

## TUTORING AS AN EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS: A TEACHER PREPARATION EDUCATOR'S REFLECTIONS

By

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### ABSTRACT

*The role of teacher educators as researcher-practitioner is viewed in this narrative reflection from the perspective of the author, the professor of record for a course in which an early field experience tutoring opportunity was embedded. The manuscript reports on the tutoring experiences through the lens of the author with instigations and collaboration with the preservice teachers. Limitations suggested, include the intentional omission of any experimentation but focuses on the lived experiences of the professor exploring this early field experience implementation. The findings are reflective and opines that a commitment to move a course into the authentic school setting should cause the author to reflect on the collaboration prior to any experimental investigation of the impact. It is believed that research may suggest how germane early field experiences are to future educators, but the voice of the instructor as the subject of the experience should be part of the body of literature as a phase of ongoing research of practice.*

*Keywords: Literacy Tutoring, Teacher Preparation, Best Practices in Literacy Instruction, Instructional Technology.*

### INTRODUCTION

Teacher preparation educators question early field experiences relevancy and whether the teacher preparation educator, a critical part of the experience, should be included in the body of literature as a phase of ongoing research of practice? Exploration of the role of Teacher Preparation Educators (TPE) as researcher-practitioners could provide observations and insights into the preparation of classroom teachers and demonstrate how teacher preparation educators could actively use current data to modify instruction and further build understanding. The early field experience and school-based tutoring project discussed present a unique opportunity for reflection and analysis to inform future research on the role of the TPE within early field experiences. Therefore, this work presents reflective analysis on a school-based tutoring experience that was part of an early field experience within a teacher preparation course through the lens of a TPE, who is the author, the early field

experience course instructor, and an elementary education faculty member with expertise in literacy development.

The seed of this project began when the president of a chapter of the 100 Black Men organization, located in the southeastern United States and affiliated with a regional state university, approached an associate superintendent of the local public-school system about establishing a school-based tutoring project to be facilitated by the regional state university and led by a faculty member with expertise in reading and literacy development. As a result of the chapter's interest, the initiative moved forward and represented a collaboration between a local elementary school, the resident chapter of the 100 Black Men of America, and the regional university where the author is an Assistant Professor. The 100 Black Men of America organization was founded in New York City, USA in 1963 as a group of forward-thinking, African American businessmen and industry leaders who convened to improve living

conditions and the quality of education for children and others within their communities. Their motto, "What they see is what they'll be", is reflective of this organization's commitment to positively impacting and changing the negative path of youth and families who have been disadvantaged and disenfranchised. With chapters dispersed in cities throughout the United States, 100 Black Men of America is the largest network of African American male mentors in the nation (Marbley, 2006).

For the author, the tutoring project design was twofold: (a) as a literacy service project and outreach to a nearby elementary school and (b) to offer an early field experience to education students at the freshman and sophomore levels. The early field experiences would not only support the at-risk tutees but would give teacher education majors hands-on experience, develop understanding of pedagogical theories learned in coursework at the university, expose students to best practices in literacy education, and connect theory with practice. Early clinical experiences allow participants a level of practice and depth typically not experienced until methods courses in the final year of college. The course section providing the tutoring experience focused on students who expressed an interest in early field experiences in literacy tutoring. The author/instructor is a former K-12 practitioner and literacy scholar who advocates the merits of practical field engagement on the development of preservice teachers. Two overall assumptions were brought to this project from inception; first, as an educator and scholar, the author believes it is critical that every P-12 student have an effective teacher. Second, the author assumes that, collectively, educators and humanitarians – whether in a P-12 setting or higher education – are obligated to combine forces with each other and the larger community to ensure effective teachers occupy every classroom. With these two overarching assumptions, reflective analysis was conducted on the experiences of preservice teachers working on a tutoring project conducted within a public-school setting from beginning to end during a designated semester in which university students worked with third graders in a selected public school as part of the course's requirements. Note that the author uses several terms

interchangeably when referring to individuals serving as tutors. Terms include preservice teachers, teacher education majors, and teacher candidates.

As the professor of record for the course and project director, the author was aware of several challenges in developing the tutoring project to benefit both tutors and tutees. The first challenge was the inexperience of preservice teachers specific to the planning and implementation of meaningful instruction. This lack of instructional experience exists, in part, due to the purposeful early scheduling of this course (pre-official admittance into the teacher education program), and prior to taking courses focused on curriculum and instruction scheduled later in the college's course progression. The goal was for preservice teachers to gain authentic practice in planning and implementation of instruction and was conceptualized as a rationale for providing early tutoring experiences. The tutoring experience served as a valuable opportunity for preservice teachers to engage in an elementary classroom environment. Therefore, the author was confident in the merit of ideals associated with the roles of preservice teachers: (a) students become more adept at using instructional resources, (b) students become more skillful in preparing instructional materials, and (c) students develop pedagogical knowledge concerning how young students respond to literacy instruction. Consequently, these three ideals were important to consider when planning instruction for tutoring and were based on the instructor's belief that such skills would develop over time through guided experiences. To foster the development of these skills and dispositions, the instructor modeled appropriate planning and instructional delivery techniques throughout the semester.

### ***Significance for Professional Practice***

The preparation of teachers has traditionally been an expectation for Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) to achieve through a continuous improvement model, national standards, and implementation of research-based foci. However, the exploration of the practice and the presentation of targeted implementation efforts by teacher educators through an initiative that combines resources and partnerships between community

organizations, public school partnerships, and participation with EPP should also be a place for reflection on the practice by the participants.

