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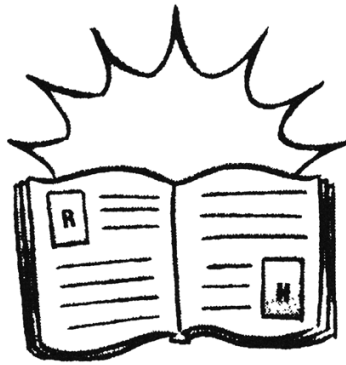
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Reading Horizons

A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts



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Editors:

Lauren Freedman, Ph.D.
Susan V. Piazza, Ed. D.
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Editorial Coordinator:

Rosario E. Hughey

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<i>“It’s Just Too Sad!”: Teacher Candidates’ Emotional Resistance To Picture Books , Aimee Papola-Ellis.....</i>	1-26
<i>Creating Spaces for Literacy, Creating Spaces for Learning, Christy Howard.....</i>	28-44
<i>Pre-Service Teachers' Growth In Understandings of Best Practice Literacy Instruction Through Paired Course and Field Experience, Jamie Lipp, Sarah Helfrich,</i>	45-62
<i>Choice and Rigor: Achieving a Balance in Middle School Reading/Language Arts Classrooms in the Era of the Common Core, Nancy Stevens...</i>	64-76



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There is no more crucial component
in all of education than reading



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“It’s just too sad!”: Teacher candidates’ emotional resistance to picture books

Aimee Papola-Ellis, Loyola University Chicago

Abstract

The use of critical literacy with children’s books that focus on social issues and disrupt the status quo can be a powerful way to create spaces for conversations with students about social justice and empowerment. Teacher candidates in a semester long children’s literature course were asked to respond to a range of children’s texts that dealt with many social issues and disrupted the commonplace. Despite an explicit emphasis on critical literacy and social justice, the candidates were very resistant to using many of the texts in their own future classrooms. They had strong emotional reactions that prevented them from consideration of how the texts could foster opportunities for students to uncover power relations in texts or to discuss ways that texts either maintain or disrupt the status quo. Data from three picture books that were cited the most frequently are shared in this paper, as well as a discussion on the implications for teacher educators who work with teacher candidates in the area of children’s literature.



“It’s just too sad!”: Teacher candidates’ emotional resistance to picture books

As teacher candidates enter the world of children’s literature during their teacher preparation program, they are often excited at the nostalgia for books they loved and enjoyed as children. These texts from their recollection typically have happy endings, warm, lovable characters, and soft childhood memories linked to them. Teacher candidates are frequently unaware of children’s books that focus less on happy endings and more on sociopolitical issues, especially ones dealing with “tough topics” that may affect students in classrooms today.

The purpose of the current study was to explore how teacher candidates responded to picture books that dealt with a range of social issues, how they used a critical literacy lens on these texts, and how they talked about the ways these texts might fit into their future classroom instruction. During a semester long children’s literature course, teacher candidates in my class learned about critical literacy and social justice, and I was eager to task the candidates with finding texts that reflected and empowered their students. I asked them to critically evaluate the way we ask students to read and think and to consider alternative viewpoints on the world. In doing so, it became evident that the teacher candidates had strong emotional reactions to many of the texts, which led to a resistance for considering their use in a future classroom. In this paper, I argue this is potentially problematic if omitting texts that elicit an emotional response leads to certain students feeling underrepresented in the curriculum, or if it leads to a lack of space for important conversations to occur regarding social justice in the classroom.

In the following sections, I will share an overview of critical literacy as was shared with the teacher candidates, as well as background on the connection between emotion and texts. I will then outline the context of the study and participants, as well as the main texts that candidates discussed. The findings of the study are then presented, followed by implications and considerations for teacher educators.

Theoretical Framework

Critical literacy theory, which stems from the notions and roots of critical theory (Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2008) is not a teaching method; rather, it is a lens, and a way of thinking that challenges texts, as well as viewpoints on the world (Luke, 2007; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2010); According to Shor (1999), critical literacy is essentially the “language use that questions the social construction of the self” (p. 282). It is concerned with analyzing and critiquing the relationships between language, social practice, and power. Analyzing texts with a critical literacy lens can help unveil ways in which language is used to manipulate readers, as well as to examine power structures within a text. Comber (2001) observed that when teachers and students were engaged with a critical literacy viewpoint, they asked questions regarding the issues of language and power, morality and ethics, and who is privileged by certain ideas, as well as who is disadvantaged. Critical literacy lessons in a classroom are always student-centered and can lead to lively and engaging discussions about controversial or social justice oriented issues (Beck, 2005). These lessons can occur with students of all ages, including college students that are being asked to critically examine texts they plan to use in their future classrooms.

Approaching Texts from a Critical Literacy Lens

Many classroom teachers at all grade levels successfully use critical literacy tenets in their instruction to empower students and allow safe spaces to tackle “tough topics” by using literature as a vehicle (Enriquez, 2014; Fain,

2008; Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; McCloskey, 2012; Polleck & Epstein, 2015). Moller (2002) wanted to create opportunities for students to engage in conversations about texts that were diverse and promoted social justice. She knew that without teacher support and guidance, book discussions had the opportunity to perpetuate stereotyping and silencing behaviors. She worked with a fourth grade teacher to create spaces in the classroom for students to become empowered by their literature discussions while delving into topics such as racism. Fain (2008) used a critical literacy framework with first and second graders and found they were acutely aware of sociopolitical issues including racism and oppression, and were able to connect to characters in picture books about these topics. By including these texts in her classroom, Fain was able to give her young readers a space for conversations about social justice and ways that they could be empowered to recognize oppression and take a stand against it.

This work with critical literacy is being done with teachers and students in a range of educational contexts. At the preschool level, McCloskey (2012) used critical literacy and writing lessons to create a space to discuss the students' perceptions of people in jail. At the high school level, Polleck and Epstein (2015) found that female adolescents in their study were empowered by the analysis of texts dealing with racism, sexism, and classism, and the use of a critical literacy lens led to a sense of agency and affirmation. In addition to reaching across grade levels, this emphasis on inclusion of tough topics is significant for teachers throughout the world. Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste (2014) looked at social studies teachers in Singapore and their inclusion of controversial topics that related to diversity. Despite policies and discomfort, the majority of the teachers determined that most topics were "controversial-appropriate" and deserved attention within the classroom.

While there are many studies showing students that reported increased

engagement or empowerment from the use of critical literacy and texts that focused on social issues (Fain, 2008; Lewis & Tierney, 2011; McCloskey, 2012; Polleck & Epstein, 2015), there are still many teachers who have resisted the inclusion of these texts in the classroom, often due to their emotional responses.

Critical Literacy and Emotion

Incorporating texts that disrupt the status quo and viewing these texts through a critical literacy lens can spark emotional discussions and strong engagement with the text (Beck, 2005). Researchers and scholars have written about this link between emotions and text, and the role they play in the interaction between the reader and the text (Anwaruddin, 2015; Barthes, 1973; Beck, 2005; Boler, 2004; Chen, 2016; Melinee, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1978). Emotional reactions to texts are normal, and even necessary, for true meaning-making. Rosenblatt (1978) wrote of the many experiences offered to the reader, including the emotional impacts, and wrote about the process of deriving meaning from text relying on both the intellectual and the emotional context of the reader. Anwaruddin (2015) discussed a connection between critical and affective literacy, describing the ways that readers engage with texts through emotion. Additionally, Boler (2004) explored the strong link between emotion and aspects of identity, as well as the relationship between emotion and power, with relation to texts.

There is research supporting the notion that emotions are a strong and logical part to interacting with texts, and that exploring these topics in books, particularly through critical literacy, can often lead to benefits for students (Chen, 2016; Jimenez, 2014; Lewis & Tierney, 2011; Melinee, 2008; White, 2009). For example, using picture books that evoke emotional reactions can support children in understanding their identity, exploring a range of emotions, and developing empathy (Nikolajeva, 2013). Melinee (2008) found that

approaching these types of texts from a critical lens had a positive impact on high school students at risk for dropping out. Lewis and Tierney (2011) examined secondary students' emotional reactions to written texts and films, and discovered benefits to tapping into emotion to explore ideologies and identities.

Despite these benefits, using texts focusing on race, gender, sexuality, class, and other social issues can sometimes lead to discomfort for the teacher, and at times, resistance to including these texts in the classroom. It is not always an easy transition to using texts to facilitate conversations on controversial or sensitive topics in the classroom, and teachers may face emotional challenges when doing so (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014). Holloway and Gourthro (2011) found the teacher candidates they worked with expressed discomfort in addressing power issues in texts because of the need to confront and reflect on their own position in society. Leland et al. (1999) found emotional resistance to the use of certain picture books from teachers, with several stating particular books were "too sad," or that children at their school did not have racial issues, leading them to oppose using books that brought race to the conversation. White (2009) was able to push through this emotional resistance with teacher candidates as they used emotion to fuel their critical reflection on books, but recognized that it was only possible with strong supports in place, such as a strong classroom community.

The research on critical literacy, along with the strong link to emotions, led me to the current study, exploring how teacher candidates responded to texts focused on social issues, how they reacted to using a critical literacy lens, and how they talked about the potential use of these types of texts in their future classroom. In the following sections, I will share an overview of the study as well as findings and implications.

Overview of the Study

The current study explores teacher candidates' emotional reactions, and at times resistance, to children's books that center on sociopolitical issues. In the following sections, I explain the setting and participants of the study followed by a description of the data sources and method for data analysis.

Setting and Participants. During a semester of teaching Children's Literature to two sections of undergraduate students in a teacher education program, I read a wide range of children's books to the class and asked them to read picture books and novels across a variety of genres and themes. There was a strong focus on multicultural and culturally relevant books, which for our course was defined as books with main characters that were members of traditionally underrepresented groups. Additionally, there was a thread of critical literacy woven throughout the course. A total of 20 teacher candidates participated in the study, which explored their understandings of critical literacy and children's literature. All participants were classified as freshmen, and 19 of the 20 were female. Data related specifically to three texts---*Faithful Elephants* (Tsuchiya, 1951), *Martin's Big Words* (Rappaport, 2007), and *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005)---are included in this paper.

Since the course focused on children's literature for elementary education majors, I read a picture book aloud to the teacher candidates during every class period. At the beginning of the semester, I selected books with a wide range of themes, across genres, and with a variety of cultures represented. Among many others, some course objectives focused on exposing students to critical literacy through goals such as, "understands the role of literature in teaching about social justice and critical literacy" and, "uses literature to promote students' understanding of their lives and society, and as a means to discuss social justice and critical literacy issues." The teacher candidates read an article defining the four main dimensions of critical literacy as disrupting the

commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and promoting social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). They were encouraged to consider texts that disrupted the status quo, focused on sociopolitical issues that were relevant to their future students' lives, and to keep social justice at the center of their instruction. We also held numerous discussions in class about "controversial texts," examining our own biases related to the texts, and thinking broadly about what it means to have diversity in texts.

Data Collection

Data sources for this qualitative study consisted of course assignments and notes on discussions held in class. The first assignment was an "emotional response sheet" completed during class at the time they listened to *And Tango Makes Three* and *Faithful Elephants*. The teacher candidates were asked to record emotions felt while listening to the story, rate the emotion's intensity on a scale of 1 to 5, and explain why they felt that way. The sheet also contained open-ended response questions asking students reasons why they would or would not read the text to a future class and why they felt they had the reactions they did. On the day of the readings, I also took extensive notes on small and large group discussions they had about the picture book. Additional data sources were written reflections in which teacher candidates shared thoughts on a range of books they were either eager or hesitant to use, and a reflection specifically about *Faithful Elephants* at the end of the course to see if their thinking and feelings about the book had changed.

