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From Reading Clinic to Reading Community

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This paper discusses the shift from a clinic model to a community model for the practicum experience for literacy education graduate students. The traditional program for the remediation of struggling readers followed a deficit model. Therefore, the reading specialist would pull out the child from regular classroom instruction to isolate a reading problem using standardized assessments and then to remediate the problem with programmed instruction. While the shifts in the understanding of the reading process which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s influenced instruction and assessment and the role of the reading specialist, researchers have found that instruction of struggling readers still tend to be routinized. This has often resulted in what appears to be a lack of personalization, a disregard of experiences, strengths and vulnerabilities that the child brings to the tutoring situation. Therefore, the process of transitioning from a clinic to community model described in this article was made based on the belief that today's reading clinic component of a literacy specialist program needs to equip its graduate students to face the challenges of the classroom as well as the challenges in transcending their prior understandings and experiences teaching reading.

The reading clinic component of any literacy or reading specialist program is charged with ensuring its graduate students have the skills necessary for meeting current challenges in the schools. These courses should provide unique opportunities for graduate students to work, one-on-one, with a struggling reader, thus putting into practice theories and strategies learned in earlier courses. Additionally, the experience of actively translating theory into practice should help graduate students articulate, consider, and reconsider those theories as they make the transition from teachers to literacy leaders. As many graduate students are in-service teachers, they face additional challenges in this transition. Many teachers encounter diverse learners in their urban classrooms and are mandated to use specific literacy programs. As a result, they face challenges transcending their prior understandings and experiences of teaching reading as they assume the role of literacy specialist. (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Seldon, & Wallis, 2002; Cobb, 2004).

As faculty in a Literacy Specialist program at an urban college, we set as one of our goals to prepare graduate students for the professional challenges ahead. In particular, we feel it important to prepare them to feel confident in their abilities in meeting the needs of struggling readers, to establish a repertoire of effective strategies, and to recognize and move through the challenges of working with struggling readers. To do this, we constructed a two-course practicum experience centered on an after school-tutoring program called Literacy Space. We wanted to know (1) what students found challenging when working with struggling readers over two semesters and (2) what practices and strategies they perceived as effective when working with struggling readers.

This article describes the Literacy Space practicum and our shift from a clinic model to a community model for the practicum experience for literacy education graduate students. We then discuss the challenges and successes our graduate students articulated as they planned and implemented instruction to struggling first, second, and third grade readers they tutored in Literacy Space. Finally, we consider the implications of courses such as ours for the preparation of literacy specialists.

From clinic to community: Shifts in the reading practicum

Traditionally, the reading specialist worked with remedial students in a pullout program, isolating reading problems using standardized assessments and giving direct one-on-one instruction in a small office. The focus of the tutoring sessions was to remediate weaknesses the student exhibited on a standardized test. The traditional program did not seek to find students' strengths, only their most vulnerable areas. This model has often been equated to a medical or skill deficit model (Carr, 2003, Vogt & Shearer, 2003).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a major shift in our understanding of the reading process emphasized the importance of authentic reading and writing (Balajthy & Lipa-Wade, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1978; Smith, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Instead of viewing reading as a collection of discreet skills to be mastered one at a time, theorists and practitioners recognized the interrelatedness of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Conversations and research about reading instruction and materials began to include new insights from the fields of psychology and linguistics. Influenced by the work of theorists and researchers such as Rosenblatt (1978) and Vygotsky (1978), teachers began weighing the importance of schema theory, prior knowledge, and interaction between reader and the text. This led to a change in conversations around instruction and engagement of students in the learning process. "Instead of focusing on the finite skills that readers develop, educators began talking about how to build students' backgrounds, promote concept formation, instill joy and delight in reading, and forge connections among the language processes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking," (Vogt & Shearer, 2003, p. 16). There was a shift to develop and use contextual and holistic assessments in looking at what strengths children owned rather than focusing exclusively on their weaknesses (Carr, 2003; Farr, 1992).

Yet McGill-Franzen and Allington (2005) reported curriculum for children working with a specialist differed from specialist to specialist and "was every bit as routinized as their work in the general classroom, with no evidence that instruction was personalized to address the needs or performance of individuals," (p. 177). Similarly, Lipson and Wixson

(1997) posited that one-size-fits-all programs for assessment and instruction were antithetical to effective practice. In a discussion of change in the literacy classroom, Cobb (2004) asserted that the “responsive specialist” needed to be attuned to the differences among learners. This would aid the specialist in using the unique experiences, strengths and vulnerabilities learner brought to the tutoring situation to provide information about how the child acquired literacy. This was not a new concept; Luke (1994) discussed the social construction and literacy in the classroom and suggested the reading specialist should examine how this unique information about each student informed best instruction for that particular child.

