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Journal of Teacher Action Research



Peer-reviewed articles and lesson plans written by teachers and researchers to inform classroom practice.

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“SO WHAT ARE WE WORKING ON TODAY?”: PRESERVICE TEACHERS’ USE OF ASSESSMENT DATA IN A READING DIAGNOSIS COURSE

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Abstract Instructors of university reading diagnosis courses are charged with preparing preservice teachers to administer and analyze literacy assessments and plan subsequent instruction for children based on those assessments. Recently, several instructors of this course at a South Texas university have noticed that the planned instruction during tutorial lessons matches the information gleaned from the assessments most, but not all, of the time. The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the ways in which the undergraduate tutors used the assessment data they collected to plan instruction for their students. This study followed seven tutors as they worked with children over the course of eight sessions in two sections of an undergraduate reading diagnosis course. Findings suggest that all seven tutors used some of their assessment data effectively; however, there were instances where the assessment data and instruction were mismatched. These results point to the need for course instructors to make adjustments of weekly in-class proceedings.

Keywords: preservice teachers, reading diagnosis course, literacy assessment, qualitative research

Introduction

As part of their studies to become teachers, undergraduate students often take a course where they learn to administer and analyze literacy assessments and utilize the data obtained to plan instruction. Professors of such courses strive to create future teachers who are sensitive observers of children’s reading and writing habits and who are truly responsive to the needs of their students (Clay, 2005). Duffy and Atkinson (2001) assert the purpose of the “tutoring experience is to help [undergraduates] learn how to teach diagnostically and reflectively, and the principles of instruction that they learn through the work with one struggling reader [can] be modified and adapted to their work in the classroom setting” (p. 96). Problems surface when instructors of this course notice that the undergraduate students struggle to create meaningful lesson plans based on the responses of their tutees during assessment administration.

Recently, several instructors of this course at a South Texas university noticed that, while some of the undergraduate students', also preservice teachers', lesson plans matched the assessment results they had obtained, others were incomplete and consisted of activities that had little or no basis in the assessment information of the children they were tutoring. It is hoped that, by carefully studying several undergraduate tutors' work in this course, those who teach the course will be able to make lasting changes that will result in more rigorous instruction for both undergraduate students and children involved in the tutorials.

Literature Review

Diagnosis of Reading Problems Courses. Many university-based teacher certification programs offer literacy assessment courses, some of which include an in-house tutorial component. In courses such as these, education students are expected to learn how to conduct several reading and writing assessments and analyze the results. They are then to use the information they gather to build a sequence of study for their tutees. This is a crucial skill to have, one that they will use every day as classroom teachers.

Instructors who teach undergraduate courses with a tutorial component work to help preservice teachers learn how to problem-solve. Assaf and Lopez (2012) advocate preservice teacher tutoring because it creates a "community of practice" that helps to prepare them for their classrooms. Future teachers, under the guidance of a more experienced reading educator, are given the opportunity to practice assessment and plan appropriate instruction.

One-to-one Tutorials. During the regular school day, the children who are served in the diagnosis course tutorial sessions are taught mostly in a whole group setting, where often, the teacher to student ratio is one-to-22. Research indicates one-to-one teaching is preferred by both teachers and students (Baker, Rieg, & Clendaniel, 2006; Christensen & Walker, 1991; Hedrick, McGee, Mittag, 2000; Juel, 1996; Mokhtari, Hutchinson, & Edwards, 2010). Students have distinct needs, and a one-to-one setting allows teachers to better address these needs. The tutors get to know themselves as teachers and employ their own teaching styles (Assaf & Lopez, 2012; Jones, Stallings, & Malone, 2004). One-to-one settings are often less intimidating for preservice teachers and can help them become more confident as they begin teaching (Bier et al., 2012; Mallette, Kyle, Smith, McKinney, & Readence et al., 2000). Many preservice tutors have not only claimed to learn more about themselves in a one-to-one setting, but they also grow stronger bonds with their students (Assaf & Lopez, 2012; Lane, Hudson, McCray, Tragash, & Zeig, 2011; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002).

