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RESEARCH

Exploring the Professional Development of a First-Year Teacher: Literacy Specialist as Mentor

WENDY FARKAS

Mentoring novice teachers has been shown to increase teacher efficacy (Ward, 2005), and typically a veteran teacher within the school district in which the novice teacher was hired takes on that role. However, university professors may serve as mentors too and may actually “bridge the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice” (Coffey, 2012, p. 95). Interestingly, I was able to serve in both capacities as a mentor, having taught in the school district for sixteen years, served as a literacy specialist for two years, and taught for three years in higher education. In addition, I was studying reading at the doctoral level for six years when I served as a mentor to a first-year teacher. As mentor, I wanted to provide a level of support I wished I had during my first years teaching. After further examining previously collected data from a program evaluation study, I was drawn to this new research direction because of the significant time I spent with the first-year teacher and the need I felt to explore the outcomes of that collaboration. I wanted to better understand how to apprentice first-year teachers into the field of education by examining the mentor/mentee relationship between a first-year teacher and a literacy specialist.

Developing collaborative, long-term relationships between teachers (mentees) under the guidance of a facilitator (mentor) has been shown to increase teachers’ understanding of how students learn, understanding of content knowledge, and understanding of effective instruction (Murata et al., 2012). However, having emotional support as a novice teacher may be equally important as having pedagogical support (Desimone et al., 2014). Integrating a mentoring culture where intensive reflection, evaluation, and coaching are valued has also been shown to be an effective way to apprentice novice teachers into the field of education (Couvier, Brandon, & Prasow, 2008). For this study, I explored the relationship between me and a first-year teacher. We co-taught an eighth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) class

and met daily to discuss student learning, literacy and learning theory, and recent research in the field. All proved to be valuable learning experiences. Personally, I know that our collaboration helped me learn how to model literacy strategies for content-area teachers, so I wanted to explore what the first-year teacher gleaned from our collaboration. What professional development constructs may emerge that will help guide middle level administrators’ understanding of how to better apprentice new educators into teaching?

When designing and implementing professional development initiatives, I want administrators to ask, “How can I best support new teachers’ acquisition of positive teaching experiences, while also scaffolding their developing theoretical and pedagogical knowledge base to increase their self-efficacy as teachers? What does the research tell me?” These were questions I took seriously when coaching and collaborating daily with the first-year teacher; therefore, I decided to examine how our co-teaching experiences and daily reflective conversations may have affected his pedagogical knowledge base, teaching efficacy, and instructional practice.

Theoretical Framework

In cooperative learning environments grounded in social constructivist theory, students and teacher continually raise the bar for one another through their social interactions in classroom discussions. Teacher and students become active learners based on their ever-evolving knowledge of the topic, the text, their past and present experiences, and their motivation to excel in their learning community. When given useful tools in an authentic cooperative learning environment embedded in a social constructivist framework, students have the opportunity to achieve and thrive. This theoretical framework embraces the foundational learning and critical thinking emphasized in the Common Core State Standards (2010), which recommend that students should be engaging “effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with . . . topics, texts, and issues, building on other’s ideas and

expressing their own clearly” (p. 49). Therefore, I argue that providing first-year teachers the opportunity to develop professionally under the tutelage of an experienced literacy specialist—in the same way middle level and secondary teachers are expected to apprentice their students into their core disciplines—may have the greatest impact on first-year teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and instructional practice.

The emphasis of the CCSS is more on the process of learning the content than on the content alone, addressing the idea that students never truly become members of an academic community until they can create using the tools of a discipline (Gee, 2004). Therefore, it becomes imperative that teachers help apprentice their students into their discipline by effectively modeling how to read, write, and communicate in their discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Who better to apprentice new teachers into the academic discourse of teaching using literacy tools than a literacy specialist? In fact, this is one of the primary roles of a literacy specialist, helping scaffold both students’ and teachers’ literacy learning through modeling effective use of literacy tools while implementing evidence-based instructional practices (McKenna & Stahl, 2009).