Data Analysis and Researcher Stance

Data was coded using line-by-line analysis (Charmaz, 2011), looking for common ideas throughout the teacher candidates' responses. After this process revealed threads of resistance and emotion, I coded the data again with more

focus on these specific factors.

Since all of the teacher candidates in my class would be spending their teacher preparation program in linguistically and culturally diverse urban schools, and the majority of them stated their desire to begin their career in an urban setting, I believed that becoming familiar with texts that focused on a range of sociopolitical issues often impacting urban classrooms would be beneficial. I selected picture books that I hoped would challenge the teacher candidates to question why certain groups are positioned the way they are in texts, to consider the power and privilege that exists in texts in our world, and to provide a space for conversations about diversity and social justice. My own commitment to social justice and my own prior experiences in culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings shaped my course planning as well as my purpose for the study. However, I went into the study expecting the candidates to be very eager to use these texts in their future work, primarily based on my own positive experiences using them in my former classrooms, as well as their selection of a university that focused on social justice. When the data began to show more resistance than enthusiasm towards the texts, I attempted to clarify my own analysis of their responses through reflective questioning in small and whole group conversations, as well as by looking for patterns across candidates. This reflective questioning was informal and took place within class discussions, with the purpose being to ensure my interpretations of the candidates' emotional reactions were accurate. This transparency regarding the purpose of my questioning allowed the candidates to further engage in critical conversations about their own emotional reactions to the texts that were shared.

Findings

After reviewing, analyzing, and coding the teacher candidates' coursework, as well as anecdotal notes about the class discussions following

various read alouds, several common themes were found. First, the teacher candidates were extremely resistant to using texts eliciting a strong negative emotional response, such as anger or sadness. Next, they had fears about future students, especially in the elementary grades. Finally, their own emotional responses guided their decision making about text selection for their classrooms. While we discussed many books throughout the semester, three stood out as eliciting the strongest responses and most references from the teacher candidates. The data related to those three picture books, *Martin's Big Words*, *And Tango Makes Three*, and *Faithful Elephants*, are shared in the following sections.

Setting the Stage

On the second day of the semester, the teacher candidates all completed a chart indicating their willingness to use texts on a variety of topics in future classrooms. Some of the topics were death, bullying, racism, and gender issues and stereotypes. They indicated their willingness to include the topic through literature on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “I would never use the text” and 5 being “I would use it without hesitation.” At the end of the course, students repeated the exercise.

The participants rated many of the topics low, indicating extreme hesitation to use books that focused on these topics. A few changed their rating by the end of the semester, but most remained unwilling, with scores at 3 or below, which reflected some consideration of including that topic in the classroom but with great concern. The topics that received the lowest scores, indicating the lowest possibility for inclusion in the classroom, were drug use, sex/sexual identity, gangs, and death. Many of the teacher candidates were unwilling to include books about more common topics such as bullying, citing a fear of students feeling “sad” about hearing a book dealing with bullying if they

were being bullied themselves. Several also noted resistance to using books about religious differences, including sharing a text about students from a “non-dominant religion,” for fear of “upsetting or offending someone.” This fear was common throughout many texts we shared over the semester.

Additionally, while the teacher candidates rated these topics on the lower end on this assignment, they actually indicated even more reluctance to use these types of texts when responding privately on other assignments. This happened often throughout the semester; when the participants were sharing reactions with classmates, either small or whole group, they shared slightly more willingness to consider a book on a certain topic than when they reacted knowing nobody else would read their thoughts except me.

Finally, at other times, the teacher candidates expressed a slight willingness to read a hypothetical book about a topic, but changed their perspective when they were exposed to an actual text on that topic. The three texts that posed the most challenge are discussed in the following sections.

“Can We Leave Out the Death?”: Reactions to *Martin’s Big Words*

Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Rappaport, 2007) is a Caldecott honor picture book biography serving as an introduction to the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. The author uses her own words alongside actual quotes from King to share an overview of his life. The story follows King from childhood and early experiences with segregation, to adulthood and his significant impact on the civil rights movement. It briefly shares the circumstances of his death and ends with the inspirational message that King’s words continue to live on. The book can be used across many grades, but it is geared toward primary grade students.

After reading the text aloud, I asked the teacher candidates to engage in

a conversation with a partner as I roamed the room to take notes on conversations. I heard mostly positive remarks during these small group discussions, but when we began to discuss whole group, the tone changed slightly. Alison, a typically soft-spoken freshman, initiated the conversation with concern. She remarked that it had good information, but thought it was not appropriate for any students younger than fifth or sixth grade. When I told her the book was aimed for primary students, she reacted strongly, saying, “I could never use this text with students that young. They shouldn’t be exposed to death at that early of an age.” Before I could respond, several other teacher candidates echoed a similar sentiment. Their concern was the part in the text that deals with King’s death, and reads, “On his second day there, he was shot. He died.” Approximately a third of the teacher candidates felt this was inappropriate for young readers, and a few even suggested reading the text but skipping the part about King’s death altogether. Their reasoning was that they wanted their students to know about King, but not to know that he was shot. They were concerned their students would become fearful or too upset to listen to the rest of the story.

While most of the teacher candidates felt that it was appropriate to use the text in some way, the majority felt it was best to wait until at least fourth grade. Several of them were willing to use it with younger students, as long as they had an option to skip the topic of death. Only a few spoke openly about a willingness to be honest with even their youngest students about this significant part of our history and to use the whole text to start conversations in their classroom about King’s importance.

“I Don’t Want To Draw Attention To It”: Thoughts On *And Tango Makes Three*

After showing up frequently on banned books lists for several years, *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005) has gained in popularity

and discussion in schools and homes. This book relates the true story of two male penguins, Roy and Silo, at the Central Park Zoo that behave like other male-female couples through some of their interactions. The zookeepers notice these penguins sitting on a rock one day, emulating the behaviors of the female penguins who are sitting on their eggs. This leads to a decision by the zookeepers to give Roy and Silo an unhatched egg that needs to be cared for. The two sit on the egg and care for it until it hatches and little Tango is born. Roy and Silo raise Tango as their own penguin chick with much success. The book is often challenged based on implied themes of homosexuality and same-sex marriage and has been removed from shelves of libraries in schools around the United States, but it also continues to be part of many classrooms.

When the teacher candidates reflected at the end of the semester on which text from the course they were reluctant to use, this was the second most frequently cited book. In class, the discussions remained fairly positive, with remarks such as, “It is a cute book!” or “I like that it is true!” Reactions were kept at a surface level, focusing mainly on the idea that it was a story about penguins. I suspected there were more emotions and reactions that the teacher candidates were holding back, and this was confirmed when they were allowed to respond more privately on paper.

More than half of the teacher candidates said they would not use this book at all in their future classrooms. While most said the reason was fear of parents’ reactions, a portion of the responses centered on their own discomfort or uncertainty about the topic of same-sex marriage. They felt that they could not read a book about a topic that they did not believe in and preferred to avoid the topic completely. One candidate, Rebecca, said, “I would be hesitant to use [And Tango Makes Three] because it is a sensitive subject. I don’t think we should talk about those things.” Maggie echoed the same idea, adding, “I would be worried about ruffling the feathers of parents, essentially.”

While three students did name this as a book they were eager to use and thought it would open a space for including their future students who came from non-traditional family structures, most disagreed. Sarah said, "...I would hate to see some kids laughing and making fun of the penguins in the book and having a student in my class who has two dads feeling bad about himself/herself and being embarrassed about his family." Instead of seeing this as an opportunity to disrupt this type of reaction and open a space to discuss diverse families, Sarah preferred to avoid the subject completely in order to prevent the conversation from taking place, mainly out of a need to protect her students from possible embarrassment or sadness.

Some teacher candidates wrote that they might use this text because it was "just animals" or because it was a true story, but they would never consider using a text with realistic characters coming from a same-sex marriage home. In this case, the teacher candidates' own beliefs and biases prevented them from being open to exploring texts, even from a social justice stance. When pushed to consider how this text was a strong exemplar of books that disrupted the status quo, one of the key tenets of critical literacy that we had previously discussed, they remained resistant and would not consider its inclusion in future classrooms.

"But It's So Sad!": Digging Deeper With *Faithful Elephants*

Tsuchiya's book *Faithful Elephants* (1951) focuses on events that reportedly occurred at the Ueno Zoo in Japan during World War II. The story tells the tale of three elephants that were starved to death after the Japanese Army commander ordered the deaths of all the zoo's dangerous animals, in order to protect the people in the city in the case of a bomb hitting the zoo. The elephants were unable to be injected with poison, nor would they eat poisoned food that was presented to them. Therefore, the decision was made to

starve the elephants. The text vividly describes the emotions of the zookeepers as the elephants made a plea for food and water, using their remaining strength in hopes of survival. Readers have a moment of hope when the elephant trainer, who loves the elephants dearly, goes against his orders to give the animals a bit of food and water. Ultimately, the elephants are not saved before the war comes to an end, and the animals are memorialized with a monument at the zoo.

Because this text was referenced the most frequently by the participants and with the strongest emotional reactions, more data is included here. The teacher candidates wrote a reaction specifically to this text and had in-depth classroom conversations about it. While this was the one text that only two participants reported willingness to use in a classroom, it is also the one in which the candidates were able to recognize the value of critical literacy instruction inherent in the text.

After reading the text aloud, I gave the class time to think about their reactions. At least three teacher candidates were visibly in tears, and many others sat very still, unsure of how to begin a conversation. Emily, the first respondent, began with, simply, “It’s just too sad.” Others met her comment with nods of agreement, and the class slowly started to join the discussion. Several questioned why a teacher might ever want to use this kind of book in a classroom, which led to our discussion on critical literacy.

When explicitly asked how this book offers many opportunities to consider multiple perspectives and the idea of the author positioning the reader, the class was able to generate many remarks that showed a strong understanding of the tenets of critical literacy. The biggest impact was recognizing that the text is told from a perspective not often represented in texts about war-- other victims. They noted that textbooks and other

materials they recall reading in school focused simply on the facts of the war and shared limited perspectives. One freshman, Hala, said she never thought about animals being impacted by war. She commented, “Wars require people to make sacrifices. It’s just really sad that the animals had to be the sacrifice. I never thought about that.” Another, Meredith, said, “It [war] is never thought about from this angle...it’s very hard. But we should.” The small and whole group discussions following the read aloud began with just two teacher candidates remarking about the story being told from a perspective that is not usually represented in stories about war. The conversation slowly started to unfold with more classmates realizing this was true of their own reading experiences in schools. They began to list all the viewpoints this story could include, the Army commander, the zookeepers/animal trainers, the children who regularly visited the zoo, the people who lived in the city, and soldiers from other countries learning about what happened. Being able to examine an issue from multiple viewpoints, no matter what your own viewpoint may be, is a significant part of developing critical literacy. This text offers a range of perspectives, making it a strong selection to talk about critical literacy skills.

Another aspect of critical literacy that was discussed was recognizing the language used by the author at certain parts to manipulate the reader’s emotions. Some teacher candidates commented that it angered them to be made to feel hopeful when the trainer gave the elephants food; several of them felt this was unfair to position them to be optimistic that the animals might be saved after all, only to have such a horrendously described death be their ultimate fate. When pushed to think about this more critically, Alexandra said she was really bothered:

I never really thought about this before, about how authors can totally make you feel a certain way. I would have thought any feelings I had were just my emotional reaction, but I see how the author can have a lot

to do with that.

Another manipulative part to the text's language teacher candidates discussed involved the elephants doing their trick in a hopeful attempt their trainer would provide them with food. This part of the text was referenced as the most difficult to hear, emotionally, by the teacher candidates. They remarked the visual this created was extremely difficult to bear, and that it reminded them too much of their own pets doing tricks. Kaitlyn, a freshman special education major, said:

I know the author wrote it that way on purpose. It makes me kind of mad when I think about how he (the author) did that on purpose, but I still can't help feeling sad. It made me think of my dog! At least I know now that I was being manipulated. Even if I still feel that way, I feel like I have more control if I at least recognize it.

