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Preservice Teachers' Experiences of "America Reads" Research

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This article has two purposes. First, we want to make visible the experiences of undergraduate preservice teacher researchers who collaborated with university faculty to conduct three research studies of an America Reads Literacy Tutoring Program. Our second purpose is to offer evidence from the preservice teachers' research logs, comments and reflections that supports or challenges current discussions about the effects of preservice teacher research.

The article begins with a brief discussion of the America Reads investigations in which the preservice teachers participated. Next, we discuss the preservice teachers' thoughts about their research experiences. Finally, we explore implications raised by this research.

The Context for the Preservice Teacher Researchers' Studies

In the fall of 1997, our university initiated and sponsored a federally-funded America Reads Literacy Tutoring Program in two elementary schools in two adjoining towns in community. Forty-one pre-service teachers received work-study funds to tutor the school children after school. The tutors were required to have taken at least one reading/language arts class and to be enrolled in at least 6 credit hours of course work. Tutors attended a six-hour orientation workshop, which presented an overview of the program and details about planning tutoring sessions and evaluating students' progress. Tutors also wrote lesson plans for each tutoring session and attended weekly seminars in order to debrief about the tutoring and share ideas. Lesson plans were to include: goals and objectives, procedures, materials needed, and a reflection about the session. The choice of specific activities was left to individual tutor preference.

At the beginning of the tutoring program, three preservice teachers, Kari, Kim and Amy, were each invited by a different faculty member (David, Charline, and Penny) to participate in conducting a research study associated with the America Reads Program. These students were invited to become investigators because the faculty researchers had been impressed with the insightful thinking, ability to analyze, organization and dependability demonstrated by the students in their preservice classes. The goals of the three America Reads studies were similar. The investigators wanted to study the children's, the tutors' and the caretakers' views about the after-school tutoring program.

The Three America Reads Studies

In this section, we will briefly describe each of the three studies to portray the experiences of the three preservice teacher researchers. In all three studies, the research questions were parallel: 1) what are the children's (or tutors' or caregivers') experiences of America Reads, and 2) how do the tutoring sessions influence their views about reading? To answer the first question, we engaged in observations, interviews, and examination of written documents. To answer the second question, we were interested in their perspectives about how literacy is defined, what counts as literacy knowledge, who gets to participate in reading and writing interactions, and what roles the participants take (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Constructs associated with ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974) supported the conceptual frameworks of the studies: a) the origins of children's, tutors' and caregivers' views are constructed and mediated through social interactions (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1994), and b) reading and writing interactions (including instruction) are defined as social and cultural processes with written language (Bloome & Katz, 1997). These constructs provided a possible approach for entering the experiences of the participants by emphasizing how they "perceive, value, and act on literacy demands and what they count as authentic literacy practices" (Green & Dixon, 1996, p. 297).

The two elementary schools in the America Reads Program were located in lower income areas of their respective school districts. Pleasant Valley students are predominately of European-American descent, while students at Washington are primarily of African-American ancestry. Students are usually bused to Pleasant Valley, while Washington students live in the surrounding neighborhoods. Approximately 60% of the students at Pleasant Valley and 80% of the students at Washington qualify for free or reduced breakfast and lunch programs.

Study 1: The Children's Views

Eleven boys and eight girls volunteered to participate. Kari and David collected data during twice-weekly visits to tutoring sites beginning in September, 1997, and ending in April, 1998. The data collection included: participant observation notes of the tutoring sessions, recorded interviews, and photocopies of children's artifacts from the tutoring sessions. Data analysis indicated that children and their tutors negotiated roles, responsibilities, practices with reading and writing, and understandings about readers and reading. To summarize, students' achievements with reading during the tutoring sessions reflected: a) the relationships they built with their tutors; and b) the shared knowledge and understanding about reading and writing which they constructed through their interactions with their tutors. Implications of this study raise questions about tutors' training, ways that tutoring sessions are planned, and ways that tutoring is evaluated.

Study 2: The Tutors' Views

Seven tutors completed the study. The tutors were all females, most of who were juniors and seniors majoring in elementary education or special education. One participant was a Family Service major. Data consisted of a 15-item Likert scale survey (the Tutor Self-Perception Survey), given in the spring and the fall, and video-taped semi-structured group interviews, administered by Amy and Charline in November, February and March.

