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Negotiating Practicum Experiences in a Reading Specialist Preparation Program

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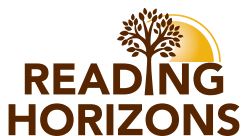Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

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READING HORIZONS

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─────────── **Abstract** ───────────

In this cross-case study, we examined how two reading specialist candidates negotiated their yearlong practicum experiences in relation to university coursework and their previous teaching experience. Data sources included interviews, weekly teaching logs, and field observations. Findings reported in extended vignettes reveal how both interns were placed in positions that required them to negotiate instructional expectations at their internship sites and practices advocated in their coursework. In both cases, those two realities were often at odds when they were required to implement a program with scripted lessons and a required pacing guide. The findings raise important questions about the impact of such experiences on reading specialist preparation and representation of the reading specialist role.

Keywords: reading specialist preparation, practicum experiences, qualitative cross-case study, vignettes

Preparing candidates for the complex role of a reading specialist requires opportunities to develop specialized knowledge about (a) literacy processes, (b) assessments that reveal students' competence related to those processes, and (c) specific instructional approaches and resources that can be used to support students in their literacy development. In addition, reading specialists are often called upon to provide leadership in curriculum design and to organize and deliver professional development. They also need to understand how to work and plan with teachers to provide instruction in classrooms or to coordinate instruction for students they work with outside the classroom (Bean et al., 2015). To meet these professional goals, the Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (ILA, 2018) require not only coursework but also supervised practicum/clinical experiences. In these settings, candidates have opportunities to "work with individual(s) and small groups of students at various grade levels to assess students' literacy strengths and needs, develop literacy intervention plans, implement instructional plans, create supportive literacy learning environment(s), and assess impact(s) on student learning" (p. 41).

There is a robust literature on the impact of practicum experiences for preservice teachers in their student teaching placements. In contrast, there is limited research on practicum experiences for reading specialist candidates. The purpose of the present study was to investigate how reading specialist candidates, who are certified teachers, negotiated

their practicum experiences in relation to coursework and teaching experience. Specifically, this study is an exploratory cross-case study of two candidates who were participants in a unique preparation program at a Research 1 university in the U.S. Northeast.

Practicum Experiences

According to the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation(CAEP), "effective partnerships and high-quality clinical practice are central to preparation so that candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to demonstrate positive impact on all P–12 students' learning and development" (CAEP, 2015, p. 6). Research studies have documented how student teachers are profoundly influenced by their field placement experiences and the mentors to whom they are assigned during that placement (Savage, Cannon, & Sutters, 2015; Sudzina, Giebelhaus, & Coolican, 1997; Sempowicz, & Hudson, 2012). As a result of such recommendations, as well as critiques and evaluations of teacher preparation programs, teacher educators are including more clinical experiences and establishing partnerships with local elementary schools to provide training and mentoring in classroom settings (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011).

Features of Effective Practicum Experiences: Collaboration, Adaptation, and Feedback

In an interesting study by Beck and Kosnick (2002), student teachers provided their insights about what constitutes a productive practicum experience. Among the features student teachers identified as being critical to their learning were (a) opportunities to collaborate on lesson planning and finding resources, (b) ability to flexibly adapt curriculum materials, and (c) substantive feedback on teaching enactments.

In a cross-professional investigation, Grossman and her colleagues (2009) identified three critical aspects of practicum experiences for candidates in the ministry, counseling, and teaching. Across these three professions, they identified opportunities for candidates to: (a) experience representations of important practices, (b) engage in analysis or decompositions of the practices, and (c) approximate or enact the practices with supportive coaching and feedback. In a teaching practicum, representations could include observing a teacher while she is teaching a lesson or studying a plan for enacting a specific instructional approach. Decompositions might involve analyzing resources to determine their purposes and the principles underlying their design. Approximations would include opportunities to plan and enact a lesson and receive feedback in a debriefing session or during the viewing of a video or reviewing a transcript of the lesson.

These two views of practicum experiences are congruent in several aspects. Specifically, both teaching candidates and teacher educators place value on mentors sharing practical knowledge related to planning and resources, and providing feedback on enactments. For reading specialist candidates, these attributes assume particular importance.

Features of Effective Reading Specialist Preparation: Opportunities for Supervised Fieldwork and Leadership Experiences

Researchers who have examined the effects of fieldwork and clinical experiences during the certification process for reading specialists assert that these are critical components in preparing candidates to fulfill their roles effectively (Frost & Bean, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Wepner & Quatroche, 2011). A general consensus emerging from these studies was that more fieldwork opportunities needed to be offered to candidates in order

for them to be proficient in working with students who would benefit from support and in providing resources and leadership to classroom teachers.