Teaching disciplinary content using evidence-based instructional practices grounded in literacy can be particularly challenging for new teachers who have limited pedagogical knowledge and limited experience in how to best implement various instructional practices. Therefore, I developed the following research question to explore the influence of a sustained, rigorous professional development initiative: What effect will an intensive twelve-week collaboration between a first-year middle school teacher and a literacy specialist have on the novice teacher’s pedagogical knowledge and instructional practice?

This Study

This current study is part of a much larger study (Farkas, 2015) in which I explored middle school students’ academic outcomes and experiences during the implementation of a 12-week program designed to improve their reading comprehension and motivation to read. During that study, I worked collaboratively with a first-year teacher (who also participated in this study) and his students. The collaboration indicated the importance of mentoring early career teachers and how to best scaffold new teachers’ professional development. The data set for this study was only a small part of a much larger data set that included middle school students’ reading

motivation and reading comprehension outcomes, as well as qualitative data from three semi-structured interviews.

Method

Teacher and Literacy Specialist

As the principal investigator of this study, I worked as a literacy specialist, mentoring a first-year teacher. At the time of implementation, I had four years of experience teaching English Language Arts (ELA) at the middle level, twelve years teaching English at the secondary level, and two years working as a literacy specialist. The research I did for this study was part of my dissertation research to fulfill my final requirements as a doctoral candidate and receive my Ph.D. in reading. The first-year teacher graduated from a Midwestern university with a teaching degree, specializing in ELA and Spanish. He graduated from the school district in which he is now teaching, so he was very familiar with the needs and backgrounds of his students. He was highly engaged, supportive, and open-minded throughout implementation of the ELA curriculum; he also valued disciplinary literacy instruction and was eager to learn more and make it an integral part of his instruction in both ELA and Spanish.

Context and Participants

The superintendent of the school district in which this study took place asked me to design and implement the ELA program while coaching a first-year teacher, hoping to close the ever-widening gap in reading achievement between at-risk students and not-at-risk students. The data were generated at a predominantly white, public, suburban middle school located in a Midwestern state. Approximately 250 seventh-grade students and 285 eighth-grade students, ages 11-14, attended the school. The middle school was classified as a gap school, meaning there was a substantial gap between lower scoring students’ reading comprehension scores and higher scoring students’ reading comprehension scores on the state-mandated standardized reading test.

The middle school was in their first year of transitioning to a trimester schedule: five classes, 72 minutes long, for twelve weeks. Middle school students were starting their second trimester at the start of program implementation. There were 31 students in the first-year teacher’s class: 17 at risk of failing (according to state guidelines) and 14 not at risk.

Procedures

I worked collaboratively, in the capacity of a literacy specialist, with the first-year ELA teacher over the course of a 12-week trimester. We co-taught his eighth-grade ELA class,

implementing the curriculum I developed to raise students' reading motivation and reading comprehension. We met five days a week for 70 minutes each day and did the following: discussed literacy and learning theory and evidence-based research texts, wrote daily reflections about our co-teaching experiences, and discussed instructional plans for the following day. At the start of the trimester, I did a majority of the teaching, modeling for the first-year teacher instructional practices that embodied the adolescent literacy theory and practices discussed in our daily meetings.

Measures and Data Analysis

Both the first-year teacher and I completed three semi-structured written interviews throughout the semester and composed daily written reflections (see Appendix A). I employed constant comparative analysis of the qualitative data (Glaser, 1978; 1992). After transcribing all quantitative data and initial summary writing, evaluation coding was used for the initial coding scheme, which consisted of descriptive, in vivo, and process coding (Saldana, 2013). I composed summaries and then started second-round coding and completed additional summary writing. During third-round coding, initial and secondary codes were further collapsed into themed categories.

Results

First-Year Teacher's Semi-Structured Written Interviews and Daily Reflections

During third-round coding, the following themes emerged: environmental factors, active reading, engaged learning, gradual release, academic discourse, and new pedagogy. The environmental factors category emerged from the first-year teacher's comments about issues out of his control. For example, he commented about the overly hot room, about students being taken out of class for various reasons, about student absenteeism, etc. He tended to connect these environmental issues with students' poor behavior. The following quote is illustrative of how this theme emerged:

The room was very warm. Students were quite talkative about many issues/matters during the hour. Students had trouble remaining focused—even during short activities due to the hot room . . . Students seemed interested in the Bookmark Activity, but some students, I think, are simply pretending that they are interested in order to have some time to read independently (i.e. actually disengage from the class). Mentor teacher was absent (at a confer-

ence) yesterday, and I wonder if this was a reason why students had trouble concentrating/following directions. Students appeared to be distracted by Ms. Rob's [teacher who shares classroom space] objects in the classroom. (I am concerned that this "fascination" with these objects may cause silliness.)