Kaitlyn captured the overall sentiment of the teacher candidates; as a reader they felt a little power to recognize the manipulation that occurred, even if they were, in fact, manipulated to feel or think a certain way. Most of the freshmen said they had never been taught to use a critical literacy lens or to look for ways they were positioned by authors, and in hindsight, it bothered them to have their first conversation about it be as college students.

However, despite these revelations related to critical literacy, power, and positioning, the teacher candidates were left with ill feelings toward the text. On a post-assessment assignment for the children's literature course, they were asked to recall the one text from the whole semester they were most reluctant to use. More than three-fourths of the teacher candidates named *Faithful Elephants*. The main reason named was the strong emotional reaction they experienced. Sandra said, "I wouldn't want to use [*Faithful Elephants*] in a classroom because it is really sad and I just didn't like it." Courtney shared the

same sentiment:

That book was way too depressing for me to hear, and I feel like I would not be comfortable sharing that with my students. While it does give a great message about wars affecting animals, it would be really difficult for me to get through the book knowing what will happen in the end.

This type of response was very typical. Teacher candidates reported that it was “just too sad” to use, and they needed to protect their students from such sadness. Natasha states directly, “I would never use this book in a classroom. I can’t stand the idea of making children sad.” Throughout the course, we did read other texts related to death and war, such as *Pink and Say* (Polacco, 1994), which involves two well-loved characters dying during the civil war. Even though this text had people who died (and is also said to be based on true events), the teacher candidates had a less powerful emotional reaction than with the elephants. Overall, the main consensus was that this text was an excellent model to teach and use the tenets of critical literacy, with numerous opportunities to question the text, but that it had no place in an elementary (or even middle school, according to most candidates) classroom because it evoked strong sadness.

Discussion and Implications

Although our university has a focus on social justice, and throughout my course I emphasized sociopolitical issues, power relations, and disrupting the status quo through literature, the overwhelming majority of teacher candidates enrolled in the study were reluctant to use text that dealt with “tough topics.” Three texts stood out as evoking the strongest reactions, the first, dealing with the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the second dealing with same-sex couples; and the third dealing with the death of animals in war. The

candidates frequently cited their own emotional responses to the text, along with anticipation of their future students' emotional responses, as the reasons why they would hesitate to include the books in their classrooms.

The teacher candidates' own emotional responses to the texts shared in class strongly influenced their decisions about whether they would include those texts in their classrooms. They discussed fear of their students' emotions, with a longing to "protect" their students. Caring about students and their emotional well-being is undeniably a positive attribute for teachers; however, teachers must be cautious that longing to protect does not prevent conversations that could disrupt the status quo and teach valuable lessons about social justice.

We also need to be cognizant of our own emotional reactions and how they might impact others. Our emotions are not only individually formed, but also created through interactions and relationships with others (Chen, 2016; Hargreaves, 2000). Teachers' own emotional reactions to texts could have the power to strongly influence how their students will respond emotionally (Becker, Goetz, Morger, & Ranellucci, 2014), especially when they interact with one another through book discussions and reading response activities. It can sometimes be challenging for teachers to understand the role their emotions play in their classroom, and how to integrate these emotions into their own professional development (Chen, 2016).

At times the resistance to the texts I shared in class stemmed from the emotion of fear, fear of how to handle what the candidates deemed as controversial topics in the classroom, or fear of pushback from students' parents. This can be particularly daunting for teacher candidates or new teachers just entering the field and is certainly understandable. However, this fear has potential to result in narrowing the curriculum and censoring content in their instruction (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014), which could lead to

missed opportunities for critical reflective conversations or even altered views of key historical events. For example, the suggestion from one of my teacher candidates to read *Martin's Big Words* by omitting the part about King's death was particularly troublesome. There are many issues in history that are cause for very serious conversations in the classroom, ones that would evoke sadness, anger, and confusion. However, these events are essential to understanding key pieces of our history. It would seem unlikely that a classroom teacher would use discomfort as a reason to exclude lessons on slavery, the Holocaust, or civil rights. These are important aspects of history, yet are filled with potential spaces for emotional dialogue to occur. By embracing the emotion and reflecting on how it links to our own individual and collective identities, it can empower our students to become critical reflectors of the world in which we live.

While it is understandable that some of these texts were emotionally difficult and dealt with subject matter that needs to be considered for the individual students and their developmental level, the blanket decision not to use them because they are “upsetting” does not allow time and space for students to critically reflect on these issues. Pushing past the fear and other emotions in order to include texts on social issues or to view texts with a critical literacy lens can lead to benefits for students in the classroom, such as recognizing power relations and privilege, understanding multiple perspectives, and learning how to link reading and writing to social action (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Additionally, if classroom teachers do not embed tenets of critical literacy in instruction and teach students how to read texts with this lens, those students may be less equipped to recognize issues of injustice and power in the texts they encounter leaving them open to be unknowingly manipulated by authors. When considering texts that deal with diversity in culture or even family structure, like *And Tango Makes Three*, teachers should

not simply omit those that may not align with their own backgrounds and beliefs, or those they fear will lead to challenging dialogue. This potentially robs students of the opportunity to see themselves in the texts we share on a regular basis. By embracing this discomfort and using it to fuel discussions about social justice, identity, and power (Boler, 2004) we help students learn to navigate through tough conversations in many contexts.

Emotional connections and reactions to text are necessary and important for readers (Rosenblatt, 1978). These emotions have the power to lead to social control or to political resistance, and within educational contexts can serve to maintain the status quo or to disrupt it (Boler, 2004). Schools and classrooms have the potential to function as a site of critical reflection, empowerment, and transformation for individuals and groups (Boler, 2004; Holloway & Gourthro, 2011; Jimenez, 2014). However, becoming critically reflective is often more challenging than teacher candidates expect because of the emotional self-exploration involved (Holloway & Gourthro, 2011). Boler (2004) invites educators to think of this as a “*pedagogy of discomfort*,” where this fear and emotion are actually crucial in reflecting critically and challenging one’s beliefs and assumptions about the dominant ideologies.

Developing this pedagogy of discomfort certainly occurs over time. The teacher candidates in this study were all classified as freshmen, enrolled in only their second semester in the teacher preparation program. They had already spent time in school sites as an observer, but they had limited experiences at this point in their program interacting with children in schools or observing teachers using texts that focused on some of the topics we explored as a class. However, having this class take place early in their teacher preparation program also allowed the candidates to view the use of text in classrooms with a critical literacy lens, to consider students’ engagement when teachers read texts focused on social issues, and to discuss with classroom

teachers how they can balance their own emotion with text selection in the classroom. It is my hope the teacher candidates will continually reflect on their own emotional links to curriculum and pedagogy in the classrooms they visit throughout their program and eventually in their own classroom.

Teacher educators should consider the role that children's literature plays in their own courses, and the types of text they introduce to teacher candidates. Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004) surveyed teachers on the ways they viewed controversial topics in the classroom, finding few teachers that felt well prepared for handling these topics in school. There is a need to create spaces within the university walls to allow teacher candidates to explore their own identities in connection to race, gender, culture, and other social issues and how those factors shape our emotions and experiences. These conversations can help prepare reflective educators who may then promote these same conversations in their classrooms (Holloway & Gourthro, 2011). Challenging teacher candidates to examine power relations that exist in texts and in schools and to confront those power relations despite emotional responses is imperative to preparing teacher candidates to move toward a social justice-oriented curriculum that represents the backgrounds of all students (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). By embracing the emotions and unease, teachers explore their own beliefs and identity, and help their students do the same, which has potential to lead to empowerment for all children.

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About the Author

Aimee Papola-Ellis is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy. Her research interests include critical literacy, teacher education, and literacy instruction in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. She completed her Ph.D. in Literacy Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno.





Creating spaces for literacy, creating spaces for learning

Christy Howard, East Carolina University

Abstract

This study represents the practices of a middle school social studies teacher as she focuses on integrating questioning, reading, and writing in her content area. This teacher uses literacy strategies to engage students in practices of reading multiple texts and writing to showcase learning. She creates opportunities for students to make connections to their learning, posing questions to enhance critical thinking and the use of multiple sources to support responses. Through these actions, she creates spaces for student reading, writing, and learning to occur.



Creating spaces for literacy, creating spaces for learning

Introduction

If literacy is defined as the “ability to read, write, understand and interpret, and discuss multiple texts across multiple contexts,” (International Reading Association, 2012) then there is no question that literacy instruction should be integrated into content area classrooms. Historically, researchers have asserted this integration can serve to improve literacy and content area learning (Anders & Levine; 1990; Bean, 2000; Moje, 2008; Shanahan, 2004). Most recently, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) has promoted literacy as a shared responsibility across disciplines in a school. The recurring message is literacy matters, not only in an English Language Arts classroom, but across all content areas.

Researchers suggest that reading and writing are often taught as individual subjects, in isolation of other content areas, which can result in literacy not being used as a tool for learning across disciplines (Macphée & Whitecotton, 2011). Pamela, (pseudonyms have been used) a sixth grade veteran social studies teacher, and the focus of this case study, worked to ensure that literacy and social studies did co-exist in the context of her classroom. Pamela worked to provide avenues for students to understand their thinking processes and make connections through reading, writing, and questioning opportunities. This study seeks to examine how a content area teacher integrates literacy practices in her social studies classroom.

Methods

This case study aims to explain the “hows” and “whys” of literacy practices in a social studies classroom. More specifically, it explores how and why a successful teacher integrated literacy strategies in her content area of social studies. To explore this topic, an explanatory case study method was used (Yin, 2009, p.18). This method of empirical inquiry allows for investigation of “a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real

life context” (Yin, 2009, p.18). In this case, it allows for investigation of the close examination of the use of literacy strategies as they were related to and supported Pamela’s unit of study in the context of her social studies classroom.

School Context

This case study, which was part of a larger study, took place in a 6th grade social studies classroom at a high poverty middle school in the southeastern part of the United States. The school was a magnet school located in the downtown area of the city, serving students in grades 6-8.

Data Collection

Methods of data collection included a variety of sources (Yin, 2009) including interviews, observations and documents. The study began with an interview of Pamela where she was asked questions pertaining to the upcoming unit of study she would be teaching. At the completion of the initial interview, classroom observations were conducted everyday during a 70-minute class period for the duration of a unit of study, which lasted 4 weeks. An observation protocol (Creswell, 2007) was used that focused on instructional strategies, teacher interactions with students, and classroom organization.

Observations of Pamela’s instructional practices were conducted throughout the unit of study. The unit of study was titled “Cultures” and focused on increasing student awareness of cultures around the world, particularly how different cultures impacted society. At the conclusion of the unit of study and observations, the final interview was conducted. This interview revolved around Pamela’s reflection of literacy instruction throughout the unit.

Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interviews and observations were compared to each other in order to assess themes and to determine the similarities between Pamela’s interview responses and the classroom observations.

Based on the interviews and observations conducted throughout the study, three major themes emerged that indicate ways in which content area teachers can integrate literacy learning. This article focuses on these three themes as one illustration of literacy in the content area classroom: 1) Questioning and discussions - Pamela asked questions as a way to promote discussion around

content area topics and readings and to help students process reading assignments while preparing for writing; 2) Text Variety - Pamela used a variety of sources to engage her students and foster their flexibility as readers of content area texts; and 3) Creating spaces for writing to apply knowledge - Pamela created space for writing in order to give students the opportunity to showcase their learning, and to reflect on their thinking. The strategies used to support literacy learning within each of these themes are discussed further below.

