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TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW: PRESERVICE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TEACHING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

In this research study, we investigated 40 elementary preservice teachers' understanding, attitudes and beliefs at the start of their reading methods class regarding the teaching of reading comprehension. The methodology is qualitative and constant comparative methods are used. Conclusions indicate that the majority of preservice teachers aligned themselves with valuing comprehension, but when juxtaposed against skills, they were more divided in its value. Most preservice teachers did not reference comprehension instruction as part of their memories in school which indicates unclear recollections of specific comprehension instruction. When preservice teachers did reference comprehension instruction they focused on authentic reading and discussions of literature in home settings including engagements with siblings or parents. By thoroughly analyzing what preservice teachers know at the onset of the semester, instruction can be tailored to activate background knowledge allowing teaching and learning to be more purposeful.

In this research study we investigated the beliefs preservice teachers bring to a reading methods class relevant to reading comprehension instruction. As teacher educators our inquiry was initiated by the Report from the National Reading Panel (NRP) (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) which identified comprehension as one of the critical proficiencies necessary for effective acquisition of reading skills. The NRP goes on to state that research into teacher preparation regarding the teaching of reading comprehension shows great potential for improving this area of literacy. It maintains that interest in the topic of how best to prepare preservice teachers to effectively deliver reading comprehension instruction does not have a large research base.

We define reading comprehension as "the process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (Sweet & Snow, 2002, p. 23-24). Furthermore, reading comprehension instruction is defined as a teacher in a classroom setting assisting students to "understand or work out the meaning of more than a single, isolated word" (Durkin, 1978-1979, p. 488). We begin by discussing the literature and research which guided and supported our thinking. Next, we describe our setting, participants, research procedures and conclude with the findings of our study.

Literature Review

Our research is grounded in the sociocognitive perspective of Gee (2004) and the social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978). Gee (2004) maintains that the values of learners are greatly influenced by the larger learning environment which we define as prior formal school experiences. This would include not only instructional activities, but also interactions with teachers and fellow students. Additionally, prior life experiences help one define and classify new life experiences. These experiences are not simply a remembering of facts or information but rather they are “value-laden, perspective taking” (Gee, 2004, p. 118) perceptions of the mind. Having spent many years as students in both elementary and secondary classrooms, preservice teachers classify some literacy events as holding certain importance while devaluing others. These judgments are based on values that preservice teachers perceived their former teachers placed on literacy events. In other words, the perspective of the teacher influences the values of the students.

Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist framework complements the sociocognitive philosophy with its presupposition that human learning has a specific social nature. According to Vygotsky, optimal learning occurs in an environment in which both students and teachers participate in thoughtful reflective discourse with the teacher taking the role of the knowledgeable other. The teacher assists students in the construction and understanding of new knowledge. We believe the sociocognitive and social constructivist philosophies relate directly to the research on teacher beliefs. Richardson (1994) identifies teacher beliefs as paradigms that originate from an accumulation of personal life experiences. She contends that, unless one examines teachers’ beliefs and the underlying reasons for those beliefs, attempting teacher change may not be successful. Therefore we felt it was necessary to closely examine the literacy experiences and beliefs preservice teachers brought to our methods courses. With this knowledge we believed we would be better equipped to address long held attitudes and possible misconceptions regarding reading comprehension instruction. In his seminal work Lortie (1975) concluded that prospective teachers have definite views on teaching having spent years in apprenticeships of observation watching their teachers teach them. Ultimately, his study indicated that teachers teach the way they remember being taught.

Finally, Durkin’s (1978-79) influential study on reading comprehension instruction revealed that little teaching of comprehension strategies existed in elementary classrooms at that time. Following that publication research on comprehension instruction flourished (Block & Pressley, 2002) and numerous successful programs for teaching comprehension emerged (Raphael & McKinney, 1983; Ogle, 1986; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, & Schuder, 1996; Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, & Rinehart, 1999). Distressingly, it appears that specific comprehension instruction is still missing in classrooms however; a great deal of comprehension assessment is evident (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Hampson, & Echevarria, 1998). Taking these factors into consideration one can presuppose that preservice teachers entering the profession today have been exposed to little direct comprehension instruction in their elementary years.

Setting And Participants

The researchers in this study share a long history of collaboration including publications and presentations at conferences. Combined we have over 25 years of teaching experience in elementary and middle school settings. Our philosophies of teaching and learning are similar and we regularly share instructional techniques and strategies which have proven successful in our university teaching. During this study we were teaching similar preservice reading methods

courses focusing on content, methods, and assessment for teaching reading to elementary students.