Bean, Swan, and Knaub (2003) emphasized that those who prepare reading specialist candidates need to be mindful that those candidates must have opportunities to not only become knowledgeable about literacy teaching and learning, but also have experiences which will "enable them to develop the leadership and communication skills necessary for their positions" (p. 453). The practicum component of a preparation model is an essential aspect of such preparation, providing candidates with multiple occasions to deepen their specialized knowledge and to use that knowledge to make informed decisions. From the perspective of Grossman and her colleagues (2009), those occasions need to include opportunities for candidates to (a) develop a practical representation of the reading specialist role and what the role entails, (b) analyze recommended or mandated instructional approaches and resources, and (c) enact principled practices with supportive feedback.

Potential Challenges of Practicum Experiences

While the importance of supervised practicum experiences has been endorsed by professional standards and teacher educators, there are challenges in identifying sites in which such experiences can be enacted by reading specialist candidates. One challenge for reading specialist preparation programs is to locate contexts in which candidates can observe how reading specialists engage in principled practices and also participate in the decision-making process that informs such practices. Another challenge is to identify sites in which the practices are aligned with the specialized knowledge that candidates are developing through their coursework. One concrete situation that relates to both decision-making and alignment issues is the increasing use of scripted programs in interventions for students who need support in their literacy development. In such programs, the ability to exercise informed professional judgement is often severely limited (Land & Moustafa, 2005). The challenge is that there has been an increasing reliance on scripted programs across the country (Commeyras, 2007; McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petrosko, 2008), particularly with the students that reading specialists serve.

The constraints involved in implementing scripted programs conflict with the notion that practicum experiences need to "prepare [candidates] to be successful in enacting complex teaching practices" (Zeichner, 2010, p.89). When scripted programs are the mandated practice in a practicum site, there are limited opportunities for candidates placed in those contexts to engage with the kinds of representations, decompositions, and approximations of complex decision-making and collaboration that Grossman and her colleagues identified as key components of the effective teaching of practice (Grossman et al., 2009).

At Riverton University (pseudonym), half of the practicum sites for reading specialists are contexts in which leveled literacy intervention (LLI) is implemented. We, a supervisor and a teacher educator in the reading specialist program, decided to investigate how our candidates fared in such a context. In the sections that follow, we describe the main features of LLI and then the model of reading specialist preparation used at Riverton.

Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI)

LLI is a commercial program developed by Fountas and Pinnell and was established as a reading intervention method used in the United States in 2009. According to information on the LLI website and responses from an LLI marketing representative, the program is currently "being used in every single state in this country" (email, personal communication, March 1, 2017).

LLI is unique because it makes the assertion that the program can help students who are reading below grade level to make significant progress in all the domains of reading. There are several important features of LLI. First, it is a scripted program with specific directions for how lessons are to be conducted, and what teachers are to say and ask. Second, lessons are taught in a sequential order, with each lesson building on the previous one. The implementation of this program is quite rigid. Once teachers or reading specialists have determined the intervention starting point, they are not allowed to omit or skip lessons. Third, LLI is designed for small groups of three students, which allows for individual attention during the intervention instruction.

A typical LLI lesson is meant to last for 30 minutes and includes several activities which are meant to target decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Vocabulary is not explicitly taught until students reach the third grade level.

A typical LLI lesson begins with the instructor conducting a "running record" assessment with one student while the others independently reread the books they took home the night before. On the few days a week the reading specialist is not required to conduct a running record, students quickly reread their books and the group typically either plays a short game (using sight word cards) or studies a poem relating to previous word work that they have done.

The second part of a LLI lesson focuses on phonics and letter/word work to help students develop their decoding skills. Although such approaches can be beneficial, the specific letter/sounds or spelling patterns taught in the LLI sequence are not those that students are learning in their regular classroom instruction.

In the third part of a LLI lesson, students are introduced to a new fiction or nonfiction text, which they will read. This introduction is scripted, and is referred to as a "picture walk" or "story preview." Specific questions and discussion points are provided for the instructor; however, these questions are primarily focused on literal comprehension. After the introduction, students "whisper read" the story independently in order to develop their fluency, and the instructor listens to them and helps as needed.

The fourth part of a LLI lesson involves the group discussing and revisiting the text. Teaching points and comprehension questions are provided for the instructor. There is a writing component included in the LLI lessons, and typically this involves interactive writing with the instructor guiding what the students will write about.

There has been very little research investigating LLI. One study by Burton-Archie (2014) investigated the impact of LLI on the reading scores of 2nd grade students. Although scores of the students who participated in the program significantly increased, the scores of students in a comparison group increased even more. A second focus of the study was to survey with 18 intervention teachers about their impressions of the program. Results indicated there were more positive perceptions than there were negative or neutral. Ransford-Kaldon, Flynt, and Ross (2011) also suggested that reading intervention teachers saw LLI as being an effective intervention that helped students make significant reading gains.