Questions and discussions to process content knowledge

Often when classroom discussion is ineffective, it is because teachers monopolize the discussion and tend to ask inauthentic questions (Hess, 2004). Simply asking questions does not necessarily help students process information; it is important to ask the types of questions that promote further thinking and learning for students (Duckor, 2014). Pamela asked high quality questions that promoted critical thinking and analysis, which led to high quality discussion. These questions were an important aspect in creating a context for literacy learning in her social studies classroom.

The questions Pamela posed promoted small group and whole class discussions. She would ask students to answer questions independently and then share their answers with a partner and/or the whole class through think-pair-share activities (Lyman, 1981) and turn and talk (Harvey & Daniels, 2009) opportunities. These strategies represented the social aspect of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1993), which was evident in the context of Pamela's classroom. These strategies provided students opportunities to share collaboratively through question prompts in order to move beyond memorization of facts to deeper learning and critical thinking. Pamela consistently used questions to "warm up" the minds of her students and to engage them in critical thinking and discussion processes throughout the lessons that focused on both content and literacy skills.

Each of Pamela's questions had a purpose, whether it was using questioning to help students preview the texts they were preparing to read, to make connections with different texts and their own lives as they read, or to analyze texts from multiple perspectives and sources. In Pamela's unit on the study of cultures, for example, she asked questions to help her students make

connections to their readings and to verbally process the information they read. At times Pamela used questioning as a way to activate student thinking before reading. Some questions Pamela posed at the beginning of a lesson on population included: “Why do you think in some places there has been a limit on how many children a family can have? How does population impact us now? Why have death rates changed?” These were not questions students would find in their course readings, but instead, these questions asked students to draw on their knowledge of the world and their experiences in order to think critically and bring this knowledge and experience to their reading. For these questions, Pamela asked her students to first think independently about their responses, and then pair with a partner to further discuss and share their ideas with the whole class prior to engaging with the text.

After reading, viewing video clips and class discussions, Pamela guided students’ critical thinking further as she asked, “How have cultures changed over time? Why have these changes occurred?” Once students had a chance to read, view videos, and discuss the text with their peers, she asked students to draw on all three of these learning experiences in order to answer these questions. Students were able to think through their ideas with peers and refer to the text for support as they considered her questions. Pamela continued to engage them further with questions.

Why is population important to transportation? What happens to the population when one group moves to another area? How is the new area affected? What does popular culture have to do with globalization? I’m asking you to think critically here.

These questions were posed to help students draw on evidence from multiple sources to think critically about the implications of societal changes. Pamela used questioning as a way to engage students in discussion and thinking about their readings as she met her goal of increasing student awareness of cultures around the world and how different cultures impacted society.

Pamela used questioning in order to help students gain content knowledge. When students did not respond correctly to Pamela’s questions, she used strategies such as rereading and chunking the text or revisiting a diagram or video. While watching a video about population, she paused to ask the students about the role of culture in population, when no one knew the answer, she asked them to review the video segment again, keeping the question in

mind. Pamela often asked probing questions and encouraged students to respond to each other. Pamela used strategies to help students connect the course readings, discussions and questions to their writing experiences to deepen and illustrate their knowledge. These were not questions that asked students to regurgitate information; instead, they required that students comprehended the text and draw inferences and conclusions based on their readings.

These questions and prompts posed by Pamela gave students the opportunity to access the text as a resource and to interpret the text through critical thinking and discussion in order to acquire content knowledge (See Table 1). Through this questioning, students were able to analyze and evaluate texts through a critical lens as supported through the Common Core State Standards (2010). Pamela asked students questions that would require them to use textual evidence, which supported the literacy in history standards (CCSS, 2010) and supported the unit objectives of increasing student knowledge of cultures around the world. These questioning strategies helped students set a purpose for reading and engaging with multiple texts as a resource for learning.

Text variety beyond the traditional textbook

Due to budget restraints in the district, Pamela's textbooks were old, and she discussed how they did not appeal to her students. In an effort to engage them in the learning process and challenge her students, Pamela provided students with opportunities to engage with multiple types of texts. Researchers have supported the idea that students should be given opportunities to read multiple texts on a particular topic (Hansen, 2009; Moje, 2008; Nokes, 2008; Stahl & Shanahan, 2004). In order to address the required standards for her content area, Pamela reached beyond the traditional textbook.

While Pamela required that her students engage with the textbook, she also worked to engage them in many other forms and formats. For example, Pamela asked her students to read texts in reader's theater form from Scholastic magazines, traditional texts from magazines, diagrams, and maps. Pamela also showed history videos, used audio recordings of texts and integrated music in her classroom. Not only did Pamela use multiple formats of text as a vehicle to show students different perspectives, she also used them to scaffold the reading process as her students engaged with increasingly more difficult texts. Pamela used these texts to engage and challenge students, asking them to analyze the

Table 1: Questioning to Process Content Knowledge

Questioning to Process Content Knowledge
<p>Questions to Activate Thinking</p> <p>Why do you think in some places there has been a limit on how many children a family can have?</p> <p>How does population impact us now?</p> <p>Why have death rates changed?</p> <p>Questions to answer from drawing evidence from course readings/viewings</p> <p>How have cultures changed over time? Why have these changes occurred?</p> <p>Why is population important to transportation?</p> <p>What happens to the population when one group moves to another area? How is the new area affected?</p> <p>What does popular culture have to do with globalization?</p>

lesson materials and showcase their content knowledge through writing exercises. She created an emphasis on textual engagement and asked students to use information from multiple texts as evidence of learning and supporting their stance on a topic. For example, Pamela asked students to write about how population could change over time using evidence from the class videos, textbook, diagrams, and class discussions. This approach is supported by research as Moje (2008) suggests that subject area teachers provide students with multiple text types in order to both build knowledge and engage students with disciplinary texts. She suggests these various texts can “support the construction of knowledge necessary to access the abstract and dense print texts of the disciplines” (p. 102).

Pamela engaged students in music as a text as she worked to explore various cultures. During one observation, Pamela played songs from various cultures in order to explore cultural differences and raise her students’ awareness about the role of music in cultures around the world. “Okay everyone, on your paper, write music/culture.” The activity involved the students listening to musical selections from other countries. “Pay attention to

the instruments you hear” she told them:

With this assignment I want to raise your awareness about different types of music in different countries. I’m going to share some different music with you. Write about the instruments you hear, your personal response to the song, I like this song because . . . I don’t like this song because . . . how does the song make you feel and what country do you think this song came from? I’m giving you the choice to write your answers in paragraph form or notes form.

Using the knowledge students gained about cultures they had to determine which country each song represented and write a written response to the music. Music choices included songs from Spain, China, Africa and America. Pamela asked students how the music addressed the topic of culture. She asked them to consider the origin of the music, and how one song compared to the next. Pamela played the music and after each song asked students to discuss their written responses. The music was a medium that served as a source of connection for students. At the conclusion of this activity, Pamela asked students to write about the role of music in their culture and think about the role of music in other cultures as well. This activity helped to meet Pamela’s unit objectives by using music as a text to increase student awareness of cultures around the world. At the same time, she was asking students to make personal connections to music as a representation of culture. This helped students bring their personal knowledge to the task. Building background knowledge and helping students link new material to their prior knowledge helps students make connections to texts and their learning (Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Each day in Pamela’s class was a connection to the next day, a connection to new texts and a connection to the lives of her students that helped them learn the content area information she was teaching.

One Friday afternoon during the unit of study, at the conclusion of the week’s lessons, Pamela asked students to write about the benefits of living in a culturally diverse country and discuss the drawbacks. Students were to use their sources of learning from the week including videos, the textbook, notes, organizers, and class discussions. Pamela wanted students to use information from a variety of their learning sources to respond to this question. After students completed this writing task, Pamela asked students to share their ideas

with the class. As students listened to their peers, they were able to add to their writing, building a resource that represented their learning. Using visuals, videos, maps, and music illustrated how important it was for students to process questions based on different mediums and to put their thoughts into writing.

Fisher and Frey (2013) suggested that if students are to be asked to write from sources they should be taught to “carefully read texts and collect evidence from those texts” (p. 99). Through class discussions, notes, and Quick Writes, students collected evidence daily from multiple sources. Teaching students to engage with and collect evidence from the text was an ongoing process in this classroom. Through the use of multiple texts, Pamela created a space for her students to become critical consumers of information (See Table 2). This was seen throughout the unit as Pamela provided many opportunities for students to engage with resources by asking questions, providing opportunities for discussion and asking students to use these sources to create written responses.

Creating spaces for writing to apply knowledge

Throughout the process of questioning, discussing, reading and revisiting various social studies texts, Pamela created spaces for students to write in a way

Table 2: *Types of Texts*

Types of Texts
<i>Magazines</i> -To evaluate different examples of culture through visual images and articles
<i>Diagrams</i> -To see visual representations of populations
<i>Maps</i> -To see locations of countries being studied
<i>Videos</i> -To see examples of, and raise student awareness of population, pop culture and transportation, across different cultures
<i>Music</i> - To hear examples of, and raise students’ awareness about the role of music in cultures around the world
<i>Textbook</i> -To read about different cultures of the world
<i>All texts</i> -To compose a written piece representing the benefits and drawbacks of living in a culturally diverse country

that represented their connections and their knowledge of the content. Pamela used writing as a way for students to defend claims and display their knowledge based on “what they have experienced, imagined, thought and felt” (CCSS, 2010 p. 63). Pamela created these writing opportunities throughout her daily lessons. Writing was not the conclusion of the unit; instead, Pamela created spaces for writing throughout the unit, requiring students to continually interact with and create texts in multiple ways. Her instruction allowed for a cycle of reading various texts, questioning, and writing, but not necessarily in that order. Writing did not occur in Pamela’s classroom in isolation. This integration was natural for Pamela as she created spaces for all three to occur. Figure 1 helps to illustrate this concept.

Through creating spaces for learning, Pamela created a scaffolding process where she supported learning through discussion and questioning and helped students work to a level of academic independence that could be

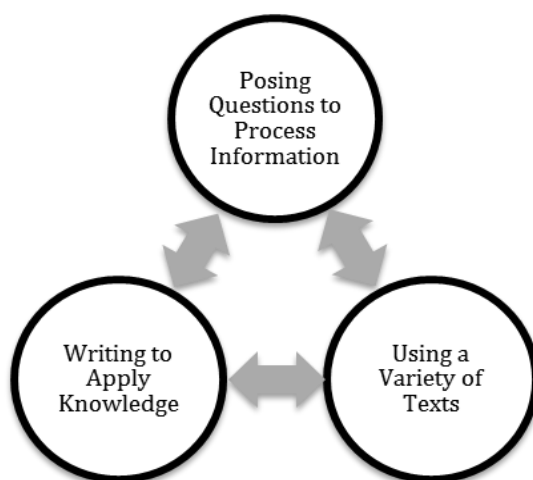


Figure 1: *Creating Spaces for Learning*

demonstrated through writing. In order for Pamela to meet her goal of integrating writing in the social studies classroom, she had to create space and opportunity for this to occur. Students need regular opportunities to engage in writing tasks (Fisher & Frey, 2013), and Pamela created these opportunities for her students.

In the beginning of the unit, students were asked to read the introduction to cultures in their textbooks. From there she asked them to

create a “Quick Write” about traits that represented the culture of their family. Students shared these responses and compared their experiences to the information gained from the text, continuing the cycle of creating spaces for learning through engaging with text, writing and discussing their knowledge with peers.

Pamela often created low risk environments by providing students with choices to determine their own topics for discussion and reflection. In one lesson, as a review, she asked the students to choose any topic from the unit and create a graphic organizer of their choice to represent the new information they learned. Students were then able to share their graphic organizers with their partner, and as a whole class to review previously learned information. This opportunity provided students with the choice to present on a topic in which they felt confident and share this knowledge with their peers. Students then used their graphic organizers to create a written piece about their topic.