The forty participants in the study were third year undergraduate or post-baccalaureate preservice teachers earning a state teaching credential. The participants were at various points in their professional training with some taking their first method course while others were completing their methods courses and would soon begin student teaching. They attended two different public universities in neighboring states in the Southwest/West Coast region of the United States. All were predominately female (38 out of 40) which reflected the College enrollments at both universities and is consistent with typical representations of teacher education students (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996). Additionally, the vast majority of the preservice teachers were Caucasian.

Design And Procedures

In this research a collective case study was used. This is a particularly valuable design when examining educational issues and most notably when studying program evaluation (Stake, 1995). Written discourse and literacy belief profiles served as evidence of how and what the preservice teachers believed concerning reading comprehension. Guided by the thoughts of Hubbard and Power (1993), we determined what data sources would be relevant to our research and we were cautious to collect only data that would directly speak to our research question.

Data Sources

To begin, we administered the Literacy Beliefs Profile (LPB) (Kucer, 1996) at the beginning of the semester to assess preservice teachers' perceptions of literacy instruction at the start of the reading methods course. The LBP, adapted from the DeFord Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (DeFord, 1985), is a Likert type survey consisting of 24 statements. Upon close examination of the LPB statements, we identified and analyzed the preservice teachers' responses to three statements which directly related to comprehension instruction:

1. Reading and writing activities, even for beginners, should focus on meaning and the functional use of written language, rather than on exact word and spelling identification.
2. When evaluating reading and writing the teacher should focus on meaning, rather than on correct word identification, spelling, etc.
3. Good readers and writers first focus on the overall meaning of what they are reading and writing rather than on correct word identification, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, individual facts, and details.

We believe these three statements aligned with our original definition of reading comprehension (Sweet & Snow, 2002).

Next, the preservice teachers wrote personal literacy reflections that focused on their literacy histories. Specifically, the preservice teachers were asked to concentrate on individuals, places and materials for which they held vivid memories. The purpose of the assignment is to help the preservice teachers understand that their personal backgrounds influence their expectations in the classroom. The following guiding questions were provided:

1. What memories do you have of stories, literature, reading, or literacy? Many people hold a spectrum of memories ranging from positive to negative.
2. Were you read to as a child?
3. Did your family tell stories?
4. How did you learn to read?

5. Discuss individual participants in your literacy history, the environment, and important artifacts. Set the scene for readers.
6. How have these memories influenced your working definition of literacy? (Dillon, 2000).

Data Analysis

The responses to the Literacy Beliefs Profile were categorized on a sliding five point scale with a response of one indicating the preservice teacher strongly agreed that reading should focus on meaning making rather than correct word identification. A response of five represented a strong belief that accurate and exact word reading and recognition were paramount to constructing meaning. Each preservice teacher's score was recorded by number for each of the three statements analyzed. The results for each statement were then analyzed for patterns relating to the preservice teachers' beliefs regarding comprehension instruction.

Kelchtermans (1993) investigated teachers' lives and looked for critical persons and incidents in their professional biographies. His work guided our analysis of the literacy memories of our preservice teachers. We used Kelchtermans' definition of "critical" person, event, or period of time as one that the preservice teacher referred to as a very significant circumstance. For examples, expressions such as "I will never forget..." and "it was important to me..." helped identify critical events.

We each read the literacy memories written by our respective preservice teachers. We looked for critical events and focused on specific references to comprehension. We then compared our notes and reached consensus regarding the themes found in the literacy memories (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). To check for reliability, each co-author read a 10% representative sample of memories written by the preservice teacher enrolled in the other co-author's class. We then compared the critical events identified from the representative sample to ensure that both researchers were reading the memories with a similar approach. We were in agreement over 90% of the time which would indicate a high degree of inter-rate reliability.

Results And Discussion

An analysis of the Literacy Beliefs Profile yielded the following results. When asked to respond to the first statement: "Reading and writing activities, even for beginners, should focus on meaning and the functional use of written language, rather than on exact word and spelling identification," the mean response was 1.95 suggesting a meaning making focus. Next, when asked "When evaluating reading and writing the teacher should focus on meaning, rather than on correct word identification, spelling, etc," the responses were more widely distributed with the mean score being 2.52. This suggests that although the preservice teachers deemed meaning making as important and valuable, word identification and spelling potentially hold equal value.

Finally, in response to "Good readers and writers first focus on the overall meaning of what they are reading and writing rather than on correct word identification, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, individual facts, and details," the mean scores of 2015 indicates again that while meaning construction is important accuracy also holds a high degree of significance.

Essentially, all three statements asked preservice teachers to evaluate the role of meaning making or comprehension versus such skills as word usage and spelling. Although the majority of preservice teachers aligned themselves with valuing meaning making and comprehension when juxtaposed against skills as in the second statement, the preservice teachers were more divided in their responses. A mean score of preservice teachers' responses for all three questions

was 2.358 which are slightly above the middle point suggesting that they are more inclined to agree that meaning making plays a significant role in reading.

