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Meeting of Two Minds: Research-Based Literacy Activities in Practice

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This study examines a collaborative project between a literacy professor and a classroom teacher. The professor used a Newbery Award winning novel to develop a unit for a fifth-grade classroom using curricular materials and methods that showcased research-based literacy practices. The fifth-grade teacher, in turn, used her knowledge of students' strengths and challenges in comprehending texts to modify the activities to meet their specific needs. This collaborative approach to designing instruction enhanced students' enthusiasm for the unit, the depth of their discussions, their personal connections with characters, and their critical and literary analyses of the text. This collaborative approach also provided an authentic model of effective literacy instruction for the professor's preservice teachers.

It is a March morning in a fifth-grade classroom and a thematic word wall is being built. Three students eagerly share vocabulary words that they chose from the reading assignment completed the night before on chapters from *The Tale of Despereaux* (DiCamillo, 2003). A brick wall made of brown construction paper is starting to rise in the front corner of the classroom. On the classroom wall, a bulletin board displays students' drawings of the main characters from the novel along with quotes that show insight into each character's thoughts, motivations, and personality. Earlier, the students engaged in a lively discussion involving a critical analysis of the characteristics of the novel's main characters, Despereaux, Roscoe, and Gregory. The elementary students then analyze the relationships between a character's actions and his/her own personal motives and how those actions were viewed by other characters.

The previous vignette shows a classroom snapshot of a lesson that was the result of a collaborative partnership between a professor of literacy and an elementary teacher. The goals of

the partnership were multifaceted. The classroom teacher wanted to enhance her students' ability to comprehend fictional texts through the use of research-based practices; ultimately, she wanted her students to develop a greater motivation for reading. As a literacy professor, my goal was to create a model of literacy instruction for my preservice teachers that had been field-tested in an elementary classroom. Our collaborative approach to designing literacy instruction provided the context for achieving these goals.

As schools and departments of education prepare teachers for tomorrow's elementary classrooms, attention must be given to providing preservice teachers with excellent and workable models of instruction. As noted in the Association for Childhood Education International's (ACEI) Position Paper (1998), *Preparation of Elementary Teachers*, "Teacher preparation programs for preservice elementary teachers should provide carefully administered, sequenced and supervised clinical/field experiences in all areas of the elementary curriculum" (p. 2). This view is shared by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1997) who also reported that exceptional teacher preparation programs include "strong relationships, common knowledge, and shared beliefs among school- and university-based faculty" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 30).

For many years, teacher educators have sought ways to counteract the disparity in teaching methods demonstrated in class and those students see in their field placements (Hughes, Packard, & Pearson, 2000). As Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) stated,

While most of the research on this issue has focused on the beliefs of preservice teachers, it applies equally as strongly, perhaps more strongly, to practicing teachers who have developed what we might label "self-apprenticeships of practice" rather than apprenticeships of observation. Practices that are deeply rooted in personal experience are highly resistant to change. (p. 212)

Practicing teachers have been influenced by self-apprenticeships of observation, or what they have experienced themselves as students (Lortie, 1975), and self-apprenticeships of practice, or patterns they have formed from both early preteaching and other teaching experiences. Teachers need to create a foundation for continual learning to keep current about policies, practices and research. This continual learning will allow teachers to improve instructional and assessment activities for the students they teach (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005).

As a university instructor of reading with responsibilities for undergraduate field supervision of preservice teachers, I am well aware of the need for classroom cooperating teachers who can and will model research-based practices for preservice teachers. To this end, I sought to cultivate a more personal and collaborative relationship with one of our cooperating classroom teachers, Ms. Jackson, who taught fifth grade at the time of the study. Through discussions with this teacher, I had learned that she was seeking ways to increase not only her students' motivation for reading, but also their reading fluency and comprehension skills. These areas of reading instruction also interest me. One of the clinical requirements for our preservice teachers was to plan and teach a unit of instruction based on a novel.

To model the development and implementation of a unit for the preservice students enrolled in my upper-elementary reading methods course, I created a series of research-based activities (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000) using the novel, *A Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread* (DiCamillo, 2003). The activities were designed to promote fluency, increase comprehension of the novel through the use of drama and computer-based technology, and engage students in critical analysis and higher order thinking. As a former elementary teacher

with 15 years of teaching experience in a self-contained, sixth-grade classroom, I was interested in testing the activities to gain firsthand knowledge of their effectiveness with students in the fifth grade, and I hoped to gather firsthand observations and student work samples that could be shared with the preservice teachers in my university classes. I also wondered about the types of modifications that a classroom teacher might make when implementing the suggested activities. After discussing our proposed collaboration and securing permission from the principal, we began our work.