Pamela taught students how their knowledge of social studies was gained through their writing about their reading. For example, through the use of graphic organizers and two-column notes, Pamela taught students how to take notes and organize their thoughts from lectures, the textbook, and videos. These note-taking strategies helped students to determine the importance of information, organize information and document their responses to information. Students used these notes in discussions and to form further questions. As students shared their questions from their written notes, they reflected on their reading/viewing and prepared for their writing in response to reading tasks such as a paragraph, a Quick Write, or a response to a prompt. Pamela asked students to think critically as they prepared for their written responses by constantly posing questions. “Why does it matter how many people live somewhere?” she probed. She created these opportunities for discussions and questions, which would lead to writing opportunities that would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge.

The questions Pamela asked in her classroom were a springboard for writing. This writing took the form of written responses that allowed students to convey their knowledge, reflect on their learning, and support their claims on topics. In one observation, Pamela instructed students to write a paragraph about how cultures change, using the information and resources they had learned in the unit. In their writing and responding to questions, Pamela asked

students to use the word wall terms and concepts in their responses to ensure they were using the language of the topic. Once students had an opportunity to respond to her questions, pose their own questions, and share ideas with their peers based on their reading, she asked them to put pen to paper and write their responses to prompts and questions.

Two weeks into learning about how cultures impacted their society, Pamela asked students to engage in more elaborate writing by creating culture books about themselves. The book was to represent their lives through customs, foods, music, etc. Students were able to make personal connections to the text and think of how their lives resembled the cultures they studied around the world. This activity was an example of how Pamela helped students' writing become more extended and connected to specific social studies content through scaffolding tasks. Students were also asked to consider the impact of the cultural differences between themselves and other cultures they studied. Pamela used the culture book as a way to create a space for students to make personal and real world connections to their learning through this writing task. The culture books were written by students and shared with their classmates, providing ownership of their learning and a space for sharing the personal connections they made.

Pamela implemented an integrated model of literacy in her content area, which included reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Pamela created spaces for reading, questioning, and writing in a way that would help students convey knowledge and retain information (See Table 3). In Pamela's social

Table 3: Writing to apply knowledge

Writing to apply knowledge
<i>Quick Writes</i> -To make connections and reflect upon learning
<i>Graphic Organizers</i> -To take notes and organize thoughts from lectures, the textbook, and videos in preparation for writing
<i>2-column notes</i> -To take notes and organize thoughts from lectures, the textbook, and videos in preparation for writing
<i>Written Responses to Reading/Prompts</i> - To make connections with different texts and analyze texts from multiple perspectives. To showcase knowledge of how cultures impacted society.
<i>Culture Books</i> - To make personal connections to the content and to consider the impact of the cultural differences between students and other cultures they studied

studies classroom writing mattered, but it was a process of asking questions, providing various texts to engage students and constantly creating spaces for writing, discussion, and consequently, learning.

Conclusion

At a time when so many students across the country continue to read below grade level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), it is imperative that educators shift their focus to literacy instruction beyond the English Language Arts classroom. Pamela's approach to social studies instruction was to ensure that literacy was present in the context of her classroom in meaningful ways that supported content area learning. She did not simply post notes on the board and ask students to copy them, nor did she lecture for 70 minutes and assume students would retain the information. Instead, she embraced her responsibility as a content area teacher, working to provide ways for her students to access texts, learning the content of social studies while reading, writing, and questioning using the described strategies.

What is important to note in this study is 1) Pamela's questions, text choices, and writing tasks were all deliberately planned in order to meet her unit goal of increasing student awareness of cultures around the world and how these cultures impacted society. Each of her instructional decisions was based on making sure students gained content knowledge on this topic. 2) Questioning, using multiple texts, and writing to showcase knowledge worked together. In isolation, any of these strategies may not have been as effective. This approach provided an opportunity for students to expand on their thoughts and learn the content through various texts, verbal, and written application. Pamela created a space where these aspects of literacy and social studies naturally fit hand in hand.

While Pamela used research based literacy strategies seen in many classrooms such as reader's theater, think-pair-share, word walls, graphic organizers, etc. the way in which these strategies came together through questioning, engaging with multiple texts, and writing opportunities, demonstrated the ways in which she intentionally created a space for literacy, learning, and engagement. Specifically, Pamela asked questions of students verbally and provided opportunities for them to share their responses. Ultimately students were able to use multiple sources including texts, videos,

discussions, and resources to engage with the content and write about their learning. Pamela used these literacy strategies as tools for scaffolding the learning process, helping her students gain access to content area knowledge, which was exhibited when all of Pamela's students passed the unit test with a "C" or higher. The activities Pamela promoted in her classroom gave students an opportunity to learn from their peers, develop their thinking, and practice literacy skills to enhance their knowledge of social studies.

Implications

The implications of this study suggest the approach to literacy strategies in the content area classroom is multifaceted. The integration goes beyond asking students to read a text in a content area class, but encompasses a range of strategies and practices as showcased through the "spaces for literacy" Pamela created where students were given the opportunity for deeper, sustained interactions with texts.

While Pamela was a veteran teacher, she discussed how she still had to spend time researching strategies to use with her students. The effort Pamela put into creating her lessons suggests that content area teachers need on-going professional development to learn about specific strategies for integrating literacy into their classrooms. Often teachers can feel ill prepared to integrate literacy in their discipline (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, & Mueller, 2001; Mallette, Henk, Waggoner, & Delaney, 2005). Professional development opportunities could provide strategies related to literacy that will help teachers feel confident that literacy strategies can be a valuable tool for accessing content knowledge. This integration across content areas could open possibilities for collaboration of teachers and allow students to transfer these literacy practices across disciplines. Together, the instructional practices Pamela demonstrated can help teachers by creating spaces for literacy and, as a result, creating spaces for content-area learning.

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About the Author

Christy Howard is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University where she teaches literacy courses in the College of Education. Her research interests include teacher preparation and content area literacy.





Pre-Service Teachers' Growth In Understandings of Best Practice Literacy Instruction Through Paired Course and Field Experience

Jamie Lipp, Ohio University
Sarah Helfrich, Ohio University

Abstract

Illiteracy is on the rise in the United States, and the potential negative impact on today's struggling reader is devastating. Now more than ever, preparing pre-service teachers to be effective teachers of literacy is crucial. This study examined the growth in understandings of best practice literacy of eleven pre-service teachers through paired course and field work. Results reveal that through paired course and field work, growth of best practice literacy instruction is shown by pre-service teachers' enhanced abilities to define, assign importance, and relate to implications for student learning as well as develop efficacy around their use. Results of this research have an impact on teacher preparation programs and highlight the importance of engaging pre-service teachers in literacy experiences that are connected to the course and field to better prepare them to meet the challenges of ensuring all students grow to be literate individuals.



Pre-Service Teachers' Growth In Understandings of Best Practice Literacy Instruction Through Paired Course and Field Experience

Introduction

Today's struggling readers will face many obstacles as they progress through school. These may include a higher likelihood of being retained in school, being incarcerated, and living in poverty. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated that over \$2 billion is spent each year on students who repeat a grade due to reading problems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), while the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that 60% of America's prison inmates are illiterate, and 85% of all juvenile offenders have reading problems (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Further, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) revealed that 14% of adults over the age of 16 read at or below a 5th grade level and 29% read at an 8th grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Among those with the lowest literacy rates, 43% live in poverty.

Combating illiteracy has become a national problem, but effective teachers can provide the solution. There is strong agreement that schools will succeed only when teachers have the expertise and competence needed to teach reading effectively (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Research from the International Literacy Association [ILA], formerly the International Reading Association, concluded that putting a quality teacher in every classroom is key to addressing the challenges of reading achievement in schools (2007). Because colleges and universities prepare 80% of today's teachers, increased attention to the formal training of pre-service teachers in the area of literacy is necessary (United States Department of Education, 2013).

At the university level, coursework and field experience have often existed as a theory/practice divide, with one having little influence on the other. Research revealed that excellent teacher education programs engage beginning

teachers in a variety of field experiences in which they have opportunities to use their coursework and interact with excellent models and mentors (ILA, 2007). Darling-Hammond (as cited by Scherer, 2012) asserted how important it is to create coherent programs for pre-service teachers in which all of the courses are connected to clinical work. She described these programs to be those where, “the student learns specific practices, goes into the classroom and works on those practices, and then brings the experience back, debriefs, problem solves, learns some more and takes it back to use in the classroom” (p. 20). Creating pre-service teachers who are highly prepared for the demands of today’s classroom can be supported through the coherent combination of course and field work.

The purpose of the present research study was to examine how pre-service teachers change and grow in their understandings of best practice literacy instruction when course and field work are closely aligned. The present research sought to answer the following question: In what ways do pre-service teachers grow in their understandings and beliefs of best practice literacy instruction through unified course and field work?

Literature Review

Pre-service teachers need specific learning opportunities to become effective teachers of literacy. The ILA (2010) identified Curriculum and Instruction as well as Assessment and Evaluation among their six standards for Pre-K and elementary classroom teachers in regards to teaching reading. Instructional approaches and materials are the fundamental tools of reading instruction (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2010). Pre-service teachers must be equipped with a solid understanding of best practice literacy instruction that is based on research and theory. Pre-service teachers can learn to implement effective literacy instruction based on knowledge gained from their teacher preparation programs (Fazio, 2000).

As with instruction, assessment is an important area for pre-service teachers to understand and experience. According to the standards set by the ILA in 2010, elementary teacher candidates must be able, for example, to interpret and use assessment data to analyze individual, group and classroom performance and progress, use assessment data to plan instruction systematically, use evidence-based rationales to make and monitor flexible

instructional grouping options for students, and use various practices to differentiate instruction. Without formal preparation in assessment methodology, beginning teachers struggle with translating diagnostic data into effective teaching strategies. With such preparation, those same teachers are able to pinpoint areas of concern and weaknesses in their own teaching (ILA, 2007).

Two of the best practices in the areas of assessment and instruction are running records and guided reading. Running records serve as a systematic observational tool that teachers can use to guide instruction. Clay (2005) insisted, “in every way, the information produced by systematic observation reduces our uncertainties and improves our instruction” (p.3). There is consistent evidence that the use of formative classroom assessment like running records distinguishes exemplary from ordinary teachers (Ross, 2004). Therefore, pre-service teachers must be well informed regarding the benefits of using formative assessment, such as running records, in the classroom.

Guided reading has been noted as an effective form of reading instruction for decades (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Fountas and Pinnell (1996) confirmed that most descriptions of comprehensive literacy programs now include guided reading as one of the essential components. Guided reading can assist students in their growth as readers, if teachers can effectively implement the process of creating and managing flexible groups, making it of high importance in teacher education (Ferguson & Wilson, 2009).

Effective Pairing of Course and Field Work

Uniting course and field work is key to effectively preparing pre-service teachers. Coursework and content knowledge provide pre-service teachers with a base of knowledge, which is then further developed through live teaching opportunities in the form of a field experience component. Field experiences are needed as a means to transition pre-service teachers from an academic world to a field based learning environment (Retallick & Miller, 2010). Carter and Anders (1996) contended that the skills students develop in the academic world are considerably different than the skills needed to learn from their own teaching and field experiences. Because of their importance to professional learning, field experiences for pre-service teachers have been compared to medical student internships and residencies (Huling, 1998).

Field experience opportunities allow pre-service teachers to focus on the actual process of teaching. This method of supervised practice for pre-service teachers can provide valuable learning and development of both knowledge and skill related to teaching reading. The National Research Council (2010) has considered systematic, structured field experiences to be one of the most critical aspects of effective teacher preparation. Likewise, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010) has recommended field experiences as essential to the reform and improvement of teacher preparation programs. Heibert and Morris (2012) assert that working directly on improving teaching, the methods used to interact with students about content, is the most productive option for improving classroom instruction.

