

From Perception To Practice: Improving Literacy Pedagogy Through Field-Based Inquiry

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Abstract

For over a century, approaches to reading instruction have been a volatile issue in education. The controversy regarding instructional approaches is evidenced in the context of educators' beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom. Much has been done in the way of research regarding the relationship between a teacher's theoretical beliefs and practice in the classroom. However, there is a lack of research surrounding early field experience and the possible influence on preservice teachers' philosophical viewpoints. The purpose of this study is to explore preservice teachers' theoretical orientations and how they inform their practices during early field experiences.

Introduction

All human beings are influenced by theories they use throughout their daily lives. Whether people are aware of the theories that inform their decisions and opinions, their existence is ever present. Tracey and Morrow (2012) note one of the most important reasons for understanding theories is that most all behavior is linked to the individuals' theories (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). In the classroom, teachers make instructional decisions everyday based upon

student learning needs. These decisions are influenced by the theories to which the teacher subscribes.

It is necessary teachers understand and internalize the theories that inform their instruction yet it is something few consider. As a result, this often leaves teachers unable to provide an informed argument regarding their choice of instructional procedures and materials (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). However, when teachers have a working understanding of the theories that frame their instruction, they are better equipped to connect theory to practice.

It is important to consider the learning theories that inform teachers' beliefs regarding how children learn to read. Teachers who adhere to a behaviorist decoding perspective believe they are primarily responsible for student learning and use direct instruction to teach specific reading concepts and skills. According to Tracey and Morrow (2012), direct instruction is the most common approach to teaching reading and is done by the following steps: 1) giving students specific objectives 2) designing instructional strategies 3) designing instructional procedures 4) selecting examples 5) sequencing skills and 6) providing opportunities for practice and review (p.49).

Another approach to reading is the skills perspective, an example of cognitivism. Using this perspective to inform instructional decisions, teachers pay particular attention to students' perceptual abilities, short-term and long-term memory, and executive control processes (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Teachers that adhere to a skills perspective are in favor of using guided reading as an approach to reading instruction, with leveled readers a mainstay in the classroom. Along with this, cognitive-based instruction in the classroom includes strategies such as reciprocal questioning, graphic organizers, and interactive writing.

Additionally, whole language perspective, an example of constructivism. This top-down philosophy of reading is based on Dewey's foundational work (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Teachers that subscribe to this philosophical approach to learning believe that the reader is an active agent in their own learning, constructing meaning from the text based on prior experiences. The teacher uses literature-based units as a platform for student learning and discussion. Students problem solve, brain storm, complete K-W-L-S charts, and create story webs as active learners responding and making connections to the text.

According to Ketner, Smith, and Parnell (2001), theoretical orientations are on somewhat of a fluid continuum, meaning our perspectives are not fixed. In fact, experiences not only shape our practices, but also intersect with the theories that support them. It is quite common to slide on the continuum and merge both decoding and skill perspectives, and skill and whole language perspectives. It is not possible however, to merge decoding and whole language perspectives as one is too divergent from the other (Ketner, Smith, & Parnell, 2001).

Need for Research

A substantial amount of research has been conducted regarding the relationship between teachers' theoretical conceptions and their instructional practices. Pajares (1992) reported that in order to understand how teachers develop their theoretical conceptions, the difference between beliefs and knowledge must first be considered. Stansell and Robert (1979) posited that preservice teachers' theoretical orientations are influenced by teachers at the university, which are often countered during practicum settings by the supervising teachers' orientations. Pesce (1990) noted that graduate-level training was found to influence teachers' endorsement of whole language approach. Further, Richards, Gipe, and Thompson (1987) found that teachers with

diverse experience and education often subscribed to a whole language approach, compared to less experienced teachers who were most likely to endorse a phonics approach. However, there is a gap in research surrounding the possibility of field experience effecting preservice teachers' personally held theories regarding literacy acquisition. Specifically, this study will address the following question:

1. Does the type of field experience preservice teachers experience affect their perceptions regarding children's literacy acquisition?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this quasi-experimental study were eleven students enrolled in two sections of literacy classes at a university. The participants were divided into two groups based on their enrollment. Participants in the control group (n=4) enrolled in a beginning literacy methods course with a corresponding internship and experienced 40 observation-only hours in the classroom teaching one lesson. Participants in the experimental group (n=7) enrolled in an advanced literacy methods course with a work-intensive internship and experienced an autonomous eight week literacy tutoring internship, teaching 16 lesson plans and writing a teaching portfolio.