The Riverton Model of Reading Specialist Preparation

At Riverton University, the reading specialist preparation program consists of eight courses organized into a sequence of three phases. In phase 1, candidates take courses designed to build their specialized knowledge of reading processes (decoding/phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, disciplinary literacy, and writing) and related assessments and intervention models. In phase 2, candidates use their developing knowledge in two supervised practicum experiences: one with younger students in a tutorial setting, and one with older students in a summer school setting. The final course focuses candidates on the role of the reading specialist in school settings with an emphasis on leadership and professional development.

There are two options for candidates in Riverton's reading specialist program. The first option is that candidates become interns and complete a year-long internship working with reading specialists in cooperating schools. In that option, the practicum experience with younger students is fulfilled by the internship. In the second option, candidates, who are usually full-time teachers, complete both practicum experiences.

The present study investigated the internship program at Riverton University as a model of reading specialist preparation with extensive practicum experience, and examined in what ways two reading specialist interns negotiated their practicum experiences in relation to coursework and their own teaching experiences. An obvious way in which the interns needed to negotiate their practicum experiences was that at both internship sites, interns were required to implement the LLI program to some extent. We wanted to understand how interns negotiated their practicum experiences when those experiences involved implementing LLI rather than approaches they had been taught in their courses. Thus, the research questions for this study are:

- How do reading specialist interns negotiate practicum experiences in relation to their coursework and teaching experience?

- Specifically, how do the interns negotiate internship experiences in which LLI implementation is required?

Methods

We conducted an exploratory cross-case study in order to answer the research question. According to Merriam (1988) case studies generally exhibit four characteristics, including (a) *particularistic*, centered on a certain situation, program, event, phenomena or person; (b) *descriptive*, based on a rich data set; (c) *heuristic*, potential to inform understanding, and (d) *inductive*, data driven.

Participants

The two participants in this study were selected using purposeful sampling, as this investigation was focused on the Riverton's Internship program model. Sarah and Emily (pseudonyms) were chosen based on their contrasting characteristics as shown in Table 1. Sarah attended a Catholic college in inner-city New Jersey for her teaching degree. In contrast, Emily attended a large state university for her initial teaching certification.

Table 1 Characteristics of Reading Specialist Interns

Sarah, placed at Kitt Elementary	Emily, placed at Fairfield Elementary
Married white female	Single white female
2 children	No children
More than 5 years teaching experience	Only teaching experience was preservice teaching practicum
Aspirations for grad school (masters)	Aspirations for grad school (PhD)

Context

This study took place at two cooperating schools located in different districts, which are located just outside of Riverton, a large city in the U.S. Northeast. As seen in Table 2, Kitt Elementary and Fairfield Elementary (pseudonyms) were purposefully chosen for their differences and similarities.

Table 2 Features of Internship Sites

Kitt Elementary—Sarah	Fairfield Elementary—Emily
K–12 school	K–5 school
Serves a rural community	Serves a suburban community
Demographics: 73.1% White, 12.6% Black, 11.7% two races, 2.3% Asian, .3% Hispanic	Demographics: 79.9% White, 14.9% Black, 3.9% two races, .9% Hispanic, .3% Asian
66% proficient in math, 55% proficient in reading/language arts	79% proficient in math, 63% proficient in reading/language arts
Average teacher: student ratio 13:1	Average teacher: student ratio 15:1
Eligible for free or reduced lunch: 58.1%	Average yearly household income: $30,615
District implemented LLI scripted program Mix of pull-out and push-in instruction	District implemented LLI scripted program All sessions are pull-out instruction

Kitt Elementary

Each day, Sarah reported to a large room that was designed to accommodate three Riverton university interns and their mentor, Natalie. Filing cabinets and shelving created four separate instructional spaces, yet this provided little privacy and the noise level was sometimes an issue. Sarah's second mentor, Sherri, was housed in a private office located down a different hallway. This resulted in the interns communicating much more frequently with Natalie than Sherri. Natalie had 3 years of classroom experience, and 1 year as a reading specialist, and Sherri had almost 20 years of combined experience as a classroom teacher and a reading specialist.

Sarah conducted push-in and pull-out instruction throughout the day. She pushed into classrooms of all grade levels, and also conducted pull-out instruction with small groups of students for 30 minutes. Communication with teachers about the push-in lessons was difficult, and Sarah mentioned repeatedly how this lack of collaboration left her feeling unprepared to conduct quality push-in lessons.

Fairfield Elementary

At Fairfield Elementary, Emily reported daily to the reading center located inside the library. There were two larger offices/instructional spaces for her reading specialist

mentors, Stephanie and Lisa, who both had more than ten years of reading specialist and classroom experience. Emily was provided with her own classroom to conduct pull-out instruction; it could comfortably accommodate only two or three students. This space was adequate for her morning pull-out sessions; however, for her fourth and fifth grade pull-out instruction she often taught five or six students. This group size limited the activities that she could conduct with them. The administrators preferred that the reading specialists only conduct pull-out instruction, so Emily did not push into classrooms and collaborate with teachers.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data sources for this investigation were (a) weekly teaching logs completed by the interns; (b) semistructured interviews conducted at the beginning, midyear, and end points of the internship; and (c) two day-long field observations at both schools each semester.