Upon analyzing the literacy memories one characteristic the vast majority of preservice teachers had in common was a strong oral family tradition and/or frequent and rich literacy interactions with parents, siblings and/or extended family members. The following quote is typical of the comments found in the literacy memories, "Reading was such a central aspect of my childhood that it was second nature for me to pick up a book and read for enjoyment." Throughout the literacy memories the preservice teachers did not have vivid memories of classroom comprehension instruction as evidenced by this representative quote, "Although I probably received reading instruction from teachers, I do not recall anything about it."

Positive memories of reading comprehension instruction were included in some of the memories but the most powerful memories of schooling were negative associations. "I thought that reading and writing were boring" or "I remember taking state tests and only having half of the numbers bubbled in for the section on reading and comprehension. From what I can remember, I never finished one section on a state test." There were no specific references to comprehension instruction in school although two students made reference to a popular reading supplement used in elementary classrooms in the 1970-80's. In these reading supplements children read short stories printed on cards and answered questions based on the stories. One preservice teacher revealed that "if I was not reading at the same level or higher than my friends, I felt inferior. I know that on more than one occasion I tried to 'bluff' my way through a quiz to get to the next level." One preservice teacher believed this practice "helped teach reading comprehension skills but the questions at the end of each story did not challenge students to use higher order thinking skills." Another preservice teacher spoke about not applying herself in her early school experiences and when entering fifth grade "realiz[ed] the importance of literacy in life and education." To improve her reading comprehension she began to read material of her choosing and therefore increased the amount of reading which in turn, she believed, increased her reading comprehension. Another student who specifically mentioned comprehension did so in the context of her parents reading aloud to her. After the read aloud was completed her parents would discuss and ask questions. "Through our discussions and interaction with the text, I was able to develop basic reading comprehension skills that would later be helpful in school, church, and home."

Conclusions And Implications

The majority of preservice teachers aligned themselves with valuing comprehension, but when juxtaposed against skills, the preservice teachers were more divided in their responses. Although the preservice teachers value comprehension, the value that many of them placed on skills separate from comprehension suggests that they do not have a strong foundation between skills and strategies and the relationship each has with reading comprehension.

Literacy modeled in the home was a strong theme for many of the preservice teachers. Having significant adult role models and positive teachers was influential. None of the forty preservice teachers in the study recalled comprehension instruction as part of their memories in school. References to comprehension focused on authentic reading engagements at home, reading with siblings or parents, or talking about texts with parents.

Lastly, a preponderance of the preservice teachers could speak to the importance of comprehension as part of the reading process citing global strategies. The preservice teachers,

aside from their personal experiences, recognized that comprehension involved skills, strategies and an understanding of conventions.

Having each taught reading methods classes for several years, we realized as a result of this inquiry that we were not always meeting our preservice teachers' needs when it came to teaching them how to teach comprehension. Specifically, after analyzing this data and coming to understand what our preservice teachers actually understood about the teaching of comprehension at the beginning of instruction, we realized that our past teaching was most likely outside preservice teachers' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). By thoroughly analyzing what preservice teachers know at the onset of the semester, we now have the opportunity to tailor our instruction in a way that activates our preservice teachers' background knowledge allowing our teaching to be more purposeful.

This study speaks to the importance of asking more than the occasional open-ended question, "What do you know about comprehension instruction?" This study speaks to asking deliberate detailed questions in a variety of ways allowing professors to craft a comprehensive picture of what preservice teachers understand. There is also value in acknowledging gaps and voids in preservice teachers' understandings. Specifically, what aren't preservice teachers saying when they talk about comprehension instruction and reading as a meaning making process?

We believe this study addresses the importance of having knowledge of your preservice teachers' instructional level. Specifically, if preservice teachers have limited understanding of comprehension instruction, which may be defined as answering the questions at the end of the chapter, then how we teach our preservice teachers needs to be within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The results of this research calls for further inquiry concerning what preservice teachers understand regarding the teaching of reading comprehension. Because our focus in this article is to demonstrate what our preservice teachers brought to the reading methods class and because we were methodical in examining their base knowledge, it seems equally prudent that we examine their understanding of comprehension instruction at the end of the reading method classes. With instruction, what then do our preservice teachers understand about teaching comprehensions instruction? Understanding the "how" of how preservice teachers come to understand the teaching of reading comprehension is equally important. Furthermore, there is a need for a specific literacy class focusing on comprehension instruction providing ample opportunity for both depth and breadth in learning.

As we conclude this article, a preservice teacher's words resonate in our thoughts, "literacy is no easy word to define. Many can read in this country, but how many truly comprehend what they read. Literacy to me is hard to explain fully."

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