## 1. Literature Review

The National Reading Panel (NRP), a 14-member committee convened by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the request of Congress, was commissioned in 1997 to review existing research regarding the best practices for teaching reading. In their report, the panel identified five essential components, dubbed as the “five pillars”, deemed foundational to effective reading instruction; further when properly utilized, aid students in ongoing reading development. The five components are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). In response to the NRP report, Allington (2005) stated that although the report was on target with components of effective literacy instruction, the report was void of other research components important to reading instruction. Allington (2005) proposed five additional pillars of reading instruction: (1) classroom organization; (2) matching pupils and texts; (3) access to interesting texts, choice, and collaboration; (4) writing and reading; (5) expert tutoring (p. 3).

According to Allington (2005) pillar number five, expert tutoring, is typically delivered by trained tutors; namely, teachers, reading specialists, and other certified individuals involved in tutoring delivery. Similarly, Gordan (2009) referenced the classroom teacher as the expert tutor most effective for students, as he/she not only has the necessary training but also has developed relationships with the students. Given his recommendation, Allington (2013) indicated that too frequently, the lowest performing students typically receive reading intervention instruction from paraprofessionals not trained and least developed as experts. Allington found this intervention mismatch between the paraprofessional and struggling reader to be somewhat counterproductive and unfortunate, as paraprofessionals are usually the least expert personnel working with students in schools. In fact, Gordan's (2009) research on “master tutors” (p. 442) reveals that they “... see

themselves more as 'learning detectives', coaches, and mentors rather than 'homework helpers' or 'test-prep specialist’” (p. 442).

In general, the research on tutoring documents several intervention programs that have established the worth of both one-on-one and small group tutoring and its ability to positively impact achievement levels of developing readers at grades one, two, and three (Nelson-Royes, 2013). The author uses the term developing reader to include students commonly labeled as non-readers, at-risk readers, and struggling readers. In the sections that follows, the author summarizes tutoring programs for developing readers, specifically reading recovery (Pinnell, Lyon, Deford, Bryle, & Seltzer, 1994), Success for All (Slavin et al., 1996), Early Steps (Santa & Hoiem, 1991), and Howard Street (Morris, 1999). Much of this information was originally reviewed and compiled by Morris and Slavin (2003).

### 1.1 Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery was developed in New Zealand by Marie Clay (1985) and is a concentrated, temporary intervention for students identified as the lowest-achieving in first grade. Once identified, these students meet one-on-one with a teacher trained in the recovery method for 30 minutes daily over a period of 12 to 20 weeks (60 to 80 tutoring lessons) consisting of nine parts: (a) reading familiar books (1-2), (b) rereading the book from the previous day, (c) letter identification work, (d) working with breaking words into parts, (e) hearing and recording sounds in words, (f) sentence writing, (g) cutting up a story and then reconstructing it, (h) the introduction of a new book, and (i) reading of a new book (Clay, 2005).

At the conclusion of the 60 to 80 tutoring lessons, or earlier if the student reaches the median reading mastery levels of classroom peers, Reading Recovery services conclude for that student. At that point, the student receives the designation of discontinued; thus, considered recovered as the program title, Reading Recovery, implies. If the student does not reach the median reading mastery levels of classroom peers, services are still concluded. In this case however, the student receives the designation of not discontinued. Subsequently, students designated as not discontinued are typically referred for special education

evaluations because, at this stage of non-success there is a greater likelihood of the student having an actual learning disability. The Reading Recovery program's philosophy and design rule out the idea that reading and writing difficulties are solely due to the lack of exposure to instruction.

The goal of Reading Recovery intervention is to decrease the number of students who experience difficulties in reading, again starting in first grade (Morris, Tyner, & Perney, 2000). Research on the program reports that 75% of students receiving the intervention reached grade-level both in reading and writing (D'Agostino & Harney, 2015; Deford, Pinnell, Lyons, & Young, 1988; Pinnell, et al., 1994). Pinnell (1989) who conducted a study that reflected the success of the Reading Recovery method, revealed that students who received these services scored significantly better on diagnostic measures at the end of first grade as compared to students in control groups. Additionally, in a follow-up study on Reading Recovery implementation, Pinnell (1989) found that students in second and third grades who received Reading Recovery services showed sustained superior results as compared to students in control groups.

## **1.2 Success for All**

Success for All is a literacy reform program chiefly serving high-poverty schools, initially instituted in Maryland and Pennsylvania (Pikulski, 1994) and part of the Success for All Foundation (Mathematica Policy Research & What Works Clearinghouse, 2017). Today the program operates in schools across the USA. In fact, "For 30 years Success for All has worked directly with educators in thousands of schools in disadvantaged communities to help their students achieve reading levels at or above the norm" (para. 3). As a foundation, Success for All uses research-based best practices in the curriculum, lesson implementation, professional development, family support, and tutoring services to ensure, as the program name suggests, success for students in reading achievement (Slavin & Madden, 2001). Moreover, while this program strongly focuses on literacy, it also includes other areas of school curriculum. Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2003) conducted research on the positive impact of Success for All on reading development. Borman et al. (2003) identified

41 experimental-control research studies which revealed the positive effects and claims of the Success for All program.

Success for All is typically a whole school implementation process (Like Reading Recovery, Success for All) utilizes individual tutoring sessions to instruct students who have been assessed at below average in reading. However, the main component focuses on grouped instruction, which includes grouping students across grade levels. Specifically, students meet in heterogeneous groups daily for 90 minutes of reading instruction. They are grouped and regrouped, as needed, based on their instructional reading levels. This type of across grade level, heterogeneous grouping, referred to as the Joplin Plan (Gutiérrez & Slavin, 1992; Slavin, 1987), has proven to be beneficial in increasing reading achievement. A unique feature of the Joplin Plan requires teachers to assess reading proficiencies of students every 6-8 weeks. Each group is taught by a classroom teacher as well as specialists in the school. Teacher assistants are also trained and used as tutors for higher functioning students. As students make gains in their reading attainment, they are regrouped into higher level reading groups.

