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Learning to Teach: Insights Gained in an Advanced Reading Methods Practicum

BY KATHRYN HADLEY

Mine is a very new voice from the classroom. I am a senior at a small private liberal arts college in the upper Midwest. Last semester, I completed an advanced methods course in teaching reading. As a teacher-in-training, I feel that I have benefited enormously from this class. To make the most of my learning in this course, I kept a professional development journal so I could track my thinking across time. I wanted to be able to record my thoughts and experiences immediately following instructional days and to reflect on them so that I could better understand my experiences. This I intended to include only in my portfolio. With the encouragement of my professor, I share them here, in hopes that they may illuminate the experiences and perspectives of a very new teacher as she contends with the complexities of classroom life, albeit, in this case, a classroom of four! I first relate the structure of the methods class. I follow with descriptions of my students and my instructional sequence. Then, I share insights about my learning in the class in two important areas, classroom management and instruction. Finally, I share my conclusions about this experience and its contribution to my education.

The Practicum Course

The course is titled *Practicum in Reading at the Elementary Level*. It's a four-credit course that meets twice weekly in the afternoons. The first month of the course is instructional in nature. The professor works with students to hone the skills acquired in the previous two literacy methods courses and to teach specific assessment and instructional strategies that will be needed in this course. During this time, doctoral students assess the children with whom the practicum students will be working. The children come from four urban schools with which my university has partnerships. Then, the last 10 weeks of the course is the practicum. The children come to our campus literacy center for tutoring in small groups two afternoons a week from about 3:10–4:40. Each of the practicum students is assigned a small classroom and a group of students. They decorate their classrooms as a teacher would to make them positive and educational places to be in and to personalize them for students. This part of the course I know my peers and I enjoyed as we prepared for students. In my classroom, I decorated the door with a positive educational theme, "Star Readers Brightening the Night Sky!" The door was covered with a dark blue background, little cutout people representing each of the students, and bright yellow construction paper stars with students' names

on them. A table with five chairs and a chalkboard were in the classroom. I hung colorful cutouts of the nine planets and the sun from the ceiling boards. In addition, there was a large bookcase for storing teaching materials and students' supplies.

My students

I began tutoring with four students, Colton, Dامتريوس, Trevon, and Michael (not their real names). After the first week of practicum, Dامتريوس was moved to another tutor's class. He and Colton were identical twins and were unable to work productively together in my room. Colton was a third grader who was very shy in the beginning. He opened up quickly, however, and became one of the most outgoing of the group. His participation increased even more after his twin was moved to another classroom. Trevon was also a third grader. A lively child, he would often speak out and engage in arguments with the other students. However, he also tried very hard while reading and was very eager to participate when interested in the topic. In contrast, Michael was a soft-spoken fourth grader who got along easily with his group mates. The students were a pleasure to teach, but at times challenging!

My instructional routine

Knowing how important it is to have a classroom routine, we learn to create and maintain one in this

practicum class. Each day, tutoring began with what we called a book chat. This was an oral review of one of the books that the students had brought home to read. We then would engage in a strategy lesson. Across the term, I focused these lessons on decoding by analogy, reviewing story structure, and drawing inferences. Next, we would do guided reading and then writing in response to reading. The day ended with students choosing new books to take home with them to read.

Learning to teach

I analyzed my professional development journal entries to arrive at categories of learning. I identified two areas that occupied my thoughts, classroom management and instruction. These I understand are common areas of concern for new teachers. Having identified these areas, I looked within my entries to note particular concerns and experiences that I had. These I share below.

Classroom management

I know that management is always a concern for new teachers and for me it was a paramount concern at the outset of the class. How would I get my students to do what I wanted them to do? How would I manage my students in a positive, yet effective way? What would I do if they didn't listen to me? All of these were questions I had. It was with some trepidation that I anticipated beginning tutoring.

Shortly before tutoring began, two of the teachers who would be working with my professor to supervise us talked to our class about classroom management techniques. They had a wealth of ideas and thoughts on particular management systems used both in their own classrooms and in the local schools. One of the teachers had been a student in this course, so she had valuable insights about tutoring in the literacy center. (This calmed my fears a bit, as I was very nervous about beginning.) With these teachers' support, each of us formulated a plan for our classrooms.

