Literacy Lessons and Preservice Teachers: Belief Systems, Reflective Responses
Dr. Ursula Thomas
Fall 2010
University of West Georgia

Dr. Ursula Thomas is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education and Birth through Age Five Program Coordinator at the University of West Georgia. Her research agenda includes issues of cultural mediation and its effects on instructional choices, the power of teacher educator research on diversity in the classroom, and literacy in the early childhood education classroom. She can be contact at uthomas@westga.edu.

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to examine preservice teacher's knowledge bases and beliefs about literacy and the impact of their personal reading experiences on literacy instruction. **Methodology:** This study utilized mixed methodology. This included survey data and open coding. Data were collected using a survey, an annotated DRTA lesson plan, and a personal reading experience narrative. **Results:** The research reports that there are differences among beliefs concerning early literacy instruction and assessment of preservice teachers before the reading methods course. **Conclusions:** Preservice teachers are moderately familiar with knowledge bases concerning early literacy instruction and assessment before the reading methods courses. **Recommendations:** Further studies of the impact on foundations courses such as early childhood education and child psychology are warranted, as they seem to inform curriculum methods courses.

Introduction

Teacher beliefs are at the heart of the classroom learning socialization process and help set the climate for learning. This research seeks to examine what preservice teachers think about literacy belief systems, influenced by personal experiences, and instructional choices. Beliefs are filtered by experiences, which are screened for meaning (Goodman, 1988), so it is reasonable to expect that teacher beliefs influence classroom decision-making and practice (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992) and therefore, the classroom atmosphere experienced by children. Understanding the relationship between teachers' beliefs, teacher's instructional decisions, and students' perceptions of learning is important because it is clear that students interpret instruction based on their prior knowledge and conceptions of the topics to be presented during instructional time.

Review of Literature

Preservice Teachers and Reflective Thinking

The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers and teacher educators is a deeper understanding of their own beliefs that support teaching styles and ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. By gaining a better understanding of their own individual teaching styles and beliefs mediate by those teaching styles through reflective practice, teachers can improve their effectiveness in the classroom; especially in regards to race and class. What does the research now tell us about the preservice teacher and literacy?

Preservice Teachers, Literacy Beliefs

The demands of Reading Excellence and the National Reading Panel Report has cast a long shadow on the reading instruction of today in our teacher education programs; as well as the professional development provided for inservice teachers. In 2000, the International Reading Association published its position statement on Excellent Reading Teachers. The statement included the following research-based indicators of highly effective classroom teachers:

> 1. They understand reading and writing development, and believe all children can learn to read and write. 2. They continually assess children's individual progress and relate reading instruction to children's previous experiences. 3. They know a variety of ways to teach reading, when to use each method, and how to combine the methods into an effective instructional program. 4. They offer a variety of materials and texts for children to read. 5. They use flexible grouping strategies to tailor instruction to individual students. 6. They are good reading "coaches" (that is, they provide help strategically). These common and repeatedly emphasized features stress the "what" and "how" of effective reading instruction and include the following: 1. assessing students' reading strengths and weaknesses, 2. structuring reading activities around an explicit instructional format, 3. providing students with opportunities to learn and apply skills and strategies in authentic reading tasks, 4. ensuring

that students attend to the learning tasks, and 5. believing in one's teaching abilities and expecting students to be successful.

Teachers who designate reading behaviors to be achieved prior to teaching and who teach content relevant to these outcomes often have students who achieve at a higher reading level than do teachers who do not. The reading instruction that is provided must relate to assessment data, expressed learning outcomes or benchmarks, instructional design, and application in real-life reading tasks. Chances to learn should reflect the desired learning outcomes, not simply review the content. Effective reading programs have teachers who believe in themselves and expect their students to succeed in learning (Blair, 2007).

Literacy Instruction

A number of recent research studies (Block, 2001; Tompkins, 2002; Jalongo, 2003) have shed light on the concepts and components of literacy instruction. The Hoffman, Roller, Maloch, Duffy and Beretvas (2005), study reported on the preparation of elementary preservice teachers to teach reading and on their first 3 years of teaching in elementary schools. Results intimated that participation in a high-quality teacher preparation program had an affirmative impression on the process of teachers entering the profession and on the espousal of effective instructional practices by these teachers. Program completers of the excellent programs were more effectual than teachers in the comparison groups in producing and involving their students with a high-quality reading environment.