Success for All incorporates one-on-one 20-minute tutoring sessions before or after heterogeneous group instruction. The focus of an individual tutoring session involves more intense skill instruction on the same topic introduced during group instruction (Pikulski, 1994; Slavin, 1987).

## **1.3 Early Steps**

Early Steps (ES) is still another reading tutorial program with features similar to Reading Recovery (Santa & Hoiem, 1999). This program emphasizes the early identification of at-risk readers, one-on-one daily tutoring, and ongoing teacher training (Morris, et al., 2000). These components, intended to serve as the foundation for effective tutoring strategies, represent trademark features of ES. This differs from Reading Recovery in that it focuses on 30 minutes of organized word study as a key part of the tutoring process. Specific to word study, the design of explicit instruction – related to letter sounds and spelling patterns (orthographic patterns) – is essential to this aspect of lesson planning. One quarter of daily, one-on-one tutoring sessions focus on

literacy learning through word study (Morris, et al., 2000). Finally, in the ES model, all first-grade teachers participate in twelve training sessions focused on systematic phonics instruction, over the school year. The training sessions provide a framework that allows teachers to tutor at-risk readers under close supervision of an ES trainer.

Morris et. al. (2000) conducted a study in which they examined the effectiveness of the ES program. In the study, 43 at-risk readers (1<sup>st</sup> grade) received individual tutoring instruction monitored by an ES trainer. Study results revealed the students who received ES tutoring in phonics instruction outperformed the students in the control group. This outcome substantiated Early Steps' positive impact on at-risk readers (Morris et. al., 2000). In another study, Santa and Hoiem (1999) conducted research on a group of at-risk readers who received ES tutoring in a school district in Montana. In contrast, students in the control group spent time engaging in a type of self-selected reading process which did 30 minutes of systematic word study instruction monitored by a qualified tutor. Study findings demonstrated that students receiving ES tutoring significantly outperformed students in control groups that did not receive the same kind of tutoring. Overall, results revealed tutoring efforts were most beneficial for students with the most severe reading challenges at the beginning of first grade. Specifically, ES tutees outperformed control groups on several reading and spelling measures assessed at the end of first grade.

#### **1.4 Howard Street**

The Howard Street (HS) tutoring program (Morris, 1999) began as a volunteer-based tutoring program in low-socioeconomic neighborhoods in Chicago. This program differs from previously discussed tutoring programs in two distinct ways. First, HS is specifically designed to impact the reading development of students beginning in the second and third grades in contrast to the focus on first graders as in previous programs. Morris, Shaw, and Perney (1990) identified readiness levels as a factor to justify tutoring initiatives after first grade. According to Morris et al. (1990), attempts to tutor first graders is problematic because many may be functioning on a kindergarten reading level and lack fine motor skills, alphabetic knowledge, and

understanding of book-orientation. According to Morris et al. (1990) it is the absence of readiness for conventional instruction, possibly due to delays in maturation levels, that continue to challenge volunteer tutors and limit student progression rates. The second distinction relates to the program's use of volunteers as tutors, not certified teachers. Volunteer tutors consist of parents, college students, business employees, grandparents, etc., who provide one-on-one tutoring utilizing a lesson scripted by the teacher. Tutoring sessions last approximately one hour and consist of the following components:

- *Guided Reading at the Student's Instructional Level (15-20 minutes)*: The tutor supports the child as they read stories aloud .
- *Word Study (10-12 minutes)*: Word study activities allow for the engagement of skills such as sorting, reading, and exploring spelling patterns.
- *Writing (15 minutes)*: Students engage in writing short stories using the writing process of drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.
- *Easy Contextual Reading (10-15 minutes)*: This reading is done by the student. Such reading may involve a new book selection or the rereading of a selection. Time spent reading at this stage of tutoring builds the student's sight vocabulary, fortifies fluency, and helps to develop reading interest.
- *Reading to the Child (5-10 minutes)*. For modeling purposes, tutoring lessons end with the tutor reading to the student. Typical selections might be a fairy tale, a fable, a short picture book, or a chapter from a longer book (Morris, 2006).

To ensure that lessons are implemented correctly by tutors, a reading specialist or supervisor is available during tutoring sessions to monitor the tutoring process. As the supervisor monitors the quality engagement, they can assist the tutor/volunteers as needed. The supervisor is also available to model techniques and provide guidance for tutors. Observations made during tutoring helps the supervisor make informed decisions in the design of subsequent lessons.

Lastly, according to a study conducted by Morris et al.

(1990) which focused on volunteer tutors, students tutored with the HS model outperformed comparison groups in both reading and spelling. This study had as its focus the effectiveness of using community volunteers as tutors for at-risk readers opposed to 'professionally trained' tutors (Morris & Slavin, 2003; Wasik, 1998; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). In addition to effectiveness, the HS tutoring model represents a cost-efficient benefit of using volunteers as tutors.

## 2. Methodology

While this project is not a formally planned research study, it served as an informal approach to action research by studying the project as it took place and afterwards. Similarly, the author did not use formally planned data collection methods, but rather, made observations and assessments throughout the course of the semester and during post tutoring debriefing sessions. The author's analysis of the project is based on ongoing observations, communications with tutors, information from end of semester tutor surveys, and the author's own experience as an educator using research-based best practices. Furthermore, because this project was an adaptation to a university course in teacher education, it is considered part of the curriculum and did not involve specific issues related to trustworthiness that are typically part of formal research.