Setting the Context

Ms. Jackson's elementary school was located in a rural area in western Illinois between two small towns within a span of seven miles. All students were bused to the school, which housed Pre-K through Grade 6. The student population was identified on school records as 98% White, 1% African American, and 1% Hispanic. Thirty-nine percent of the school population received free or reduced cost lunches. There were two fifth-grade classes; however, students in both classrooms were grouped during reading instruction.

Ms. Jackson's group included 14 students who were classified as "low average to high ability" in their reading. According to various frameworks for calculating readability (Fry, 1977; Lexile Framework for Reading, 2004), *The Tale of Despereaux* (DiCamillo, 2003) is considered to be at a late fourth-grade or early fifth-grade reading level. All of Ms. Jackson's students were reading at or above this level at the time of the study. A Newbery Award recipient in 2004, this novel has a complex plot and extensive vocabulary appropriate for fifth-grade students. In this novel, a mouse named Despereaux goes on a quest to rescue a human princess. Although he initially becomes an outcast to his kind, he emerges as a hero at the end of the novel. Through the four stories in this book, the author explores the aspirations of Roscuro, a rat; Miggery Sow, a homely servant who wants to be a princess; Despereaux, the main character; and the real princess, Princess Pea. The plot contains foreshadowing and flashbacks and provides the reader with many opportunities for critical thinking.

Instructional Activities

The National Reading Panel Report outlined "categories of text comprehension instruction" (pg. 15), including comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, use of graphic organizers, question answering, question generation, story structure, and summarization. Accordingly, the six activities developed for the unit on the novel stressed these different categories of text comprehension. The instructional activities shared in Figure 1 were designed to be used during and after reading the section of the book entitled "Book One: A Mouse Is Born." The activities promoted reading for pleasure as well as to obtain information, and they involved students in a variety of tasks aligned with current research in reading instruction. A compact disc (CD) of activities including descriptions of the activities, materials needed, and graphics necessary for each activity was provided to Ms. Jackson.

Comprehension is an active process in which the reader constructs meaning using his/her background knowledge and purpose for reading, the text, and the context where the reading occurs (Gunning, 2006). A good reader is metacognitive as he/she recognizes the strategies used during reading (Johnson-Glenberg, 2005). Strategies are deliberate cognitive processes of selecting, enacting, and monitoring a plan to attain a goal (Almasi, 2003). A strategy is defined

as a systematic plan that is consciously adapted and monitored to improve learning (Harris & Hodges, 2005). Evidence from the National Reading Panel Report (2000; cf. Nichols, 2002)

Figure 1. *Activities Developed by Professor for Study*

Activity	Strategies	Instructional Emphasis	Description of Activity
1. Literary Analysis: Layers of a Character	Analyzing; Making inferences	Questioning; Using graphics to represent abstract concepts	Students answer questions about a character's actions and motives as specified an event in the novel decided by the teacher. Intent (the brain): What did my thinking tell me to do and why in this situation? Emotion (the heart): How did I feel during this situation? Personal choice (a speech bubble): What was the driving force behind the action?
2. Using Drama to Encourage Critical Thinking	Summarizing; Analyzing; Making connections	Analyzing characters and plot; Practicing fluent reading	First students read aloud five readers' theater scripts with mice as characters. Next they compare and contrast mice from the scripts and determine whether each script contains elements of fantasies or fairy tales. This activity may use a graphic organizer.
3. Character Marks for the Story Time Line	Summarizing	Recognizing plot; Identifying time sequence; Making visual representations	Students make bookmarks, using a graphic and yarn, to represent each character. Students find certain events in the day's assigned reading and mark it with the bookmark.
4. Vocabulary Brick by Brick	Making personal connections	Learning vocabulary in context	While reading the novel, students gather words and write each word on a brick made of construction paper. They add words to the castle-shaped word wall as they share the word in context, its definition, and a personal connection to the word.
5. Writing with a Web Hunt	Synthesizing	Using technology; Writing expository essays	Using a Web Quest, students obtain information about castles. Students use this information to write an expository piece about castles and dungeons, including how dungeon conditions might affect a real mouse.
6. Game: "A Mouse is Born"	Summarizing	Questioning; Cooperative learning	This game reinforces facts from Book One of the novel. Working in small groups, students answer "fate or choice" questions related to novel.

indicate that the following strategies are found to be effective tools to improve comprehension: monitoring, question answering, question generating, and summarization. Graphic organizers and recognizing story structures are also valuable aids to improving comprehension. Of the six

activities described in this article, five involve comprehension monitoring and four involve summarization. Question answering, question generating, and understanding story structures are each involved in two of the activities. These and other comprehension strategies (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), as listed in Figure 1, helped students practice strategic reading of texts.

