory should be made relevant to the school situations in which teacher candidates observe. Localized cases might help candidates transfer what they have been taught in teacher education classes to what they observe in school classrooms. This is relevant to teacher candidates in urban areas where exemplary teaching and modeling as recommended by IRA's research report (IRA, 2003) is paramount. Helping candidates analyze and understand local cases would provide them with

opportunities to reflect on the principles underlining exemplary teaching.

2. Teacher education programs can also offer opportunities for teacher development through a partnership with local schools. Such professional development opportunities can be both formal and informal. Graduate classes and workshops are examples of formal opportunities. Teacher education department web sites and partnerships with local schools (such as Professional Development Schools) could enhance informal contacts and strengthen trust between the two parties. Professional development opportunities offered through such partnership should provide school teachers continuous exposures to best practices of education and thus bring them more in line with what's going on in the classroom. Consequently, such partnerships through professional development would benefit teacher candidates in their field observations when local school practices are consistent with what's taught in the teacher education classrooms.
3. We need to conceptualize field experience in a more general framework than a single method course the teacher candidates' professional growth. Various core courses in a teacher education program should collate the data collected in students' field experiences as feedback for their courses to further coordination of students' field experiences as recommended (IRA, 2003). We believe the data-driven research would be more important to help construct a general direction of teacher education programs' field observations.

In addition to the practical issues, we see the following implications for future research. First, we need to know what happens in the classrooms in which our teacher candidates observe. Classroom observations together with teacher candidates' interviews and probing might provide some important missing links for our understanding of the classroom reality. We believe research observations in urban classrooms should focus on local practices with an eye for making the connections

with the mission, philosophy, and theories of teacher education programs. We believe the data-driven orientations are more valuable in helping urban teacher educators conceptualize the role of field experiences in teacher candidates' professional development.

Second, research should be able to illustrate the role of the teacher candidates in succeeding or failing during field experiences. The perception of urban teacher candidates may be just as important as the actual achievements during field experiences. Additionally, to understand how to provide a learning environment that validates teacher candidates' perception as well as skills and knowledge will have much to offer in making our teacher education programs more effective.

Third, investigations into what is going on in urban teacher education programs can help to conceptualize field experiences in the framework of urban teacher education. While the purpose should never be to institute uniform instructional procedures, we should be sure that consistency in theory and practice could be in place to ensure that teacher candidates' understandings are reinforced throughout various experiences offered by the program. Currently, we have no way to ensure such consistency except through mission statements, syllabi, and textbooks in university classes. Research in this area should provide us with an understanding as to the factors, processes, and structures of teacher education programs that ensure effective field experiences for teacher candidates.

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