"It's the fieldwork": A Reflective View of Supervised Fieldwork in a Graduate Literacy Program
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ABSTRACT

　　　This article presents views of course-embedded fieldwork as a structure to facilitate connections between research and practice for teacher candidates in a graduate literacy program. Four major categories emerged from the group interview with the graduate students. Teacher candidates related that course-embedded fieldwork was valuable because it allowed them to apply research to practice, approach learning as an active endeavor, have the opportunity to learn from peers by seeing them at work, and have the opportunity to plan together. The data were collected in an emergent literacy class, but the implications for scaffolding teachers and collegial relationships range across the educational landscape.

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　　　Can graduate literacy programs make connections between theory and practice so that the ivory tower and the chalkboard work together to develop knowledgeable teachers who understand both the how and the why of effective instruction in literacy? How can incorporating course-embedded fieldwork be a structure that supports the development of effective literacy teachers? Does modeling effective practices help teachers develop instructional knowledge? We wondered about these questions as we planned for a graduate emergent literacy course prior to the semester beginning. As teacher educators and elementary school teachers, we wanted to support the theory-practice connections as we planned and taught the course. In this article we will explore some of the issues about course-embedded supervised fieldwork that emerged as significant while we reflected with students after the course ended.

　　　There is a recognized need to incorporate research findings into teacher practice at the preservice level so that acknowledged research forms the bridge to, or grounds effective teacher practice (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Smylie & Kahan, 1997). However, at the master's level, which is mandatory in our state for professional teacher certification, there is an even greater need for connecting theory and practice. Requisite fieldwork and/or a practicum at the graduate level are often ways that colleges help teachers refine their practice and make connections to theory. There are typically two ways this work with pupils takes place. One model is to have graduate students fulfill fieldwork requirements independently of the graduate class, with the final practicum being the only supervised experience. An alternative model is to have supervised fieldwork embedded into the courses leading to a final supervised practicum. The second model of course-embedded supervised fieldwork is the one followed at the college where we work. The emergent literacy course we taught was one of many required classes with course-embedded fieldwork leading to the final supervised practicum. Thus, students in this program complete many hours of supervised fieldwork before taking the capstone practicum class.

Many teachers have reported that one of their primary sources for instructional knowledge comes from their own lived experiences with children (Borko & Niles, 1982; Cowan, 1999; Guskey, 1986; Scharer & Detwiler, 1992). One finding of importance in the literature is that teachers are more likely to change practices and beliefs about literacy instruction if the research presented to them is accompanied by valid practices. Modeling suitable research-based practices for implementation with students supports teachers' change in practices (Cowan, 1999; Guskey, 1986; Morrow, 2003; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991; Scharer & Detwiler, 1992). However, once teachers leave the questioning context of the undergraduate college classroom, they rely more heavily on lived experiences as the source of knowledge rather than the research literature (Hargreaves, 1993; Lortie, 1975). It is therefore vital for colleges to foster teacher knowledge and reflection about practice in graduate literacy programs (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000). In addition, colleges should try to develop teachers' understanding of the benefits of supportive teaching communities to combat the tendency toward isolation in the classroom (Hargreaves, 1993; Morrow, 2003). Other studies have shown that improved pupil learning supports teacher changes in knowledge when new practices prove to be effective with children (Guskey, 1986; Scharer & Detwiler, 1992).

Study Background

The data for this study were gathered during the 2002-2003 school year. Graduate level students in two sections of an emergent literacy course were the study informants. The authors of this article were the instructors. The graduate courses met at a magnet school featuring bilingual classes at each grade level. Additionally, a significant part of the pupil population comes to the school from the nearby inner-city. This setting provided the graduate students an opportunity to work with a diverse group of children.

During the class, supervised fieldwork was the focus of the first hour. The tutorials took place in a very large cafeteria in which there were forty long trestle tables. Thus, there was room for graduate students to work near one another, or to work separately from each other.

Parents return the children to school for a weekly enrichment program. Every week, when the tutorials began, graduate students greeted the assigned emergent literacy learner and his/her parent or caregiver who brought the child for the tutorial session. The pupils were either in kindergarten or first grade. Some graduate students were paired one-to-one with a pupil, while others worked in pairs, and sometimes triplets. The remainder of the class was a seminar type discussion that focused on the graduate students' tutoring, a discussion of the weekly assigned readings, and the modeling of appropriate emergent literacy strategies.