I decided that I wanted to generate classroom rules and classroom procedures together with my students. Therefore, on the first day of class, following "getting to know you" activities, my students and I thought of five rules for working together during the semester. This allowed the students to take ownership of the rules. I also had a list of guidelines for success. These stressed ways to be successful such as "always try." In addition to the rules and the guidelines for success, I had a system of consequences. I patterned mine after

a system that one of our supervisors recommended. I taped a pocket for each student to a piece of poster board. Each pocket had a child's name on it and included four different colored index cards. Each card represented a consequence. For example, the first card (yellow) represented good behavior and the second card (red) represented a first warning. Students started the tutoring session with a yellow card, but if the student broke a rule, I would tell the student to switch his card to the next color. When the student finished the day with a yellow card, he received a sticker on a chart with his name on it and the dates of tutoring. After four days of stickers, the student received a small prize such as a pencil or stickers.

I learned fairly quickly that my classroom management needed to involve much more than just having a plan. Part of it was having and implementing a plan, and part of it was developing a way of interacting with students as I managed them. I noted in my log entries that I wanted to be "firm but enthusiastic" with students. It took me a few tutoring sessions to figure out what this meant for me exactly. After a couple of weeks, I realized that I thought of this as being firm with the rules and "sticking to my guns," but also being a teacher who made learning enjoyable and interesting. For example, I found that when a student started to walk around the classroom and I would tell the student to sit down. When the student didn't listen to me the first time, I had to be strong with a firm request for the student to sit down. However, in the next moment, when attention returned to the lesson, my enthusiasm returned to my voice. This worked well for me because the students were able to recognize that they were to do as they were told, but learning would be enjoyable in my classroom.

I also puzzled through ideas about the kind of learning environment I wanted in my classroom. It seemed at times that a certain amount of "chaos" was in order. In other words, it was okay to have a little bit of talking and laughing in my classroom. (This felt very much like chaos to me at the beginning of tutoring.) I discovered that it is impossible for third and fourth graders, or anyone for that matter, to sit in their seats with hands folded and to stare straight ahead at the chalkboard. Therefore, a little bit of moving in their seats to re-adjust and to laugh (when appropriate) can be good for the students and for the classroom atmosphere. I came to realize that this was important for learning because it allowed the students to feel relaxed and comfortable in the classroom. I

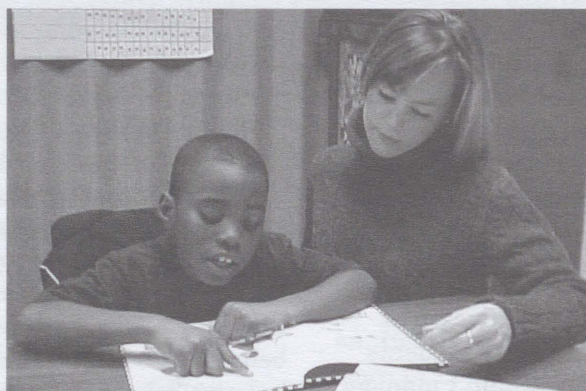
didn't want my classroom to feel too severe because I thought learning might be more difficult for students. At other times, it was important to have a quieter work environment, for example, while we were doing running records. I concluded that different tasks called for different work environments and that I could move between a more casual environment and a more structured one while maintaining control of the classroom. (By the end of tutoring in December, I no longer equated talk and movement with chaos.)

A recurring difficulty across the term was the frustrating behaviors that two students would exhibit. They distracted us all. Trevon would point fingers at Michael and Colton, call them names, tease, tattle, swear, make faces, and even, on one occasion, purposely fall on the floor to disrupt class. Another student, Colton, was also a handful. Rather than focus on his own behavior, he focused on Trevon's, continually peppering me with questions: "Trevon is leaning on the table. Should he be doing that? Trevon is teasing. Should he change his card? Should Trevon be sharpening his pencil now?" In September, these two boys pretty much got the better of me. On one occasion, I was so distressed by their behavior that nothing but a large plate of nachos following class would calm me down.

