

Making it Real: Applying Coursework to Fieldwork in a Teacher Residency Literacy Methods Course

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Abstract

Teacher residency models are gaining momentum as powerful models for preparation because preservice teachers spend an entire year in a local classroom while also continuing their learning through required coursework. In its inaugural year of offering a teacher residency program, Texas Christian University modified course structures to allow residents to learn, apply, and reflect on the implementation of the course content into their residency classroom. In this article, the authors explain the modifications to course assignments and how residents applied course content to their residency experiences. Limitations of those applications are also discussed.

Keywords: teacher residency, field experiences, school partnerships, literacy, teacher preparation

The reality of the ongoing and ever-increasing teacher shortage is not news to anyone involved in teacher education. The increasing attrition rate is due in part to low salaries and dissatisfaction with working conditions. The retirement of veteran teachers also accounts for some of the decline in numbers. According to Guha et al. (2017), untrained novice teachers are especially likely to leave the profession after their first year in the classroom, particularly when their initial training lacked robust and meaningful classroom experience under the guidance of a successful mentor teacher. This final factor can be addressed through teacher residencies. The

purpose of this article is to highlight how one educator preparation program modified coursework to encourage teacher residents to apply coursework to the residency fieldwork – in a sense “making it real.”

Teacher Residency Programs

Teacher residencies are gaining momentum as tools for addressing the increasing teacher shortages while building a talent pipeline for school districts. Inspired by the medical residency model, teacher residencies are defined as year-long programs in which the resident works as an apprentice alongside a master

teacher while taking closely linked coursework at the university. Many teacher residency programs are situated in high-need, urban districts (Guha et al., 2017; Wasburn-Moses, 2017).

According to Guha et al. (2017) residencies, when well-designed and well-implemented, can create significant long-term benefits for schools, districts, and the students they serve. They require educator preparation programs to rethink the nature of clinical experiences and reimagine coursework (Dennis, 2016). One of the characteristics of a high-quality teacher residency program is relevant coursework tightly integrated with clinical practice (Guha et al., 2016; 2017; Pathways Alliance, 2022). Wasburn-Moses (2017) emphasizes that “integration between course and fieldwork is the bedrock of the residency model” (p. 39).

Research supports theory-to-practice connections between course content and field experience in educator preparation programs (Jenset et al., 2019; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). Grossman and colleagues (2008) suggest when “assignments that link coursework and fieldwork are thoughtful, purposeful, and well-constructed,” the impact on teacher candidates may be more influential than simply the amount of course or fieldwork (p. 283).

Teacher candidate experiences within residency programs also support the close alignment between coursework and clinical practice. Mourlam et al. (2019) found that when course content was closely linked to the residents’ field experience, residents perceived it as more relevant and impactful on their knowledge, skills, and confidence.

This study seeks to build upon the existing research to analyze how teacher residents enrolled in a literacy methods course use, apply and reflect on the implementation of the course content into their residency classroom.

TCU Teacher Residency Program

Beginning in the summer of 2022, the College of Education at Texas Christian University began the process of designing a Teacher Residency model for students pursuing Early Childhood through Sixth Grade (EC-6) certification. This process included partnership meetings with the National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) and local school district administrators. There was also a site visit to a successful residency program. Faculty developed a plan to recruit and select residents for the 2023-2024 pilot year and made EC-6 program changes to support the residents’ limited time on the TCU campus (see Table 1).

Table 1

EC-6 Programmatic Differences Between the Residency Program and the Traditional Program

	TCU Teacher Residency Program	TCU Traditional Senior EC-6 Program
Fall 2023	Four days a week in clinical teaching/residency classroom	One day a week in a field placement classroom experience
	One day a week on the TCU campus to take three senior courses	Six senior courses
Spring 2024	Four days a week in clinical teaching/residency classroom	Five days a week in clinical teaching
	One day a week on the TCU campus to take three senior courses; one evening course	One evening course

This also involved a redesign of senior coursework so residents would have opportunities to apply what they learned each week directly into their residency classrooms.