### 2.1 Proposed Limitations

The use of personal narrative and reflective professional constructivist collaborations between author and tutors were semi-structured through office meeting communications, activity discussions, goals, and target activities. The author did not critique or measure the process or moderate activities; the implementation is solely based upon the academic and practical experiences of teaching reading by the author. The design was not experimental nor can any measurable outcomes or generalizations of effects be suggested by the researchers. Therefore, any perceived limitations concerning the tutoring project could include addressing ways to improve the scope and implementation of this project going forward with ongoing practice and additional research.

### 2.2 Course Setting/Context for Tutoring

The elementary school selected for this initiative was a Title I school serving about 350 students in grades K-5 during the

2016-2017 school year. The Title I school had a 92% poverty rate, and all students received free and/or reduced meals. The school has a 12:1 teacher/student ratio. Demographics based on race and ethnicity revealed that the student population consisted of approximately 90% African American, 5% multiracial, and 3% Hispanic students (School Digger, 2017). Rankings are reflective of test score results supplied by NC state department of education and are reflective of rankings as a value-based category indicated by the number of stars assigned to each school. Schools in the top 10% of the ranking receive five stars; schools in the 20-30% ranking receive four stars; schools in the 50-70% ranking receive three stars; those in the 30-50% ranking receive two stars; and, lastly, schools in the 10-30% ranking receive one star, and 0-10% receive zero stars. The school selected for this tutoring initiative had a School Digger ranking of 1,111 out of 1,400 in North Carolina, or in the 0-10% category rating one star.

This school is near the university attended by the preservice teachers participating in this initiative. Tutors reported to the elementary school during class time since the project correlated with this class, enabling a quick return to campus for regular subsequent university classes. As a final note, this school was selected based on the recommendation and wishes of the president of the 100 Black Men's organization, who had also attended the school as a child. In addition, the organization funded needed resources for tutoring.

### 2.3 Selection Process for Preservice Teachers Participating as Tutors

To provide this early field experience opportunity for teacher education students, tutoring was embedded into only one of the five course sections offered. Viable candidates were chosen to serve for the tutoring initiative by professional advisors within the university. Information about this early field experience opportunity was posted on the university's website, and flyers were posted in common areas on campus. Students who expressed an interest met with the author/professor of record for the course. Course requirements and expectations were shared during meetings, and the author articulated specific expectations of this early field experience opportunity with each

potential tutor to be transparent about the commitment involved and intended benefits expected to result from the tutoring experience. The author communicated to each potential tutor that the course would provide a context where expectations outlined in the College of Education's Conceptual Framework could be practiced and modeled in an authentic public-school setting. Ultimately, candidates agreed to commit to expectations to be approved to take the course and participate in the tutoring project. Given the parameters, the initial pool of selected tutors totaled 10. However, as the project progressed, several reneged and dropped out. Four of the original 10 selected completed the project.

## **2.4 Selection Process for Elementary Students/Tutees (Third Graders)**

The principal of the selected elementary school targeted the third grade as the pool to identify tutees for the initiative. Students identified by third grade teachers for tutoring had been evaluated as being at-risk for reading failure, because they were at least one grade level behind according to literacy metrics administered at the end of second grade and/or beginning of third grade. A total of 10 students were selected from the three third grade classrooms collectively. All 10 participants were African American, with 80% (eight males) and 20% (two females). Only one student was enrolled in an EC (Exceptional Children's) program. This student was diagnosed as having a learning disability and was required to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as mandated by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Lastly, because the tutoring project was incorporated into the third-grade literacy block (protected time), parental approval was not required for selection of their children as participants for this initiative.

## **3. Pre-Project Orientation Sessions**

Two distinctive pre-project orientations were necessary to prepare tutors for actual implementation of the tutoring project with third grade tutees: (a) the tutor orientation sessions and (b) orientation sessions for tutees.

Prior to the implementation of the tutoring initiative, identified tutors participated in the orientation process where school routines, protocols, and procedures were

addressed by the school's principal. After the initial meeting with the principal, a school tour followed; tutors met faculty and staff and visited the designated classroom tutoring site. Having an assigned classroom was an unforeseen perk of the initiative, because it would serve as a dedicated space for the project. The classroom provision demonstrated the principal's prior planning, commitment, and support of this effort and the principal's proactive attempts to minimize distractions and create an optimal learning environment. Overall, this orientation process proved beneficial to the tutors as many had not been in an elementary school setting since they were grade school students, therefore, associations with elementary school culture were purely based on their early school experiences. As university students planning to be teachers, the tutors learned current school policies, rules, regulations, school culture, and other protocols that school faculty and staff would be expected to know and enforce.

Throughout the orientation, tutors were introduced to school personnel related to the initiative: the administrative staff, the curriculum coach, all third-grade teachers, and participating teacher assistants. In addition, the author (in her role as professor) arranged for observations of all three third-grade classrooms where tutees would be selected. At this point, third grade tutees had not been identified. The purpose of these observations was to see students in the natural learning environment. Classroom visitations culminated in a debriefing session with tutors, facilitated by the author, to discuss observations. Tutors expressed reactions concerning a range of positive and negative behaviors and dispositions exhibited by the third graders. The purpose of initial classroom visits was to observe students; however, tutors also took note of how classrooms were organized and how teachers engaged students during instruction. As reported by tutors, some teachers appeared to be more effective in their instructional efforts and delivery than others. For those teachers who were observed as being less effective, tutors noted several negative behaviors among several students. Such behaviors included lack of engagement, distracting or interfering actions, and displays of disrespect for adults. Following the discussion of the observations, efforts shifted to the professor theorizing a possible rationale for

behaviors, followed by tutors engaging in brainstorming possible interventions to mitigate behaviors. This process was especially valuable as a preemptive strategy in the context of the upcoming tutoring sessions. Empowering tutors to make personal observations and use critical thinking skills was the goal of pre-project debriefing sessions; tutors demonstrated their ability to problem solve and take on the responsibility of a tutor/teacher. As such, these tutors revealed an emerging sense of autonomy in relation to this role.