Literacy Space: An Opportunity for Professional Growth

The Masters in Literacy Birth through Grade 6 program offered at our urban college included a two semester practicum experience working with struggling readers in two different contexts. The primary experience is an after school tutoring program called Literacy Space. Here, graduate students at the end of their 37 credit course sequence worked once a week with a first, second, or third grade struggling reader within a community setting. At the same time, the graduate students tutored a fourth, fifth, or sixth grade student in an outside setting, communicating with each other through Blackboard.

In designing graduate students’ experiences in the practicum component, called Literacy Space, we wanted them to have the opportunity to be reflective of their best practice and seek advice from their instructors and their colleagues. The course structure facilitated this. During the first 75 minutes of the class the students met with their tutees. Although sessions were individually tailored to the needs of the child, they typically included activities to develop automatic word recognition, strategic knowledge, and language comprehension as offered by McKenna and Stahl (2003). For example, a session might consist of twenty minutes of reading *Sheep in a Jeep* by Nancy Shaw with the initial focus on developing concept of story and recall. Highlighting tape would then be used to identify all the long /e/ words in the story. The graduate student would put those words on index cards for the tutee for a

word sort activity during a later session. Finally, the tutee would listen to the book on tape and chorally read along to develop fluency.

We met in both an open room filled with a variety of texts, art materials, games, and manipulatives. There were also several smaller rooms for students to use if they wanted to tape record reading, use the computers, or felt they needed a quieter setting.

Following their work with children, graduate students participated in weekly hour-long seminars which were a balance of instructor led discussions of relevant theoretical implications and tutor generated discussion and questions raised by their tutoring experiences.

The two Literacy Space courses were designed to give graduate students the opportunity to put into practice their conceptual understandings and theoretical perspectives while working with struggling readers. We believed our graduate students needed an opportunity to be creative, reflective, and adaptive literacy leaders while increasing their abilities and knowledge base. Drawing on the work of Herrmann and Sarracino (1993), Roskos, Boehlen, and Walker (2000), Tatum (2004), we designed these two courses in order for our graduate students to meet the multifaceted demands of literacy leadership in urban schools.

When Roskos et al. (2000) studied the teacher's role in creating a system to support student learning in a reading clinic, they incorporated a time when the students could reflect on the one-to-one tutoring sessions with their colleagues. Not only could concepts be examined and text-based knowledge interwoven into the conversations, but students could seek advice from colleagues. Putnam and Borko (2000) indicated that when a diverse group of teachers come together in a community, they could draw upon and incorporate each others' expertise into their own teaching and learning situation. We believed it was critical to develop and incorporate activities that would enable our graduate students to deeply reflect upon their tutoring sessions. We developed a Daily Record of Activities sheet (see Appendix) for graduate students to record activities used with the children and reflect on what they learned about

their tutee from the activity in order to inform instruction in the immediate future. As Roskos and her colleagues discovered,

Although learning by doing also seems critical, what may need greater emphasis is not the actual “doing” or practice teaching, but the learning it affords made visible through artifacts, such as detailed field notes, checklists, or written self-reflections, and well-assisted regular debriefings about specific teaching incidents, (p. 232).

We also used the on-line course system, Blackboard, to hold on-line discussions about the tutoring sessions. In this way the graduate students in Literacy Space used Blackboard discussions as a time to reflect, integrate their learning and their practice as well as seek advice from their colleagues.

It was also important for the instructors of the courses offered in Literacy Space to be reflective practitioners as well. Herrmann and Sarracino (1993) found the opportunity, when restructuring their literacy methods course, for self-renewal and reflection as practitioners. We designed the weekly Blackboard prompts from the beginning of their second semester. The content of the prompts reflected our perception of the students’ most pressing issues. They were designed to extend and deepen classroom conversations. The prompts served two purposes. First, we wanted to stimulate reflective, collegial conversation among the graduate students with respect to their work with children. Secondly, the postings on Blackboard would help the instructors meet the short term needs of the graduate students and provide insights into how the courses might further be restructured to better prepare graduates for their role as literacy leaders.

Methodology

Graduate Student Participants

The 28 participants in this study were matriculated graduate students in a Masters of Science in Literacy program in an urban city college. Twenty-five of these students were teachers of grades K- 8, two taught pre-school. The classroom experience of the 27 graduate students

who were teaching ranged from three to five years. One participant was working outside the field of education. There were 27 females and one male. Their ages ranged from 23 to early fifties. There were two sections of the course. The second author was the instructor of the course.