Thirteen residents were selected from the existing junior-level EC-6 cohort to participate in the 2023-2024 TCU Teacher Residency Program. TCU partnered with one large urban district for this inaugural year, and residents were placed across four elementary campuses as paid employees and received a \$20,000 salary for the school year. Both the residents and their host teachers attended a full-day workshop on the TCU campus to learn about the co-teaching model (Grady et al., 2019), so they could collaborate effectively to support the students. Residents reported to new teacher training with the district in late July and started teaching on the first day of school. Once the TCU semester began, the residents taught four days a week in their residency placement and came to the TCU campus one day a week to complete the required coursework. EC-6 program changes were made to accommodate this schedule.

TCU instructors also redesigned syllabi to support the integration of theory to practice into the residents’ senior coursework and to make the day on the TCU campus an effective learning experience. Each of the three courses offered in the fall was an in-person class, and faculty decided to reduce the time in class from two hours and forty minutes per class (traditional course time) to one hour and fifty minutes since residents would be applying coursework to their fieldwork experiences. Faculty also redesigned many assignments to ensure they were “thoughtful, purposeful, and well-constructed” (Grossman et al., 2008, p. 283) to bridge the theory-to-practice gap.

Figure 1 provides an example from the syllabus of a literacy methods course for grades 3-6. The “Classroom Application” column was added to the residents’ syllabus, and each week residents had tasks to complete in their classroom connected to the course content. This information was submitted as an assignment (noted in the last column of Figure 1) for a grade, and time was built into the class session for residents to discuss the assignment and their residency experience with each other.

Figure 1

Syllabus example from Reading Instruction in Grades 3-6; Week 2

Date	Topics	Reading/Preparation for Class	Classroom Application: Tasks to Complete in Residency Classroom PRIOR to Class – Plan to do these no later than Mon/Tues of the week	Assignments to Be Completed PRIOR to class
Aug 30	<p>Intermediate vs. Primary Readers</p> <p>Differentiation in upper elementary literacy programs</p> <p>Introduction to reading comprehension</p>	<p><u>Read:</u></p> <p><i>Differentiated Literacy Instruction in Grades 4-5: Chapters 1 & 2</i> (Differentiation and Tiered Instruction; Designing an Upper Elementary Literacy Program)</p>	<p>Become familiar with the district reading curriculum and closely observe how it is implemented in your classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much time is allotted for ELA instruction per day? How is that time used? • How is differentiation and tiered instruction implemented? • Which comprehension strategies are used? (see p. 27) • Which indicators (pp. 20-21) do you see present in the instructional materials? 	<p>Response to classroom application #1 (using the directions in <i>Tasks to Complete in Residency Classroom PRIOR to Class</i>, write a response for each question/bullet)</p>

Method

Study Context

Thirteen residents were enrolled in the 2023-2024 TCU Teacher Residency Program. Twelve of the thirteen residents consented to participate in the research study. In the fall semester, all residents were also enrolled in three university courses including *Reading Instruction in Grades 3-6*, a literacy methods course focused on mid-upper elementary students taught by one of the researchers. This course built upon a literacy methods class for grades K-2 that students took during their junior year. *Reading Instruction in Grades 3-6* included a wide variety of topics such as prior knowledge, advanced word study, comprehension, vocabulary, and differentiation.

An essential component of a residency program is close alignment between course content and the residency experience (Mourlam et al., 2019). As a result, residents completed weekly tasks that allowed them to apply the course content and readings in their residency classrooms (See Table 2). Since assignments were redesigned for the residents' unique experiences, the course instructor/primary researcher was interested in how the residents understood and applied the course content in their placements. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How are teacher residents applying the course content of a literacy residency course in their residency classrooms?
2. What do the coursework-to-fieldwork assignments reveal about residents' understanding of the course content and their residency experience?