Critical analysis is an essential skill performed by independent readers (Walker, 2004), who are able to evaluate and negotiate the significance of texts by applying a standard of criticism to analyze and judge the literary work (Harris & Hodges, 2005). A clear understanding of the conventions of literary analysis assists students in critical analysis. By providing background information in conventions of genres or in historical and cultural issues surrounding a text, we help students to understand why the author says what he/she says (Burden, 2004). Activity 1, *Layers of a Character*, required that students examine characters' emotions, intent, and their personal choices in the situational context of the novel.

Drama is another way to review and expand students' understanding of plot structure and to support their writing process (Beyersdorfer & Schauer, 1993). When students perform dramatic readings of text, the reading becomes an aesthetic experience. This experience promotes personal engagement and creates a learning environment where comprehension is natural and relevant (Cramer, Cheek, & Stringer, 2003). During Activity 2, *Using Drama for Critical Thinking*, students read five readers' theater scripts involving mice, and they critically analyzed the scripts and the novel to decide which one best displayed all of the elements required in a fantasy. Students also compared characteristics of the mice from each script to those of Despereaux. Activity 2 was also designed to enhance students' oral reading fluency through repeated readings with teacher feedback (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Retelling appears to be a potent generative learning strategy for enhancing reading comprehension. By engaging in verbal rehearsal of silently read material, the reader learns something about the nature of reading comprehension (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985). During Activity 6, students retold and summarized information from the novel, making inferences while answering questions written on the game cards. Activity 3, *Character Marks for the Story Time Line*, required students to retell and place bookmarks in the correct sequential order in the novel. This activity not only required students to summarize the story line but also to identify the time sequence in sections of the novel that contained flashbacks.

Writing about what is read may also improve reading comprehension (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2007). Computer and Internet literacy are important components in reading and writing instruction. Studies have shown that lower achieving students who are also allowed to write using word processing programs produce material that is more acceptable by class standards (Hetzroni & Schrieber, 2004). When working with these new technologies, students are often actively engaged, and they develop a habit of using computer software and other technology to write (Kist, 2004). Assignments should provide students with opportunities to use both digital and nondigital media (Bowman, Mahon, & Stephens, 2003). Activity 5, *Writing with a Web Hunt*, allows students to search designated websites for detailed information about a medieval castle. This activity requires students to practice finding relevant information and to synthesize it in a paper using process writing.

Comprehension and reading fluency are linked to vocabulary knowledge. Studies have shown that strategically preteaching unknown key words increases reading fluency and reading comprehension (Burns, Dean, & Foley, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2003). Because many of the words in the novel are related to medieval castles, Activity 4, *Vocabulary: Brick by Brick*, allowed students to link content knowledge to words found in the novel through the creation of a thematic

word wall. When students came to the word wall to post each word, they shared its definition and a personal connection to the word. In-depth knowledge of words must integrate new words with ideas that exist in the reader's schema (Greenwood, 2002). Accordingly, this personal sharing of vocabulary enabled students to relate new words to existing words on the word wall. In so doing, students came to see their own relationships among words, rather than just those revealed by the teacher (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2003).

Implementation and Modification of Activities

Well-designed instructional materials allow for the classroom teacher to make modifications to suit personal preferences or to meet individual student or class needs. To note any modifications that Ms. Jackson may have made to the activities I had designed, I observed Ms. Jackson's classroom during the reading instructional period on five different days for a total of 7.5 hours. During this time, I collected detailed observation notes as students were engaged in four of the six activities. Daily conversations with Ms. Jackson helped me understand why and how certain activities were modified to better meet the needs of her students. A discussion of my observations of several of the activities follows, along with insights gained from Ms. Jackson.