On the first and last days of class, the graduate students filled out a questionnaire that asked if they would be interested in further discussing their experiences at a follow-up meeting when the course was completed. Eight students, approximately 20% of the students in the classes, met with us three months after the semester ended for a group discussion. The tape recordings of the group discussion were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for categories and trends in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Originally we coded the data into the following eight categories: comparisons to undergraduate studies and experiences, collaborating as a professional need, negotiating while working with peers, working and planning with other teachers, working in school communities, learning from peers, comparing classes without fieldwork, and transitioning from supervised fieldwork to the classroom. Then we collapsed the original eight categories into four major categories. The four categories were: applying research into practice, the importance of active learning, the advantage of seeing peers at work, and the opportunity to plan and work with peers.

Although graduate students began the course with a visceral, almost gestalt understanding of emergent readers, the students were not familiar with specific knowledge or supporting practices relating to areas such as phonemic awareness (Yopp, 1992), concepts about print knowledge (Clay, 2002), developmental writing (Dyson, 1995), or interactive writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999). These concepts were part of the assigned readings, and were also addressed in class discussions. Additionally, sustaining practices were modeled during fieldwork and in class.

What We Learned

While we believed at the outset that there are advantages to course-embedded supervised fieldwork, we were unsure of how graduate students would evaluate the experience. The follow-up interview session offered the opportunity to gauge reactions from a variety of students in a collegial discussion. Since the class had concluded and course grades had been given more than three months previous to the meeting, students were encouraged to speak honestly and not respond in ways they believed we might want to hear. The forum was an open discussion between the graduate students with the instructors acting as facilitators.

We were interested in how the graduate students spoke about the fieldwork experience and how, or if, it translated to their professional and personal lives. Approximately half of the graduate students were already teaching in full time jobs including classroom teachers, special education teachers, and inclusion teachers. Others were substitute teachers and full time students. Those who were teaching taught a variety of grade levels from kindergarten through high school. The following sections represent excerpts from our discussion and present the reflective views of the graduate students regarding this supervised fieldwork. Pseudonyms represent each graduate student and their tutees throughout this article.

Applying Research to Practice

Our own lived experiences had offered us a chance to understand good practices from the viewpoint of teachers, as well as academics. We hoped to share that enthusiasm for the bond between research knowledge and the classroom with the teachers enrolled in the course.

We wondered if supervised fieldwork would help our students make connection between research and their own practice. An example of the graduate students reflecting on their learning was evidenced by Martha. Martha was a first grade teacher who enthused about the new practices she was learning to support her understanding of phonemic awareness. One of Martha's comments spoke to the importance of connecting research to practice, and to the positive effect on teacher learning when students react affirmatively. She discussed learning about segmenting sounds with the strategy described to pupils as rubber-banding (Yopp, 1992).

> I would go back after class and say, 'OK, guys I learned something new.' And their [first grade students] favorite thing was rubber-banding a word [stretching the sounds]. We did every word. They thought that was the best and I would take the quick little things that I was learning in class and bring it back to first grade. It was great to see that it would get an immediate reaction from the kids.

We encouraged the graduate students to use practices learned and modeled in our classes in their work with the emergent literacy learners in the fieldwork. For example, Marisol, a fourth grade teacher,

found the concept of phonemic awareness new to her. Marisol reflected on learning about phonemic awareness and supporting practices. She said, "It worked differently for me because I [teach] fourth grade and emergent literacy was new for me. It gave me hands on [experience] because Dashawn [tutee] was in kindergarten and was not a very good reader. He was having a very difficult time. So I really had to go back and try to figure out what I was going to do with him to get him into phonemic awareness because he was really having a hard time even recognizing his letters that we had been working on, and working on, and working on. He did not know alliteration and he had a hard time rhyming. It was a great learning tool for me."

Kelly summed up the discussion of connecting research to practice by saying, "I think fieldwork gives you the opportunity to then apply what you were taught by both our professors and the book. I feel that without it, I might know it and it might be in my head, but I haven't had the opportunity to do it myself, to critique it myself. I feel like without the fieldwork and without the opportunity to apply what I was learning, it would almost be like teaching to the test, or learning it for the course, learning it for the final grade."

Active Learning

Active participation was highly relevant to teacher learning, as well as to pupil learning. Carole further emphasized the role of course-embedded fieldwork in her learning when she contrasted it to a class she was currently taking that involved observing pupils, but not providing instruction to pupils through fieldwork. She stated, "It just isn't the same. I mean it's good to actually see them in action [in a classroom], it's a little easier to learn by doing."

Naomi, a full time student, supported the concept of active participation when she said, "Like children need manipulatives and hands-on experience, it's just the same for us in fieldwork. We need to work with children and have those experiences, actually visualizing it. Especially for me because I just know that a lot of you have the experience all day long."

Meg, another graduate student who was not a full time teacher, suggested that supervised fieldwork helped make the modeled strategies more accessible to the graduate students because of the opportunity to use the strategies. She stated, "I felt in class time, maybe because you did [modeled in class] a lot of these things that we talked about and seeing that, it's much clearer than just hearing about them."

