

LOOKING WITHIN: A STUDY OF AN UNDERGRADUATE READING METHODS COURSE

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The current interest in examining and restructuring reading teacher education is due in part to criticism that professors of education do not subject their own teaching to the same degree of rigorous examination that they undertake when studying elementary and secondary school teaching. A related criticism is the apparent mismatch between what is professed as sound instruction and the manner of instruction used in teacher education. In other words, it has become increasingly obvious that university teaching should exemplify the type of innovative instruction recommended for teaching reading.

Some educational researchers have responded by studying various models of teacher education as they restructure their own approaches to teaching (e.g., Herrmann & Sarracino, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1989). Their innovations in reading teacher education reflect a move away from the competency-based model (learning observable skills identified with effective reading instruction) and a traditional craft (apprenticeship with and observation of excellent teachers) toward an inquiry-oriented approach (Alvermann, 1990). The inquiry model is characterized by terms such as "reflective practice," "reflection-in-action," "teachers are researcher," and "teacher as decision-maker" (Calderhead, 1989).

In light of the call for more self-study in teacher education and changing views on ways to teach reading methods courses, we decided to investigate the following question: How do approaches to teaching six sections of a reading methods course that differ to the extent to which they adopt an inquiry orientation affect preservice teachers' perceptions of (a) their preparedness to teach reading, (b) the relevancy of the course, and (c) the influence of grading procedures?

BACKGROUND

At our university all elementary school majors are required to enroll in a reading methods course (ERD 342) entitled "The Teaching of Reading to Early Elementary Children." Professors who teach this course have indicated dissatisfaction with students' level of commitment and interest in the course content, with the degree to which the course broadened students' perspectives, and with the effect the course was

having on students' field-based teaching immediately following the course. In the fall of 1991, one professor radically changed his approach to this course from a competency-based model to an inquiry model. The professor's positive reaction to these changes led some graduate students and faculty who teach other sections of the course to undertake various innovations as well. The result was that one course section was very inquiry-oriented, whereas others represented various elements associated with competency-based, traditional-craft, and inquiry-oriented teaching.

DESCRIPTIONS OF COURSE SECTIONS

The following descriptions of each course section were generated from course syllabi, classroom observations (except in one section), informal interviews, and one structured interview with each instructor. The descriptions highlight the respective instructors' intentions in teaching the course, their course organization, and their approach to evaluating students. We have given a long and short descriptive name to each section and present them in order from more traditional to more inquiry oriented.

The Lecture and Issues Section (Lecture)

The structure of this section was determined primarily by the instructor. The instructor unilaterally made decisions related to evaluation, materials, content, and class activities. Class periods were typically divided into two parts. The first part was a lecture on the assigned readings and a question-and-answer session. In the second part students met in groups to discuss a major topic or issue in reading, followed by reports from each group. Course grades were based on a thematic unit, midterm, and final examination.

The Theory into Practice Section (Theory/Practice)

The emphasis in this section was on practical approaches useful in teaching reading. This was supported by discussions of issues in reading instruction, lectures on theory, and readings from five books. The readings complemented a list of lesson types that students took turns teaching to the rest of the class. Students had input when they chose whether to be evaluated with quizzes, midterm, and final, or on projects. Students who chose projects again had input into the nature of the project (e.g., one-third of the class chose tutoring once a week.).

The Dialectical Discussion Section (Discussion)

The intention in this section was to engage students in dialectical exchanges about the content in their textbook. Students discussed general statements about the teaching of reading that they responded to in conjunction with their reading assignments. Students also presented a demonstration lesson based on the contents of an article from *The Reading Teacher*. Students wrote a reflective evaluation on their demonstration lesson conducted for the class and assigned themselves a letter grade.

The remainder of the course grade was determined by the instructor who gave quizzes to assess students' knowledge of phonics generalizations and administered a final examination designed to test the application of knowledge about reading methods.