Valencia, Place, Martin and Grossman (2006) conducted a study to learn how new elementary teachers understood and used curriculum materials for teaching reading, and how, in turn, these materials influenced teachers' instructional choices. The analysis suggested that curriculum materials interacted with teachers' knowledge of reading and reading instruction, and with the contexts in which they worked. As a result, curriculum materials both edified and prohibited teachers' in the field learning. They found that teachers with weak knowledge or more restrictive materials and environments learned less and were least able to modify instruction to meet the needs of their learners. The teachers with stronger knowledge, access to numerous materials, and support for decision making regarding materials and instructional strategies learned more and were more able to modify instruction. Furthermore, early engagement with certain curriculum materials had effects two years later on these teachers' instructional choices.

Previous research revealed that elementary students benefit from specific types of instruction at different stages in their literacy development (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Block, Oakar, & Hurt, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) recognized "the important role of teachers, their professional development, and their interactions and collaborations with researchers, which should be recognized and encouraged".

Method
Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to examine preservice teacher's knowledge bases and beliefs about literacy, the impact of their personal reading experiences on literacy instruction, and reflective thoughts on creating a reading lesson.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided study:

1. Are there any differences among beliefs concerning early literacy instruction and assessment of preservice teachers before the reading methods course?
2. How familiar are preservice teachers with knowledge bases concerning early literacy instruction and assessment of preservice teachers before the reading methods course?
3. How familiar are preservice teachers with knowledge base theorist?
4. What factors positively and negatively affect the reading experiences of preservice teachers?
5. What patterns emerge when preservice teachers reflected during the construction of an annotated DRTA lesson?

Participants

Forty-two, first block methods students were surveyed to collect data for the study. Twenty-two surveys were completed at the beginning of the course (Spring 2008). All participants completed the Personal Reading Experience Narrative as well as the Annotated Directed Reading and Thinking Activity Lesson. All of the participants were preservice teacher education students with no professional teaching experience.

Measures and Data Collection

This study utilized mixed methodology. Data were collected using a survey, an annotated DRTA lesson plan, and a personal reading experience narrative. Personal Reading Experiences Essay asks the participant to think about themselves as readers. The participants were asked to zero in on one reading experience that they have had that was wonderful, write about it. The participants were asked to zero in on another reading experience that you have had that was awful, write about it. An Annotated Directed Reading and Thinking Activity Lesson requires the student to create a DRTA guided reading lesson with a narrative or expository text provided by the instructor during a two hour class period, collaboratively. It also was accompanied by annotated think aloud form. The annotated form reflected an open-ended question (What were you thinking as you planned this section?) format for each of the sections of the DRTA lesson The sections were: Developing readiness to read the selection (Anticipatory Set), DRTA (DLTA) cycle, Comprehension check for clarification, NOT evaluation, Rereading the selection for purposes specified by the teacher (to address content goals), and Enrichment or Extension activities. The DRTA group lesson was based on the DRTA Lesson framework. The DRTA is a general plan for directing children's reading of stories in published reading series, trade books, or content area selections and for encouraging children to think as they read to locate a designated purpose, to make predictions and check their accuracy (Stauffer, 1969). All of the participants completed this reflective form.

For the gathering of pre-assessment information, a questionnaire was adapted from the Survey of Early Childhood Practitioners Regarding Literacy Instruction and Assessment, Beliefs, Knowledge Base, Teachers' Practice (Marley, 1995). This survey

instrument was used to determine and compare the literacy beliefs, knowledge bases, and practices of early childhood educators who espouse emergent literacy and reading readiness philosophies. A cover letter was included that explained the purpose of the study as well as an assurance of confidentiality. The data from the questionnaire was reported using descriptive statistics via percentages.

Data Analysis

Report of Survey of Early Childhood Practitioners Regarding Literacy Instruction and Assessment, Beliefs, Knowledge Base, Teachers' Practice

When analyzing the survey data in reference to any differences among beliefs concerning early literacy instruction and assessment of preservice teachers before the reading methods course, the researcher found that 60% of preservice teachers identified their reading beliefs with that of emergent literacy. Forty percent of the preservice teachers identified their reading beliefs with that of reading readiness. Sixty-eight percent of the preservice teachers were familiar with the knowledge base terms. Two terms that 80% of the preservice teachers were not familiar with were holistic reading instruction and print-rich environment. Lastly, 89% percent of the preservice teachers surveyed were not familiar with more than twenty percent of the knowledge base theorists listed in the survey.

