

The Impact of a Teacher Preparation Literacy Course on Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Young Children how to Read

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Pre-service teachers enroll in teacher education programs accompanied by their varying perceptions of teaching and learning based on their various experiences at school and home. This study was conducted to examine the impact of an early literacy teacher preparation course on pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching emergent literacy. Data includes narrative responses taken from an open-ended survey question administered to 106 participants enrolled in a K-6 teacher preparation program at a southern public flagship university. A constant comparative analysis indicated that participants' perceptions were impacted by a variety of components discussed in the course as well as field experience.

Pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning have developed as a result of multiple experiences that one has encountered throughout their academic life span (Grisham, Lenski, & Wold, 2006). Their perceptions of how young children learn to read are a reflection of their literacy history, which is a reflection of their emergence into literacy (McLaughlin, 1994). Literacy histories reflect materials, important individuals, and events that enhanced one's literacy development (Roe & Vukelich, 1998).

As a twelve year student in a school setting, pre-service teachers have observed varies types of instruction given by many teachers; these many years of observation is also referred to as the apprenticeship of observation (Borg, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Holt-Reynolds & Knowles, 1991; Lortie, 1975; Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick, & Parker, 1989; and Zeichner, 1996). Pre-service teachers may believe they understand the complexity of teaching based on their many years of observing

practitioners implement instruction (Lortie, 1975). These many years of observations can build perceptions of teaching and learning (Berliner et al., 2005). A study conducted by Feimna-Nemser et al., 1989, concluded that pre-service teachers' post perceptions of having sufficient knowledge to teach based on their apprenticeships of observation were altered after completing a introductory teacher preparation course. They became cognizant of the fact that they were not proficient in knowing about subject matter, children's development, and pedagogy.

To assist pre-service teachers in understanding how to apply current teaching practices in today's classrooms, as well as observe the changes in teaching and learning, it is essential to implement field experiences in teacher education programs. Field experiences allow pre-service teachers to see content taught in teacher education courses applied in a classroom setting (Grisham et al., 2006; International Reading Association, 2003; NCATE Blue Ribbon

Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning, November, 2010; and Parault, 2005). During field experiences, pre-service teachers are allowed hands-on opportunities to work with the children and teacher in the classroom to apply the content they have learned in their course work to help them understand how to implement instruction and develop a greater understanding for how children learn (Dewey, 1938; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2007; and Gismondi & Samaras, 1998). A study conducted by Coughlin (2001), concluded that pre-service teachers initially saw the role of a teacher as a traditionalist with much emphasis on teacher centered instruction; after conducting the field experience they viewed the teacher as a facilitator of learning implementing student centered instruction.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine if the early literacy teacher preparation course impacted pre-service teachers' perceptions of how children learn to read. An open-ended survey question was administered to participants on the last day of the course. The research question guiding this research was: "How do pre-service teachers describe the impact of the early literacy course on their perceptions of emergent literacy?"

Subjects

The 106 participants in this study consisted of pre-service teachers enrolled in a 300-level early literacy methods course for elementary majors attending a flagship university in a southern state. The 300-level course is a six-hour credit course that meets bi-weekly for three hours per meeting for the duration of one 16-week semester. The course focuses on literacy instruction appropriate for K-3 students and emphasizes the five components of reading: Phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. During their enrollment in this course, pre-service

teachers conduct 12 hours of field experience. During the 12-hour field experience, the pre-service teachers observe a veteran teacher while taking detailed notes, implement a reading lesson, and work with children during literacy instruction. Participants conduct the field experience at local schools that differ by suburban/urban setting as well as the socioeconomic status of the students enrolled in the school placement.

Procedures

The open-ended survey question, "As you reflect on the information acquired in the course, what has made a significant impact on your perception of emergent literacy?," was administered to participants on the last day of the early literacy methods course. To ensure confidentiality, participants were asked to omit their names on the response sheet. Responses from the question were transcribed and analyzed for themes and conclusions.

Results

A total of 106 responses were collected from participants. The results from the question revealed that 96% of the participants believed the early literacy course impacted their perceptions. A small percentage of the participants (2%) commented on the complication of learning the information in the course but did not discuss whether or not the information received in the course impacted their perceptions. The remaining 2% of participants stated that none of the information given in the course impacted their perceptions. Code names were given to describe participants' responses. Participants' statements are identified by their course section (Section A-SA; Section B-SB; Section C-SC; Section D-SD; Section E-SE; Section F-SF).

A constant comparative analysis revealed that participants' perceptions of emergent literacy were impacted in the following ways: a) the significance of early literacy instruction

on future reading success; b) importance of the five components of reading to literacy success; c) knowing that literacy begins at birth; d) the importance of teacher knowledge to literacy success; e) learning through application: field experience; f) the importance of parental involvement to literacy success; g) course instructor's passion and knowledge of the subject; and h) the importance of differentiated instruction and assessment in the literacy classroom.

As participants reflected on the information received in the course, most of them believed the information they received on the significance of early literacy instruction on future reading success impacted their perceptions. Participants commented about children grasping the steps of literacy as soon as possible so they would not struggle with literacy skills as they transitioned between grades. They also mentioned the importance of early childhood interventions to help prevent reading difficulties in future grades. Many participants commented on understanding that children who struggle with reading in the lower elementary grades have a very difficult time understanding the world and won't be able to be successful in school.

SA2 stated-

I have learned that it is important to start early on literacy. Early childhood intervention is crucial to reading success. Reading is important for the success of each student.