Data Collection and Analysis

After each meeting with the tutee, each graduate student completed a Daily Record of Activity sheet which provided space to briefly record activities, future plans, and reflections about the session.

As a part of their course assignments, students were required to participate in weekly online discussions on Blackboard. Blackboard discussions had been a part of several earlier courses and students were experienced with this type of assignment. This was designed to give graduate students the opportunity to reflect on their experience while using their lesson plans, notes, and Daily Activity Sheets as a basis for discussion. It allowed them to share their best practices, their concerns, and pressing challenges working with their tutees.

The data for this study were drawn from Blackboard discussions that occurred during the second semester from the fourth week of the course to the end of a 15 week course. Graduate students had written three lesson plans for their tutees by the fourth week and had at least six more sessions for which to plan. The discussion prompts were given and students were asked to respond to each prompt and to respond to at least one other course participant. The open-ended prompts were:

Let's use this week to do two things: First share strategies that you've found effective with your student in Literacy Space and/or with students you've worked with in other settings. Be specific. Secondly, what do you find to be the biggest challenges of working with struggling readers?

There were 53 postings generated on Blackboard in response to the two prompts. All participants responded to the prompts. Some students identified more than one strategy or challenge; each was counted independently. There were 31 responses to the prompt concerning

effective strategies. There were 34 responses to the prompt concerning challenges.

Independently we read through the responses several times to determine initial coding themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Two questions guided our initial coding: (1) What are the common challenges the graduate students encounter during their tutoring sessions? and (2) What are the common activities employed by the graduate students with their tutees which they deem to be best practice?

Initially we developed two themes, *instructional challenges* and *personal challenges*, for coding of the challenges prompt. What we did not expect, but which the data indicated, were the specificity of the challenges. The two broad categories did not accurately describe the challenges expressed by our students in this course. We found instructional challenges could be broken down into six subcategories or themes and that personal challenges could be broken down into four subcategories or themes.

Our initial coding themes for the activities the graduate students employed centered around specific reading strategies such as comprehension or decoding. These themes did not accurately describe the diverse activities graduate students were employing to teach those strategies while individualizing instruction based on the tutee's strengths and interests. Therefore, we reexamined the data to look for any common activities used to teach specific strategies.

After several rounds of initial coding, whereby all Blackboard postings were read and reread, we found several categories or themes within the data. Each author independently coded the data using those themes. To establish inter-rater reliability we met to compare our coding. Any place we disagreed, we reanalyzed the data together, shared our thinking, and resolved all differences thus establishing 100 percent agreement in coding for themes. Finally we determined the frequency and percentage of occurrence of the themes.

Findings

We found two overarching themes among the challenges our graduate students faced while tutoring struggling readers: (1) the personal challenges and (2) instructional challenges.

Challenges

Graduate students tutoring struggling readers identified motivation as the most challenging dimension of working with struggling readers (Table 1). Nearly 30 percent of the graduate students discussed their concerns about motivating the struggling readers they taught.

Several students wrote about the difficulty in sustaining students' interest in the tutoring lessons they have planned:

The biggest struggle for me was getting her interested... It's a great challenge to motivate a student who knows that they are a struggling reader.

One of the struggles I am facing with William is keeping him interested in what we are reading.

My greatest struggle with Alyn has been captivating and maintaining his interest in literacy activities... He is not interested in literacy activities and tries to avoid them whenever possible.

Students' lack of interest challenged tutors to think differently about the readers with whom they were working.

Related to the concern about motivating students was graduate students' concern about prioritizing instruction. An integral component of the practicum course was the requirement that students develop individualized lesson plans, based upon the strengths and vulnerabilities of the struggling readers they had previously assessed. While the course framework provided students with tools to engage and instruct struggling readers, we did not proscribe a "one size fits all" approach towards

lesson plans. For many students, this responsibility challenged their comfort zone:

One of the things I struggle with is pinpointing and focusing on one thing at a time... I find that there are so many things I can work on and in the end I feel that I really didn't do anything at all. I need to work on quality as opposed to quantity.

I now feel that I need to plan my lessons to target comprehension skills and I am not sure where to begin. I can see that she needs a lot of work on retelling, sequencing, and identifying the important ideas in the story. Does it really matter what skills I focus on first?