Data indicated that in the fall the tutors were very confident in their views defining literacy and in their competencies of diagnosing, planning and teaching of reading and writing. However, in the spring the tutors were more critical of their own literacy diagnosis and instruction skills. They recognized that they were still growing professionally as reading tutors. Overall, they regarded their academic preparation for tutoring as effective. The results suggest the importance of ongoing support and staff development for tutors (Wasik, 1998).

Study 3: The Caregivers' Views

Caregivers of 33 of the children in America Reads participated in fall and spring interviews conducted at the schools by Kim and Penny. Data consisted of the taped and transcribed interviews and field notes taken by the researchers. Through constantly comparing the data for topics and themes, Kim and Penny discovered the following: caregivers observed improvement in their child's reading ability and attitude toward reading and could explain their child's development with more specific language in the spring; caretakers attributed improvement mostly to the work of the tutors and the one-on-one attention in the tutoring sessions; in every home reading with family members reportedly increased and became more interactive by spring. In summary, the results suggest that the adults' and the children's ongoing experiences with tutors have an influence on families' "home literacies," including their knowledge, practices and attitudes about reading.

The Roles of the Preservice Teacher Researchers

All three preservice teachers played major roles in the conceptualization and implementation of their particular America Reads study. Their activities included writing successful grant proposals and management of their budgets; conducting Human Subjects Review and securing participants' permission; making arrangements for data collection; interviewing participants; recording field notes; collecting, organizing and analyzing data; synthesizing results to form conclusions; and disseminating findings through presentations and professional writing.

Theoretical Framework for the Study of Preservice Teachers' Experiences

One way to think about the notion of preservice teacher research is to consider how the research effort encourages preservice teachers to establish and revise their teaching practices and beliefs. In order to investigate this effort more specifically, the notion of preservice teachers' experiences as researchers is interpreted in light of recent literature about students as ethnographic researchers. This discussion relies substantially on ideas about ethnographic research proposed by Egan-Robertson and Bloome (1998).

This recent literature provides a framework for exploring the research efforts of preservice teachers as researchers in three ways: a) Preservice teacher research is not about reproducing knowledge found in various written texts; b) Preservice teacher research is about generating new knowledge and new texts--new ways of seeing what are perceived as familiar phenomena; and c) Given a and b, preservice teacher researchers are invited into, and indeed seek to establish new relations with other people involved in the research as well as new relations with a body of

knowledge. Each of these theoretical concepts is discussed in more practical terms in the following sections.

From the first, the preservice students were engaged in field-based inquiry. Their roles were not confined to library searches and the reproduction of various written, authoritative sources. As the preservice teachers' wrote and talked about their field-based research, they constructed their own "texts" of what was significant to them and what they perceived their roles to be (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). The texts they constructed were products of a process of communicating about their research experiences.

In the present study, we can interpret the texts which the preservice teachers constructed about their research experiences as a means of building understanding about what is particular to their research situations (e.g., Becker, 1988). In the case of the preservice teachers' research, their experiences are tied to the particular texts they construct across their research activities. By focusing on what is particular, we try to make visible the complexities of the preservice teachers' research experiences. These include activities described previously, such as interviewing participants and analyzing data.

A second implication of this framework is that the texts represent a way for students to build knowledge about education. The texts that the preservice teachers constructed provided a way of gaining some control over their knowledge about education. Through the process of constructing these texts, teacher researchers come to an understanding about their experiences in educational settings; they accept these understandings or seek to change them. Such a view of research, then, encourages a view of preservice students as already possessing knowledge about teaching and learning.

Third, the preceding discussion about texts and how people create them suggests the possibility of constructing new relations between people and between texts. More specifically, preservice teacher research offers the potential for establishing, maintaining, and changing relations with faculty advisors and other participants in the research, as well as altering relations with a body of knowledge associated with the research effort. A related implication is that establishing and changing relationships can encourage preservice students to revalue themselves as students and as future educators.

Preservice Teacher Researchers' (PTR's) Perceptions

As the three America Reads studies drew to a close, the six authors of this article talked about forming a research team to study the views of Kari, Kim and Amy about their experiences as preservice teacher researchers. The preservice teacher researchers were eager to compare notes about their experiences and to reflect about how their experiences would impact their future roles as educational professionals. The faculty members were interested in the students' views about research processes and the researcher roles and relationships that had evolved over the course of the studies. We all believed the study would be of interest to others in the field because of the increasing calls for information about effective ways to involve undergraduates in research (e.g., Reisberg, 1998; Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998).