Using Multiple Kinds of Assessments. Several studies have highlighted the success of preservice teachers in learning how to effectively administer literacy assessment tools during reading diagnosis courses (Massey & Lewis, 2011), as well as how to use them to

inform instruction (Duffy & Atkinson, 2001; Morgan, Timmons, & Shaheen, 2006). Some preservice teacher-tutors demonstrate that they are able to closely analyze data and work with students on specific skills (Massey & Lewis). For example, novice tutors might indicate that their students struggle with comprehension, and as they grow familiar with the reading process, they are able to discuss students' needs in terms of inferring or visualizing. Massey (1990) also discovered, rather than using one formal assessment to drive instruction for all tutoring sessions, tutors continued to assess across lessons, both formally and informally, and use the results during the subsequent tutorial sessions.

Some course instructors have found preservice teachers base the instruction of their tutees on observations they make while teaching, resulting in "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1987). After spending time getting to know their students' learning styles, interests, and needs, tutors record this as observational data and use it to raise their students' reading and writing (Hedrick et al., 2000; Leal, Johanson, Toth, & Huang, 2004; Worthy & Patterson, 2001). This process allows them to rely on more than a textbook to plan activities (Stump, 2010), since "creative responsiveness, rather than technical compliance, characterizes the nature of effective teachers" (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000, p. 732). Also, as students' needs change, some preservice teachers adjust their instruction (Fang & Ashley, 2004; Hedrick et al.), which is also a highly desirable skill.

Preservice Teachers' Reflections. Diagnosis course instructors often ask preservice teacher tutors to take detailed notes during tutoring sessions and reflect on these at a later time (Morgan et al., 2006). The reflections help them to process instructional strategies that worked and what made them work, as well as those that did not and why they did not (Hedrick et al., 2000; Leal et al., 2004). Morgan et al. discuss the importance of tutors finding patterns in the information they record in order to understand how their children progressed as readers. During these reflections, students are to also consider how the tutoring process helps them develop instructional routines, not only for use during tutorial sessions, but also in future teaching situations (Massey & Lewis, 2011; Worthy & Patterson, 2001). Duffy and Atkinson (2001) noticed that, in their reflections, preservice teacher tutors expressed they valued their experiences tutoring young readers and that it was a good opportunity to become familiar with one child as a reader and writer.

Methodology

In this cross-case qualitative action research study, the researchers analyzed the assessment results of seven preservice teachers enrolled in a diagnosis of reading problems course and considered these results as they examined the subsequent lesson plans that were to be based on the assessment data obtained. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of the assessment data and the resulting instruction of undergraduate preservice teachers enrolled in a diagnosis and correction of reading problems course at a South Texas university in order to improve the teaching and

learning in this course. The goal of a reading diagnosis course is to produce teachers who understand how to effectively use literacy assessment data. However, there is little mentioned regarding exactly *how* this is accomplished. As teachers, they will be expected to engage in the constant cycle and integration of assessing and teaching. So the question remains: how do literacy teacher educators help novice future teachers link assessment and instruction? The researchers decided, before this question can be answered, they must examine the lesson planning practices of these future teachers.

Findings yielded from this study will inform the teaching and structure of the diagnosis course as well as several of the other literacy teacher education courses at the university. This will be particularly important in the areas of adjusting instruction and choosing instructional activities for children to boost strategic reading and writing. Preservice teachers will, in turn, provide teaching materials and activities that match students' current levels of processing, rather than basing instruction on unsupported instincts. Because reading diagnosis courses are offered at many academic institutions as part of teacher preparation programs, the effects of this study may reach beyond this particular institution. The question that guided this research was: In what ways do preservice teachers use information obtained from a reading assessment protocol and a writing assessment protocol to plan a course of instruction for their students?

