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Beliefs and Practices of Three Literacy Instructors in Elementary Teacher Education

This article describes the beliefs and practices of three literacy teacher educators at one site of a longitudinal multisite case study of teacher education and literacy teaching that describes teacher candidates' experiences in literacy courses and their first two years of literacy teaching. One instructor held a social constructivist perspective and focused on depth of conceptual understanding; two promoted breadth to prepare the students for the early years of teaching. The courses highlighted print literacy. Neither critical literacy, multiliteracies, or multimodality were emphasized. Instructors perceived that their students were prepared to teach literacy, but noted inconsistencies between their courses and practices in the field experience.

Cet article décrit les croyances et les pratiques de trois formateurs d'enseignants en alphabétisation dans un des milieux d'une étude de cas longitudinale et multisite portant sur la formation des enseignants et sur l'alphabétisation. On décrit les expériences de stagiaires dans des cours d'alphabétisation et lors de leurs deux premières années comme alphabétiseurs. Les croyances d'un des formateurs s'inscrivaient dans une perspective socio-constructive et portaient sur la profondeur de la compréhension conceptuelle ; les deux autres instructeurs favorisaient l'étendue des connaissances dans la préparation des étudiants pour les premières années de l'enseignement. Le cours mettait l'écrit au premier plan. Ni la littératie critique, les littératies multiples ou la multimodalité n'étaient mises en évidence. Les formateurs estimaient que leurs étudiants étaient prêts à enseigner en alphabétisation, mais ils ont noté des incohérences entre leurs cours et les pratiques lors des activités sur le terrain.

Literacy education has always been a priority in the elementary school curriculum. Historically and politically, literacy has been conceptualized narrowly as including oral and written sign systems (Eisner, 2002; Leland & Harste, 1994). Literacy, however, is a complex phenomenon that embodies the creation and representation of personal and social meanings across multiple sign systems (Bustle, 2004; Courtland, Niemi, Paddington, & Magnusson, 2006; Courtland & Paddington, 2008; Eisner; Kinzer, 2003). Further, new literacies or multiliteracies are socially and culturally situated (Kist, 2005; Monkman, MacGillivray, & Hernandez Leyva, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Rogoff, 1995). As

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the boundaries of literacy have expanded, literacy teaching has become more complex. Teacher educators face a challenge in preparing teacher candidates to become effective literacy teachers. Grossman et al. (2000) and Hoffman et al. (2005) argue that there is a need for longitudinal research that documents teacher candidates' professional preparation and their transitions through the early years of literacy teaching.

In this article, we describe the beliefs and practices of the three literacy instructors who taught the elementary language arts methods courses at one site of a longitudinal multisite case study on teacher education and literacy teaching. The purpose of the study was to describe the preservice preparation of elementary literacy teachers and the nature of their experiences during their first two years of literacy teaching.

In the first year of the study, a survey was conducted with 106 elementary teacher candidates to determine their perceptions of their preparation for effective literacy teaching. Interviews were then conducted with the three instructors and 10 teacher candidates enrolled in the elementary Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree program. In years two and three, a sample of five novice teachers were followed through their first two years of teaching.

Data from the instructors were collected through semistructured interviews and analysis of instructors' course outlines. Data analysis was constant-comparative (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2002). Data analysis of interview transcripts and course outlines highlighted several key themes: connections between theory and practice; course content and pedagogy; perceptions of the consistency between the course and field experience; and preparedness for literacy teaching. A limitation is the small sample of instructors.

Review of the Literature

The research is informed by two strands of literature: (a) research on literacy teaching and learning; and (b) research on teacher education. First, we espouse a social constructivist, transactional theory of literacy teaching and learning (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986). The expertise of the teacher educator is critical to developing relevant course content and pedagogy for teaching literacy as are the theoretical frameworks embedded in the literacy course (Delpit, 2003; Kosnik & Beck, 2007).