Over time, I learned to respond more effectively to them. At first I would let them know I was displeased and turn their behavior cards. I found, however, that the card system didn't work very well. Misbehaviors occurred so frequently that turning the cards became meaningless. I came to understand that many of the behaviors were the result of the need for attention. I had a choice to make. I could either continue responding to the negative behaviors or work to help build the students' positive behaviors. I came to the conclusion that although the boys were difficult to manage, they were enthusiastic learners and interested in pleasing me. I began to positively reinforce them for doing what they should be doing and for their enthusiasm. As Trevon became a better citizen, his relationship with Colton improved and their negative interactions markedly diminished. I often talked to them about how we were all partners in learning and that we

needed to work together to help one another every day—building community, in effect. I was very pleased one day in November when Trevon independently apologized to Colton for telling him a word he was trying to figure out, something the boys knew not to do. This took empathy and initiative on his part, and I thought it was very nice. I was very pleased, too, with Colton for not allowing Trevon's initial behavior to distract him from reading. Progress was being made in my classroom!

Throughout the semester, I tried to implement the best advice that I have received from an experienced teacher: Don't try to be your students' friend. Teachers can show they care as friends do, but children need direction and authority. Take an interest in them and how their day is going, but be their teacher and their role model. In keeping with this, I tried to be friendly and interested in my students, but maintain my role as teacher. I found that if I remembered this, management came much easier to me.



Instruction

In looking through my log entries, I noted that three areas gave me particular concern: the level at which to focus instruction, how to keep students engaged during lessons, and how to respond to issues of race when they arose. While the first issue is probably the most important of these for designing instruction, I noticed that it was not the most pressing for me. Instead, I seemed overwhelmingly concerned with how to keep students on task during lessons, particularly at the beginning of tutoring. Therefore, I begin the discussion of my instructional concerns with this issue.

Keeping students engaged

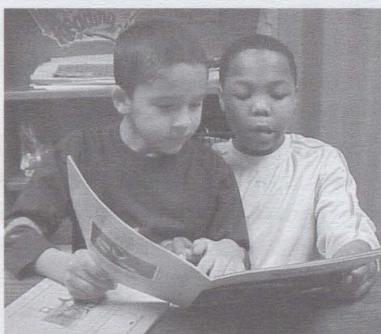
I was very concerned with keeping my students engaged in lessons. My log entries across the semester suggest that I interpreted engagement in two different ways. At first my thinking about engagement was pretty much limited to getting my students to pay attention during lessons. I thought that to pay attention they needed to be sitting up straight in their chairs with their eyes forward, mouths closed, and hands folded in front of them. If I saw them

doing this, I was satisfied that they were attending to lessons. This was difficult for students to maintain, however, as they were a very active bunch. I remarked in my log that I was constantly saying things such as "Trevon, stop tapping your pencil!" "Michael, put your chair on all fours!" and "Colton, are you listening?" The first few weeks of tutoring were maddening in this way. In thinking of how to respond to these behaviors, which I identified as attention diverting, I decided to ask students questions about our lessons. In my experience, that is what teachers do to hold students accountable for learning as well as to check their understanding. I was rather shocked to find that, on most occasions, my students were able to answer my questions correctly despite the behaviors that I found so distracting. Thus it seemed that while they were engaged in pencil tapping etc., they were also paying attention. This was an enormous insight for me. Then I thought about my own behaviors in classes. I am not able to sit through a 90-minute university class and not fidget or doodle in some way, but I *am* paying attention to the professor and learning. Thus, I started to put myself in my students' place. I began to think about what their long school day implied for learning during our time together following school. I realized that my behavioral expectations for paying attention were unreasonable.