Graduate students had the opportunity to reflect and articulate their challenges while tutoring in Literacy Space. Their on-line conversations assisted them to work through their challenges and meet the literacy needs of their tutees.

Table 1

Challenges expressed by graduate students

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of total responses	Examples
Personal			
Motivation	10	29	"The biggest struggle for me was to get her interested" "Keeping him interested in what we are reading" "Captivating and maintaining his interest in literacy activities"
Relationship with child	3	8	"You do not want to be too strict because you want them to come back. I find myself not being as assertive as I am in a classroom"
Feeling overwhelmed	2	5	"I felt very overwhelmed with the three lessons we had to prepare... I feel there is just so much I would like to help my

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of total responses	Examples
			student with but time is limited"
Limited previous experience	1	2	"I have never worked with young readers... this is a new learning experience for me.
Instructional			
Prioritizing instruction	7	20	"I am not sure where to begin... Does it really matter what skills I focus on first?" "I need to work on quality as opposed to quantity"
Individualizing instruction	5	14	"Another struggle that I have experienced is determining what instruction would best support her needs" "The biggest challenge I have found is finding the strategy that works best for each child"
Finding materials	4	11	"I have experienced difficulty finding books that she can successfully read that interest her" "If the book looks too easy he also shuts down. He also shuts down when the book looks too long... It's hard finding the more than one 'just right' book"
Accuracy of assessment	2	5	"Really pinpointing the real issue"
Lack of home support	1	2	"In spite of communications and suggestions, collaborative efforts are not easily established"
Fostering independence	1	2	"How do I know they are really using all those strategies by themselves or at home? I have to hope that all of my read teaching is being used when I am not looking!"

Strategies for Best Practice

According to Invernizzi, Landrum, Howell, and Warley (2005), "But an unintended side effect of a headlong rush toward science and accountability in assessment that does not take into account the practicalities of everyday teaching may create a disconnect between what assessments tell us about students' performance and what teachers need to know to instruct them," (p.610). Graduate students working with the children in Literacy Space employed many authentic assessments, informal and formal measures, in order to develop a profile of the children's strengths and vulnerabilities to inform their instruction. Rather than looking at the child to find what is missing or what is wrong with the child and fixing it, graduate students in Literacy Space looked at the difference of a child's performance and what the school expected the child to achieve and designed an instructional program to close the gap as suggested by Ruddell (2001). Through readings, discussions, and experience with a wide variety of materials in Literacy Space, students developed a plethora of strategies to meet the needs of their students. Through the Blackboard discussions with classmates, graduate students revealed their best practices.

It became evident that students were individualizing instruction based on children's interests and strengths. Thirty-one postings discussed 27 different activities to teach specific strategies the graduate students believed were most useful in working with their struggling reader. In 11 or 35 percent of the Blackboard entries, students mentioned matching books to the child's interests either by naming specific books that match a child's interest or a topic the child found interesting and how they were infusing strategies while using the books.

Several students used a child's artistic ability to integrate literacy strategies during instruction. Steffi (all names are pseudonyms) stated, "He also loves to color and draw. For the past three weeks I have been integrating different drawing activities into our reading and word work, which has made things flow more smoothly. One activity he enjoyed greatly was when I brought in a comic strip. After reading it we worked together to turn a story we had read into our own comic. He really liked combining drawing and writing onto the same activity." Chris has used

her child's artistic ability. "He loves to design and build projects, so we have created a boat, a car, and a model of the Statue of Liberty. We have written directions for each and created imaginary stories about the boat. We also read nonfiction works about the Statue of Liberty and wrote a report about what we learned." Carli found that capitalizing on her child's artistic ability helped to motivate her student. As she stated in one of her Blackboard postings:

One strategy that I have found successful when working with Craig has been inviting him to write 'off of' the pictures he draws as a way to motivate Craig to write. Craig is truly an excellent artist. He is also a very reluctant reader and writer...However, once I invited him to write about his own pictures, he wrote a whole page in one session.

Drawing was also used as a form of retelling. Students had their children draw events from a story, put them in order, and use their drawings as cues for retelling. In this way, students were tapping into their children's strengths to meet their literacy needs and help them make strides in their achievement.

Students used books which matched their child's interests to motivate them to write. Mickey found Rich's love of math and calculating numbers so began reading *The Math Curse* (Scieszka, 1995) as a springboard for writing his own book about numbers.

Diana found,

In order to get him to start writing, I have brought in a series of wordless books. This has allowed him to have a basis on which to tell a good story and focus on how he wants to say things, without the what to say getting in the way. This works well for him as he has a good imagination, but often forgets where he was while writing due to struggling with the physical act of writing and encoding. I am using these books as a starting point and then a pattern on which to fall back upon for his own original writing.