The active reading and engaged learning themes emerged from the first-year teacher's statements about students' effective use of reading strategies and participation in collaborative discussions around texts. Considering the teacher did not have any comprehensive understanding of explicit reading strategy instruction nor how to structure and implement literature circles, his following statement toward the end of the trimester is quite significant:

Students are effectively and purposefully applying cognitive reading strategies, such as predicting, monitoring comprehension, and making connections. This is significant because many of these strategies were not a part of students' repertoire at the beginning of the class. Students spent the majority of the class reading and using their reading strategies through sticky notes. Students completed the annotations assignment. Some students had more effective/detailed annotations than others. Students were attentive to the content today, which consisted of book talks for the lit circles unit. Several students said that they were excited to read, 'Can't wait to get my book tomorrow.' The lit circles seem like a good strategy for engaging and encouraging students to read.

The academic discourse theme emerged in the last few weeks of the teacher's reflections. Throughout the trimester, I continually modeled how to integrate academic language, and analysis of the first-year teacher's written discourse revealed a significant increase in his own ability to recognize how students were using disciplinary language and what our role was in helping to apprentice students into our disciplinary discourse community:

Students are exhibiting signs of growth through their language in daily speech. Students are becoming a part of the academic league. That is, they are learning how to express their thoughts in a sophisticated manner. Students seem to enjoy the discussions; they seem to be interested in being scholars.

The gradual release theme emerged from the teacher's reflection on instruction. He was not familiar with the

gradual release of responsibility teaching and learning framework until our daily discussions on its practice and theoretical support. However, very early in the semester his written reflections revealed an extensive understanding of how to implement the framework successfully: “First, I modeled how to approach the speech, noting how to examine the structure, main ideas. In addition, students were provided instruction regarding the use of annotating and cognitive reading strategies.”

The new pedagogy theme emerged from instances where the teacher reflected on his own developing practice and/or my practice; there were many times that the teacher expressed self-doubt in his own teaching efficacy:

I am wondering if students are benefiting from their strategy application. [The] mentor teacher’s energy seems to be instrumental in igniting students’ interest for the unit. I hope I can eventually be that engaging. She instills the fear of God ... but they like her. They seem to respect her more than me.

Yet, at other times, his statements illustrated a tremendous growth in his pedagogical knowledge base and indicated an increase in his self-efficacy. For example, earlier in the semester he wrote, “The modeling for me did not go as smoothly as I would have liked.” However, later in the semester he stated, “Daily, I am reminded of the importance and recursive nature of the gradual release of responsibility teaching and learning framework. I took an opportunity to explain commas with coordinating conjunctions because so many students were struggling with the skill.”

Literacy Specialist’s Semi-Structured Written Interviews and Daily Reflections

The same themes emerged in analysis of my own written daily reflections and written interviews data set; however, for the written interview, I had one additional element in which I had to respond: Describe how the classroom teacher implements instructional practices. The following is an example of what I unearthed in analysis of the one additional element.

The teacher and I implemented literature circle discussions in different rooms to minimize the volume of discussion and to monitor group discussions. Through my analysis, it became clear that “the novice teacher struggled with literature circle implementation.” Therefore, I went back to the first-year teacher’s daily reflections for further analysis, and he commented that things did not go well with the literature circles he was facilitating: “Students participated in lit circles—many students did not

have their role sheets completed. Some students still were uncooperative—not engaging in lit circles, have a negative attitude.” On the other hand, my reflective notes from that day revealed a different perspective about students’ level of preparedness and participation:

The cooperating teacher had 5 groups and I had 4 in the MC [Media Center]. Students who were prepared for lit circle discussion appeared very excited about what they are reading. I have no idea why so many students were not prepared with their role sheets because it is obvious they have read because of their insights in discussion and noticeable excitement about their books. It’s interesting that several students were so excited to get a new free reading book (for when they finish lit circle reading, so they won’t be so determined to read ahead in their lit circle book). Excitement for two books at once!