Helfrich and Bean (2011) identified the importance of marrying the components identified as crucial to the development of a successful teacher preparation program: coursework (content knowledge); field experiences closely related to coursework and content knowledge; and collaboration among members of the “triad” (p. 245). The authors further acknowledged that both coursework and field experiences appear to be critical elements of teacher preparation programs, allowing teacher candidates to gain knowledge of concepts and put into practice what they have learned, thus helping to prepare them to teach literacy. Ensuring the coursework and related field experiences provide opportunities for teachers to develop their understandings in a learn-by-doing environment is essential for successful preparation of teacher candidates. This purposeful pairing of coursework and clinical field experience allows pre-service teachers to identify linkages between theory and practice (Retallick & Miller, 2010). Many universities are making changes in their programs to offer strong clinical experience connected to coursework (Scherer, 2012). Field experience opportunities are significant to the development of understandings of the ways in which pre-service teachers learn to teach literacy. In addition, Freeman (2010) offered that in order for these field experiences to benefit pre-service teachers, they should be well planned in positive learning environments with quality educational professionals and institutions.

Methodology

The research followed eleven pre-service teachers enrolled in a reading methods course with attached elementary field experience in the Spring of 2014.

During this time, pre-service teachers were given opportunities to learn and implement two important literacy strategies: running records and guided reading. A researcher-developed survey about pre-service teachers' understandings (definitions) of and beliefs about the overall importance of running records and guided reading were completed at both the beginning and end of the semester. Written reflections were collected after the participants were able to learn about and have hands-on experience with running records and guided reading in both the university and elementary classroom.

Participants

Eleven pre-service teachers enrolled in a three-semester hour reading methods course (Early Childhood Education; Reading Methods) with an attached field experience were asked to participate in this semester long research study and given the option to decline participation in the study with no impact on their grade. None of the pre-service teachers had professional teaching experience, nor did they yet hold a teaching license. All pre-service teachers were undergraduate or post-baccalaureate students (seeking teacher licensure) and ranged in age from 22–43. All but one of the students were female. Participants were primarily Caucasian, with the exception of one Asian American participant.

Coursework and Field Placement

The course was held at a branch campus of a small, private, four-year University in central Ohio. Prior to teaching in the field component, pre-service teachers engaged in coursework that was assisted through constructive feedback of lesson plans, clear instruction and modeling, as well as in-course practice. As the course proceeded, pre-service teachers were taught to administer and analyze running records and instruct students in guided reading groups. Pre-service teachers gained experience with these literacy components through readings, discussions, videos, modeling, practice, and ultimately, engaging in live teaching experiences using these literacy strategies in the field.

For the field component, the pre-service teachers were placed in K–3 classrooms throughout central Ohio. The field sites varied in size and socioeconomic status and were selected based on current agreements with the university. Mentor teachers all taught an English/Language Arts block and were selected based on willingness to participate and a commitment to model and

support understandings of best practice literacy instruction within their classrooms.

Each pre-service student had a supervisor that observed and evaluated their teaching in the field three times throughout the semester. These supervisors held scheduled meetings with the pre-service teachers and mentor teachers where constructive feedback was given based on these observations. Mentor teachers, supervisors and the instructor collaborated to ensure basic expectations of the field experience were met by the pre-service teacher (ex. attendance, participation and assignment requirements).

Researcher

The instructor of the course also served as the researcher, serving in multiple roles. For example, the instructor of the course directly supervised the pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and supervisors to ensure clear expectations and common understandings existed throughout the course and field. The instructor taught and assigned the content, then worked with the mentor teachers and supervisors to ensure the students were able to practice in the field the learned content in the coursework.

Procedures

The research study selected running records and guided reading as two key areas to support literacy instruction. Pre-service teachers' understandings of these two areas, as well as their impact for teaching, were developed through course and field experience opportunities. These two areas were chosen because of their clear impact on assessment and instruction to support literacy development in children.

After extensive, in-class learning opportunities surrounding running records and guided reading, pre-service teachers were then able to apply this learning in the field. Prior to pre-service teachers teaching guided reading in the field, they were first required to administer a running record assessment on each child in their guided reading group to identify their instructional level, reading strengths, and areas of targeted instruction. Additionally, running records were administered on each child in the guided reading group at the end of the lesson series to track individual student's progress. Once the initial running records were administered and analyzed, pre-service teachers were required to teach 12

guided reading lessons throughout a four-week period during the semester. Each guided reading group consisted of 3-6 children.

Pre-service teachers learned about running records and guided reading through their coursework, but were then able to practice these newly learned skills with actual students. As future literacy teachers, knowing how to use these best practice literacy strategies to support instruction contributes to the success of the teacher. Research by Dawkins, Ritz and Loudon (2009) confirmed the importance for pre-service teachers to develop a wide range of literacy teaching practices, especially those that rely on deep knowledge of literacy concepts and skills to be a more effective teacher.

Instruments

Eleven surveys were completed at the beginning of the course (January) and at the end of the course (April). The surveys consisted of open response questions and a Likert scale. Pre-service teachers were asked to rate the importance of running records and guided reading in overall reading instruction by using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important. The surveys were designed to identify the participants' basic knowledge about running record assessments and guided reading. Likewise, pre-service teachers reported on their understandings of the definitions of each, as well as the impact of running records and guided reading on literacy instruction. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Define ("running record"/ "guided reading").
2. Do you think (running records/ guided reading) are valuable teaching tools to use with students? Why or why not?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not important and 5 being very important, how would you rate using running records in the classroom to enhance student learning?

Pre-service teachers completed reflections throughout the course as they finished their experiences with running records and guided reading. Reflections consisted of one question each that asked the pre-service teachers to reflect on their personal experiences in the field related to the literacy topic (running records/guided reading). Pre-service teachers were encouraged, in their reflections, to summarize their familiarity, understandings, and beliefs of

the effectiveness of these literacy components and their impact on instruction. The reflection questions were as follows:

1. After learning about running records and their uses, and using running records to assess student reading abilities and plan instruction, reflect upon your personal experiences in the field using running records, specifically how you see them contributing to both your teaching and the students' learning.
2. After learning about guided reading and the necessary components of a guided reading lesson, and having the opportunity to teach students using multiple guided reading lessons, reflect upon your personal experiences in the field using guided reading, specifically how you see guided reading contributing to both your teaching and the students' learning.

Data was collected through pre and post surveys and reflections. Pre-surveys at the beginning of the course were collected before any instruction, discussion, or field opportunities were available. Two reflections per pre-service teacher (22 total) were completed after they were able to learn about each of the literacy strategies (guided reading and running records), discuss, practice and reflect on the overall success in the field. Post surveys were collected at the final course meeting, when all learning opportunities for the methods course and field experience were complete.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed for differences from the initial surveys to the final surveys. The open-response questions from the survey as well as the reflections were coded to identify themes in understandings, opinions of effectiveness, confidence, and likelihood of pre-service teachers to use these strategies in their future teaching. First, definitions of literacy strategies from pre to post were compared to identify stronger, more accurate understandings in definitions and understandings of the two focus areas (running records and guided reading). Then, the scales indicating overall importance were compared from pre to post to identify gains. Finally, additional understandings and opinions from reflections were then further examined.

Growth in Understandings of Best Practice Literacy

Likert items were analyzed to reveal if pre-service teachers' opinions of the importance of specific literacy topics, running records and guided reading, had changed over the course of the semester. Likewise, the ways in which participants viewed how use of the literacy strategies could enhance their future teaching were noted. Definitions of running records were analyzed (pre and post) using three components of an accurate definition: Running records are (1) an assessment (2) used to observe reading behaviors/strategies and (3) helpful to plan instruction to meet student needs. Definitions of guided reading were coded (pre and post) using four components of an accurate definition: Guided reading is (1) planned, small group reading instruction (2) teacher supportive (3) allows for differentiation within the lesson based on strengths and weaknesses and (4) used to monitor reading progress. The post reflections were analyzed to reveal further emerging themes of understanding among the participants.

Results

The results of this study confirm growth in pre-service teachers' understandings, definitions of and feelings of importance in specific areas of best practice literacy as evidenced by examining pre- and post-surveys. Results are further supported by the opinions, ideas and consolidations made within the final reflections. Results reveal that through paired course and field work, growth of best practice literacy instruction is shown through pre-service teachers' enhanced abilities to define, assign importance, and relate to implications for student learning as well as develop efficacy around their use.

Prior to Course and Field Work

Initial surveys reveal that pre-service teachers were unfamiliar with, or only somewhat familiar with, running records. Likewise, these surveys reveal many inaccurate definitions of running records. For example, one student initially defines a running record in these words: "A running record is when a teacher reads a student a text over and over." Three of the eleven participants identified running records as an assessment tool while seven of the eleven participants identified running records as providing insight into student reading behaviors. Only one of the eleven participants identified running records as a teaching tool to guide instruction. Participants rated running records either with a 3, 4 or 5, indicating they believed them to be of medium to high importance.

Pre-surveys reveal that six pre-service teachers had a limited understanding of guided reading, defining it as a student reading while the teacher listens, or teachers helping only when needed. Five of the eleven pre surveys indicate the pre-service teachers gave an inaccurate definition of, or had no experience or knowledge about guided reading. Examples include, “students read with an interactive device” and “I have not heard the term before.” One student reveals incorrect understandings of guided reading while providing a definition on the pre-survey. He writes, “Guided reading is a reading done with a student and teacher that gives help if needed.” In terms of importance for overall reading instruction, the likert scale shows that all participants began the course believing that guided reading was of medium to high importance, rating it between a 3 and 5.

It is interesting to note that, though pre-service teachers showed limited to no understanding of the literacy terms *running records* and *guided reading*, they all believed them to be important concepts. One possible explanation for this perceived importance is that they had heard the terms spoken by teachers before, either in their university coursework or their field placement classrooms, which made them believe they were necessary practices, even though they did not yet know how to perform them, or what exactly they were used for. Further, it is possible the pre-service teachers initially believed the literacy terms to be important concepts simply because they were the focus of the survey.

Post Course and Field Work

Post surveys and reflections revealed clearer understandings of running records and guided reading and their importance in relation to literacy instruction; sample pre- and post-statements are included in Table 1. The same student who showed misunderstandings in the pre-survey revealed stronger understandings of the purpose and implications into teaching that running records possess in the post-survey, as evident by her comment:

A running record is an assessment (formal or informal) used to see how fluent a reader reads and what cues they use to make errors and self-corrections. Running records show the student’s reading strengths and weaknesses and are used to guide reading instruction.

All participants were able to successfully identify running records as an assessment tool as well as being used to guide instruction. Ten of eleven participants noted that running records were used to observe and record student reading behaviors. Post survey Likert scales revealed all participants used a rating of either 4 or 5 to indicate their opinions of importance in using running records to support reading instruction. The overall gains in the Likert scale were 10 points.

Reflections identified three themes in regards to running records: 1) running records are very useful in the classroom; 2) running records are used to differentiate and plan instruction; and 3) administering running records takes time and practice, but pre-service teachers' confidence has grown through practice. Reflections support enhanced understandings and allow pre-service teachers to reveal how the combination of course and field work has supported their growth as teachers. Examples include calling running records an "eye opening experience," "now viewing running records as a much needed tool to identify the specific areas of reading that need further supported," and "an accurate assessment that allows the teacher to tailor the instruction to increase progress of the student."

Post-surveys, in combination with reflections, revealed an increase in understandings and abilities to define guided reading. The same student with incorrect understandings in the pre-survey revealed, in the post-survey, a much deeper understanding of guided reading:

Guided reading is a small group reading lesson guided by the teacher. The teacher supports the reading through close observation of all students while developing decoding, fluency and comprehension skills by reading texts at a similar level or interest of the students in the group. This instruction allows teachers to monitor progress of students and differentiate their instruction.