The Collaborative Study Guide Section (Study Guide)

The instructor's approach in this section was to set the course's structure while providing opportunities for student input in specified areas of the course. The instructor assigned readings but had pairs of students take turns designing chapter study guides. Class time was spent discussing the study guides, writing in dialogue journals, reading children's literature, and discussing how to design literacy activities based on tradebooks. The course grade was based on completing study guides, taking a mid-term quiz and final exam based on the student-generated study guides, and compiling a portfolio. The portfolio involved creating an annotated bibliography of 10 children's books, writing a lesson plan to accompany a children's book, and reflecting on past and present learning experiences.

The Decision-making with Portfolio Section (Decision-Making)

The emphasis in this course section was that teachers are professionals and "must not rely on other experts or a prepackaged set of ideas." The instructor's goal was to develop preservice teachers' sense of themselves as decision-makers in control of their own learning. At the beginning of the course, the instructor presented a framework for the course based on one text, engaged students in whole-class activities designed to stimulate their thinking, and suggested main topics that might be explored. Portfolio assessment was used to promote self-reflection and to determine each student's final course grade. In the beginning of the course, each student met with the instructor to discuss their portfolio and how it could be used to assess their learning. Students were encouraged to engage in self-assessment and to set their own goals for attendance and professionalism.

The Constructivist with Portfolio Section (Constructivist)

The content for this course proceeded directly from students' needs and interests as they pertain to teaching children to read in elementary school. The rationale was based on a constructivist view of learning and emphasized personal reflection. The course began with a survey of some 20 reading methods textbooks to ascertain the kind of topics commonly covered in preparing teachers of reading. Students used this information to make decisions about topics to study. They independently sought readings related to the content they had identified as important to study. The instructor used class time for discussions about independent readings and activities designed to stimulate students' thinking about issues that students might wish to pursue. Students' course grades were based exclusively on an open-ended portfolio that was to document their self-reflection, intellectual growth, and awareness of underlying principles over isolated facts. The instructor also constructed a portfolio to document and to evaluate his role in teaching the course.

METHOD

Participants

There were two groups of participants in this study, one being the instructors who taught the six sections of the course. This group was comprised of three graduate teaching assistants, one assistant professor, and two associate professors. All had been classroom teachers for more than 5 years although their experience teaching this course varied. Their course evaluations for these sections were all above average. The second group was comprised of 165 undergraduate students enrolled in the six course sections (enrollment per section ranged from 19 to 28). They were required to take this course, which was the first in a two-course sequence devoted to the teaching of reading.

Survey Questionnaire

We conducted our investigation by asking the student participants to complete a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was comprised of 11 Likert-scale items with a response range from 0 to 5. Each item was followed with a space for comments (the questionnaire is available from the first author). The questionnaire was administered at the end of the course by someone other than the students' instructor. Students were assured that the instructor would not see the completed surveys until the course grades had been filed and they were assured that their responses would be anonymous.

Analysis

Of the 165 undergraduates enrolled in the six course sections, 109 voluntarily returned the questionnaire. Their responses were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analyses involved computing mean ratings for each item and comparing means across course sections by using analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures. The qualitative analyses focused on analyzing students' comments for those items where statistically significant differences were found between course sections.

The qualitative analysis was conducted by three of the authors. We generated a coding system of categories and properties represented in the students' comments. The process of generating a coding system began with independent readings of comments to identify key words that summarized the main points. We met on two occasions to compare and discuss our individual application of code words to the data. This led to a provisional list of codes which we individually applied to the data (a final version of the coding scheme may be obtained from the first author). Again, we met to compare and discuss our coding. Consistency was maintained by comparing our individual coding and reconciling differences when necessary. The codes were entered into *Ethnograph* (Seidel, 1988), a computer program that allows for systematic searches of coded segments. These searches were used to identify patterns and themes that contributed to our understanding of the students' reactions to the different course sections.

RESULTS

We report on three questionnaire items that addressed major points of interest and that yielded statistically significant differences. We also report the qualitative analyses of comments offered for these items.