Data Collection

Data collection occurred throughout the fall 2023 semester. The data included ten "Response to Classroom Application" assignments. These assignments required students to consider the readings and course content to apply the learning to their residency classroom. As noted in Figure 1, the first Response to Classroom Application assignment required the residents to read two

chapters from their textbook, *Differentiated Literacy Instruction in Grades 4-5* (Walpole et al., 2020), and become familiar with the district reading curriculum using both observations during the school day and application of the material in the reading. The other nine Response to Classroom Application assignments followed a similar pattern.

Data Analysis

Constant comparative methods (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) were used to analyze the data. We intentionally chose five Response to Classroom Application assignments to analyze that represented different topics and spanned the entire semester (see Table 2). We began with a priori codes based on the research questions that included the application of course content, understanding course content, and residency experience. This revealed that most responses were reflections on the application of course content, which provided insight into residents' understanding of the course content and their residency experience.

Next, we used open coding to analyze students' responses to the five selected prompts, identifying nine additional codes to reflect specifics of what the data revealed. These codes included the application of course content to specific students or situations, ways in which they saw personal growth in themselves, and tensions between what they saw in the classroom and what they wanted to see. After each assignment was analyzed for participants, we wrote a summary statement detailing the key ideas and themes, and we noted representative quotes. The details of each data source, themes, and quotes are discussed below.

Table 2*Classroom application assignments analyzed for this study*

Classroom Application	Readings / Content	Classroom Application prompt
1	Read: <i>Differentiated Literacy Instruction in Grades 4-5: “Differentiation and Tiered Instruction; Designing an Upper Elementary Literacy Program”</i> (Walpole et al., 2020)	Become familiar with the district reading curriculum and closely observe how it is implemented in your classroom. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much time is allotted for ELA instruction per day? How is that time used? • How are differentiation and tiered instruction implemented? • Which comprehension strategies are used? (see p. 27) • Which indicators (pp. 20-21) do you see present in the instructional materials?
4	Content: Learning by Scientific Design (LbSD) from the previous week (Deans for Impact, 2023a)	Analyze two warm-up activities that occur in your classroom this week. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is relevant, specific prior knowledge the focus? Explain. • How does the warm-up activity support students’ organization (schema-building) of the prior knowledge that will connect to the new material? • Are all students involved (all write or all talk)? Explain. • What, if any, pitfalls do you observe?
5	Read: “Implications of the DRIVE Model of Reading: Making the Complexity of Reading Actionable” (Duke & Cartwright, 2019) -AND- “A Closer Look at Close Reading: Three Under-the-Radar Skills Needed to Comprehend Sentences” (Mesmer & McCully, 2017)	Consider a student that you have worked with in your classroom. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the DRIVE Model of Reading help you understand this student’s reading strengths or challenges? Be specific as you consider each step of the model. • How might you use the practices listed in the Mesmer & McCully article to support this student’s sentence comprehension? If you are able, try one or more of these practices with the student.

7	<p>Read:</p> <p><i>Differentiated Literacy Instruction in Grades 4-5: “Building Comprehension”</i> (Walpole et al., 2020)</p> <p>-AND-</p> <p><i>Teaching Reading in Small Groups: “Guided practice toward independence: Strategy lessons for comprehension, print work, and fluency”</i> (Serravallo, 2010)</p>	<p>Choose an instructional method for either whole group or small group reading instruction from the readings. Implement with students in your class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which instructional method did you choose and why? • How did this look in your classroom? What modifications did you make from the reading to your implementation? • What went well? How do you know? • What areas do you want to grow as an instructor?
10	<p>Read:</p> <p><i>Differentiated Literacy Instruction in Grades 4-5: “Building Vocabulary”</i> (Walpole et al., 2020)</p> <p>-AND-</p> <p><i>Differentiated Literacy Instruction in Grades 4-5: “Building Fluency”</i> (Walpole et al., 2020)</p>	<p>Choose to focus on either vocabulary or fluency in your classroom integration this week.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on how vocabulary or fluency has been taught or addressed in your class this year. How does this connect to the chapter(s)? • Select an aspect of the instructional planning/strategies listed in the reading and implement it in your class. • What went well? How do you know? • What areas do you want to grow as an instructor?