During the implementation of Activity 1, *Literary Analysis: Layers of a Character*, Ms. Jackson and I were both impressed with the students' comprehension of implied meanings within the text. Ms. Jackson added to the original activity by having the students create additional comprehension questions related to the reading assignment and share answers to their questions during the class discussion. Many questions generated by the students were higher-level questions (Krathwohl, 2002), and students used evidence from the text to support each of their answers. Other modifications included asking students to draw portraits of the characters and to identify quotes from the novel that best represented each character's essence. The portraits and accompanying quotes were displayed on a bulletin board. Another modification required asking students to compare and contrast, in writing, three characters from the novel: Gregory, Most Honored Head Mouse, and Botticelli. Students wanted to share their impressions following the assignment, and Ms. Jackson noted that they seemed both motivated and engaged.

Ms. Jackson also modified Activity 3, *Character Marks for the Story Time Line*, to include discussions of story events. After students marked the place in the book where a particular event occurred, students shared several of the DiCamillo's key sentences relating to that context. This addition promoted cooperative learning. Ms. Jackson modified Activity 5, *Writing with a Web Hunt*, by asking two students to teach the class how to use the Web Quest. The school's Internet connection was slow, yet despite the delays experienced using the Internet, Ms. Jackson noted that students' attention was rapt. She provided additional instructional opportunities, including an art activity that allowed students to use chalk to draw the mood of the dungeon, bringing in a castle built by a fourth grader to provide a concrete visual, and making other nonfiction texts on castles and medieval times available to the students.

Activity 4, *Vocabulary Brick by Brick*, required no modifications by Ms. Jackson. Students started a class session by sharing vocabulary words and adding them to the growing thematic "castle" word wall. Due to conflicts with my teaching schedule at the university, I was not able to observe Activity 2, *Using Drama to Encourage Critical Thinking*, or Activity 6, *Game: "A Mouse is Born."* Ms. Jackson reported that no modifications were necessary with these activities.

At the end of the unit, I asked Ms. Jackson to share her overall impressions with me. She said:

I think they [the activities] were well worth doing or I wouldn't have done them—the variety, and the different approaches, incorporating technology of course. The kids loved the website. And the other thing was that the research backed up what was done. I will never forget that day the kids had that massive discussion [over the characters' motivations]. It was what we dream of. It was a marvelous experience.

Benefits of Project

Activity 3, *Character Marks for the Story Time Line*, and activity 6, *Game: "A Mouse is Born"* were shared with preservice teachers during a make-it, take-it workshop at a local reading council meeting. One remarked, "I like how these activities can be adapted to use with any novel I teach."

Because preservice teachers in methods course are always looking for more activities to teach essential reading strategies, the activities were shared during instructor-modeled mini-lessons reinforcing comprehension strategies. Ms. Jackson has been a speaker in the methods class as well discussing our collaborative activities that have been implemented in her classroom. I have found that preservice teachers believe that an elementary teacher's reinforcement of research-based practices adds a new level of credibility to my instruction. The biggest lesson I learned from this collaborative partnership was pick your partner wisely. Although Ms. Jackson was a veteran teacher with 36 years experience, she was very flexible in her teaching style and welcomed new instructional activities. She always followed through and completed activities that we had planned. Speaking from experience with other partnerships with classroom teachers, I have found that this is not always the case.

When going into a partnership, you have to be willing to share both positive and negative perceptions with each other. Ms. Jackson and I had no problems sharing with each other. This openness could have been due to the fact that we knew each other and had many discussions about preservice teachers I had observed in her classroom. She was willing to let the partnership happen and listened to my ideas based on research. Ms. Jackson helped me remain grounded in reality by adapting the lessons to meet individual student needs. If she felt that her students needed a more concrete visual such as a worksheet, she added it. I was grateful to her for letting me have the joy of observing elementary students at work, because I have never forgotten my roots as an elementary teacher and how much fun it is to watch kids think and react to what they read.

Conclusions

This project points out several important benefits to the type of collaborative work conducted. Classroom teachers, such as Ms. Jackson, are often aware of the necessity to incorporate research-based practices into classroom instruction, but they may have limited access to current research journals and limited planning time to put innovative ideas into practice. At the same time, university faculty may have knowledge of and access to current research, but they typically have limited venues for the testing of new curricular materials and methods. Because the majority of teacher preparation programs must rely on community schools for the experiential training of student teachers, and because university faculty are already in close contact with cooperating teachers who mentor student teachers, it makes sense for this

established relationship to be extended to include collaboration in the testing of innovative, research-based practices. Such collaborative research and development efforts are mutually beneficial, help to establish links between theory and practice, and benefit the professional development of both preservice and inservice teachers, as well as university professors.

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