### **3.1 Tutee Orientation Sessions**

After tutees were identified for this initiative and prior to the actual implementation of tutoring instruction, several preliminary activities occurred that were deemed essential to the efficiency and success of the tutoring experience. Activities included classroom setup, establishing rules, tutor/tutee introductions, icebreakers, completion of reading interest inventories, and the planning and implementation of a reading diagnostic assessment of all tutees.

The first meeting with tutees was a whole group meeting in the classroom assigned to the initiative. Tutees were welcomed by tutors. Bulletin boards were created where tutors and tutees painted their hands with their favorite colors and pasted a handprint on the bulletin board. A read aloud of the book *Chrysanthemum* was jointly read by tutees followed by a related activity focused on students' names. Tutees also completed a reading interest inventory. The information from this inventory was used by tutors as they created subsequent activities for tutees. Preliminaries ended with a literacy readiness diagnostic assessment. To assess literacy readiness levels, the iReady adaptive diagnostic was utilized. i-Ready is a commercial software program that is aligned with K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading and mathematics. The important features of iReady are student instruction, performance diagnostics and progress reports.

Finally, tutors were trained in the proper use and management of the iReady reading program which included the diagnostic assessment. An associate of iReady provided the initial training. This program was suggested by the Associate Superintendent of the school

system in an earlier meeting as it was utilized in other schools within the district. An iReady site license was purchased by the 100 Black Men organization that sponsored the tutoring initiative. The adaptive diagnostic assessment and instruction components were used by tutors, while classroom teachers maintained responsibility for ensuring that students met the iReady program's on-line technology instruction requirements.

A major requirement of tutors was the preparation of instructional materials which were utilized for each lesson meeting with tutees. Because many of the students engaging in this early field experience (tutoring initiative) were sophomore students (and a few freshmen), they had little to no experience with lesson planning and literacy instruction. This was a benefit of using the iReady product as an assessment tool, because it incorporated an adaptive diagnostic and teacher-led instruction components as lesson instruction was generated following the completion of the adaptive diagnostic. Upon completion of the online adaptive diagnostic, tutors could access reports which provided information on students' literacy instructional strengths and challenges. Such reports were then used by novice tutors in the creation of literacy instruction to positively impact tutees.

### **4. Tutoring in Action**

Tutoring sessions occurred on Tuesdays and Thursdays of each week, each session lasting one hour and 15 minutes, resulting in a total of 150 minutes across a 16-week semester. These sessions coincided with the scheduled literacy block of time for grade three. Tutees were pulled out of their regular classes. Each session was comprised of four equally important components: (a) whole group meetings for tutors and tutees (W - whole group, routines, pre-tutoring welcome, gathering with all tutors and tutees), (b) on-task tutoring (O - one-on-one and/or small group tutoring), (c) observations and outcomes (O - observations, outcomes reflected in end-of-tutoring session closing), and (d) time with tutors and professor (T - time spent in debriefing sessions including all tutors and the professor). Thus, the acronym: WOOT.

Information from interest inventories was helpful for tutors in getting to know tutees individually and to build classroom

community. Information from reading interest inventories served as a means of tailoring instruction to compliment student preferences.

The author's process for generating project related information was a work in progress, as the author was involved not only in observing tutoring sessions but was instrumental in facilitating tutor's understanding of pedagogical practices, instructional strategies, content, community building/relationships based on real-time tutoring practices. The author's ability to facilitate, observe, and interact during the project provided field-generated data that was analyzed and used to enhance the tutors' learning experiences. This process also enhanced the author's understanding of the project's potential and future use. Below are findings that emerged from analyses and evaluation of this cohort and project.

- Beginning each tutoring session with a whole group meeting provided an opportunity for tutors to work collaboratively with each other to plan and then implement instruction. This practice enabled tutors to have authentic classroom experiences. Whole group meetings were also opportunities to welcome tutees, set the day's agenda, review and/or introduce content, set expectations for the day, inform tutees of any schedule changes, etc. One activity that occurred during each whole group meeting was a review of one of the 12 powerful words identified by educational consultant Larry I. Bell (2005). Bell has identified 12 words that commonly cause students difficulty when encountering them. Relative to this tutoring project, the focus on one powerful word during each whole group meeting occurred as a supplement to powerful word instruction already occurring in the regular classroom (grades 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup>) and in special classes.
- Small group or one-on-one tutoring instruction followed the whole group meeting. The iReady diagnostic pretest had been administered prior to implementation of this tutoring project. It identified competency levels for each tutee in five areas: (1) phonemic awareness; (2) phonics; (3) vocabulary/word study; (4) fluency; (5) comprehension.