Seeing Peers at Work

Graduate students commented about the opportunity to see their peers at work and to learn from each other as well as from the professors. Learning for adults presented as a social construct that was as important to the graduate students as it is for children (Vygotsky, 1978). The following exchange highlights the ascribed benefits of these opportunities. It begins with us trying to recap the comments that had been offered.

Reva said, "So if I'm hearing you, then what you're saying is, you have this ready-made peer group who…"

Marisol, "interact and support one another."

Kimberly added, "Or even just to see it [a colleague's practice], even across the room. Wow, look at that over there, how am I going to use it? And say [to yourself], Look over there, see what they're using."

Marisol continued, "How many times would we slide over and look at something and say, 'Ooh, that's really great, where did you get that idea?' It really worked, it was fun, and it was a nice way of supporting one another. It was a good learning experience."

Martha related fieldwork to working in a school setting. She stated that seeing some of her fieldwork peers teaching inspired her own practice when she said, "Plus, it's kind of like a real-life situation. When you're in a school setting, there are other faculty members that you can bounce ideas off of. And another teacher you can say to, 'Have you tried this with this kid? You had him last year. What can I do to get through to him?'"

Marisol further commented on comparing fieldwork to actual school situations by saying, "Bouncing ideas off of your co-workers is a great way to get information without having to wait all year to figure something out."

While we knew graduate students would gain knowledge from the class, we underestimated the opportunity provided by seeing other teachers at work. The students welcomed the opportunity to develop practices by observing their colleagues and by adopting and adapting observed instructional practices.

Opportunity to Plan and Work with Peers

The class structure supported a short period of time when the graduate students were encouraged to reflect and plan with each other (Hargreaves, 1993). There was a brief period of time at the end of fieldwork and before the formal class began when graduate students could confer with each other. We discussed the option of working and planning with a peer in fieldwork. Marisol commented on this time by saying, "The peer interaction before, during, and afterward was a real part of it [course learning] too. Because of that time that you would meet afterwards, right before we would get together to continue instruction when we were at the table discussing everything, we would say, "And what happened? And what are you going to do next time?" And I'd get an idea, and we would come up with [our plan for the next session]. So, you know, groups would help each other. Not just with support, but with ideas. So, that peer interaction was really great also."

Kelly, a special education teacher, indicated her awareness of the trends toward inclusion and teaming in classrooms by stating, "I think it's important for teachers, new teachers, to get used to working with one another. That's where education is going right now with all of these inclusion classrooms and everything else. You need to have that rapport with two teachers. It's so important."

Martha further compared the collaborative stance in fieldwork to the actual classroom by responding, "You're not working by yourself, you have teachers coming in and out of the classroom like for special ed, you know they're in and out, you have to work together."

While the opportunity to work with a peer in fieldwork was an option, Kelly suggested perhaps it should be mandatory if it is to be like the world of schools as she has experienced it. Kelly commented, "But I also think you're almost forced to work with these other people, whether you like to or not. That's why it might be important, or more realistic, for the professors of the class to pair people together. Rather than people picking because if I could pick my related services people, wow, what a team we would have. But, in a sense, that's just not how it works. You have to learn to get along with one another, and you have to somehow learn how to work with one another."

Reflecting on our Findings

The trends that emerged from the reflective group interview indicated that the graduate students found value in connecting course knowledge to actual practice, in using strategies that were modeled in class, in the opportunity to see colleagues at work, and in the chance to plan and work with peers.

Our findings about the importance of planning, working, and reflecting with teaching colleagues are similar to the revised New York State teacher certification requirements as described in the mandated mentored experience for first year teachers. The regulations enable more experienced teachers to scaffold beginning teachers through activities which include "…modeling instruction for the new teacher, observing instruction, instructional planning with the new teacher, peer coaching, and time management methodology…" (New York State Education Department, 2003). Our conclusions and the new regulations are almost concurrent and seem to support one another.

Of course, a possible concern is that despite our efforts to hold this reflective discussion long after course grades had been received, our informants were students and we were professors. We attempted to resolve this issue of power by timing and the informal nature of the discussions. Our impressions are that the informants were being candid in their views. Further, this small group may be representative of people who enjoyed supervised fieldwork, or may not be representative of the classes.

Reflecting on the overall positive and negative aspects of supervised fieldwork in a graduate program, the overwhelmingly positive relationship forged between the college and the community and the children receiving supportive literacy instruction far outweigh the negative aspects. Further, as described, our informants state that their professional learning is enhanced by supervised course-embedded fieldwork.

Well prepared teachers lead to well instructed children. It is our belief that supervised fieldwork fosters this important knowledge and development of skills.

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