The major foci of attention were the teaching logs and interview transcripts, which were analyzed to discover specific references to (a) interns' general experiences at their internship sites, (b) information about being introduced to and implementing the LLI program, and (c) comments related to how the interns were able to incorporate what they were learning from their coursework at the university into the internship setting.

To report the findings from that analysis, we used the technique of extended vignettes. This technique allowed for a rich description to be provided about each intern's experiences across time related to the three foci mentioned above. Within each vignette, the information that emerged while coding the data sources could be synthesized. This synthesis was possible because in many cases the themes were not discrete, but rather interrelated in important ways.

According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), "A vignette is a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical or emblematic in the case you are studying. It has a narrow, story-like structure that preserves the chronological flow." In this case, the bounded space was the year-long internship.

Findings

Sarah's Vignette: Initial Internship Experiences

At the beginning of the year, Sarah's mentors trained her to conduct reading assessments with students of all grade levels. As all the students in the school needed to be tested, this process took an entire month to complete. Meanwhile, Sarah was also enjoying her first university courses in the fall semester, and she quickly realized how the information from readings and assignments could be incorporated into her reading instruction. She recognized that there were some limitations to incorporating the teaching strategies that she was learning into her internship practice because LLI was the intervention used at Kitt Elementary. However, Sarah anticipated opportunities to use such strategies later in the year. She could already see that "word building activities would be advantageous to incorporate in the near future" (Sarah—Teaching log: 10.10 and 10.17).

In her first few teaching log entries, Sarah also positively described the first weeks with her LLI pull-out groups and the training she received for the LLI program and its related assessments. She felt the LLI training videos and watching her mentor conduct a lesson were sufficient in preparing her to conduct LLI instruction. However, after a few weeks of implementing the program, Sarah openly expressed dislike for some of LLI's

features, including what she considered superficial comprehension questions in the lesson plan and the suggested "book walk."

> *So, by walking them through and reading the book to them prior to them reading it themselves is ridiculous. In addition to that, you know, there's a lack of comprehension work and vocabulary. (Sarah—Interview 1, Sec. 197)*

> Sarah also wrote that she believed exclusively using LLI was a disservice to her students.

However, she recognized some potential benefits of the program as well.

> *LLI leaves a lot to be desired. While I see some advantages to the program (opportunity to read text multiple times, writing work, word work, comprehension, vocabulary), I feel as if it presents itself in way that does not meet the individualized needs of the students. I can see how a spelling inventory would be beneficial to these students. I also think it would be better if we did not need to follow the schedule as rigidly, and we were able to stop and focus on needs that arise. I think part of the reason a program like LLI is used is due to the lack of planning time. However with more flexibility I think the program could be far more beneficial to the students. (Sarah—Teaching Log: 10.26)*

> By the end of the first semester, Sarah began including non-LLI supplemental activities into her lessons, but was sometimes unsure about how to do this without causing a problem with her mentors. Sarah's mentor, Natalie, was located directly across from where she taught her LLI groups, and sometimes Sarah felt she was being closely monitored. She used the reading assessment data to justify her instructional decisions when her mentor occasionally inquired about the methods she was using from her coursework.

At the Midpoint of the Internship

> During our second interview, Sarah expressed how being able to identify learning gaps for individual students had increased her confidence that she would be successful as a reading specialist, even if she were to be hired in a district which did not use a scripted LLI program. Sarah continued to speak favorably about her university courses and their content. She felt the resources and information were all very practical and helped her address the needs of her students.

> *I am using it all every day. I find myself referring back to articles, books, and more. The articles have proven helpful when I am offering a suggestion to address a specific need. The books have been utilized to create individualized plans for my students. Our books have also proven to be useful in identifying where the deficits lie and how I can best address them. All of the resources that we have been asked to use for class at Riverton have been practical within the job as well. (Sarah—Teaching Log: 11.13)*

> Sarah's perception of the LLI pull-out program was evolving. After several months of implementing LLI, she conceded that it was not as awful as she had first thought. In fact, she wrote in her teaching log how "the consistency of the framework and the reading practice which students experienced were beneficial, as long as teachers were permitted to use their own discretion when adding supplementary resources and instruction to the program" (Sarah—Teaching Log: 11.20).

While her feelings about the intervention's shortcomings had not changed, Sarah recognized there were some overall advantages to the set-up of the LLI program if teachers were free to customize learning experiences for individual students. By the time we conducted our January interview, Sarah was able to express even more significant benefits resulting from the use of LLI.