Of the five skill areas, the author selected only two skills, phonics and word study, as the focus of this initiative, for optimal effectiveness. It was thought that by focusing on these areas during tutoring sessions, students would develop their understanding of phonics and build their vocabulary knowledge, thereby complementing instruction received in the classroom. Concentrated efforts of tutors emphasized working with students on foundational skills in conjunction with the fluency and comprehension instruction they were receiving in their regular classroom settings. Finally, it is worthwhile noting that because all tutees had developed phonemic awareness based on their iReady assessment results, no tutoring instruction was required in this area. Each tutoring session lasted about 45 minutes.

- Tutoring sessions for tutees ended with whole group debriefing time. This was a time for tutors to compliment tutees publicly for their work ethic and habits, both social and/or academic, which may have contributed to academic success. This was also a chance for tutors to encourage those tutees not as successful due to inappropriate behaviors. This debriefing lasted about five minutes.
- The overall tutoring session ended with tutor debriefing conducted by the professor.

## 5. Presentation and Analysis of Findings

The findings that follow are reported as they relate to the author's observations, students' journal entries, regular debriefing sessions, and end-of-project assessments. As a reminder, the author conceptualized this study based on the mission standards and goals articulated by the university's College of Education. These standards and goals incorporate concepts and characteristics to align or gauge study findings specific to the outcomes exhibited by participating tutors. Such concepts and characteristics include: (a) school community collaboration, (b) leadership qualities, (c) diversity and inclusion, (d) literacy development, and (e) teaching for possibilities of transformation (tutors and tutees). Overall, study findings supported the stated concepts and characterized as significant and meaningful to the goals of early field experience. The author submits that findings are relevant

to practitioners of literacy, in general, and could also serve as a basis for ongoing studies specific to the value and effectiveness of early field experiences for preservice teachers.

## **5.1 Author's Observations**

The most salient observations that emerged during this project cover the following areas: (a) preservice teachers' initial conceptualizations of third grader reading skills and development; (b) shifts in preservice teachers' conceptualizations of third grade level reading skills and development; (d) high levels of engagement between tutors and tutees; and (e) increased ownership of instructional planning, decision making, and leadership of the debriefing sessions.

Preservice teachers entered this early field experience opportunity with naive and preconceived notions of third graders' literacy knowledge and reading comprehension levels. The deep literacy struggles exhibited by the project's tutees were inconceivable by the preservice teachers, as they lacked a substantive understanding of the teacher's role in designing appropriately individualized instruction. The early field experience opportunity served as a pivotal opening in which they could engage in the various tasks and challenges they will face as future teachers of diverse learners. Prior knowledge of early readers and literacy development was based on the preservice teachers' own personal experiences as high functioning readers in third grade and none of the tutors acknowledged experiencing such discrepant reading levels in their own elementary experiences. Tutors' philosophies of teaching were based on perceptions of their own early reading experiences as being successful; not requiring tutoring or other forms of remediation. As professor and tutoring project leader, the author suspects that individuals within this group were hesitant to reveal any prior reading struggles although such structures would be quite realistic among most diverse groupings of college students. Because of this project, the tutors' understandings of developmentally diverse reading abilities among the third-grade tutees expanded their general understanding of reading development. In turn, their focus shifted to reflect a transition from traditional teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Due to

these early shifts in understanding, the author observed evidence of the preservice teachers' (sophomores) eagerness to engage with tutees, thus revealing a positive attitude through this real-world teaching experience.

As the project progressed, the author observed tutors in action with their tutees and intervened where needed to facilitate the tutoring process and provide the tutors and tutees with appropriate support. For example, the author observed a tutor teaching the letter sounds and deemed it necessary to intervene to ensure more appropriate instruction of the letter sound to promote learning. On the other hand, the author observed tutoring sessions in which a tutor was particularly effective in facilitating the tutees literacy development. To illustrate this point, the author observed a tutor successfully transform a worksheet into a hands-on, kinesthetic activity to accommodate a student's learning needs. Such observations continued throughout the semester. Other significant observations involved interactions among tutors as a peer group in this project. For the most part, these preservice teachers worked in cooperation. However, midway through the semester, the author witnessed two tutors engaged in a dispute over providing rewards (candy) to tutees for positive work efforts. One tutor felt rewards were justified and not because students' efforts are relative and can be weakened through external reward systems.

By the end of the project, it was observed and discussed that these preservice teachers did more independent planning and decision making specific to working with tutees. Lastly, the author noted that midway through the semester, the tutors took ownership of debriefing sessions that were conducted by the author at the beginning of tutoring project.

## **5.2 Journal Entries**

One important practice considered important to tutors' growth as future teachers will be the ability to reflect upon their teaching and learning experiences. In fact, standard five of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, (1998) (Standard 5 p. 7) specifically documents and specifies that teachers reflect on their practice (p. 7). In terms of student learning, standard 5 also advises that "Teachers think systematically and critically about student

learning in their classrooms and schools: why learning happens and what can be done to improve achievement” (North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, 1998, p. 7). Thus, journal writing was employed as a pedagogical practice and approach to engage preservice teachers in reflection on the situations that emerged during the tutoring sessions. Along with free-writing, preservice teachers were also assigned journal writing topics which had been pre-identified by the professor as well as topics related to situations that emerged unexpectedly during the tutoring experience. The professor collected, read, and provided feedback to each preservice teacher related to each journal entry. The decision to require journaling was also helpful to the professor in identifying issues that needed to be emphasized during subsequent debriefing sessions. Using journal writing in this early field experience project proved to be beneficial as it created opportunities for preservice teachers to become more introspective concerning their literacy learning and their pedagogical practices as tutors and future classroom teachers. As tutors, this authentic engagement with tutees provides the ground for self-reflection essential considered for professional growth.