Our study of the preservice teachers' views was defined by two particular research questions: a) What are the experiences of undergraduate preservice teacher researchers who work closely with faculty during an entire academic year? and b) What influence does their experience as a researcher have upon their views of teaching, learning and their role as a future teacher? To answer these questions, we participated in a recursive cycle of writing, interviews and discussions about the writing, and further writing. These methods are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Methods and Procedures

Using ethnographic and qualitative perspectives, data were recorded since September 1997. Sources of data for this study include: one student research journal, field notes kept by the three preservice teachers and the three faculty members, notes from informal interviews between the faculty and the undergraduate researchers, and a series of final reflection papers written by the faculty members and the preservice teacher researchers (PTRs). (See Figure 1 for a timeline of the research activities.)

Figure 1. Research activities for the study of preservice teacher researcher's (PTR's) experiences.

DATE	ACTIVITIES
9/97-4/98	All team members write about their research All researchers agree to study PTRs' views on research
4/98	Faculty write reflection paper #1 PTRs present at university conference PTRs present at state conference Faculty:
5/98	Analyze faculty reflection papers for topics Ask PTRs to respond/write about original topics PTRs and faculty present at international conference
6/98	PTRs write reflection paper #1
7/98	Faculty analyze all 6 written reflection papers (#1) for topics
9/98-11/98	PTRs elaborate on identified topics and write about new topics in reflection paper #2
12/98-1/99	Faculty:

DATE	ACTIVITIES
	Write reflection paper #2 about identified topics and preservice teachers' reflections
	Analyze all reflections for topics and themes
	Send packet of reflections and ask PTR's to read and elaborate on themes in reflection paper #3
1/99	PTRs write reflection paper #3
	Research pairs discuss themes
2/99	Electronic mail distribution list established for discussion of themes and supporting details
	PTR's and faculty present at national ethnography conference
3/99	Final gathering of group: lengthy discussion about experiences and refinement of supporting details for themes
4/99-5/99	Writing of article by all team members

The faculty members began the process by writing their own reflection papers (#1) about the research experience with the PTR's. Faculty then collaborated to analyze their three papers for common topics, using the constant comparative method. Next they invited the PTR's to respond to the identified topics and to write about their own topics (#1). When the faculty members received the PTR's papers, they combined the first reflections from all six team members and again analyzed for common topics and for themes. Following this analysis, faculty wrote new responses and sent the newly identified topics, themes and their responses to the preservice teacher researchers. Kari, Kim and Amy then elaborated, clarified, and developed new ideas in their second response papers. This alternation of writing and analysis continued for 10 months, from April of 1998 through January of 1999. After the third reflection papers were written and analyzed, the faculty-PTR research pairs from the original studies had lengthy discussions about the themes and topics either in person or over the telephone. Faculty then collaborated in identifying a final list of themes from the preservice teachers' writings and comments. All six members of the team then reviewed all of their own writings to locate quotes relating to each theme in preparation for a final discussion about the research experience. For the final exchange, all team members gathered in person for a group interview about the research experience.

What We Learned

Our analyses suggested that each preservice teacher researcher had a set of experiences particular to her own study. However, there were a number of common themes that emerged from the "texts" that the preservice teacher researchers constructed about their experiences. For the purposes of this paper, Kari, Kim and Amy will discuss the five themes that they found to be the most important as they reflected: 1) gaining knowledge of research methods and academic

writing, 2) experiencing the freedom to learn, 3) developing authentic relationships, 4) building a research community, and 5) increasing self-esteem and confidence. The discussion of each theme begins with a comment from an established researcher and ends with a quote from one of the preservice teacher researchers.

Gaining knowledge of research methods and academic writing.

An ethnographic perspective is a way of thinking about the world and about the ways of participating and learning in a classroom (Yeager, Floriani, & Green, 1998, p. 138).

Through our research we have learned a great deal about the methods for collecting data such as interviews, surveys and participant observation. We gained experience in keeping field notes and in using those notes for analysis. Qualitative methods, such as the constant comparative method, and some quantitative methods were used throughout the research and in results.

The grant proposals and research reports that we wrote for our projects are different from all other writing we have done. Ordinarily undergraduates do not learn much about producing this type of writing in regular university classrooms. To learn writing in this form we needed guidance from our professors. In the future, we won't be afraid to try it on our own.

To me, being a reflective person, I'm actually doing research when I don't even know it. I'm observing what's happening with the kids all of the time when I'm in the classroom. Research is no longer some vague notion of what I will do when I get older (Zidlicky, March 1999, notes).