> *The benefits are that there's limited planning time, there's a lot of kids that you need to plan for. I think it's a good . . . start line. There's word work. There is reading work. There's writing work. There's letter sounds. All of what encompasses what we want to do as reading specialists, all the skills we want to teach our students are in these books. And the more I get through them, the more I can see how they . . . how it sort of snowballs, and the skills being taught are piggybacked. Do I think it's enough? Not nearly enough, no. I think it's too general. (Sarah—Interview 2, Sec. 373–375)*

During the same interview, Sarah continued to recognize how the limitations of the LLI program were due to its generality, and some students were unable to keep up with its rapid pacing. When the lesson sequence was strictly enforced, Sarah saw LLI as being detrimental for students. She recalled speaking with Natalie about the issue of rushing through the levels, and was frustrated when her mentor did not provide any practical solutions for this problem.

> *What would I like to be able to do? I'd like it not to be this race of having to get through this. We have to get to the next level. That's the biggest downfall to me. You're just supposed to keep going but they're not catching up, so something else is not working! They've grown accustomed to the fact that they can't read it, so they're not even bothering to try. Because, they can't! Why can't we just have some manipulative fun, get up out of their seats too . . . (Sarah—Interview 2, Sec. 411)*

Despite her frustrations with the strict pacing of the program and its lack of motivating participation structures, by the middle of the year it was evident that Sarah's evaluation of LLI was changing.

> *District adopted curriculum is not the enemy, though many might disagree. In my mind, programs like LLI are but the vessel that teachers need to steer. They provide us a guide or a framework. It is then up to educators to fill in the gaps. There is no perfect approach. Teachers need to put forth the effort to accumulate and analyze the data and make instructional decisions based on the information gathered. (Sarah—Teaching Log: 1.25)*

As Sarah continued to adjust lessons and add supplemental activities to fill the gaps that she perceived in LLI, she commented in her teaching log about how her mentors offered little in the way of guidance when creating added resources for students. This was not something the mentors did with their own students. Instead, Sarah was inspired by what she learned in her coursework and by her developing understanding of the needs of her students. This resulted in Sarah creating her own word sorts, and using different discussion techniques during her pull-out instruction.

> *That's a lot of Dr. S's class, like I've used tons of stuff from there already, and I've done spelling inventory across the board with my students now, and I know exactly what skills they need and to work on. I create my own word sorts, we talk about things, and I do not race to the books anymore... I've taken many liberties and do other things… (whispering) They read their own books too (said with wide eyes and then laughs). (Sarah—Interview 2, Sec. 462–464)*

Sarah found a way to enact a sense of agency to make her instruction more meaningful and strategic for her students, even though she was sometimes anxious that her mentors might question why she was not following the LLI lesson format as closely as they did.

Concluding Experiences

During the final months of the school year, Sarah focused as much as possible on supplementing her pull-out LLI sessions. By this point, she openly included non-LLI activities to her lessons. This was easier for her to do as one of her second-grade groups completed the LLI program for their grade level early and could not redo those lessons. As a result, Sarah was granted permission to create her own lesson plans for them.

> *I have a great deal more flexibility with second grade now. The books are far more complicated than the LLI decodable readers. It is taking my students more time to get through a book. In addition to this, I am looking through the books for spelling and word patterns in an effort to connect our word work to the text. We are examining complex sentences, context clues, and vocabulary. These students need a great deal of work in comprehension and fluency. I believe this is a wonderful way to develop these skills. I am also going to introduce interactive vocabulary notebooks. (Sarah—Teaching Log: 4.1)*

About a month and a half before the end of the internship, Sarah was eager to introduce interactive vocabulary notebooks to some of her students. She felt they enjoyed looking at and discussing the vocabulary words in-depth. Also, one of Sarah's goals with the notebooks was to help the students learn useful morphemes, or word parts, which could help them understand and read unfamiliar words on their own. Seeing how engaged her students were when using many of the approaches from her coursework became a particularly enjoyable part of the internship

Despite some of the challenges at her practicum site, Sarah described how both her internship experience and the coursework contributed to her feeling competent and prepared to perform as a reading specialist.

> *I feel very prepared to do the job at this point. I feel as if I have a great deal to offer to a school district. Both my internship and coursework have helped to prepare me. The coursework has shown me what works while the internship often shows me what does not work. (Sarah—Teaching Log: 3.7)*

Emily's Vignette: Initial Internship Experiences

As a part of the initial training in the LLI program, Emily learned how to conduct reading assessments for all grade levels and watched training videos of teachers conducting LLI lessons. In addition, she was scheduled to observe her mentors conducting one of the

intervention lessons with their students, so she could ask questions. However, the session was postponed and never rescheduled.

Shortly after she began implementing LLI, Emily had serious doubts about whether the program would enable the students she worked with to improve their reading abilities and experience success.

> *After my week of working with the LLI program, I am questioning its effectiveness. After my student teaching and substitute experience, I developed a strong educational philosophy that aligns with student centered instruction with the teacher as a facilitator. As I continue to learn more about being a teacher of reading, I wonder if these brief and jam-packed 30 minute LLI sessions of students participating in 3–5 different activities are really the best way to support the struggling readers in our district. (Emily—Teaching Log: 10.5)*

One of Emily's primary concerns was that the program didn't focus on developing comprehension skills, which she believed many of her students needed. She recognized that many of the LLI books were specifically created for decoding practice and wondered when the explicit instruction for comprehension would be included.