Findings

The analysis of the classroom application assignments revealed residents’ connections to specific students or situations, their perceptions of their personal growth, tensions they observed, and what they wanted to see. Residents’ responses on the five analyzed Classroom Application assignments began with their observations of the classroom in which they were working (#1). In week six of the semester, students submitted Classroom Application #5, and several students discussed their teaching and ways the material was supporting instruction. The final two responses that we analyzed (#7 and #10) asked students to choose a strategy from the reading and implement it in their class, which provided further insight into their classroom environment and ways they wanted to grow as instructors. The following four themes

emerged across the data analysis: (1) application of course content, (2) modification of strategies, (3) tensions related to scripted curriculum, and (4) goals for professional growth.

Application of Course Content

Across all data sources, residents consistently applied the course content to their residency classroom, often citing specific course content or readings and how they saw the same or similar pedagogical practices enacted in their placements. Classroom Application #1, asked residents to become familiar with the district reading curriculum and observe how reading instruction was implemented in their classroom. Residents identified specific instructional strategies and described how they were implemented in the classroom.

Several weeks later, residents were asked to consider how activating prior knowledge was utilized in their classrooms in response to Classroom Application #4. All residents included evidence that they were applying the content to their classroom analysis, as they discussed relevant prior knowledge, schema organization, and pitfalls (which were part of the prompts). One student reflected on a math lesson and noted the support present for schema building:

This warm-up helps students organize their prior knowledge by requiring them to actively apply their understanding of prime and composite numbers. Sorting numbers into these two categories reinforces their schema related to this concept. It connects their existing knowledge to their upcoming lesson on prime and composite numbers.

The following week, residents read about the DRIVE model of reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2019) and were asked to use this information to better understand a student's strengths or challenges and then to use the second reading listed to identify how they might support this student. Eleven of the twelve participants directly applied the content of the readings to specific students, including one resident who wrote:

The DRIVE Model of Reading helped me understand more about how reading is an interdependent process. [Student] will read a passage with fluency, however, in follow-up questions and activities, it seems as if she missed the underlying message. Following the model, I can clearly see where her skills need attention and how it is negatively impacting her comprehension.

One resident did not apply the content of the literacy articles to a specific student, but she was likely not in a reading placement. Instead, she discussed both articles and what she would do, if able. The other eleven residents crafted their responses in a way that discussed students'

strengths/areas of need and how they would use the material from the readings to support their students. Additionally, seven of the residents cited content or quotations from the readings, separate from their discussion of the application. This illustrates their close reading, comprehension, and how they were processing this new information which allowed them to successfully apply the knowledge to their students.

Modification of Strategies

Residents were also encouraged to experiment with various strategies they were learning in their residency classrooms. In many cases, this meant adapting the instruction and modifying the strategy learned to fit the grade level, classroom context, and needs of the students.

For example, when students read about comprehension instruction and strategy lessons (Classroom Application #7), one resident decided to incorporate a strategy to support inferencing into her math instruction. She recognized that word problems required students to infer information; she learned reading occurs across disciplines, and reading strategies can be used to support students outside of the literacy block.

Other residents modified the strategies they were learning by integrating them into different literacy activities. For example, they modified existing literacy centers. They adapted inferential questions to use with an informational text based on the post-reading questions provided. One student decided to modify a semantic feature analysis (Classroom Application #10) for use during a science lesson:

I chose to implement semantic feature analysis in my class. According to the book, semantic feature analysis is used when there are multiple vocabulary words that belong to the same category and can be compared and contrasted on a specific set of features... In class, I created a table with the four vocabulary words and then engaged the students in

a discussion about which ones allowed light to pass through, which stopped the light, and further talked more specifically about the specific effects each one has on light.