Experiencing the freedom to learn, as supported by the faculty members.

As researchers, students must have access to the freedom to go beyond what is already known and to go beyond the ways in which knowledge is traditionally generated. To invite students to be researchers is to invite them into a new relationship with the teacher and a new relationship to academic knowledge (Bloome, 1998, p. xii).

As researchers, we found that a new learning experience was created for us outside our classrooms. Although we freely agreed to participate, we all felt inadequate in the beginning due to our lack of experience with research. We made our insecurities known to our faculty supervisors and found that they gave us just the right amount of support and guidance. The freedom given to us was the amount that we individually decided to tackle. We were given guidance to an extent and anything that we wanted to do beyond that initial guidance was our decision. Through our collaborations with our faculty members, we were helped to determine if the individual paths we were considering taking were good ideas or not. In addition, we were allowed the freedom to take as much or as little from the experience as we wanted to.

We're just curious people. We like to learn. That's why we're in this field of education. We have questions. It's what we're about (Zidlicky, 1999, notes).

Developing authentic relationships.

Students(are) willing to engage in certain literacy practices (applying knowledge about reading and writing for specific purposes in specific situations) in part because they trust and respect the teacher who taught the (practices) (Moje, 1996, p. 192).

One of the key aspects of the research projects was the opportunity to develop authentic relationships. We cultivated relationships with our faculty advisors and with the people we interviewed. We were pleased that our mentors in research (faculty) valued our input and our contributions; they made us feel like partners. We found that we were all made to feel comfortable expressing our thoughts; even expressions of frustration were welcomed. We trusted them and they trusted us. We also learned about each of our mentors as a person. They have real lives; this knowledge makes it possible for them to be role models for us.

We also found that we developed relationships with participants in our studies. Because she spent very little time alone with the tutees, it was not possible for Kari to form relationships with very many of the children. However, Amy found that she established comfortable bonds with the tutors who participated in formal group conversations and interviews because of their similar experiences in working with children. Kim found that the comfortable, non-threatening nature of the interviews, in which she asked only for opinions, helped her connect with many of the caretakers.

I felt it was a good experience for me to work with parents and to see a little better where they are coming from. I need to trust them to tell me their opinions about literacy. These will help me plan my literacy program when I am a teacher (Willms, 1998, notes).

Building a research community.

Gordon Wells (1994) talks about the importance of a research community among teachers. Teachers can collaborate and "meet with colleagues to make sense of the research experience by talking it over with others who understand it first hand" (p. 33). Looking back, we wish that we had established this type of community of researchers from the beginning. At first, we worked individually and with our faculty partners on our own studies. Although in Kari's project there were two other student researchers that she met weekly to discuss ideas and research experiences, Kim and Amy worked alone with their faculty members. Although our individual preparations for the first conference presentation (on campus) caused a lot of anxiety, presenting together helped us to bond. Traveling to other conferences in addition to working together on campus really brought us together as a research group throughout the remainder of the year. We began to see each other as unique individuals who each had something different to offer the group, which kept the research always exciting. Working together taught us the critical thinking and the problem solving skills needed in any teamwork situation. In addition, it allowed us to form lasting bonds with each other.

Building a community will be important as I become an educator. I need to know how to work as a team member within my school, school district and local community. A research community is very much like that of a school community in that you must learn from one another and trust one

another to do what is best for the whole team, not just on an individual level. I think I've learned how to better become a team member and take into account the thoughts and ideas of everyone (Benson, 1998).

Increasing self-esteem and confidence.

They (effective teachers) are curious. They wonder about things. Why? Why did that happen? They keep digging and rooting away at things. They come back to the same issues again and again with a conscious thoughtfulness about how to confront new issues and new situations (Deborah Meier in Campbell, K, 1998, p. 11)

All of us went into our projects feeling like we did not really know what was involved in research or what to expect. That is why it was crucial that our professors helped to build our confidence in our abilities as researchers. We received a lot of support and encouragement from our professors, particularly as we prepared to present at conferences. We know that we have had experiences and accomplishments that make us unique from other undergraduates and also from many teachers. As teachers, we will have the confidence to set out to try new things, such as writing grants, speaking at conferences, leading action research teams in our schools and districts, being a team player in our educational settings, and preparing and organizing groups of educators for special events.

It is clear that our involvement in these projects benefited us in all areas of our lives. We were able to experience new things that we would otherwise not have been able to if we had not been involved. The most important of these was the development of relationships that evolved over time with our mentors and that will continue to grow as we begin our professional careers.