With this new insight, I began to think of engagement in another way, that is, maintaining focus during lessons. Because my students had already endured a long day at school and needed to move and talk, I began to think about how to make my lessons more interactive. I began to include instructional activities that incorporated game-like routines such as bingo games and memory games that reinforced learning and incorporated things like shared writing into our day. I noticed that my students really liked being able to come to the board (or chart paper) and record their ideas themselves. I also really began to focus on that issue of choice. In the practicum class, we read an article that talked about the importance of choice in motivating students. In my lessons, I would allow students to have a choice of books to read, a choice of writing activities, and a choice of reading formats (e.g., partner reading, reading along to a tape of the story, choral reading). This seemed to increase students' enthusiasm for our

time together and develop their sense of responsibility to their own learning. In addition, each lesson did not seem exactly like another since the students were able to choose their types of activity.

Another concern across the semester was how to manage my students' sharing during lessons. Experienced teachers I've observed do this so well, but I really struggled with it. I knew the importance of activating students' background knowledge and creating interest in our lessons, so I would ask students about their experiences with the topic or their knowledge of it. What I was hoping for was a minute or so of topic-related sharing. What I got was lengthy, enthusiastic talk that at first was topical but quickly digressed to irrelevant personal experiences. I knew that I should redirect students, but didn't know how to do it without cutting them off and hurting their feelings. After some days of this, I decided to politely stop the sharing student and tell him that we would have time at the end of the lesson to share stories. At the completion of the lesson, the student would remind me, and I would allow him to finish the story. This worked out perfectly! It allowed for the lessons to carry on, but honored the students' need to share. I found that the students were very respectful of my request, because they knew that I would provide them with the chance to finish their stories before we went home.



Matching student needs

Probably my biggest insight about instruction related to how to plan instruction so that it matched students' learning needs. At the beginning of tutoring, I struggled mightily with this. Each day my word recognition instruction was "too easy" according to the students. Much of our word recognition instruction in the literacy center is based upon a program that uses the key word method to teach decoding by analogy. Each day, we teach students key words that contain common spelling patterns that they can then use to decode words with those patterns. I spent a lot of time choosing key words to teach and carefully planning my lessons, but then in class the students would gleefully announce that the words were too easy. In response, I would pick new key words that I thought were harder for them, but would find again that they knew most of them. My students enjoyed their success with these words, but I found this experience very frustrating. I was missing something in my instruc-

tion, but didn't know what it was. In talking with my professor, I realized that what I was missing was really the point of this decoding strategy. That is, what I needed to do was to teach the students to use the key words they already knew to decode unfamiliar words containing the same spelling patterns. I had been so wrapped up in trying to find key words that my students didn't know that I lost sight of *why* I was teaching them the words in the first place. Once I began to do this, the students stopped saying things were "too easy" and were enthusiastic about applying their knowledge of key words to "big words." This helped me to see, too, that each day's instruction must proceed from the previous day's instruction. I needed to assess daily and then from this determine what next should be learned. This was a real "ah-ha!" moment for me. I know that our professors have stressed this during my teacher education program, but I finally understood it when I had to teach my three students two days a week across a period of 10 weeks.

A final important insight for me was that I needed to spend more than one day on a strategy. Strategies take many days, more likely weeks to learn. On the first day of instruction, I could model a strategy and perhaps engage students in guided practice. The next day, the students would need more guided practice and then some independent practice. And then they'd probably need more days like this. I learned that I could not rush my students. They needed time to learn. I also came to understand that just because I'd taught something didn't mean that my students had learned it. Finally, a constant review is necessary. All these things seem so clear to me now, but they were not just a few months ago.

Racial tensions

An uncomfortable issue for me during tutoring sessions was how to handle matters of race when they arose. Although much of my university course work addressed race and social justice, I found myself unsure of what to do when my young students referenced race. For example, one day, we were reading *Smoky Night*, Eve Bunting's (1995) picture storybook about the Los Angeles riots. In the book, an African American boy and his mother won't shop at a Korean woman's market. My student Colton asked why they did not shop there. I didn't quite know what to do with the question. I remember asking myself, "Do I respond to the race issue question, or do I leave it alone?" I decided to respond to it. I told my students that some people are prejudiced and do not like other

people because they are of a different race. In the story, Daniel and his mother don't shop at Mrs. Kim's market because she is Asian and they are not. Trevon responded, "I don't like people who are white." I didn't want to just let this go, so I said, "Then you must not like me." Trevon then replied, "No, I like you," and I continued with, "So, you like some white people." Trevon agreed. This was a very brief exchange, but I hope it contributed in some small measure to students' critical thinking about race and prejudice. Primarily, I was pleased with myself because I moved through my discomfort and responded to my student's question and the racial issue it prompted. It was a small but important step for me as a white, middle class teacher-in-training.