Report of Annotated Lesson Plan Data

Each participant was asked to complete the annotated form as the lesson plan was constructed. The researcher utilized open and axial coding, and then reconstructed the codes to surface major and minor themes. The following themes were constructed during collection and analysis. It was reported by the lesson sections.

Anticipatory Set

The data revealed several themes when it came to participants' thoughts on anticipatory set. The major themes were: prior knowledge, predictions, and vocabulary. The minor themes were: motivation, assessment, multicultural emphasis, and generative thinking. The major themes were expressed by 70% of the participants. The minor themes were addressed by less than 30% of the participants.

DRTA Cycle

When asked what they were thinking as they planned the comprehension portion of the lesson, participants generated these major themes: suitability for silent reading or reading aloud, verification of predictions, engagement, and text response. The minor themes were: setting, outcomes, vocabulary, and graphic organizers.

Comprehension

When examining student annotated responses, students were thinking about all facets of comprehension. This included: story grammar, rereading for clarification, KWL (graphic organizer), and engaging discussion. They also concentrated heavily on text connections.

Rereading

When analyzing students' responses to this portion of the annotated lesson, the students' thought reflected their concern with revisiting original responses from the anticipatory sets. This included sub skill activities like, reevaluating predictions, plotting future events in the text, and rereading for more clarification.

Extension

When examining students' reflections on the extension portion of their lesson plans, one overarching theme was creativity and their concern that the learners be able to express that in regards to the story or text. They actively planned for the learner to experience this through reader's theater, movement activities, and other modes of performance. The other major theme was writing. The participants offered several modes of journal and creative story construction as an authentic manner for learners to extend themes and understanding of the text through this medium.

Report of Personal Reading Experiences Essay

  Factor Associated with Negative Experiences

When utilizing open and axial coding within the phenomena of negative experiences, several concepts were directly linked to negative connotations. An overwhelming majority of participants reported that they had negative literacy confrontations in their high school experiences. Included in this category were literary pieces and authors; in particular Shakespeare, Beowulf, and Hemingway noted as most difficult and made the students feel incompetent when searching for meaning and navigating language.

Participants' narratives surfaced deep negative connotations with two major codes: teachers and reading aloud. Participants revealed that teachers, especially those in high school, were brutal and uncompromising in making literature engaging and inviting discussion. The participants revealed the most disdain for teachers who would not open the literature up for critique and discussion, or explanation. The participants also expressed the stress of the ineffective use of reading aloud strategies, specifically "popcorn" reading. A very small but significant code is worth mentioning. In only two of the narratives did parents play an adverse role in the literary experiences of the participants.

Factor Associated with Positive Experiences

When coding the data associated with positive literacy experiences, participants' narratives reveal a myriad of factors. The most prevalent phenomena were placed in the following categories: school personnel, instruction, relationship, and genre.
Students positively and overwhelming identified genre as a catalyst for a positive literacy experiences in their past. Fiction and chapter books were specifically identified as eliciting positive engagement.

The next category that surfaced with positive experience was instruction. Within the category of instruction, two branches were most prevalent: reading choice and reading aloud. Participants associated having the power to choose their own books to read with confidence in the literacy experience. Reading aloud was directly associated with pleasure and emotional confidence prescribed by the teacher or librarian. This, in turn, made reading an act of comfort.

One of the most powerful images the constantly surfaced in the narrative was that of the school personnel. The lone construct of the school librarian was reported to have a great influence on reader response, and the construct of a capable reader. The librarian was reported to have more influence than parents did in over half the narrative in the context of book choice.

The last phenomena that surfaced in the narratives were the broadest and most descriptive. The sub constructs include: adventure, emotions, and meaning. Within the sub construct of meaning, the narrative revealed that rich vocabulary in chosen text engaged the reader and kept them engrossed. Being engaged and engrossed in a text is an example of sustainability. The participants' narratives suggest sustainability as a hallmark of being a good reader.

The last node within the sub construct of relationship is emotion. This node is extremely descriptive. Participants' narratives reveal that there is pleasure in being a capable reader. Also, a number of participants reveal that incentives were a positive part of their reading experiences (for example; Pizza Hut's Book It and Six Flags Six Hour Reading for a Free Ticket). The narrative also surfaces that very strong connections are positive cements between the reader and the text through literary tools, such as imagery, illustration, and visualization. These skills and tools were essential in relation to nurturing the notion of the "capable reader".