Across the various journal entries, the author identified the following three significant themes: (a) Hasty first impressions of young students (tutees); (b) the dynamically changing and challenging nature of the teaching and learning experience; and (c) the importance of meeting the individual need of students in the classroom. As previously noted, preservice teachers initially engaged in this project with obvious naivety about third grade students' reading abilities and behaviors. Consequently, most of them entered the project experience with expectations and prejudgments of tutees that were often unfounded. The following journal entry validates this point.

...I saw a little guy who I thought was definitely not a 'good student.' I remember thinking "oh gosh, he's a handful. Then I remember picking him to be in my group. I couldn't have made a better choice. I not only was able to help him improve in the reading areas, but he also taught me so much, in such a short span of time...

The second theme, the dynamically changing and challenging nature of the teaching and learning experience, has to do with recognizing that they are dealing with very young human beings. This realization, by itself underscores the understanding that education is an organic and developmental process; an exercise that cannot be confined to concrete notions of predictability and performance. Furthermore, the classroom environment itself represents a community of people in which the one size fits all approach is not always effective, especially taking into consideration, not only academics struggles, but also factors occurring beyond the classroom setting of a social and emotional nature. The following journal entry illustrates one preservice teacher's experience with the dynamic nature of teaching.

“From my field experience I learned that being a teacher is a job that continues in and out of the classroom. It's a trial and error profession. You have to keep trying different things until you find out what works. It may be one thing or a combination of things. A classroom is diverse, and you have to stay on top by reflecting on each day as it passes”.

All comments making up the third theme, the importance of meeting the individual needs of students in the classroom, represents an important by-product of this early field experience opportunity for preservice teachers. That is, it was the hope of this project that preservice teachers would gain an overall understanding about how students learn especially as it relates to building their literacy and pedagogical knowledge. The following journal entry sums up a light bulb moment that one preservice teacher had following an interaction with her tutee.

On the first lesson, I only had Antonio (pseudonym) and we had a monster game with our /sh/, /wh/, /ch/, and /th/ sounds. I realized that I was a hands-on learner but so was he. Antonio put each slice of pizza in the correct monster's mouth and learned the sounds quickly because of the activity being interesting. I also learned that Antonio has a speech impediment and I knew that I would have a challenge ahead.

### 5.3 Debriefing Sessions

The need for post-tutoring debriefing sessions was

necessary to analyze the events experienced during each tutoring session. Daily debriefing sessions were beneficial in increasing preservice teachers' basic understandings of the instruction they were providing. Debriefing sessions were necessary because preservice teachers/tutors had little experience in literacy teaching, as none had taken any courses related to methods of teaching reading. Debriefing sessions served as professional development time for preservice teachers with the aim of building their literacy knowledge, instructional delivery skills, and teacher presence. In addition, the author decided to incorporate sessions to provide feedback and a platform where preservice teachers could openly share sensitive information. In turn, they could use critical feedback to reflect on personal and professional growth. Preservice teachers reported debriefing opportunities were invaluable because they recognized the need for advanced knowledge in literacy instruction. Furthermore, debriefing sessions provided preservice teachers a structure where they could share "glows and grows", meaning, they could share successes and ideas associated with learning development for both tutors and tutees. This was also when discussion of teaching philosophies took place. Having the professor present to facilitate oppositional beliefs proved to be beneficial to the overall process.

The author noted that issues routinely discussed during debriefing sessions fell under the category the author termed as maximizing instructional time. Both directly and indirectly, these issues related to the quality and efficiency of good teaching methods. Within the category of maximizing instructional time, two specific topics emerged: (a) classroom management (b) individualizing instructional activities/maximizing instructional time.

### *5.3.1 Classroom Management*

Classroom management involves setting up a stable and consistent environment where teaching and learning effectively occur. This includes rules and guidelines of appropriate behaviors, as good classroom management contributes to better use of instructional time and decreases inappropriate student behavior. A tutor described a situation where she was having difficulty managing a student's behavior due to problems in

focusing on the lesson. Consequently, the student's behavior was a disruption to learning and the best use of class time. During the debriefing sessions, the author suggested that the tutor create an individual behavior contract with the student. After reviewing the contract with the student, they reached a mutual understanding of appropriate behavior for learning. When the tutor was consistent in carrying out her end of the contract the student's behavior was positive and reverted when the tutor was inconsistent. This case illustrated how classroom management benefits instruction and learning when the contract is maintained.

### *5.3.2 Individualized Instructional Activities/maximizing Instructional Time*

One of the tutors' primary tasks was to create individualized instructional activities for tutees based on assessed areas of strengths and needs. Assessment was conducted via the computer where tutees read test items from the computer screen and selected answers based on understanding. Tutors received training in the administration of the assessment. Utilizing the iReady product was most helpful in facilitating this process, because the iReady product contained a diagnostic assessment that each tutor used to assess tutees. Upon completion of the diagnostic assessment, a profile was provided outlining the reading readiness levels and challenges specific to each tutee. Overall, tutees' reading strengths and challenges were reported in five reading areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, word meaning, fluency, and comprehension. These five areas of reading instruction align with the research findings contained in the National Reading Panel (2000) (NRP) report. In addition, each profile included a more detailed breakdown of the strengths and/or challenges pertaining to each tutee. As stated earlier, utilizing the information from the profiles, tutors created appropriate instructional activities that proved to be very useful to all tutors. To illustrate, one tutor had the following to say about their ability to effectively interpret the information generated by iReady in relation to the instructional process.

...iReady provided a starting point for us and we don't have to try to figure it out. It eliminated most of the

guessing game as to how I would be able to help the students.