Concluding Thoughts

I am now in my last semester of school and student teaching in a sixth-grade classroom. Working with a classroom of 30 students rather than three, I find that my experiences with classroom management last semester were invaluable. While I find that it is sometimes very difficult for me to feel in complete control of my current classroom, I have learned to speak confidently, command and maintain students' attention and respect, build interactive learning opportunities into my lessons, and to be comfortable releasing some responsibility for making choices to students.

In addition, I have also learned that it is important to have a strong connection with my students. Before each lesson last semester, I would ask each of my students how his day was and how he had been lately. I found it very important to show that I cared about my students and this strengthened my connection with each of them. It increased the amount of respect we had in our teacher-student relationship. I have carried this belief into my student teaching. I eat lunch with my current students, participate in their gym class, and laugh with them about funny movies. The personal connections I have built with them through these activities have helped me to garner their respect as a person and a teacher.

Most importantly for learning, tutoring helped me to understand how critical the connection between assessment and instruction is. In this new semester, I constantly find myself thinking, "Will students understand what I'm teaching? How will I know? Have I planned for assessment? What other ways can I assess students' learning besides what I've already

thought of?" Just a few weeks ago, I started to teach grammar lessons. I did not know how much they knew about grammar. Because of my time in the advanced reading methods practicum, I realized that I needed to assess what they knew with a pre-test of some sort. With my cooperating teacher's support, I developed one and it helped me to determine where to begin and where to go in the unit. Following the unit, I will give them a similarly constructed assessment as a post-test. I'm also going to collect writing samples before and after the unit to assess students' ability to apply the taught concepts when they write.

I know that my journey as an educator has just begun.

In this final year of my pre-service teacher preparation, I hope that my students have learned as much from me as I have from them. I am very excited to use what I have learned next year when I have my own classroom.

Author's Note: I would like to thank my professor in the practicum course for her guidance and encouragement during the course and for helping me to think through my ideas for this article.

Children's Book Cited

Bunting, E. (1995). *Smoky Night*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Books.

Call for Manuscripts

Michigan Reading Journal

The *Michigan Reading Journal* is the refereed journal of the Michigan Reading Association. With a circulation of 6,500 teachers and university-based researchers, the *Michigan Reading Journal* publishes theory-driven research articles as well as creative writing and classroom practice ideas. Manuscripts on any topic related to literacy, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, viewing, visually representing, technology, or children's/young adult literature will be considered.

Manuscript Submission Guidelines

The *Michigan Reading Journal* publishes three issues per year. In addition to accepting articles that deal with all aspects of the language arts, we provide a general focus for each issue: fall issues spotlight children's and young adult literature; winter volumes are dedicated to writing topics; spring issues address a variety of reading topics and concerns; articles derived from the MRA conference presentations may fit into any of the issues. Recommended deadlines are: Fall—May 1st; Winter—October 1st; Spring—January 15th.

Articles can be classroom-practiced based and research-based articles of interest to Michigan teachers. Manuscripts, especially creative writing or classroom ideas, can be as short as one page in length. In any event, submissions should not exceed 20 typed, double-spaced pages. Author's name, mailing address, telephone number, FAX number, e-mail address, and professional affiliation should be on a separate cover page. The author's name should not appear on the manuscript.

All manuscripts will be reviewed by three members of the editorial review board. Electronic submissions (Microsoft Word) are preferred. Please submit by e-mail to Mary Jo Finney (mjfinney@umflint.edu) and to Patricia Gallant (pgallant@umflint.edu). Send four copies of paper submissions to

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