Results

Findings and Discussion

Are there any differences among beliefs concerning early literacy instruction and assessment of preservice teachers before the reading methods course? Yes. The theoretical beliefs of the preservice teachers surveyed were significantly different. This is partially edified when looking at the reading strategies identified in the Personal Reading Narrative. How familiar are preservice teachers with knowledge bases concerning early literacy instruction and assessment of preservice teachers before the reading methods course? They are moderately familiar. The two terms that 80% of the preservice teachers were not familiar with were terms that reflect a direct and present knowledge of knowledge base theorists. This was disturbing to the professor as the theorists were linked to an educational psychology course and should have been familiar at least.

How familiar are preservice teachers with knowledge base theorist? The majority of students were very unfamiliar with knowledge base theorists. This goes back to previous psychology and child development courses that should have created a segway for familiarity with these persons. What factors positively and negatively affect the reading experiences of preservice teachers? For the most part, school personnel, the reading instructional environment, and genre were the factors that positively and negatively affected reading experiences for preservice teachers.

What patterns emerge when preservice teachers reflected during the construction of an annotated DRTA lesson? When examining the thought patterns of preservice teachers, three questions surfaced as a strand of continuity in their thought processing: what thought processes would each activity of the lesson elicit, what would be the effect on the learner, and would the lesson in total be engaging.

Implications

The study, once again, underscored the important nature of the belief systems of preservice teachers. There are three main points of implication that we as an audience of teacher educators must consider. The first is the power of experience on the personal belief system that influences the professional belief system. The second point is attending to the literacy dispositions of preservice teachers, as highlighted by the International Reading Association, early in the teacher induction process. The third and final point of implication is that we must attend to is how foundations courses are deliberately linked to methods courses. Child development, psychology, as well as history and philosophy courses must be intentionally linked to methods courses to provide an explicit foundation for preservice teachers. Teacher education programs must actively seek to nurture the crafting of literacy education professionals in instruction and disposition.

Bibliography
Anders, Hoffman & Duffy. (2000).Teaching teachers to teach reading: Paradigm shifts, persistent problems, and challenges. In Kamil, M., Mosenthal, P., Pearson, P.D., and Barr, R. (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research, III, (pp.719-742).* New York: Longman.
Armstrong, D. (2003). Curriculum Today. Pearson Publishing, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.
Blair, T. R., Rupley, W. H., & Nichols, W. D. (2007). The effective teacher of reading: Considering the "what" and "how" of instruction. *The Reading Teacher,* 60(5), 432—438.
Block, C. (2001). *Teaching the language arts: Expanding thinking through student-centered instruction* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
Block, C.C., Oakar, M., & Hurt, H. (2002). The expertise of literacy teachers: A continuum from preschool to grade 5. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *37*, 178–206.
Brookhart, S. M., & Freeman, D. (1992). Characteristics of entering teaching. *Review of Educational Research, 62*(1), 37-60.
Cunningham, A. E, Perry, K. E. Stanovich, K. E., & Stanovich, P. J. (2004). Disciplinary knowledge of k-3 teachers and their knowledge calibration in the domain of early literacy. *Annals of Dyslexia,* 54(1).
Goodman, J. (1988). Constructing a practical philosophy of teaching: A study of preservice teachers' professional perspectives. *Teacher and Teacher Education*, *4*(2), 121-137.
Hoffman, J. V., Roller, C., Maloch, S., Duffy, G., Beretvas, S. N. (2005). Teachers' Preparation to Teach Reading and Their Experiences and Practices in the First Three Years of Teaching. *The Elementary School Journal*, 105(3).
Jalongo, M. R. (2003). *Early childhood language arts* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for*

reading instruction (NIH Publication No.00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved January 18, 2007, from www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/upload/report_pdf.pdf

Marley, L.G. (1995). Early Childhood educator's belief, knowledge bases, and practices related to assessing early literacy. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana State University.

Parris, S. R., & Block, C. C. (2007). The Expertise of Adolescent Literacy Teachers. *International Reading Association*, 582—596.

Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Spear-Swerling, L. (2007). The Research-Practice Divide in Beginning Reading. *Theory Into Practice*. 46 (4), 301-308.

Stauffer, R. (1969). *Directing Reading Maturity as a Cognitive Process*. New York: Harper and Row.

Tompkins, G. (2002). *Language arts: Content and teaching strategies* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Valencia, S. W., Place, N. A., Martin, S. D, Grossman, P. L. (2006). Curriculum Materials for Elementary Reading: Shackles and Scaffolds for Four Beginning Teachers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 107(1).