I had to point out historical references to a group and text structures to another group b/c flashbacks and italicized thoughts were confusing them, as well as chronology of events. I think Star likes her book, just not being in a group of boys. Students were still actively engaged with discussion when I called time. I told students they must have role sheets completed at the beginning of the hour in order to get credit. I hope all students are prepared for discussion two [role sheets].

Homework is a real issue. Students are completing the reading and annotating in class [guided practice] for the most part but not completing the written work [role sheets] at home [if they don’t finish in class]. Several students checked out new free reading books b/c they knew they ‘would finish their assigned reading quick!’ Rebecca is so excited about her book. A real turning point for her!

The difference in these two perspectives is interesting. The novice teacher was quick to note negative aspects of the literature circle outcomes, while I focused more on the positive outcomes, like student engagement. I also questioned what I could do to improve student work completion. In my commentary from the written interview question: “Describe how the classroom teacher implements instructional practices,” I wrote, “Teaching experience and pedagogical

knowledge influence what happens in the classroom as well as how classroom practice may be interpreted.”

The first-year teacher often focused on deficits and placed blame on outside forces; whereas I focused more on positive outcomes and actions. The analysis revealed areas in which the teacher felt frustration and low self-efficacy. Where years of experience and research guided my instruction, the first-year teacher was often questioning his self-efficacy as a teacher. After completing my data analysis, it was clear there were times that I should have done more explicit modeling for the novice teacher and should have been more clear in how to implement various instructional practices. For example, I facilitated one literature circle discussion for the novice teacher but through qualitative analysis, it became apparent that one modeling session was not enough.

However, the new teacher did exhibit a gradual transformation over the course of the semester in his self-efficacy for the field of teaching, which was revealed in our daily discussions, his reflective daily notes, and his semi-structured written interviews. This transformation was also conveyed in his final memo, where he clearly demonstrated growth in his own sophisticated academic language and in his pedagogical knowledge about theory and evidence-based practice:

Very simply, modeling, guided practice, and opportunities for students to teach and share assignments are the most effective instructional practices. Best practice asserts that students do not learn effectively through only lecture. While it is acceptable—even expected—for teachers to present some content through lecture, students must have opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of material through immediate use. During the trimester, I asked students to be a part of their education by participating in student-centered activities, such as Socratic circles and literature circles. In addition, I required them to think and reflect on a deeper, more abstract level. Initially, many students were uncomfortable to think metacognitively, revealing that this skill was not a part of their repertoire as learners. Through coaching and encouragement, however, I succeeded in stretching students’ minds.

Data Reliability and Validation

I used the following recommendations to ensure reliability and validity of my qualitative analysis. Gibbs (2007) suggests the following reliability procedures for qualitative data: check transcripts for accuracy and check for a drift in codes through memo writing and constant comparison. Creswell

(2009) suggests the following validity procedures: member checking to ensure that interpretations accurately depict the data; triangulation of data to explain emerging themes and perspectives; thick, rich description to make findings transparent; and reflectivity to clarify investigator bias.

To ensure transparency and reduce investigator bias, I had to recognize my role as investigator in this study. Because of my extensive background with learning theory and evidence-based instructional practices, I could not minimize my effect on the first-year teacher; therefore, I needed to be transparent. In my efforts to be transparent, I made it clear to stakeholders that by working daily with the novice teacher, holding collaborative discussions, and planning and co-teaching, the ELA program I designed and implemented would not only increase students’ reading comprehension scores and improve students’ reading motivation but also help apprentice the novice teacher into the field by increasing his understanding of theory and how to best implement evidence-based instructional practices.

To offset my inherent bias during analysis, I had to continually remind myself to return to the data for evidence. For example, when I was analyzing the qualitative data set, if I could go in two directions, I would return to the data instead of letting my desire for the outcomes sway my analysis in favor of my preconceived paradigms. I also relied on member checking (Cresswell, 2009) and triangulation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) to make sure that my interpretation of the data was accurate and credible.

