

Service Learning and Teacher Education in Reading

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Abstract

A model service learning course for elementary teaching credential candidates is described. Preservice teachers taking a required university reading methods course studied scientifically-based reading instruction and volunteered in Los Angeles Unified School District classrooms during reading instruction time. Service learning experiences were found to assist teaching credential candidates in developing strategies for teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills to elementary students. The Literacy Profile Project, reflective journaling, and direct benefits to school district personnel, supervising teachers, and elementary students are discussed.

Service Learning and Teacher Education in Reading

When concerned social scientists discuss what ails modern civilization, they sometimes focus on education and illiteracy, asserting that there is nothing more important in schooling than teaching children to read. Education professors like to take this line of thinking a step further, either secretly believing or boldly proclaiming that there is nothing more important in teacher preparation than teaching future teachers how to teach reading. We are certainly proud to participate in this noble endeavor, *but are we doing a good job?* Do education professors teach and promote effective, research-based instructional strategies in their university reading methods courses? Is university coursework in reading instruction meaningfully tied to real-world classroom teaching?

Reading Reform

In recent years, cascading federal initiatives and legislation, such as *Reading by 9*, *Reading First*, and *No Child Left Behind*, have focused national attention on reading and the need for all teachers to be able to teach reading well. The most influential feature of the last decade's reading reform movement is its emphasis on scientifically-based, particularly phonics-based, reading instruction (Gordon, 2005). Although phonics was *out* during the so-called Whole Language era, when literature-based and constructivist teaching methodologies were promoted

(Goodman, 1986), it is now back *in* (National Institute for Literacy, 2001). The clarion call educators hear is that we must deliver engaging phonics instruction (systematic, explicit lessons that vividly highlight letter-sound relationships, spelling pattern-sound relationships, and word blending) because such instruction has been scientifically proven to be effective for beginning and struggling readers (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Some education critics are asking whether professors in the nation's teachers' colleges are supporting or hindering reading reform efforts. These literacy watchdogs also caution that ivory tower lecture halls are probably poor venues for learning the practical strategies and nitty-gritty basics involved in teaching children to read. It is certainly likely that reading methods courses differ greatly from professor to professor, college to college, and state to state in terms of content, especially when one considers that college teaching is almost always protected by the principles and hallowed privileges of academic freedom. Certainly, many colleges have legendary, fabulous, inspiring teacher educators who do exemplary work preparing future teachers to employ research-based and up-to-date instructional methods. But not all education professors are current enough, experienced enough, and/or philosophically inclined to demonstrate and teach the new recommended literacy content.

The Reading First Teacher Education Network (RFTEN), a federally

sponsored initiative, has invited 32 participating colleges and universities to engage in multi-year self-study, faculty development, and course refinement in order to insure that reading methodology courses in teacher education are in alignment with nationally promoted research-based methods of reading instruction. This article describes an up-dated (and locally grant-sponsored) reading methods course for elementary teaching credential candidates at California State University, Northridge which incorporated crucial components of scientifically-based reading instruction with *service learning*, or real-world classroom-based tyro teaching. This synthesis of very current course content with engaging and practical school site service learning is offered as a model for other universities seeking to offer high quality, high value, and efficacious teacher education in reading methods.

Service Learning in Teacher Education

Service learning, with its goal to provide students with real-world learning experiences to complement textbook readings and classroom-based learning experiences, is perfectly suited to teacher education. Indeed, this learning strategy is not new in our field; most credentialing programs require teacher candidates to complete some form of student teaching, classically for a semester or two, at the end of their course sequence. It is commonsensical that teachers-in-training would benefit from spending time in actual classrooms observing and practice teaching

under the tutelage of outstanding master teachers, but not all programs link this experience to specific coursework or content domain pedagogy.

This required elementary teaching credential reading methods course at California State University, Northridge examined essential components of scientifically-based reading instruction, focusing on helping students develop strategies for teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills in elementary school classrooms. As part of the course, each student volunteered in a Los Angeles Unified School District elementary school classroom during reading and language arts time for a minimum of twenty hours. This service learning participation experience helped the credential candidates (preservice teachers) become aware of key aspects of teaching, especially phonemic awareness instruction, phonics instruction, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension skill development, crucial elements in an effective reading program described in the *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read* (National Reading Panel, 2000). Students were required to keep thoughtful observation and participation reflective journals to document their twenty hours of experience in the elementary classroom. In addition, each teaching credential candidate worked with an elementary grade student who was learning English, conducted a series of specified reading and language arts assessments, and wrote a literacy profile about the student. Each preservice

teacher also assisted the supervising teacher in the classroom during reading and language arts time, and taught a minimum of two formal reading lessons to the class.

A unique strength of the service learning experience was the Literacy Profile Project developed by the university students. Each teaching credential candidate was required to administer a battery of assessments to one elementary student and write up a comprehensive literacy profile about that student. The university students analyzed their elementary students' primary language proficiencies, levels of oral English language development (including vocabulary usage), phonemic awareness skills, phonics skills, grade level reading abilities, reading comprehension skills, developmental spelling level, words read per minute (reading fluency), and areas of strength. The credential candidates prepared detailed assessment reports and careful literacy profiles, highlighting areas of specific instructional need and recommendations for instruction.

The teaching credential candidates' journal entries vividly documented how the service learning component in this class complemented university course learning experiences and made reading instruction "come alive" for them. The real-world experience of participating in actual classrooms and working with real students (service learning) was universally appreciated as a crucially illuminating component in learning about reading instruction and literacy. The service learning

component was particularly helpful in exposing students to the rich multicultural, developmental, and linguistic diversity in public schools and allowed students to see how good teachers provide for individual and group differences in an effective and scientifically-based literacy program. Most importantly, journal entries revealed that the teaching credential candidates were able to refine their emerging professional competencies in phonemic awareness instruction, phonics instruction, vocabulary instruction, fluency instruction, and comprehension skill development through practice teaching, collegial interaction with the supervising teacher, and reflective writing.

This service learning experience provided an array of direct benefits to students, teachers, and administrators in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Local participating school principals, teachers, and school staff were able to feel linked to the local teacher education program at California State University, Northridge. Also, the supervising teachers' instructional/supervisory/assessment obligations to their classes and individual students were eased, to some extent, with the assistance of the credential student participating in their classroom for 20 hours. The elementary school supervising teachers were able to experience professional growth through the process of answering questions, guiding, and interacting in a collegial/mentoring capacity with the preservice teachers. In addition, the elementary students in the participating classrooms were afforded a

reduced student/adult ratio during the hours the university student participated in their classrooms. This allowed more one-on-one assistance and individualization. Finally, the elementary students learned new skills as a direct result of the formal lessons the teaching credential candidates taught.

Conclusion

Service learning is being promoted at our university and at many universities as an efficacious strategy to improve the quality of education for students and as a way to engage faculty, students, and community members in community-based teaching, learning, and inquiry. Reflective of this burgeoning effort, during the 2004-2005 academic year there were 1800 service learning courses scheduled in the California State University system with a reported 12% of all students participating in service learning (California State University, 2005, ¶ 1). The service learning course described in this article is offered as a successful model for other colleges and universities involved in teacher education, particularly for instructors of courses related to the methods and materials of reading instruction. The service learning component of this class was experienced as an extremely beneficial activity for the elementary credential candidates involved whose most crucial responsibility will be to teach their future students how to read.

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