All participants were able to identify guided reading as an important component of reading instruction used to enhance reading abilities. Ten of the eleven participants identified guided reading as planned, small group instruction while eight of the eleven participants noted that guided reading was teacher supportive. Nine of the eleven participants included guided reading as differentiated within based on student strengths and needs. Finally, six of the eleven participants noted that guided reading was used to monitor student

reading progress. The Likert scale on the post surveys revealed that all 11 participants rated guided reading of high importance (5) as a contributor to reading instruction and show an overall gain of eight points.

Reflections show that pre-service teachers valued learning about guided reading and the opportunity to apply this learning in the classroom. Examples include feelings of confidence teaching guided reading. One student stated,

I really enjoy guided reading groups. I felt so productive working in small groups and focusing my instruction specifically to their needs. I saw progress over the 12 lessons and felt like I was really teaching and making a difference.

Another student stated,

As a teacher-in-training it was absolutely necessary to have this experience of creating the lessons, teaching the lessons and being able to find the teaching points for each student to differentiate instruction. I more clearly understand the importance of guided reading and it's potential impact on student progress, as well as the data collection that goes along with it.

Connections Revealed

Favorably, pre-service teachers' reflections showed a link between formative assessments (running records) and planning differentiated, small group reading instruction (guided reading). Throughout their reflections, pre-service teachers made connections between the importance of informal assessments in the form of running records to guide teaching decisions, book choice and grouping for guided reading instruction. Pre-service teachers also noted the importance of instructing students at their instructional level based on the information gained through data collection (running records).

Pre-service teachers' reflections showed that they connect running records to formative assessment, citing the importance of using running records to inform teaching decisions. At the conclusion of the research, students believed running records to be important in identifying students' reading level, strengths and weaknesses of the reader, and areas in which to target instruction. Pre-service teachers also noted the importance of analyzing running records to understand specific decoding behaviors.

Pre-service teachers discovered that running records allow fluency understandings and specific reading behaviors to be revealed. They found running records to be *tools to guide instruction* and identified strengths and weaknesses of the reader. Pre-service teachers understood that taking accurate running records requires much practice, but that the administration becomes easier as practice continues. They found running records to be a valuable teaching tool assists in effective guided reading planning and teaching. Reflections reveal growing confidence surrounding the use of running records to have developed through field experience opportunities.

Further, many pre-service teachers noted in their reflections that guided reading allowed them to better understand the needs of their students. Likewise, reflections showed that guided reading allowed pre-service teachers to get to know their students and also personalize the lessons. Finally, reflections revealed that pre-service teachers believed guided reading allowed them to differentiate within the small groups to better meet the needs of individual students.

Discussion

Findings reveal that paired course and field experiences allow pre-service teachers to better explain, defend importance, and feel confident to teach using these literacy skills. Pre-service teachers are able to better understand the value of the techniques of running records and guided reading, are more confident to teach using these strategies, and can more accurately define the strategies. Connections are evident between a specific assessment method and the ways in which this method drives instruction, specifically with running records and guided reading. Results of this study are consistent with previous research (Helfrich and Bean, 2011; Heibert & Morris, 2012; Retallick & Miller, 2010; Scherer, 2012), confirming that pre-service teachers, through the pairing of course and field work, through more accurate definitions, beliefs of importance and confidence within, do show enhanced understandings about best practice literacy instruction, specifically in the areas of running records and guided reading.

Data concludes that pre-service teachers' beliefs about the importance of running records and guided reading as best practice literacy instruction either increased or stayed the same throughout. At the conclusion of the course and

field experience, all pre-service teachers indicated they felt guided reading was a sound way to teach reading in small groups. Pre-service teachers' understandings of the ways in which running records are used to guide teaching, as well as their overall importance to teaching reading increased throughout the study. From the beginning to the end of the course, data also confirms pre-service teachers are better able to explain, defend, and teach using best practice literacy instruction through their opportunities to experience live teaching in their associated field. All students were able to more thoroughly define running records and guided reading from pre to post.

Limitations

While the results of the data reveal favorable insight into the ways in which paired course and field experiences can enhance best practice literacy instruction understandings among pre-service teachers, this research does have limitations. Due to the small amount of subjects in the study, more research is needed to enhance understandings about the ways in which pre-service teachers develop understandings of best practice literacy instruction. Likewise, the author-as-course instructor-and-researcher can set limitations on the findings. Further studies of the impact of pre-service teachers engaging in best practice literacy instruction through connected course and field work are warranted, as they seem to impact curriculum methods courses.

Implications

In summary, pairing course and field work proved to be a successful experience for pre-service teachers in terms of growing understandings around best practice literacy. All pre-service teachers noted both running records and guided reading to be essential strategies for teaching reading. At the end of the course and field experience, pre-service teachers had a solid understanding of how using running records as formative assessment can guide teaching decisions in small group literacy instruction in the form of guided reading. Results of this research have an impact on teacher preparation programs and highlight the importance of engaging pre-service teachers in literacy experiences that are connected to both the course and field, to better prepare them to meet the challenges of ensuring all students grow to be literate individuals.

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About the Authors

Jamie R. Lipp, a former Reading Recovery teacher for Worthington Schools in Columbus, OH, USA, is currently a doctoral candidate in the Gladys W. & David H. Patton College of Education at Ohio University, Athens, USA, and the elementary English language arts and social studies curriculum specialist for Westerville City Schools, Columbus, OH, USA; e-mail

Dr. Sara R. Helfrich is an Associate Professor in the Gladys W. & David H. Patton College of Education at Ohio University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in language and literacy development, literacy assessment and instruction, and literacy coaching. Additionally, she serves as the Literacy Program coordinator, overseeing the undergraduate reading program as well as the online Masters and reading endorsement programs. She also works closely with K–3 pre-service teachers and classroom teachers as a faculty coordinator in the early childhood professional development school partnership program. Her research and publications focus on pre-service teacher preparation and self-efficacy related to teaching reading.





Choice and Rigor: Achieving a Balance in Middle School Reading/Language Arts Classrooms in the Era of the Common Core

Nancy Stevens, University of Wisconsin—Whitewater

Abstract

While the advantages of reading workshops are well known (Atwell, 1998), there is currently a debate among scholars, practitioners, and politicians about the use of instructional/independent level texts in light of the Common Core Standards' end-of-year requirement for students to be reading at grade level (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Particularly in middle school, where motivation to read often declines, a workshop approach can help students develop and strengthen their interest in reading. A classroom survey completed by middle school students in a suburban school district in the Midwestern United States illustrates students' positive response to a reading workshop approach (Atwell). However, students must also be able to read grade-level text proficiently. Using a combination of workshop and instruction with grade-level texts will help support students in reaching the end-of-year standards required by the Common Core.



Creating spaces for literacy

While working as a literacy coach in a suburban school district in the Midwestern United States, I listened as students entered their reading class, having animated discussions about the books they were reading. Many were reading *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and making excited utterances about the way the plot unfolds. As a literacy coach I work with sixth and seventh grade teachers implementing a reading and writing workshop model (Atwell, 1998). Although district elementary teachers began workshop implementation in the previous year, it was new to the middle school. Some teachers were excited about the new model of teaching while others were skeptical. Previously, they used a traditional reading/language arts approach in which whole-class novels and reading anthologies were used for reading instruction. Shortly after the transition to the workshop model, teachers were required to implement the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), and students were expected to read grade-level texts by the end of year. At the end of third quarter, teachers decided to distribute surveys to sixth-and seventh-grade students to explore their attitudes and experiences related to English/Language Arts. The surveys revealed that students were motivated by the workshop approach for many reasons; however, teachers recognized that they needed to support students in new ways to meet grade-level standards required by the Common Core.

Common Core Standards and Middle School Readers' Workshop: Finding a Balance

For struggling readers, teachers may feel caught between the Common Core Standards' (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) requirements that students read complex text within grade-level bands while ensuring the texts are also accessible. While not diminishing the importance of increasing the rigor that is required of students, we must also be attentive to building motivation and self-efficacy. Particularly at the middle school level where students' interest and motivation to read often declines, workshops can add to students' interest in reading. As students read more, they gain experience, and it is reasonable to expect that achievement will increase (Guthrie, 2004). When students choose the books they read, motivation and engagement increases. Having the

opportunity to collaborate with others reading the same book, or texts with similar themes, provides for more in-depth exploration of the books. The deeper discussion that often results offers additional practice with close reading.

As noted in Appendix A of the Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), many students have been reading texts that do not reflect the complexity required of students entering college and the workforce:

In brief, while reading demands in college, workforce training programs, and life in general have held steady or increased over the last half century, K–12 texts have actually declined in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students’ ability to read complex texts independently. These conditions have left a serious gap between many high school seniors’ reading ability and the reading requirements they will face after graduation (p. 2).

Strategic scaffolding is important as students encounter difficult text: “The general movement, however, should be toward decreasing scaffolding and increasing independence both within and across the text complexity bands defined in the Standards” (p. 3). Considering the requirements set forth in the Common Core Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), and the wide variety of reading levels found in today’s middle school classrooms, how can we support students in reaching this goal?

The International Literacy Association’s Common Core State Standards Committee published Literacy Implementation Guidance for the ELA Common Core State Standards (ILA, 2012). The issue of challenging texts requires students to read grade-level texts, emphasizing that the new, rigorous and challenging requirements will help students reach “more advanced literacy achievement levels” (p. 1). Nevertheless, they also highlight the resulting complications in meeting this outcome, noting “merely adding more challenging texts to the curriculum will not be a sufficient or effective response to this requirement” (p. 1). The Committee highlighted that the levels of text students are required to read refers to reading levels at the end of the year.

However, this does not mean that all assigned reading should be at these levels. In order to help students attain the necessary end-of-year levels, teachers need to establish an ambitious itinerary of rich and varied narrative and informational texts, including some texts that are easier than the Standards specify (ILA, 2012, p. 1).

This is important for all students, including those who are reading below grade level, because it offers readers opportunities to enjoy a wide variety of texts. By providing reading experiences that are positive and motivating, teachers encourage students to read more, not less. As students engage in text-based discussions and listen to others, they use these positive experiences to meet the end-of-year grade level expectations set out in the Common Core State Standards.

Readers' Workshop at Goodfield Middle School

The English/Language Arts teachers at Goodfield Middle School (a pseudonym) observed that student motivation tended to be lower than the enthusiasm often found in elementary schools. Goodfield has an enrollment of approximately 800 students. At the time the surveys were distributed, 39% of the student body was classified as low income; the ethnicity of the student body was 69% white, 20% Hispanic, 6% African American, 3% Asian, and 2% American Indian and multiracial. The district required teachers to move to a workshop approach. While teachers acknowledged the lack of motivation to read among many students, several teachers were hesitant to give up the traditional approaches to which they were accustomed, while others were interested to learn about this new model of instruction. Guthrie (2008) points out, "Teachers learn early in their careers that the more students read, the better readers they become, and it has been shown that reading engagement predicted reading achievement internationally, and in the United States" (p. 3). Therefore, finding ways to extend student interest and engagement into middle school is essential. This is one of the reasons the district implemented a workshop approach.

Prior to the beginning of the year, teachers met in grade-level teams to design and structure readers' workshop (Atwell, 1998) in order to provide consistency within each grade level. Workshops began with a class read aloud, which provided the opportunity for students to listen to and discuss texts at a variety of difficulty levels, followed by mini-lessons. After the mini-lesson and guided practice, students engaged in independent reading as the teacher conferred with individual students about their books (Atwell, 1988; 2007).