Students' Confidence about Teaching Reading

For the question "How confident are you that you are acquiring knowledge and having experiences that will enable you to be a successful teacher of reading?" A one-way ANOVA indicated a main effect for course section [$F(5, 101)=3.37$, $MS_e=3.02$, $p<.007$]. Post hoc comparisons (Fisher PLSD) revealed significant differences ($p<.05$) between the Constructivist section ($M=2.56$, $SD=.85$) and each of the other five sections (Decision-making, $M=3.71$, $SD=.85$; Study Guide, $M=3.60$, $SD=.94$; Theory Practice, $M=3.54$, $SD=.64$; Lecture, $M=3.38$, $SD=1.04$; Discussion, $M=3.33$, $SD=1.07$).

On average the students in all sections were moderately confident that they were learning what they need to know to be effective teachers of reading, although students in the Constructivist section expressed a mean level of confidence that was significantly below the other five sections. To investigate further the students' confidence levels, we analyzed the 96 comments they made about this item and their responses to a follow-up question asking "To what do you attribute your confidence or lack of confidence regarding the teaching of reading?"

The most prevalent comment across all sections was about a lack of field experience. Approximately one-third (32) of the students said that their confidence would be greater when they gained teaching experience in elementary school classrooms. The following comment is typical:

I feel I will be more confident once I get into the classroom and gain experience with teaching reading. I attribute my lack of confidence to my lack of experience (student in Discussion section).

Furthermore, it was clear that lacking field experience did not always mean they were dissatisfied with the course work:

ERD 342 was a great course. It gave us background knowledge of literacy learning. However, we did not have very many experiences in teaching reading in this class (student in Decision-Making section).

It is interesting to note that comments about lacking field experience were made by students who rated themselves as very confident (10), moderately confident (15), and not confident (7). A perception of needing field experience in conjunction with a reading methods course seems important irrespective of the students' level of confidence.

Approximately one-fourth (22) of the students felt that they did not know how to teach reading despite completing a reading methods course:

I just don't feel like I could teach a child to read if I were asked to (student in Study Guide section).

There were 10 such comments made in the Study Guide section. In four of the other course sections there were 2 to 4 comments about not knowing how to teach reading, but no such comments appeared among students in the Theory/Practice section.

Relevancy of Course Work

Students were asked to rate and to comment on the relevancy of their course work to the realities of teaching reading in elementary school. The mean responses for each section reveals that students viewed the Theory/Practice section as most relevant. However, each of the other sections was rated moderately to highly relevant.

There was a significant main effect on this item [$F(5, 100)=6.01$, $MS_e=5.09$, $p<.0001$]. Students in the Theory/Practice section found their course work significantly more relevant ($M=4.60$, $SD=.51$) than did students in the Discussion ($M=3.64$, $SD=.67$), Lecture ($M=3.23$, $SD=1.24$) and Constructivist ($M=3.13$, $SD=1.26$) sections. In this section approximately one-third of the students chose to tutor in elementary schools for one of their grade requirements, and this experience might have led students to rate the course as highly relevant.

To investigate further what contributed to relevancy, we examined the comments provided by students who rated their course section as highly relevant (33) and those who rated their section as less than relevant (8). Two factors that contributed to relevancy were: (a) the extent to which there was attention given to different approaches to teaching reading, and (b) the instructor's use of examples taken from his or her own teaching experiences in elementary schools.

Effect of Grading Procedures

One of the factors that distinguished the six sections was the manner in which students were evaluated and graded. The Constructivist and Decision-Making sections used portfolio assessment exclusively, whereas the Study Guide section combined a portfolio project with exams. The Lecture, Discussion, and Theory/Practice sections used quizzes, exams, projects, and/or presentations to determine grades. To investigate the effect of the different types of evaluation, we sought responses to the question: "To what extent do you think the grading procedures used affected your performance in ERD 342?" Respondents were also asked to comment about the ways in which the grading policies and procedures affected their interest and ability to learn about the teaching of reading. Mean differences on this questionnaire item only approached significance ($F=2.174$, $MS_e=3.76$, $p=.063$). Nevertheless, students in the two sections that used portfolios exclusively had mean ratings (Decision-making, $M=4.04$, $SD=.98$; Constructivist, $M=4.00$, $SD=.39$) that were higher than students in the other four sections that did not use portfolios exclusively (Theory/Practice, $M=3.47$, $SD=1.50$; Discussion, $M=3.25$, $SD=1.28$; Lecture, $M=3.23$, $SD=1.48$; Study Guide, $M=3.00$, $SD=1.27$).