> *This week similar to the weeks previous I struggled with the district adopted curriculum and its lack of focus on comprehension in the lower grades/reading levels. Though I understand the books are made to teach students how to read and don't necessarily foster comprehension, I question when these students will receive explicit instruction on comprehension. (Emily—Teaching Log: 11.2)*

By the end of November, Emily began demonstrating a sense of agency by selecting activities she could integrate into her LLI lessons, while remaining mindful of her responsibility to follow the program. An example of this balance occurred during a field observation visit in November. Emily wanted to supplement the LLI lesson for The Three Little Pigs by reading an additional version of the classic story. She used The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka (1989), which told the story from the wolf's perspective. Then she had the students discuss differences in narrative point of view, author's style, and use of humor.

Emily's efforts related to her intention to have students enjoy "reading club," which is the term Fairfield teachers used to refer to the LLI program. As she informally assessed what her students needed, she made a point to supplement the lessons to make them more engaging.

Despite their loyalty to the LLI program, Emily's mentors were flexible and allowed her to occasionally use some of her new strategies and approaches if they supported the students' learning. Not only did they give Emily permission to branch out from LLI, but they also sometimes provided her with resources if they were available.

> *This week, I tried Syllasearch with my 2nd grade students. It went well! My mentors provided me with the sentence strips I needed to prepare, and gave me permission to do the "word work" portion of LLI a little differently. (Emily— Teaching Log: 10.19)*

Emily also described how the coursework enabled her to better understand why one of her students, who spoke using a form of Western Pennsylvania dialect, struggled so much with reading. Rather than think the girl's problems were intellectually based, she could see it was a language issue that was making reading difficult for her.

This week, I was able to relate learning from my language and language systems course to my internship experiences. The articles I read and responded to for my coursework focused on dialect, code switching, and the effect student language has on their learning. This helped me to make sense of why some of my students struggle with orally producing words we find in reading. For example, I have one student that has some form of Western Pennsylvania dialect that is preventing her from correctly decoding and producing words. In the book we were reading this week, the word was squirrel. The 'sq' consonant combination was really hard for her to get simply because of the way she typically pronounces those sounds. In addition to minor things like this, this student (and her sister) respond to comprehension questions using language that could be deemed as "incorrect" simply because of the language they use when expressing their thoughts. (Emily—Teaching Log: 12.7)

Being able to see how the information in her courses was so useful and applicable to her internship, Emily was encouraged to gain as much knowledge as she could from course assignments and readings.

At the Midpoint of the Internship

Over time, Emily's viewpoint about LLI evolved from questioning the entire program to an acknowledgement that there were elements in the program that could assist readers who could benefit from targeted and supportive instruction. This change was surprising, because at the beginning of the year, Emily made pointed comments about how she did not understand why the mentors seemed to be "so in love with LLI" (Emily—Field Notes: 11.13).

By her January interview, Emily voiced concerns because she didn't know about other reading intervention programs. She wondered what would happen if she were hired in a district that had not purchased LLI. Although Emily attempted to ask her experienced mentors about other existing programs, she was not able to gain any valuable insight from them.

Although she would have liked to know more about other intervention programs, Emily did comment that LLI was well organized and rereading the texts was good practice for students. In addition, she observed how the skills they worked on in the lessons matched the skills students would need to use in reading the books. For example, she commented that "the word work in that lesson is going to come up in the new book we read" (Emily—Interview 2, Sec. 240).

This week, my most valuable learning was that LLI is actually good for some things! I have a struggling group of 1st graders, and with them I can see how the basic and repetitious parts of this program help them. This leads me to question if all struggling students should be put in LLI. I have stated several times that I don't think there is a simple fix for all students, and that for some students, this LLI program is boring and not what they need. It was nice to see this program as a good fit for students this week! (Emily—Teaching Log: 1.25)

Emily still expressed frustration about the boring nature of the LLI program. She strongly believed that learning should be enjoyable whenever possible. In her teaching log, she added additional comments in bullet points stating the different ways she had

supplemented LLI that week. In one of her teaching log entries, Emily mentioned a few examples of how she made learning more engaging.

> *I started making more games, having more competition, and doing more free writing because in addition to reading problems, a lot of my students also struggle with expressing their thoughts and interacting with others in a way that makes sense. I try my hardest to teach the "whole" student in my room instead of just focusing on one aspect of literacy. (Emily—Teaching Log: 2.12)*

Emily justified her supplemental approaches by citing an article from her disciplinary literacy course. Information in the article clashed with the idea that one program could address the needs of all readers.