Role of the Researchers. The lead researcher is an assistant professor at the university where this study occurred. She teaches sections of the undergraduate reading diagnosis course; however, she did not teach either of the sections in which the undergraduate student participants were enrolled. She had previously taught several of the undergraduate participants in another course at the same university, so they knew her and were comfortable working with her. The lead researcher also knew the instructors of these two diagnosis course sections, so they were comfortable with her working within the context of their classrooms. The second researcher, at the time of this study, was an undergraduate student pursuing a high school English teaching certificate at the same university. She was accepted into the McNair Scholars program, a highly selective program at the university that requires students to participate in research with faculty mentors. She had taken the diagnosis of reading problems course during her undergraduate program a year prior to this study and therefore held a unique perspective while taking a close look at the link between assessment, diagnosis, and instruction. She was not, however, at the time of this study, a student in either of the sections studied and had already finished the majority of the coursework for her degree.

Participants and Setting. Seven undergraduate female students participated in this study. They were purposefully selected because they volunteered to participate in the study and agreed to have their work and lessons more closely examined than is usually done by one instructor during the semester, as there are usually 25 students enrolled in each course section. These undergraduate students attend a four-year regional university in South Texas that serves about 12,000 students. They were enrolled in two

sections of a course titled Diagnosis and Correction of Reading Problems, which is a required course for students seeking any teaching degree.

The first five sessions of the course are taught traditionally, as the instructor disseminates information about children who are reading and writing below grade level and the assessments that might be used to determine who these students are as readers and writers and how to best provide interventions. In the following eight class sessions, traditional class is held for one hour, and each undergraduate student then tutors an elementary-aged child, ranging in age from six to twelve on the university campus for one hour. The course instructor is present during this time, moving throughout the classroom and stopping every few minutes to listen in on lessons. Tutoring sessions consist of instruction in the areas of reading comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, word study, and writing. Of the seven children who participated, four were female, three were male, and they ranged in age from six to ten.

Data Collection. Three types of artifacts were collected for this study: literacy assessment protocols and accompanying observational notes, lesson plans and accompanying observational notes, and interview transcripts.

Literacy Assessment Protocols and Observational Notes. The preservice teachers enrolled in the course administered, scored, and analyzed several formal and informal literacy assessments over the course of the tutoring sessions. They turned in photocopies of the completed assessments to the researchers. These are relevant pieces of data because the tutors used these tools for both on-the-run and later instruction. It should also be noted that this process of gathering assessment data is a required part of the course assignments. Although tutors administered other assessments during the tutorial sessions, the assessment protocols collected for this study include the Bader-Pearce Informal Reading Inventory (2013) and an informal writing inventory. The graded reading passages in the informal reading inventory allowed the preservice teachers to determine at which grade level their tutee read by assessing their reading accuracy and comprehension of short stories at various levels of difficulty. The informal writing inventory allowed the undergraduate students to assess their tutees' writing by having the tutee copy, transcribe, and compose short stories.

Lesson Plans and Observational Notes. Each participant submitted hard copies of the six lesson plans (the first two sessions are used largely for assessment administration) used during tutorial sessions. Each plan consisted of the topic to be addressed, the activity used to address it, the child's response to the activity, and the tutor's anecdotal notes for each activity. Each tutor also wrote a brief reflection paragraph about her teaching after she finished teaching each lesson.

Interview Transcripts. After the eight tutoring sessions concluded and all assessment data sets and lessons were coded, the researchers conducted a 20-minute, semi-structured interview with each participant using a short set of guiding questions (Appendix A). The patterns and codes obtained from the assessment protocols and lesson plans were used to create the interview questions. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed so that they could be analyzed for comments that supported the work each tutor did with her student.

Data Analysis. After all data was collected at the conclusion of the eight-week tutorial period, the researchers used the following steps to analyze the data. Each tutor's hard copy assessments were coded using *a priori* coding. This type of coding was chosen as the researchers pre-determined areas of instruction by which to group the data. These areas are comprehension, reading accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, and writing. The researchers then took this information and considered each tutor's lesson plans, including activities and anecdotal notes, alongside the assessments and coded lesson plans. Finally, the interview transcripts were coded alongside each tutor's assessments and lesson plan sets for similarities and differences in what the tutors said they did and what they actually did during lessons. Information from the interviews is interwoven in the "results and discussion" section. The researchers were looking for gaps per the research question: In what ways do preservice teachers use information obtained from a reading assessment protocol and a writing assessment protocol to plan a course of instruction for their students?

Trustworthiness. To ensure trustworthiness of the data collected, two measures were utilized. First, three kinds of data were collected in the form of assessments that were administered by the tutors and their observational notes during the assessments; lesson plans and observational notes during tutorial sessions; and interview transcripts. Second, member checking was employed by sending the participants their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy of responses and guarantee that they were represented fairly. Third, the researchers worked closely throughout the entire data analysis process by checking on one another's observations.

Ethical Issues. Participation in the study was completely voluntary on the part of the undergraduate students, children, and parents. Each participant consented to being a part of the study. The researchers were not instructors for this course, and the study did not affect the preservice teachers' grades or standing at the university in any way. The researchers obtained assent from the children whose tutors participated and consent from the parents of these same children, thereby having the consent and assent of seven trios (tutor, child, and parent).

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the preservice teachers' assessment protocols, lesson plans, and interview transcripts revealed two categories of findings. First, in some areas, the tutors used their assessment data effectively by aligning instructional activities to observed and recorded assessment data. Second, in other areas, they either had solid assessment data and missing lessons to address that data, or they had planned instruction for areas in which they had no recorded data.

Tutors' Effective Use of Data to Plan Instruction. Each of the seven tutors had evidence to show they had used the assessment data they gathered to plan instructional activities to address their tutees' specific areas of need. The areas discussed here are comprehension, fluency, writing, and reading accuracy.

Comprehension. Three of the tutors used their students' results on the informal reading inventory to focus on areas of comprehension where extra work was needed and provided a matching set of instruction during tutorial sessions. One tutor, Stacy (all names are pseudonyms) commented that this is the area "where the big struggle [for my student] was" (5/5/2015 interview). Tutors recorded that their students had difficulty retelling texts and that they either retold events out of order or left out big ideas from the text. To address this, one tutor taught her student how to do a "five-finger retell," a strategy in which the student uses each finger and thumb to recall the story elements. Another tutor used short texts in order for the student to practice retelling an entire story in one sitting. Yet another utilized a graphic organizer in the form of a story map to help her student correctly sequence events.

The preservice tutors also responded to the data they collected concerning their tutees' difficulties answering comprehension questions administered at the end of each selection on the informal reading inventory. Some tutors attended to this concern by playing games with students, such as "Quiz-Me Can," in which the student draws general questions from a can and answers them with the tutor's help. Others created foldables with their students to work on story elements and making predictions.

Fluency. Two tutors, Karen and Allison, recognized that reading fluency needed to be addressed with their students and made appropriate accommodations for this in their lesson plans. One tutee's lack of expressive reading prompted her tutor to create word strips, each with a sentence that ended with a different punctuation mark. She demonstrated how to read each sentence strip, and then gradually released the task to her student. Because of another child's choppy phrasing when reading, her tutor chose to use several poems during each tutorial session, reading each one chorally or through echo-reading to encourage her student to hear the rhythm of the poetry.

Writing. After administering the informal writing inventory, five tutors observed their students' various difficulties with writing. When interviewed, Maxine said, "We would have conversations [about the photograph prompt], but it was just the pen to the paper where he struggled" (5/1/2015 interview). Other tutors indicated that their students did not write much, rushed, were frustrated, or were unsure of punctuation and spelling. In order to motivate students to write, tutors made tasks novel by playing "roll-a-story," an activity where the child rolls a cube with six events and puts them together to form a story. They also wrote responses to texts, friendly letters, and alternate endings to stories they read together. Since these tutors also noticed that their students were not writing much, they included instructional activities such as using graphic organizers and writing in response to informational texts through the use of KWL (What I Know; What I Want to Know; What I Learned) charts.

Reading Accuracy. All seven preservice teacher tutors carefully recorded miscues on the informal reading inventory, and all observed that their students demonstrated some difficulty with decoding sight words, short words, or multisyllabic words, depending on the child's reading level. Tutors used a miscue analysis chart to guide their word study instruction and several commented during their interviews that using this chart helped them determine which particular phonics skill to teach. For example, one tutor noted that her student had difficulty reading multisyllabic words, so they did some Making Words (Cunningham & Hall, 2008) activities and played games that focused on working with affixes and base words. Two of the participating tutors documented that their students often confused beginning sight words, so they included the following activities in their lesson plans: flash cards, word identification BINGO, and using magnetic letters to bring words to fluency by forming them several times.

Missing Connection Between Data and Lessons. In addition to effectively linking assessment data to instruction, all seven tutors grappled with the task of analyzing all data carefully and planning purposeful activities based on their observations. It was noticed that tutors either had data but were missing corresponding lessons or planned lessons without the data to support the need for those lessons.

Data and Missing Lessons. Two tutors, Stacy and Anna, indicated that their students needed fluency instruction. Stacy stated that her student "would run through punctuation marks [and] wouldn't pause in between" (5/11/2015 interview). As lesson plans were reviewed, however, it was discovered that there was no evidence that fluency was addressed during tutorial sessions. Similarly, Stacy and Cassandra noticed that their students were unmotivated to write during administration of the informal writing inventory. Upon inspection of their lesson plans, there were no planned activities that focused solely on writing motivation. So, while the preservice teachers documented that these were issues on the assessments, there were no indications in their lesson plans that they addressed these particular deficits.

Lessons and Missing Data. All seven tutors who participated in this study planned some instructional activities for their students that, while many were research-based and high-quality activities, were not related to the information they collected about their students during the administration of the assessments required for the course. Vocabulary instruction is one area six of the tutors chose to devote time and resources to without having the assessment data to back up the instruction. Students participated in such activities as looking up the definitions of words, working with vocabulary word cards, using word banks, and playing games with vocabulary words. There were no notes included about vocabulary on the informal reading inventories of these tutors' students.

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider regarding this study. The sample of preservice teachers was small, part of only two course sections, and was located at one university; therefore, there exists a small degree of generalizability (Merriam, 1998). Also some of the participating undergraduate preservice teachers had been previous students of the first researcher, and this may have affected the way they responded during the interviews. Lastly, the preservice teachers' performance in the course may depend upon who their instructor is and their course preparation up to the point of taking the reading diagnosis course.

Conclusion

The results of this study have pointed to the need for some restructuring of this course, as well as some possible refinements that need to be made to other undergraduate reading courses in the same program. A large portion of this course is devoted to teaching education students how to administer and score several assessments, some of which they can learn to do by reading about them and analyzing examples on their own. Perhaps some of the time would be better utilized by not only discussing, but demonstrating exactly what to do with the assessment data that is collected during the first few tutorial sessions, as Baker and colleagues (2006) suggest, and then engaging tutors in "structured practice" (Wasserman, 2009, p. 1049). It seems that the preservice teachers need practice in "noticing" and "naming" (Johnston, 2004) their tutees' performance on both assessments and activities. Instructors might conduct live teaching sessions in which they model the processes of analyzing assessment data, choosing a skill, planning instruction for that skill, and teaching a student. This can be videotaped and voiced over with commentary for subsequent viewings. After observing and taking notes on this process, students in the course can debrief with one another and with the instructor. Then, in ensuing class sessions, instructors can individualize this process by closely observing tutors as they work with children and "step in to model and reteach as necessary" (Massey & Lewis, 2011, p. 128).

Success in the reading diagnosis course on the part of preservice teachers is crucial, as it is often one of their first experiences with the formal teaching of children. They will take what they have learned into their field experiences and student teaching.

Instructors of this course build the foundation of assessment data collection and the resulting responsive teaching. They help their tutors know what to say and do when their children ask, “So what are we working on today?”

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. How do you feel about the overall tutoring experience and what did you learn from it?
2. What did you observe and what patterns did you see when administering the assessments?
3. In what ways did the assessment results help you plan your lessons?
4. Which lesson activities resulted in thoughtful responses from your students?
5. How do you feel the tutoring experience helped you grow as a teacher?