For member checking, I asked the first-year teacher if I could email him over the summer. I developed a narrative capturing the first-year teacher’s experiences during implementation. Several reflective questions were developed using Valli’s (1997) recommendations to encourage further reflection from the new teacher (see Appendix B):

Reflective teachers link theory to practice by using varied sources of information, examining their own practice and school policies in order to become better teachers, analyzing problems from multiple perspectives, and using new evidence to reassess decisions. Reflective teachers can alter their teaching behavior and context to accomplish desirable goals (p. 70).

The first-year teacher responded, stating that the narrative did indeed capture his experiences during program implementation. For example, he states:

The investigator and I discussed our students' needs carefully considering how we could use reading logs and metacognitive reflections to gain insights into students' thinking. In addition, we implemented literature circles/literacy circles to encourage cooperative learning, as well as to foster an academic language.

His member checking response is echoed throughout his written interviews, daily observations, and reflections. Multiple data sources, data collection methods, and theories to corroborate evidence for the validity of the research findings were used for triangulation.

The Intersection of Theory, Evidence-Based Practice, and Collaboration

As my analysis revealed in this exploratory study, such professional development initiatives may prove essential for administrators to consider. For example, administrators should consider employing literacy specialists at the middle level to help novice educators make the connection between theory, adolescent literacy constructs, and evidence-based instructional practices and the impact the learning environment has on teaching and learning. In addition, when designing professional development initiatives, a case can be made for apprenticing first-year teachers' pedagogical knowledge and instructional practice through intensive, long-term partnerships. Specifically, literacy specialists can be paired with novice educators, helping to successfully apprentice them into our field by modeling how we apprentice our middle school students into our various academic disciplines: designing curriculum that embodies theory and evidence-based research, implementing with fidelity evidence-based practice, and reflecting on the relationship of student learning and our practice.

The results of this exploratory study illustrate tremendous pedagogical knowledge and practical growth of the first-year teacher and the subsequent positive impact the co-delivered instruction had on middle level learners' achievement. Students' reading motivation and reading comprehension significantly increased during the 12-week professional development initiative (Farkas, 2015).

Results indicate that professional development resources and requirements could be directed to this kind of mentoring. Since teacher learning, like student learning, is situated, the results from this study illustrate the importance of not only considering how a teacher learns but also how a teacher

learns in a specific environment and the process that is embedded. Expert teachers gradually scaffold their students' learning through sustained focused instruction, guided practice, and collaborative activities where students are practicing skill application (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Therefore, if the goal is to help new teachers develop their ability to effectively implement evidence-based practices grounded in literacy, results from this study indicate that may be best accomplished by developing long-term, rigorous collaborations between novice teachers and literacy specialists, collaborations where new teachers are able to immediately practice application of newly acquired skills and use newly acquired skills in the very environments they will successfully teach in the future—all on their own.

Implications for Practice

Mentoring novice teachers has been shown to increase teacher efficacy (Ward, 2005); however, literacy specialists with university teaching experience may serve as ideal mentors and may actually "bridge the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice" (Coffey, 2012, p. 95) more effectively than assigned mentor teachers with no adult literacy training.

Recent research found that having emotional support as a novice teacher may be equally important as having pedagogical support (Desimone et al., 2014). Integrating a mentoring culture where intensive reflection, evaluation, and coaching are valued has been shown to be an effective way to apprentice novice teachers into the field of education (Couvier, Brandon, & Prasow, 2008). An important relationship was established between the first-year teacher and myself. We co-taught the ELA class and met daily to discuss and reflect on student learning, literacy and learning theory, and recent research in the field.