Many children were interested in fairy tales and students used them successfully for scaffolding. Since many variants of *Cinderella* and *The Three Little Pigs* were available to the children, students used the children's interest and background knowledge of the tales by reading a simple version of the tale and then proceeding through more difficult versions thus building word recognition and fluency while keeping a comfortable comprehension level.

Other strategies for comprehension and fluency students found successful while using high interest books were echo reading, the use of graphic organizers, rereading, recording the child reading, and discussion.

Students found that high quality books of the child's interest allowed for the child to stop and question when something did not make sense. Ann stated, "I have also found using a graphic organizer such as a story map strengthens Lief's comprehension." She goes on to state in another posting that graphic organizers are a good "visual aid for comprehension."

Sally suggested, "I really like the idea of reading the page first and then having the student read the same page in order to help his/her fluency and phrasing." Geri found, "I read it and have them echo me and when they are confident, I have them read it back to me on their own."

Using books on tape and having the child record him/her self while reading was found to be motivating. As Ann describes, "So, I tried listening to books on tape and he loves it. Then we went one step further and he read a book on tape. He loves it. It was like a game and he was so excited to hear his voice coming from the videotape."

Word study and building of sight words was addressed in game form with most of the children. One student created tongue twisters with words containing similar consonant blends and created a contest with a very competitive child. Students made concentration like games from sight words.

Students also expressed the need for ongoing assessment in order to plan instruction effectively. As Kate put it, “They must be taught how to use metacognition and apply it to their actual progress. This relates to the idea of ongoing assessment.” Diana said, “I also find that activities that are based on previous sessions are a benefit to him.” Reading conferences and miscue analyses as well as constantly being informed about the child’s interests were used periodically helped to inform best practices for these students.

The flexibility, physical design, and materials available in Literacy Space allowed students the freedom to plan with their children’s strengths and vulnerabilities at the forefront. Computers, a plethora of board games, puppets, art supplies, a well stocked library of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and magazines to match children’s interests gave the students the opportunity to design and implement instruction which illustrated best practices.

Conclusions and Implications

There was a tension that existed for the graduate students in Literacy Space as they gathered information about the unique literacy behaviors owned by their tutees and as they designed appropriate instruction for them. At the schools in which they worked, they were required to implement a purchased program as the school and staff struggled to meet the guidelines established by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). These graduate students often looked for a programmed response in designing instruction for their tutees. They were not as flexible with the “how” even though they knew “what” they should learn. Cobb (2004) found that teachers who were willing to change their instruction and revision their perspectives on teaching and learning were most effective in maximizing student learning.

Having the opportunity to articulate the challenges they faced while working with a struggling reader led the graduate students to relate their concerns to prioritizing and individualizing instruction for their tutees. Since no specific reading programs were available in Literacy Space for implementation in response to an assessed vulnerability, graduate students needed to be creative and reflective when designing instruction

for their tutees. This was a common theme on Blackboard as graduate students identified their challenges, designed instruction, and communicated with each other.

As evidenced in the Blackboard discussions, graduate students were asking their classmates for suggestions of strategies to use with their tutees tailored to meet specific goals in instruction. Graduate students were not routinized in their instruction but were being responsive specialists. The varied number of strategies being used with the children in Literacy Space indicated that graduate students were responding individually to the strengths and vulnerabilities of the children with whom they were working. There was no indication of any prepackaged or programmed lessons suggested by or adopted by the graduate students.

In asking for and giving suggestions to each other, they were able to differentiate instruction based on the child, the child's interests, and needs as evidenced by earlier assessments. Graduate students were drawing upon each others' expertise and incorporating that knowledge into their own teaching and learning situations with their tutees. Blackboard gave the students the forum in which to reflect on their own instructional strategies but to adapt other strategies which used by their colleagues in Literacy Space. The opportunity for discussion increased their repertoire of abilities and knowledge base.

A two semester sequence of courses allowed students to evolve from teachers to literacy specialists. The two semester sequence allowed them time to put theory into practice, to reflect on their own tutoring sessions, and identify their own challenges in the transformation from teacher to leader. By creating a system for the graduate students to support each other's learning, for coming together as a community, they were able to draw upon and incorporate each other's expertise.

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Appendix

DAILY RECORD OF ACTIVITIES

Student _____ Meeting Number _____
Date _____ Tutor _____

Activity	Diagnostic Implication	Reflection
Community Share		