Full inclusion classrooms at Goodfield typically had students reading several years below grade level, which presented challenges for teachers prior to the workshop model as texts were inaccessible for a large portion of the class,

yet not challenging enough for others. The workshop approach allowed students to read books that were at their independent reading level, resulting in many engaged and confident readers (Atwell, 2007). At Goodfield, each class had an extensive classroom library that contained a wide variety of genres at a broad spectrum of reading levels. Early in the year, students were supported in identifying text selections for independent reading. Students had time to discuss books with others reading the same book.

Book clubs were introduced midway through the first semester (Daniels & Steinke, 2004). The book clubs began with teacher scaffolding but soon progressed to student-led discussions. Choice in book selection and appropriate reading level is essential if students are to be engaged in what they are reading (Atwell, 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Once students were introduced to book clubs, they were reading two different books: 1) an independent reading book without restriction to genre or theme and 2) their book club books, which provided choice but were based on themes. The choice of book club books was more limited in scope than the independent book. A typical format for the workshop used at Goodfield is provided below.

Students' Views on Reading Workshop at Goodfield

All sixth and seventh grade English/Language Arts teachers were required to change from a traditional format to a workshop format, meaning that all teachers transitioned to workshop during the year in which this survey was distributed (2009 - 2010). There were five teachers in grade six and four teachers in grade seven, with approximately 280 students and 260 students respectively. The school serves grades 6 – 8 with just over 800 total students. Students returned to a traditional English/Language Arts format in grade 8 so that they could better transition into high school English. Toward the end of the first year of workshop implementation, the sixth and seventh grade teachers designed a survey that was discussed in their professional learning community (PLC) grade-level groups. They decided that it would be an option to ask their students to complete the class climate/goal surveys that included prompts related to what they liked about the workshop format. Students were free to write negative comments. One student out of a total of 240 who took the survey wrote a negative comment; the remaining was either positive or unrelated to workshop. It was made clear to the students that these would not be graded.

Table 1: *Workshop at Goodfield*

Time (Based on 70-minute block)	Workshop Component	Reading Level of Text	Frequency
7:30 – 8:30	Read Aloud (Whole Group) (Teacher choice – novel or informational text; based on interest)	Independent , instructional or grade	Daily
8:30 – 8:45	Mini-Lesson (Whole Group) (Skills and strategies appropriate for read aloud book)	Independent , instructional or grade	Daily
8:45 – 9:15	Independent Reading Reading/ Conferring/Collaboration (Schedule with students in advance)	Independent	3 days (Rotation for conferring)
	Book Clubs (Based on themes; choice within themes)	Independent and Instructional	2 days
9:15 – 9:45	Sharing/Collaboration Time	Varied	Daily

The purpose of the survey was to gather students' perspectives on Readers' Workshop near the end of the first year of implementation. Responses on the surveys were similar in both sixth and seventh grades. There were 57 students who took the survey in sixth grade, and 83 students who took the survey in the seventh grade. In order to determine students' thoughts about the workshop, an informal coding scheme was used to classify responses to the question, "What I like most about Readers' Workshop is _____." Comments were categorized according to four themes: (1) having an extended period of time to read a self-selected book, (2) being able to read a best fit book, (3) participation in a book club with choice in book selection, and (4) extraneous comments that were too general to categorize or were unrelated to the prompt.

Seventy-six percent (N=119) of the sixth grade students and 58% (N=44) of the seventh-grade students made comments that what they liked the most about Readers' Workshop was related to the amount of time they were able to read a self-selected book in a quiet, relaxing environment. Comments such as "I love reading and I get to read a lot," "all the time to read," "that I get to read awesome books," and "I can get absorbed in a book and not get interrupted" demonstrate students' support of having time to read and become engaged in a book.

The first theme identified how the ability to self-select books increased student motivation to read (Atwell, 2007; Stairs & Burgos, 2010). Part of the motivation for choice in book selection is the ability to choose books both interesting and at their independent reading level; this is particularly important in inclusive classrooms such as those at Goodfield. Having the ability to select their books, read them independently, confer with a teacher during the workshop, and to experience success builds confidence while teaching students to see themselves as readers.

The second theme related to being able to choose a book that was at an appropriate level. Responses were classified into this category only if there was specific mention of a "just right" book (Atwell, 2007). Many responses in the first theme addressed self-selecting books but didn't include a specific reference to "just right" books; these responses were only included in the first category. Only 1% (N=2) of sixth graders specifically said a "just right book," while the percentage increased to 10% (N=8) in grade seven. It should be noted that students were guided in how to select books early in the year.

The third theme represents student overall interest in book clubs. Nine percent of sixth graders and 12% of seventh graders favored book clubs, specifically mentioning choice in selection. As might be expected in middle school, several students commented about their interest in collaborating and discussing books with others. Among the reasons for liking book clubs, students wrote, "I get to read a lot of different genres," "I like the African and Asia book clubs," and "I like how you get to choose from a selection of books for book club instead of having to read a book that we don't want to read." At Goodfield, workshop teachers worked with social studies teachers collaboratively to incorporate literary non-fiction into both classes, thus supporting literacy in the disciplines.

The final category, general comments or negative responses, represented 17% (N=44) of the respondents in sixth grade and 23% (N=19) in seventh grade. Of the total responses, only one was a negative comment – “I can get out of it.” The rest were unrelated to readers’ workshop or they were too general to be categorized.

Taken as a whole, both sixth and seventh grade responses demonstrate that having choice, extended time to read, and participating in book club discussions with peers were valued by students. Having time and choice (including a range of reading levels) in individual reading and book club selections, were cited as positives for this approach by 91% of the students who completed surveys for both grades.

A Peaceful Co-existence – Achieving a Balance

Although the English/Language Arts teachers at Goodfield sought to motivate students through workshop approach and choice. Teachers do need to ensure that students explore other genres if they are not self-selecting a variety of genres as encouraged by the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, [NGA & CCSSO] 2010). Therefore, using a combination of the elements of workshop, scaffolding, reading complexity, and grade-level texts will motivate and enhance the self-efficacy of students who struggle and prepare them for college and careers.

One way to incorporate grade-level texts is to use them during the read aloud component of the workshop. Using higher-level texts during read alouds exposes students to more advanced text structures and increasingly difficult vocabulary. The process should be modeled, and the texts used for read alouds should include a range of texts that incorporate student interests. Linked text sets (Elish-Piper, Wold, & Schwingendorf, 2014) include a wide range of print and media such as music lyrics, poetry, and picture books, in addition to the traditional literature and canonical texts. A Readers’ Workshop also provides for the use of a wide variety of texts that are responsive to experiences of adolescents. Devoting read alouds to a range of texts, providing the necessary modeling with complex text, and demonstrating how to read and interrogate texts, provides explicit and targeted instruction that will make previously inaccessible text accessible.

A second way to incorporate grade-level texts into the workshop is with the book club component. The collaborative, discussion-based format of book clubs allows students to investigate their own questions and wonderings while learning from others in their groups. With teacher support and demonstrations, students become increasingly comfortable with more difficult text structures and vocabulary. These practices allow for the gradually decreased need for support as students gain experience and become proficient with grade level texts. Using a themed approach to book clubs, students begin with easier texts related to a specific theme and build to more difficult texts on the same theme, which provides the type of scaffolding needed to support students as they work towards independence with grade level texts. Moss, Lapp, and O'Shea (2011) describe how the use of tiered texts helps support students in their ability to read complex texts. The use of tiered texts is one way to help ensure that students are provided with scaffolding in their journey to read grade-level materials. Teachers can purposefully design book club cycles throughout the year using tiered texts. Choice can be maintained if there are several themes that students choose from when selecting book club topics.

Using the work of Elish-Piper et al. (2014) and Moss et al. (2011), teachers can select texts that are appropriate for students' backgrounds and interests, and increase difficulty as they gain experience with the easier texts. In the book club component of workshop, each "cycle" consists of a theme with tiers of texts that move from simple to complex. Since there are a variety of themes, students are still provided with choice. This configuration could be set up by quarters or in cycles. In their work on linked text sets, Elish-Piper, Wold, and Schwingdorf (2014) suggest framing text sets around an essential question. With the purposeful selection of an essential question, collaborative conversations evolve around the questions. While this modification to book clubs may diminish the free choice aspect of book clubs, it provides students with scaffolding necessary to meet the requirements of the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). A suggested revision to the workshop to include grade level texts is provided below (Table 2).

If we understand the valuable components of workshop model (Atwell, 1998), including the necessary modeling and scaffolding with grade-appropriate texts, teachers will achieve a balance that will build middle school students' interest and motivation to read while helping them gain independence with grade-level texts. Rather than the pendulum effect of workshop versus more

Table 2: *Revised workshop model*

Time (Based on 70-minute block)	Workshop Component	Reading Level of Text	Frequency
7:30 – 8:30	Read Aloud (Whole Group) (Grade-level text)	Grade level	Daily
8:30 – 8:45	Mini-Lesson (Whole Group) (Strategies based on appropriateness to read aloud text)	Grade level	Daily
8:45 – 9:15	Independent Reading Reading/ Conferring/Collaboration (Schedule with students in advance)	Independent or Instructional	3 days (Rotation for conferring)
	Book Clubs (Scaffolded from independent to grade -level text)	Independent , Instructional and Grade	2 days
9:15 – 9:45	Sharing/Collaboration Time	Varied	Daily

traditional approaches, teacher can thoughtfully apply a combination of workshop approach and strategic instruction in middle school settings as they prepare students for transition into more complex disciplinary literacies in high school.

The combination of workshop instruction devoted to strategic scaffolding of reading complex and grade-level texts in middle school language arts classrooms may provide a much-needed balance, particularly with students reading far above or below grade level. The use of complex and challenging texts during read alouds will support student learning and build independence and familiarity with text structures. Throughout the school year, students can increasingly work with such texts independently in order to meet the year-end standards.

About the Author

Dr. Nancy Stevens is an assistant professor of literacy in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy. She obtained her Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Leadership (literacy emphasis) from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Prior to earning her Ph.D., she worked for over fifteen years in both private and public K-12 schools, working primarily in adolescent literacy. She is an active member of several literacy organisations including the Wisconsin State Reading Association, International Literacy Association, Literacy Research Association, and Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers. She has presented at local, state, and national conferences and has articles published in state and national journals.

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Appendix

Survey

What I've improved on so far in 6th grade:

Before I: _____

Now I: _____

Reading Goal: _____

Writing Goal: _____

One thing I really like about Readers' workshop is: _____

One thing I really like about Writers' workshop is: _____

Some things I do not like (wish I could change) about readers' workshop are:

Some things I do not like (wish I could change) about writers' workshop are:





History, Philosophy, and Mission of Reading Horizons

Reading Horizons began in 1960 by Dorothy J. McGinnis as a local reading education newsletter and developed into an international journal serving reading educators and researchers. Major colleges, universities, and individuals subscribe to Reading Horizons across the United States, Canada and a host of other countries. Dedicated to adding to the growing body of knowledge in literacy, the quarterly journal welcomes new and current research, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies, and best literacy practices. As a peer-reviewed publication, Reading Horizons endeavors to bring school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and community leaders together in a collaborative community to widen literacy and language arts horizons.

Submitting Manuscripts

Submit manuscripts electronically to http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/. Please submit files in Microsoft Word or RTF. Manuscripts should include references and text citations according to the 6th Edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. Tables and graphs should be embedded in the manuscript upon submission. Manuscripts should be double-spaced, using 1.25 inch margins and 12-point font. All manuscripts are read in-house to determine a blind review process. The blind review process involves a two to three month time-frame. All manuscripts are evaluated and reviewed on the following criteria: significant contribution to body of literacy knowledge; timeliness of topic; theoretical framework/ underpinnings of manuscript; sound methodology process applied; and clarity of writing.



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There is no more crucial component in all of education than reading

DOROTHY J. MCGINNIS READING CENTER & CLINIC
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN