Exploring the effects of a Teacher Preparation Course on Pre-Service Teachers’ Content Knowledge of Emergent Literacy

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Abstract

During their enrollment in teacher education programs, pre-service teachers learn the academic knowledge for teaching a variety of subjects and disciplines. They also participate in field experiences that allow them to see first-hand how an experienced teacher implements course content and pedagogy with children in a classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine how pre-service teachers’ knowledge of how children learn to read changed because of their participation in a literacy preparation course that focused on the concept of emergent literacy. This study utilized results from a questionnaire distributed on the first and last day of class to determine if participants’ content knowledge of emergent literacy increased. The results suggest a substantive change in teacher knowledge occurred as a result of this experience.

Keywords: teacher preparation; pre-service teachers; emergent literacy
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According to the Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010), today’s teachers need to have sufficient knowledge about child development, curriculum, assessments, and techniques on engaging students throughout the learning process in order to ensure student success. To help pre-service teachers acquire the knowledge needed to be an effective teacher in the twenty-first century classroom, integrating field experiences throughout the program of instruction is essential. The panel urged teacher education programs to examine the effectiveness of teacher preparation through research data.

The International Reading Association (2003) suggested that quality teachers capable of implementing reading instruction successfully could rectify reading problems. Quality teachers are knowledgeable in the field of reading; they can use effective strategies and adapt lessons/instructions based on their reflective observations of their students’ performance. According to that report, it is the teacher education program and teacher-educator’s responsibility to use research-based practices to educate pre-service teachers so they can implement successful reading instruction in the classroom to help children learn to read (Moats, 1999). Student achievement in classrooms correlates with the teacher’s knowledge of pedagogy and content (Chhabra, Kapinus, & McCardle, 2008).

To provide pre-service teachers hands-on experiences working with emergent learners in the area of literacy development, teacher education programs implement meaningful experiences in authentic classrooms, providing pre-service teachers with “field experiences.” According to the Vygotskian theory, “situated cognition of coursework occurs during the situated activity of fieldwork” (Samaras, 2000, p.19). Based on this Vygotskian principle, both social interaction and social mediation aid in the development of knowledge (Samaras, 2000). Field experiences act as a scaffolding system to support pre-service teachers’ understanding of emergent literacy as classroom teachers guide them through the process of teaching children to read (Cecil & Gipe, 2009). During these field experiences, pre-service teachers observe and work with real students, teachers, and the curriculum in PreK-12 classrooms (Huling, 1998). According to Dewey (1938), pre-service teachers need hands-on experiences in the classroom to learn how to implement instruction. This hands-on experience should build pre-service teachers’ schema for becoming a teacher capable of managing classroom instruction (Dewey, 1938; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2007; Gismondi & Samaras, 1998).

Field experiences in P-12 classrooms provides experiences that complement the lectures given by instructors so that pre-service teachers can see firsthand how to implement teaching strategies with students as they observe veteran teachers (Grisham, Lenski, & Wold, 2006; International Reading Association, 2003; Parault, 2005). Pre-service teachers are also encouraged and required to implement lesson plans in their assigned classroom to get a better understanding of how the process of teaching literacy occurs in a real classroom setting. As pre-
service teachers observe literacy teachers and implement literacy lessons in the classroom, they are able to apply the content knowledge received from teacher preparation programs and develop skills needed to teach in their future classrooms (Moats, 1999).

**Review of Literature**

Various researchers discuss the impact of course content and field experience on pre-service teachers’ content knowledge of teaching. Bangel and Parnin (2008) conducted a study with pre-service teachers that examined the effect of using a gifted education online course and field experience with gifted students to increase the pre-service teachers understanding of how to implement instruction for gifted students. By enrolling in the course and conducting field experience with gifted students, the pre-service teachers’ knowledge of teaching gifted students increased. Prater and Worthy (1998) examined the effect of a one-to-one tutorial program on pre-service teachers’ knowledge and confidence teaching reading. The results suggested that pre-service teachers were able to reexamine their perceptions as they progressed through the tutorial sessions. They became more confident and competent with teaching reading since they were able to put theory to practice. Hollingsworth and Shefelbine (1987) noticed that pre-service teachers struggled making instructional decisions as they examined them while completing field experience involving reading instruction. Results indicated that lower levels of content knowledge and mastery of instructional routines and management greatly affected decision-making performance.

**Emergent Literacy Content Knowledge**

To aid pre-service teachers in developing content knowledge for emergent literacy, it is important to define “emergent literacy.” Cecil (2007) defines emergent literacy as, “a developing awareness of the interrelatedness of oral and written language” (p. 40). Emergent literacy occurs before an individual produces conventional reading and writing (Tompkins, 2007).

According to Read and Smith (2009), if emergent readers and writers do not obtain a good foundation in early literacy skills, they will likely struggle with the reading process. Read and Smith (2009) stated that to build a good foundation in early literacy skills, an emergent literacy program should address the following areas: Oral language, sound awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness.

**Rationale for the Study**

In order for pre-service teachers to become efficient reading teachers, they must obtain the knowledge and skills to teach effectively. Quality reading teachers make a difference in the academic lives of their students. They become aware of the individual needs of each student in their classrooms and tailor their instruction to meet the differentiated needs of each student through reflective practice.

Based on the information provided from Chhabra, et al. (2008), instruction provided by teacher education programs helps improve student-reading success. The researchers noted additional research could determine how teacher education programs best be designed and
delivered to support teacher effectiveness. Additionally, they suggested assessing teacher education programs to ascertain their effectiveness in preparing pre-service teachers to teach.

The rationale for conducting this study was to determine if the knowledge obtained in an early literacy course impacted participants’ content knowledge of emergent literacy. Specifically, what is the relationship between the early literacy preparation course and content knowledge of emergent literacy among pre-service teachers? The hypothesis suggested that an early literacy course would enhance participants’ content knowledge of emergent literacy.

Method

Participants, Description of the Early Literacy Course, and Field Experience

The participants in this study consisted of 106 pre-service teachers enrolled in a 300-level early literacy methods course for elementary majors attending a flagship university in a southern state. The majority of the participants in the study were 19-year-old Caucasian females. A small percentage of the participants in the study were non-traditional aged college students. The 300-level course is a six-credit hour course that meets bi-weekly for three hours over the course of one semester. Participants take this course to complete requirements of the elementary program. 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. Pre-service teachers participated in 12 hours of literacy instruction in kindergarten as part of their field experience. During the 12-hour field experience, the pre-service teachers observed a veteran teacher, taking detailed notes on the teacher’s methods, implemented a reading lesson scheduled by the classroom teacher, and worked with children during literacy instruction.

Materials

The study used the knowledge component of the Teacher Perceptions and Knowledge Questionnaire (Stern Center for Language and Learning, 2009) as the assessment instrument. The knowledge component of the instrument contains a 20 item multiple-choice assessment of an individual’s knowledge of the English language including word and sound levels. Researchers from the Stern Center for Language and Learning based the Teacher Perceptions and Knowledge Questionnaire on two theoretical orientations: Six assessment items assessed on explicit code instruction and six items assessed on implicit code instruction; additional assessment items focused on literacy experiences that occurred in the home. Explicit code instruction focuses on linking letters to sounds and blending and building sounds into syllables and words. Implicit code instruction focuses on analyzing words to look for common sounds. Shapes, beginning and ending letters and context clues identified words. The assessment is valid for the assessment of two theoretical orientations: Phonics and whole language.

A pilot test of the instrument occurred during the Center’s Reading Instructional Methods of Efficacy (RIME) program that resulted in additional modifications of the instrument. RIME is a professional development project for teachers that employs a reciprocally active, group designed model to cultivate teachers’ knowledge and skills of teaching reading to elementary
students. The instrument examines changes in teachers’ beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge after they participated in the professional development project (Bos, Chard, Dickson, Mather, Podhajski, 2001). The instrument was reliable having a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha level of .74, measuring the explicit and implicit code levels of the theoretical orientations. The knowledge component of the instrument was valid with a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha level of .60.

Procedures

The Stern Center granted permission for the researcher to use the Teacher Perceptions and Knowledge questionnaire to collect data for the study. Following Institutional Review Board approval, a class announcement informed participants of the study. After the instructor read the announcement aloud during the first class meeting, volunteers received the letter describing the questionnaire attached to the instrument. Participants then completed the questionnaire for the pre-assessment data. On the last day of class, participants completed the questionnaire again for the post-assessment data and returned them to the course instructor. Omitting participant names from the returned questionnaire insured confidentiality.

Data Analysis and Scoring

The researcher used a paired dependent samples t-test Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze the results. The knowledge section of the questionnaire consisted of 20 questions that measured the participants’ knowledge of the English language including word and sound levels as well as their knowledge of emergent literacy content. Scoring provided one point for a correct response and a zero for an incorrect response. A comparison of the average scores from the pretest and posttest determined if there was a significant difference between the means for the participants’ knowledge of emergent literacy after completing the early literacy course.

Results

Of the 130 questionnaires distributed on the first day of class, participants returned 106 completed questions (81.54%). Demographic information indicated that 100% of participants were junior leveled students. The majority of the participants (98%) were female; 2% were male. A small percentage (2%) was older than 20 years of age.

The knowledge section of the questionnaire measured participants’ knowledge of emergent literacy content. A mean score of 10.1038 was calculated for the pretest score; and a mean score of 14.6981 was calculated for the posttest score (Table 1).
Table 1

Comparison of Participants’ Knowledge of Emergent Literacy Before and After Completing the Requirements of the Early Literacy Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>10.1038</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>3.12876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>14.6981</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>4.56523</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results indicated that the performance on the post-test (M = 14.70, SD = 4.56) was significantly greater than the average performance on the pre-test (M = 10.10, SD = 3.13), $t_{(105)} = 12.081$, $p < 0.0001$.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate a significant difference in pre-service teachers’ content knowledge of emergent literacy because of participating in and completing an early literacy course. It is evident that the early literacy course helped pre-service teachers gain a greater understanding of emergent literacy.

Based on previous research, we know that field experiences affect pre-service teachers’ learning of content knowledge. Evaluating the efficacy of internship programs would be helpful as well since pre-service teachers have the opportunities to apply the literacy knowledge consistently.

Before pre-service teachers are qualified to teach children how to read, they must obtain content knowledge and know how to implement pedagogical skills effectively in literacy classrooms. It is important that teacher educators frequently assess pre-service teachers to determine if they are ready to meet the demands of twenty-first century classrooms. Quality course work that addresses the developmental literacy needs of children and field experiences that demonstrate the application of quality literacy instruction in teacher preparation programs support pre-service teachers in obtaining the knowledge and skills needed to be effective literacy teachers. The effective teacher affects students’ learning (NCATE, 2010).

References


National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning (November 2010)