Procedure

As mentioned above, the participants were divided into their perspective groups depending upon the course in which they were enrolled. While both groups received instruction regarding literacy acquisition, the field experiences were significantly different. The control group received a standard field observation experience consisting of 40 observation-only hours.

The experimental group received the additional treatment of an autonomous eight week literacy tutoring internship field experience. Tutoring focused on application of word recognition and comprehension skills and related aspects of reading instruction by tutoring children with reading deficiencies. Participants used an assortment of assessments to diagnose and tutor children. Assessments were given to the children before, during, and after the tutoring experience to help preservice teachers develop and implement appropriate instructional strategies and interventions necessary to increase student literacy achievement.

To assess participants' theoretical orientations, all participants took the likert scale Theoretical Orientation of Reading Profile, or TORP, (DeFord, 1985) at the beginning and end of the semester. This instrument was chosen because it is a reliable and valid means of assessing theoretical orientations in reading (DeFord, 1985).

Data Analysis

The extent of how educators' theoretical orientations influence student learning can be measured using reliable instrumentation such as the Theoretical Orientation of Reading Profile (TORP) (DeFord,1985). The TORP, a Likert scale response system, was designed to measure teachers' beliefs about literacy instruction (DeFord, 1985), thereby identifying teachers' theoretical orientation to reading. The TORP consists of 28 questions representing three different theoretical approaches to reading: 1) Decoding perspective: A bottom-up behaviorist philosophy 2) Skills perspective: A blended cognitive philosophy, and 3) Whole Language perspective: A constructivist top-down philosophy (DeFord, 1985).

To determine whether participants in the experimental group changed their theoretical orientations after field experience, the results from the TORP were analyzed. After calculating

the individual scores of both the pre- and post-tests, the numerical data was matched to the perspective categories representing the theoretical orientations.

Results

A between-groups one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the impact of different field experience on theoretical orientation (Group 1: observation-only field experience; Group 2: practicum field experience). The outcome variable of the posttest was found to be normally distributed and equal variances are assumed based upon Levene's test ($F(11) = .979, p = .348$). Equal variances of the pretest are also assumed ($F(11) = 3.31, p = .102$). There was a statistically significant difference in theoretical orientations for the two groups. Posttest: ($F(1,11) = 10.74, p = .01$); Pretest: ($F(1,11) = 10.39, p = .01$). To analyze and compare the results from the pretest-posttest data within the groups, a paired-samples t-test was used. This analysis indicated that theoretical orientation scores were not significantly different for the pretest ($M=67.9, SD=11.74$) when compared to the posttest ($M=69.36, SD=3.76$), $t(11) = -.244, p > .05$. I believe this statistical insignificance is due to the small sample size of the study.

Discussion

Based on the research surrounding in-service teachers' theoretical orientations of reading, we predicted that different field experiences would have an impact on preservice teachers' orientations. We found evidence to suggest there is a statistically significant difference when comparing preservice teachers' orientations and the literacy course with corresponding field experience in which they were enrolled. However, there wasn't enough evidence to indicate if the change of their orientations was due only to the type of field experience. We believe the lack

of evidence is primarily due to the small sample size. When comparing group means of the pretest and posttest, the mean scores decreased for group one and increased for group two. This means that after the field experiences, group one moved further on the theoretical continuum towards a behaviorist, bottoms-up philosophy while those in group two moved towards a blended to top-down philosophy.

Future research using a larger sample size representative of the population is needed to further investigate the possible influence field experience has on preservice teachers' theoretical orientations. Specifically, we are interested in controlling for instructor orientation as the literature indicates the university professor as a predominate influence on preservice teachers' orientation and practice (Stansell & Robert, 1979). The most constructive use of this research is to help teachers and researchers alike understand how theoretical orientations are constructed, modified, and influenced in order to create meaningful field experiences in teacher preparation programs.

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