Because portfolio assessment may have contributed to higher student ratings on this item, we examined responses to the following: "Please comment about the ways in which the grading policies and procedures impacted your interest and ability to learn about teaching reading." Across sections there were many more favorable comments (27) than unfavorable ones (7) regarding the grading policies. In regard to

portfolio assessment, there were many favorable comments (16) such as the following:

Due to the fact that this course was strictly a portfolio, I felt that I never wanted to put an end to my learning not just because of the grade I might receive, but because of my personal growth (student in Constructivist section).

Although there were many students who expressed favorable views about portfolio assessment, there were other students who strongly disapproved of it (6). Their criticisms center around the stress they felt because course grades were determined solely on this one opportunity to exhibit their learning:

I think it affected my performance a great deal. I had never done a portfolio before and I was very stressed about my grade for it (student in Decision-Making section).

CONCLUSIONS

The results allow us to draw tentative conclusions about students' perceptions of six different ways of teaching reading methods courses. Our tentativeness comes from a recognition that only 66% of students completed the questionnaire and we did not conduct in-depth interviews with students from each course section. In light of these limitations, we conclude the following.

First, students tend to maintain only moderate levels of confidence in their preparedness to teaching reading, regardless of the instructor's approach. Across the six sections, students' comments clearly indicated that their confidence was linked to their belief in the importance of field experience in preparing them to teach reading. There was a statistically significant difference between the Constructivist section which was the most inquiry oriented and other sections. The lower confidence ratings seem to be related to the instructor's application of the inquiry model in that topics were ill defined and students had primary responsibility for their own learning. Students accustomed to more teacher-directed instruction seemed anxious about the ambiguity inherent in this approach.

The seriousness of students' expression of insecurity is related to what one assumes is the objective in teaching reading methods courses. If one believes that taking a course on the teaching of reading in elementary school should lead to feeling fully prepared to teach reading, then the students' expressed lack of confidence is troubling. If on the other hand, one believes that taking a course on the teaching of reading should provide a foundation from which students can continue to learn about teaching reading through experience in the classroom and additional course work, then there will be less concern with this finding.

Second, students' ratings of course relevancy for the Theory/Practice section were higher, perhaps because some students had an opportunity to tutor elementary school children. Likewise, students' comments indicated that their perceptions of a course's relevancy was linked to the instructor presenting a variety of approaches to teaching reading and to the use of real teaching examples from the instructor's experiences.

Third, inquiry-oriented approaches to teaching may be accompanied by more open-

ended evaluation and grading practices, which was the case in the present study. The two sections using more inquiry-oriented approaches used portfolios exclusively to assign grades. Students' ratings in these sections indicated that grading procedures influenced their performance, and their comments indicated that for the most part they believed the influence to be positive.

Combining our teaching experiences with the present findings, we believe that students' perceptions are the result of a complex interaction among many factors including the instructor's approach, grading procedures, the degree to which course components deviate from traditional college courses, and most clearly from this study, the degree to which teaching experience is integrated into the course. The extent to which these six course sections were inquiry oriented, traditional craft, or competency based did not significantly alter students' perceptions regarding their preparedness to teach reading. We suspect that what is needed are more systemic changes. Across the United States, colleges and universities are undertaking bold experiments in teacher education. For example, at our university an experimental program in elementary education is underway. It is being conducted by a team of instructors working cooperatively to provide a program of study based on a constructivist epistemological orientation with emphases on multiculturalism, reflectivity, equity, and early field experience.

In closing, we note that undertaking this study has had a positive influence on teaching in our department. The study has generated more discussion over lunch and in the hallways than would have occurred otherwise and consequently more interest in and attention to how we can better prepare pre-service teachers to teach reading.

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