These preservice teachers also reported that iReady provided lesson plan information that was helpful in planning activities. Another tutor reported the following:

Truly, I am a novice to iReady, but the benefits that I originally discovered is that it allowed me to keep track of students' progress as well as combine my own personalized instruction with a valid and reliable assessment measure.

Based on the feedback from tutors related to the use of a diagnostics such as iReady, the author was able to conclude that the availability of reading assessments, lesson planning supports, and tracking strategies (generating data) helped tutors to individualize instructional activities and maximize instructional time.

Regardless of the usefulness of programs such as iReady, teaching that is intentionally planned and implemented by the teacher has more impact on students' literacy gains than does the dependency and sole use of any literacy product. In fact, Allington's (2013) research revealed that a single reading program should not be automatically connected with reading success. Instead, he asserted that teacher effectiveness is the definitive indicator of success in the acquisition of literacy skills. Allington (2013) stated, "... no research existed then, or exists now, to suggest that maintaining fidelity to a core reading program will provide effective reading lessons" (p. 523). Nonetheless, it should be noted that these preservice teachers benefited from the iReady product in a more substantial way due to their lack of teaching experience. For example, in this instance, iReady served as a scaffolding mechanism by providing them with lesson planning information that enabled them to navigate the teaching process; as such, filling in gaps of knowledge and experience at this early stage of their teacher education program, because the preservice teachers/tutors had not taken advanced courses in which assessment inventories and lesson planning had been introduced and had no formal knowledge or experience in maximizing instructional time in the classroom setting.

The principle of high time on task, or maximizing instructional time, is a key premise that underpins preparing

preservice teachers for effective instructional delivery. This means using the time set aside for the teaching/learning process to provide direct instruction. Prior to the start of the project, the author discussed pre-tutoring planning that would serve as an instructional map and emphasize the significance of maximizing instructional time. Proper planning enabled the tutors to make the necessary connections between preparation and implementation. For example, the author instructed tutors on how to identify skill-appropriate resources that are in alignment with different learning modes. The author instructed tutors on time management issues related to student behaviors and classroom procedures. Once engaged in the tutoring process, students were able to create various skill-related activities pertaining to each tutoring session, and tutors reported that assuming the responsibility for creating activities prior to a session proved to be beneficial in helping them relearn, and in some instances, learn new content as well as how to deliver content. Tutors also reported the fact that being required to prepare and incorporate two to three activities during each tutoring session also proved to minimize distractions and keep tutees' attention and focus on learning. These responses reflect tutors' increased awareness of what it means to maximize instructional time via planning and preparation prior to the teaching moment. Tutors associated their tutees' literacy gains with increased focus and high time on task. Stated simply, the author asserts that focused time and appropriately designed instruction equate to growth. Consequently, the author monitored the preservice teachers for their levels of preparedness. Over the course of the semester, several debriefing sessions focused on the merits of prior planning and lesson delivery, utilizing specific tutors/tutees examples observed by the author. Consistent attention to detail was needed for tutors to be successful and positively impact the learning of tutees by maximizing instructional time and minimizing behavioral and procedural disruptions. Planning and implementation was a challenge. Therefore, utilizing debriefing session time to analyze matters related to instructional planning and delivery was necessary to parallel evidence of planning and appropriate implementation with the literacy gains of tutees.

## 5.4 End-of-Project Assessments

The decision to design and administer a survey was deemed necessary to gain tutors' perspective as it relates to attitudes and thoughts of the potential impacts this early field experience opportunity had on increasing and developing their literacy knowledge, teaching strategies, and overall preparedness. The survey was administered at the end of the semester. Results of the survey will be a useful tool in recruiting efforts aimed at future preservice teachers/tutors, demonstrating the value that early field experiences can have on future teaching careers as survey feedback can also serve as tools for program/project improvement, an assumption that the author stated earlier in the article. The survey instrument design, constructed by the author, consisted of 14 items distributed over two parts. Part one of the instrument consisted of seven open-ended survey response items. An open-ended item format was selected to explore the response possibilities (Creswell, 2005) of individual tutees as related to their cultural and social background and experience (Neuman, 2000). The information collected from tutors will be especially useful in identifying misconceptions that tutors continued to have about literacy skill and teaching. Part two consisted of seven additional items. Individual survey items divided into three sub-sections. Tutees were required to provide constructed responses concerning the tutoring experience: (a) prior to engaging in tutoring (section one) and (b) at the end of the tutoring experience (sections b and c), including suggestions they deemed helpful for future tutees to know about the experience. Students reported that they gained more than an understanding of tutoring, such as learning styles, effective discipline strategies, rules and routines, student motivation, relationship building, planning instruction, and more.

### Conclusion

Because of this non-experimental reflective reporting of the collaboration, research studies on the impact of community, school, and university collaborative initiatives should be conducted based on an experimental design. The author further suggests that longitudinal research of preservice candidates, school based collaborative

teachers, clinical instructors and mentors as well as continuous improvement of field based clinical course work pedagogy be studied with a cohort over a period of the first five years following candidates' program completion.

The overall success of this project can be attributed to the "partnership synergy" that was established. That is the "...successful collaboration process [that] enables a group of people and organizations to combine their complementary knowledge, skill, and resources so they can accomplish more together than they can on their own" (Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies in Health, 2013 p. 2). Although this was an informal research study of the benefits of an early field experience opportunity in which preservice teachers tutored third-graders developing readers, it seems to suggest, from the perspective of the author's reflective notes and discussion sessions, the tutoring program was effective. To conclude, it is the recommendation that this project be explored using a more formal research approach in order to understand from an in-depth perspective the benefits of early field experience opportunities to preservice teachers once they are teachers.

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