All proved to be valuable learning experiences for not only the first-year teacher but also for myself, which Coffey's (2012) research supports: Mentoring teachers can benefit greatly from being a mentor. I learned how to be a better mentor through my analysis of our daily reflections and interviews. One thing that was clear to me after analysis: the new teacher I worked with needed ample focused instruction, modeling, guided practice, and collaboration before he could be expected to effectively apprentice his own students into his academic discourse community. How co-teaching experiences and daily reflective and pedagogical conversations impact novice educators' pedagogical knowledge base,

teaching efficacy, and instructional practice should be researched further, using mixed-methods to assess change in novice educators' disciplinary literacy knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and teaching self-efficacy. In addition, the impact of having two content-area specialists working together daily should be the foci of future research.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study explored the experience of only one literacy specialist and one first-year teacher and should be replicated with multiple literacy specialist/first-year teacher pairings. Comparisons can then be drawn between teachers. In addition, student outcomes should be explored concurrently with implementation of the professional development initiative, as well as ways in which districts fund professional development and mentoring. How much does it actually cost to mandate intensive and data-driven mentoring programs? How does this compare to what districts spend on state-mandated professional development workshops? Could districts offer State Continuing Education Clock Hours (SCECHs) for serving as mentors? Release time? What models currently exist for mentoring as professional development?

Conclusion

One key to increased student achievement may be concurrently implementing a professional development initiative that includes intensive, long-term coaching of first-year teachers. In a society where educators are being dismissed as professionals, this study draws attention to the complexity of teaching and the important role literacy specialists may play in adolescents' lives and the lives of first-year teachers. The theoretical and pedagogical knowledge middle school teachers possess and subsequent instructional choices they make daily within complex learning environments may prove vital in effectively scaffolding adolescents' literacy development.

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Appendix A. Written Interview Questions and Daily Reflective Notes

First-Year Teacher

Semi-Structured Written Interview

Date:

Practice

Reflection

What reading strategies are you seeing students using?

Provide a specific example of how students are using reading strategies.

Describe one or more positive learning experiences from the last two weeks.

Describe one or more negative learning experiences you may have had in the last two weeks.

Describe the instructional practices you feel are most effective; please explain.

Describe the instructional practices you feel are least effective; please explain.

Describe the most effective ways students learn in your class.

If you were asked how to define literacy, what would you say?

Please note additional information/observations.

Revision Suggestions

Daily Reflections/Field Notes

Date:

Objective Observations

Subjective Insights

Appendix B. Member Checking with Responses

Dear Teacher:

Please read the following narrative and respond to the questions that follow.

Narrative: Environmental factors really concerned the first-year teacher: hot, damp classroom, students being called to the office, absences, dances, etc., and the subsequent impact on student success. The first-year was concerned about students being engaged in learning as evidenced by his continual insights and comments about students' on-task behavior, collaborative participation, reading motivation, and work completion. His comments also focused on students who were disengaged with learning due to off-task behaviors, lack of work quality, poor attitude, etc. His observations and insights often revolved around the teaching and learning framework, gradual release of responsibility, and how focused instruction, guided practice, collaboration and independent assessment were utilized to scaffold student learning. There was substantial evidence of the first-year teacher critically reflecting on practice and student learning. He also commented on the investigator's pedagogy and passion for literacy, oftentimes, in relation to goals for his own transforming pedagogical practice. During the course of the trimester, the first-year teacher exhibited a gradual transformation in practice and insight: There was a definite transition from insecurity in pedagogical choices to informed, confident pedagogical choices and the positive impact these choices had a student learning.

Please think about the following quote:

"Reflective teachers link theory to practice by using varied sources of information, examine their own practice and school policies in order to become better teachers, analyze problems from multiple perspectives, and use new evidence to reassess decisions. Reflective teachers can alter their teaching behavior and context to accomplish desirable goals" (Valli, 1997, p. 70).

With the above quote in mind, think back to your experiences and answer the following questions.

- 1) Does the narrative accurately capture your experiences in the class?
- 2) Please elaborate on your answer to question one with specific memories.
- 3) Do you feel that your instruction met evidence-based practice objectives? Please explain.
- 4) Do you feel that you met the needs of your students with your instruction? Please explain.
- 5) Do you feel that you could adequately address students' needs and curriculum requirements through evidence-based practice within the confines of the school district mandates? Please explain.
- 6) How would you describe your personal growth in regards to building relationships with students and the investigator?
- 7) Within a social justice and equality of learning lens, please describe how well you believe the curriculum adequately addressed the goals and purposes of schooling.