The majority of participants revealed that learning about the five components of reading used to teach students how to read made the greatest impact on their perceptions. Participants revealed that phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction were necessary to help young readers grasp the concept of literacy. Participants commented on having a better understanding of how to teach these components in their classrooms, and how significant each component was to

literacy success. They became aware of how the components of reading impact each other to attain the specific reading goal, which is comprehension.

SB1 stated-

The thing that has made a significant impact on my perception of emergent literacy is comprehension. Emergent literacy is not just teaching the students how to correctly read words off of a page. It also involves teaching them skills they need to comprehend what they are reading. I will not be satisfied with my students just reading the words. I want to be able to understand what they are reading and connect it with real life experiences.

A few of the participants revealed that gaining knowledge about literacy beginning prior to students enrolling in school made an impact on their perceptions. Participants commented on understanding that children don't start learning about reading once they enroll in school; it begins as soon as they become a member of the world. Participants began to realize that children come to school with some knowledge of literacy based on their home environment; literacy is a process that continues as children enroll in school.

SC10 stated-

The biggest thing is that I have always been "scared" to teach kindergarten. I thought how in the world do you teach someone from the beginning. I learned that all the while since birth they have already been learning. Also I now know how to directly teach children how to decode words and what all else is involved.

Most of the participants commented on the impact teacher knowledge of emergent literacy has on helping students learn to read. Participants revealed that it is important for teachers to be able to explain to children the

important functions of literacy to help them grasp the concepts. They also revealed that there are many effective instructional methods to implement in the classroom to help all students be successful readers. Participants believed if they didn't possess adequate knowledge to teach their students, the students would not be successful with reading. Furthermore, they revealed that possessing adequate knowledge about literacy would help them target reading problems their future students possessed. As problems were targeted, they would be able to provide interventions to help their students.

SD7 stated-

I have a much deeper appreciation for elementary school teachers. Learning to read is one of the greatest concepts of education and it's a very involved task to teach that skill, not to mention a huge responsibility.

Some of the participants revealed that conducting field experience in elementary classrooms made an impact on their perceptions. The participants commented on learning the information received throughout the course being put into actual practice in an authentic classroom helped them understand the information better. The field experience also made participants aware of their desire to help children be successful. It also made participants aware of the different methods teachers employ to help children be successful in the classroom. Some participants revealed that they felt confident to teach literacy after observing experienced teachers in authentic classrooms.

SE5 stated-

Learning the strategies to teach; actually the personal experience in my teaching helped me understand what I needed; the help from my CI helped me with targeting students and figuring out their problems.

A few of the participants revealed that learning about the significance of parental involvement that helps students develop literacy skills made a impact on their perceptions. Participants commented on parents who read to their children aid them in literacy success. They commented that students who are not exposed to literature at home struggle with reading success. They realized that a lot of literacy development occurs at home.

SF1 stated-

What amazes me is what an impact the parent can have on the child's literacy before they begin school; every parent should be aware of this.

Some of the participants believed everything they learned and experienced in the course made an impact on their perceptions. Participants commented that they could not specifically select one discussion or event that impacted their perceptions. They revealed that everything acquired in the course helped them to understand emergent literacy and how to help children be successful readers.

SA3 stated-

Everything I have learned has made a significant impact on my perception of emergent literacy from learning to correctly pronounce letter sounds to teaching phonics, doing read alouds, and much more.

A few participants commented on their perceptions being impacted by the enthusiasm and expertise the course instructor displayed for the content. Participants commented on the competence of their instructors. They believed their perceptions and understanding of emergent literacy were significantly impacted their instructors.

SB9 stated-

Not only the information made an impact, but my instructor has too. She has totally changed my perception on emergent literacy in a positive way. Because of her, I now understand the importance of emergent literacy.

Some of the participants revealed that the implementation of differentiated instruction and assessment in the literacy classroom impacted their perceptions. Participants revealed that they were now aware that children in the same classroom are not on the same level; they commented that in order for children to be successful in the classroom, teachers must assess them and tailor instruction to meet their specific learning needs.

SC6 stated-

Reading Assessment-I did not realize that teachers have to deal with students who are not at the same level as everyone else; when I was growing up the students were placed in class according to their level.

Conclusions

The data results reveal a positive impact on most of the participants' perceptions of teaching young children how to read as a result of enrolling in the course. Based on some of the responses, participants compared the information learned in the course to their literacy histories (McLaughlin, 1994). According to a research study conducted by Roe and Vukelich (1998), pre-service teachers' were able to describe their literacy histories through models, materials, and epiphanies. Participants also commented on the impact of learning from their CI (Clinical Instructor) and applying strategies in the field classroom. This finding relates to the research of Manning and Payne (1993), who believed that as pre-service teachers continue to cultivate their knowledge in the field of teaching, their former experiences and knowledge mesh with learning that is currently

occurring. Participants were also able to see the complexity of teaching young children how to read. This finding correlates with the research that pre-service teachers are naïve to the pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge required to teach emergent literacy (Lortie, 1975).

In order for pre-service teachers to become effective classroom teachers capable of meeting the demands of a twenty-first century classroom, they must obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve student success. Teacher education programs must help them to understand the accelerated changes that are occurring in today's classrooms (NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning, November 2010). Pre-service teachers' literacy histories that contradict the goals of current research on teaching and learning must be addressed. Zeichner (1996), stated that teacher education programs must take the time to help pre-service teachers analyze and evaluate their personal histories of teaching and learning. Children's learning can be affected if effective teaching is not implemented.

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