> *This week, something I read in my Disciplinary Literacy course opposed the use of my district-adopted curriculum. The article outlined how the current push for a "fix" of all reading difficulties in students leads school district administrators to buying a one size fits all program. The more I read and learn, the more I see that there is not one single fix for reading difficulties. Students struggle for many different, and individual reasons. Though two students might look like they are at the same place, they are not. The LLI program places three students in the same group, but once again assumes the students all have the same exact needs, which is not the case. (Emily—Teaching Log: 2.1)*

Such coursework-related revelations of LLI's limitations continued to drive Emily to utilize her sense of agency in order to focus on the specific skills her students needed, rather than continue to cover many skills superficially. In one of her teaching log entries, she explained that when she spent more in-depth time on a skill, she noticed an increase in student confidence (Emily—Teaching Log: 11.16). As a result, her students felt successful while they were reading.

In an interview, Emily spoke about the insights that she was experiencing because of the content from her courses. She elaborated about how she planned to use different methods she was learning about later, even if they were not practical for her current situation in the internship.

> *In a way I would be prepared (to be a reading specialist) because we spent so much time in that first class of Language and Language Systems, really going through the basics. And if you think about it, everything that follows, always is going to lead back to those basics. And those are the things we've been learning. So I feel like this is helping me to specialize my knowledge base of these fundamental processes of reading. (Emily—Interview 2, Sec. 416)*

Concluding Experiences

By the end of the internship, Emily expressed continued gratitude for the support and help her mentors had provided. However, she critically questioned why they appeared so resistant to any suggested change to the LLI intervention. Many comments in Emily's teaching logs and interviews suggested her struggle with understanding her mentors' point of view about not trying other interventions for students who did not make progress with LLI. She especially disagreed with their decisions to often refer these students to learning support.

I just got into a conversation with one of the reading specialists at my school regarding a student referral to learning support. I do not think the student needs to be in learning support, but she did. This is where I really began to see the importance of alternative interventions. Sure, the student did not display much growth with the LLI program, but that's not to say she can't learn in other ways…I don't think it's fair to the students in our school that we are labeling them as learning support after failing to grow with one intervention. (Emily—Teaching Log: 5.16)

In her last interview, Emily expressed disappointment about how her mentors would rather believe the student was "broken" and only "settle for what worked for most kids" (July, 2016). She noticed how defensive her mentors became when the administrators wanted them to consider other interventions, especially so they could be compliant with the multitiered RTI (Response to Intervention) approach at their campus. Emily admitted that part of the reason for their resistance to change could be attributed to how they enjoyed the status quo and the established routines in the LLI program. The principals were trying to ensure that RTI procedures were adhered to, and Emily was doubtful that her mentors would fully embrace this change.

But the most frustrating was my mentors just being so stuck in what they were doing, and not really willing to change…Administration really wanted us to look at different interventions to improve for the next year, and my mentors just immediately took that as a negative thing, so that was really disappointing for me to see. I'm learning all these different interventions and all these different things, but I have two reading specialist mentors who have been in their positions for 8–9 years, who are content to just stick with what they're doing, because it works okay for most of the kids. They have been doing LLI for three years, and they are impressed with its effect on most students, and for the ones that it doesn't work for, they just assume there is something else wrong with them that I can't fix. I think they also like their pattern and their routine of doing what they do, and having to change that was like frustrating, and probably a little bit scary for them. (Emily—Interview 3, Sec. 26–34)

As the school year came to an end, Emily continued to regularly document in her weekly teaching log entries the ways in which she added activities and used various resources in addition to LLI. One of her favorite supplemental activities was book making. Emily described this at length in her teaching log

I have been using book making as a reward for all of my groups and it is going extremely well! All students have a "fancy" book in their bin and when we have extra time or students worked really hard during the lesson they get to work on their books. This has been great for writing, and even working with students on the way books work. Many of them have been rereading and self-correcting their work, adding page numbers and detailed illustrations, and most of all writing carefully thought out stories. They absolutely love doing this! (Emily—Teaching Log 3.21)

Despite Emily's opportunities to supplement LLI in various ways, during her last interview she acknowledged a concern that she only knew about LLI and didn't know about other types of reading intervention programs.

> *So, being aware of the different programs out there…that would be really nice. Because that was one of my things, my questions… Just kind of being nervous. Like hey, I'm following this script every day, and I'm modifying it, but what happens if I get hired at a school that doesn't even use it and is using something completely different. So then I have to go through the whole thing again, where I'm reading it, doing it word by word, then modifying it. So it would kind of nice to like a have a different… even if it was just like the programs in the internship, or like some in popular places. Just to kind of be more aware… (Emily—Interview 3, Sec. 141–145)*

Based on the experiences of Sarah and Emily, we offer some comments in the section that follows about what those experiences suggest and how Riverton faculty responded.

Discussion and Implications

It is important to note at the outset that this study was not designed to critique LLI. Rather, the purpose was to interrogate the implications for reading specialist interns placed in sites where LLI was the mandated curriculum. The interns were in different schools and school districts, yet they were both in positions that required them to negotiate the instructional expectations at those schools and the practices advocated in university coursework. In both cases, those two realities were often at odds. The interns expressed that conflict and addressed it in different ways.