I feel that my mentor's leadership and encouragement has helped me become more confident in not only myself as a person, but myself as an educator. I now feel there will be very little that I cannot accomplish if I put my mind to it. Just because I haven't been trained in an area doesn't mean I cannot learn in an area. This professional confidence is going to help me reach my fullest potential as an educator when I get out into the field (Benson, 1998).

Discussion and Conclusions

Preservice teacher research has the potential to redefine what counts as authoritative texts, to generate new knowledge and understandings, and to build relationships that encourage learning. Such developments have the potential to raise interest in education at a time when many teachers and students increasingly question the relevance of what goes on inside classrooms. More teachers these days at all levels of education are asking why they feel less successful with students currently enrolled, compared with twenty years ago. Despite reform efforts, teachers experience frustration as they attempt "to reach and teach contemporary students" (Mahiri, 1998, p.1). The preservice teacher research described above is significant because it shows one way for university faculty to better understand and build on the educational experiences of their contemporary students. Such research efforts also provide the students with increasing "agency to transform key aspects of schooling (e.g. research and writing) by instituting curricula and teaching practices that can help students (and teachers) to more clearly understand, effectively

negotiate, and ultimately critique and change the sociocultural, economic, and political conditions" that surround them as people (Mahari, 1998, p.4)

Preservice teacher research also has the potential to reconstitute what it means to be a student and what it means to do student work. Relationships are restructured as students work closely with faculty in the research process and create much more common ground-intellectually, academically, and emotionally-than is usually the case. As a result of these relationships, the students begin to see their research mentors as possible role models. The limits of their own potential as students are extended. They begin to see themselves more and more as active learners, rather than as students who are taught.

As undergraduate student researchers redefine their roles as students, they also see the role of student work differently. While in the past, some classroom research has been regarded as "glorified homework" (Reisberg, 1998), research that students find meaningful and purposeful helps them view their homework as "life work." They see themselves as participating in a process of learning and inquiry that is recursive, occurring over and over again as they apply their skills and knowledge to new situations.

Experience with preservice teacher researchers also has the potential to change the way teacher educators think about their roles as teachers. All three of the faculty involved in this study wrote about the value and the power of the relationships they established with their research partners. As one faculty member put it, "In doing our collaborative research study, genuine personalities and thoughtful questions became the way for us as we built this relationship." Through the course of the experience, the faculty moved from supervisory roles to positions of co-researchers and co-learners. As co-learners, the faculty members engaged in ongoing reflection about their studies and about the teaching and learning processes that occurred as the work progressed. An important point that emerged from the reflections was that interpersonal relationships appear to contribute to students' interest and engagement in particular reading and writing practices. Previous studies of reading and writing in educational settings support this idea of connections between social relations and literacy. Moje (1996), for example, concluded that "literacy was practiced as a tool for organizing thinking and learning in the context of a relationship built between the teacher and her students" (p. 180). She explained that students "participated in certain literacy practices because of their relationships with the teacher" (p. 188).

In the present study, the students recalled that one important reason they joined their research teams was their interest in working with the faculty members and their trust that it would be a rewarding experience. It appears that, as interpersonal relationships developed throughout the studies, the students grew in their beliefs that certain types of reading and writing are valuable for professional educators to understand and use. The preservice teachers, for example, made use of certain literacy practices (e.g., writing grant proposals) in the context of developing interpersonal relationships with the faculty members. It is possible that the meaningfulness of these particular literacy practices for the preservice teachers grew from the relationships that were established with their faculty partners.

As a result of this research experience, the faculty members have developed a deeper interest in the potential impact of interpersonal relationships on students' valuing of certain literacy

practices. The faculty members currently are paying particular attention to the possible influences that their interpersonal relationships and their teacher-student dialogues have upon the reading and writing that are accomplished in their courses. This includes a closer examination of the types of literacy that come to be valued by students and by faculty in their courses (e.g., thinking critically about writing and reading, presenting ideas generated by writing and reading before various audiences). They are currently asking questions about how the relationships that students and faculty establish with one another do or do not support and encourage knowledge and understanding about reading and writing and about readers and writers.

In conclusion, the experiences of the faculty as co-researchers with undergraduate preservice teachers have definitely made an impact on their approaches toward teaching their students and conducting research about their teaching. In addition, the experiences of the preservice teacher researchers have impacted their lives as students and as future teachers.

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