These modifications of learned content required the residents to transfer the learning into their instruction. Instead of only demonstrating their understanding of a concept, they were making connections to their practice and observing how this instruction supported their students when applied.

Tensions Related to Scripted Curriculum

A consistent theme across the findings was a tension related to the district-mandated scripted curriculum. Tensions were coded as ways in which students recognized that the instruction or learning environment differed from what they wanted to occur. Residents specifically reflected on the limitations of the scripted curriculum and the lack of differentiation in their classrooms which they often attributed to their school's strict adherence to the curriculum.

These tensions were immediately voiced by students after Classroom Application #1, as they were asked to become familiar with the reading curriculum. This involved noticing how the time was used in their ELA classroom and reflecting on the implementation of differentiation and tiered instruction. One resident noted her frustration, writing, "... [curriculum] does not accommodate differentiation within the classroom." Another resident reflected, "I would love to see more reading happen...something that I feel [curriculum] could grow in is providing students with more hands-on text material instead of just the teacher reading the story to the kids."

Later in the semester (Classroom Application #7) when students were learning about small group instruction and strategy lessons, another resident stated, "The curriculum we use does not provide many opportunities for small group instruction centers and I would love to have more strategies that I could use to incorporate

that into my classroom." These responses demonstrate the tension these residents felt, as they wanted to provide exemplary instruction but felt limited due to the curriculum.

Goals for Professional Growth

The final theme that emerged from the data was that residents noted goals for their professional growth. Two of the Classroom Applications (#7 and #10) asked residents to consider areas they wanted to grow as instructors, but they began naming goals for themselves in the first assignment at the beginning of the semester. These goals were often directly related to what they were learning, applying, and reflecting upon each week. Differentiation was repeatedly discussed, and one resident commented on her desire to improve small group differentiation "that makes their content appropriate and promotes growth, no matter their level."

The residents' goals also incorporated learning from previous courses. For example, residents learned about the importance of engaging students in effortful thinking (Deans for Impact, 2023b) a concept that was reinforced with the analogy of getting students to "scuba" instead of "snorkel" with the content. One resident thoughtfully reflected on her goal of asking higher-order questions:

One area that I want to grow as an instructor is improving the kind of questions that I ask. Although I have made it a goal of mine recently to ask more higher-order thinking questions, I still catch myself asking lower-level questions that don't require as much effortful thinking as other questions might. While these lower-level questions are still useful from time to time, I want to improve on asking more difficult questions more frequently to really get the students thinking and making connections in their minds.

Insights from the Inaugural Year of the TCU Teacher Residency Program

Residents consistently applied course content to their field placement classrooms. They read closely, modified learned strategies for their context, and critically considered student performance and their areas of growth. We were encouraged by the many thoughtful responses to the classroom application assignments while acknowledging areas of refinement that surfaced.

The classroom application assignments focused on literacy knowledge, skills, and strategies. Yet not all residents were placed in literacy subjects; some taught math or science. Depending on the prompts, the residents in non-literacy placements occasionally struggled with applying the content to their classrooms. We saw evidence of residents modifying the strategies to fit other content areas, but we realize this was a struggle we will continue to encounter and will need to review.

The scripted curriculum used in the district was a regular talking point in class and repeatedly mentioned in the written responses. Most of the residents had little freedom to deviate from the scripted curriculum, which often limited new strategies or instructional techniques they were able to implement in the classroom including small group instruction, differentiation, and authentic reading opportunities. We also realized the residents needed more in-class opportunities to specifically address the scripted curriculum and discuss ways to work within these constraints.

Conclusion

TCU is committed to the Teacher Residency Program. Our second cohort of residents has been selected for the 2024-2025 school year, and we continue to make necessary adjustments to the program. We are expanding the program to partner with another district. Our literacy coursework now includes modules from the Texas Reading Academies to further prepare teacher candidates. We look forward to

continued celebrations of residents' preparation in this year-long clinical teaching placement and continued insights as we modify our program.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

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