Sarah, who came into the internship program with several years of teaching experience, was initially put off by the exclusive use of LLI and the lack of opportunities to supplement or adjust it. She was particularly concerned about the rigid pacing of the program that did not allow options for students who were not keeping up, and she identified specific shortcomings in the program related to comprehension instruction. However, as the internship continued and as she was able to incorporate activities, she began to see some advantages to LLI, particularly with reference to fluency and phonics. She also appreciated how the prepared plans allowed her to limit the amount of time she had to spend planning for all the grade levels she was responsible for each day. In the end, Sarah recognized that LLI was not nearly enough on its own, and had to be supplemented and adjusted based on student responses.

Emily entered the Riverton Reading Specialist Internship Program with limited teaching experience—student teaching in kindergarten and some substitute teaching. Once Emily began her daily instruction with students, she quickly realized that she would be unable to incorporate many of the different strategies and methods she was learning from her courses and still implement LLI with fidelity. This was frustrating for her, and she mentioned that although she had every intention of eventually using ideas and content from her coursework, she also suspected that some of the information would be lost if she didn't have the chance to practice it during the internship.

Throughout the year, Emily inquired about other programs like LLI which were available to reading specialists. She was frustrated that neither of her mentors seemed able to provide her with this information, even though they were very experienced reading specialists. Her fear was that she would be hired by a district that did not adopt the LLI program, and she would not be sufficiently prepared to enact the reading specialist role. Although she recognized she had been taught during her coursework how to conduct specialized reading instruction, she still wanted to learn about other programs that were available.

A recent study by Hoffman, Wetzel, and Peterson (2016) presented important insights related to practicum experiences. Although their focus was on preservice teachers in a tutorial context, we suggest that their insights apply to reading specialist candidates as well. Specifically, the researchers voiced concerns about placing preservice teachers "inside of current practice settings without a critical look at existing practices" in those settings (p.183). They also advocated for practicum experiences described by Florio-Ruane and Smith (2004) as those that "offer spaces for preservice teachers to find their own voices and disrupt some of the dominant narratives around teaching practices" (p. 183). In their own teacher preparation program, Hoffman and his colleagues described required tutorial experiences as contexts "for connecting academic coursework to practicum experiences, and for creating spaces for developing preservice agency and voice" (p. 184). The preservice teachers in their program were able to flexibly adapt instruction based on their interactions with students. Most of the time, that was not the case for the interns in the present study.

As teacher educators at Riverton, we are grappling with how to include the implementation of LLI and similar intervention programs as part of the representation of the reading specialist role in our courses. We are analyzing how LLI resources are designed to be used and how they are actually used. That is, according to the website, LLI is designed as a supplementary short-term intervention. At Sarah's school, once LLI was completed, she was able to use a variety of resources and approaches with students. However, some students were not only part of the program throughout the year, but had also participated in previous years. At Emily's school, LLI was the only intervention being used despite the fact that the district was supposed to follow the three-tiered RTI model.

As faculty at Riverton, we have decided that we need to provide candidates in our courses with information about LLI and other intervention programs. We have agreed that we need to include in the representation of the reading specialist role the reality that school districts often purchase programs such as LLI that they will be required to implement. In such situations, it is critical that candidates are prepared to de-compose or analyze such programs in order to evaluate their congruence with principled practice and research-based approaches. As professionals, they need to be prepared to present arguments for using such programs with flexibility, selecting what works best for students based on documenting student learning and progress toward specified literacy goals.

As a field, we need to acknowledge the increasingly widespread use of scripted literacy programs and address the counter-productive impact of approaches that prioritize fidelity and adherence to specified pacing schedules over student learning and motivation. The issue here is a critical one. According to McIntyre, Rightmyer, and Petroksko (2008), "The science of reading is often cited as the current reason for schools to adopt scripted models of reading instruction" (p. 378). What is this "science"? In a best-evidence synthesis of effective reading programs for the elementary grades, Slavin and his colleagues (2009) concluded that

> The findings of this review add to a growing body of evidence to the effect that what matters for student achievement are approaches that fundamentally change what teachers and students do together every day. These programs are characterized by extensive professional development in classroom strategies intended to maximize students' participation and engagement, give them effective metacognitive strategies for comprehending text, and strengthen their phonics skills (p. 1453).

The emphasis on the importance of professional development for enhancing teachers' specialized knowledge is a critical take-away from the report. That emphasis is apparent in the ILA Standards (2018) that address specialists' necessary foundational knowledge and their use of that knowledge "to design literacy curricula to meet the needs of learners, especially those who experience difficulty with literacy" (p. 36).

In our limited study, we, like Hoffman and his colleagues, have discovered that scripted or highly structured programs have become "the reality of classroom teaching today" (Hoffman et al., 2016, p. 205). Instructors of reading specialist candidates need to acknowledge that reality and address it in direct ways.

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