Recent developments in literacy education highlight key concepts that teacher educators and classroom literacy teachers should incorporate into their theoretical frameworks for planning curriculum. These concepts include not only verbal and print sign systems, but also

- the sociocultural and political contexts of learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Luke, 2005);
- the nature of multimodalities (Eagleton, 2002; Leland & Harste, 1994; Siegel, 2007) and the significance to learning of representation across sign systems (Bustle, 2004; Courtland et al., 2006; Courtland & Paddington, 2008; Eisner, 2002; Goldberg, 2001);
- critical literacy, particularly in terms of power relations, equity, and social justice (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001; Courtland et al.; Freire, 1970; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008), particularly in relation to literature, including multicultural literature;
- new and multiliteracies (Kist, 2005; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005); and

- the bridging of students' in-school and out-of-school literacies in the language arts program (Kist; Pahl & Rowsell).

Second, research on teacher education has illuminated dimensions of exemplary programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and influences on professional development, in particular, the continuum from preservice teacher preparation through the early years of teaching (Grossman et al., 2000; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006). Darling-Hammond argues that strong teacher education programs ensure that candidates develop knowledge, skills (content and pedagogical), and dispositions for problem-solving in their practices. Feiman-Nemser notes that preservice programs must provide opportunities for candidates: to reflect on their existing beliefs and form new visions; and to develop subject matter and pedagogical knowledge; develop knowledge of learning (including cultures); and develop a repertoire of strategies alongside the observation and analytical tools to study their practices. As well, field experiences should be an integral part of the program. Among Feiman-Nemser's criticisms of existing programs are abstract and artificial fragmentation in programs and courses that impede teacher candidates' understandings of the links between theory and practice.

Grossman et al. (2000) conducted a three-year study to investigate how preservice teachers enrolled in a course on process writing implemented in their practices the ideas and strategies introduced in the course. They articulated two constructs to guide their analyses of data: conceptual tools and practical tools. Conceptual tools are defined as "principles, frameworks, and ideas about teaching, learning, and English/language arts that teachers use as heuristics to guide their instructional decisions" (p. 3). Examples of conceptual tools are instructional scaffolding, process-writing, and constructivism. Practical tools are defined as "classroom practices, strategies and resources that do not serve as broad conceptions to guide an array of decisions, but instead have a more local and immediate utility" (pp. 3-4). Practical tools include, for example, journal-writing and writers' workshop. We found that teacher candidates' appropriation of conceptual tools was influenced by the array of practical tools they learned about in the writing course, field experiences, and the first year of teaching. Influences on their implementation of conceptual and practical tools included the settings in which they taught and the press of curriculum materials available. The use of practical tools learned about in courses began to reappear in the second year of teaching.

Kosnik and Beck (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of beginning teachers' preparation for teaching literacy and the early years of literacy teaching. In the first year of the study, they interviewed 10 literacy instructors about their practices. They found that although all instructors identified their philosophies as constructivist, they used divergent frameworks. Most instructors worked through major topics, but many courses were disjointed. The courses differed substantially from one another. All instructors used modeling. The instructors expressed concerns about time. We note that instructors were not informed about research on teacher education. They argue that there is a lack of priorities in teacher education and that instructors must work collaboratively to prioritize goals and plan their literacy courses.

Feiman-Nemser (2001) observes that the induction phase is a critical component of professional development for beginning teachers:

The situation in which new teachers find themselves is inherently paradoxical. Like all beginning professionals, they must demonstrate skills and abilities that they do not yet have and can only gain by beginning to do what they do not yet understand (Schon, 1987). This places beginning teachers in a vulnerable position. Moreover, the work of teaching, itself complex, uncertain, and full of dilemmas, sharpens the paradox by reminding beginning teachers at every turn of what they cannot yet do. (pp. 1027-1028)

The process of becoming a teacher takes place over time. Feiman-Nemser notes that among the concepts and skills that beginning teachers need to develop are: "Gaining local knowledge of students, curriculum and school context" (p. 1028); "designing responsive curriculum and instruction" (pp. 1028-1029); "enacting a beginning repertoire in purposeful ways" (p. 1029); "creating a classroom learning community" (p. 1029); "developing a professional identity" (p. 1029); and "learning in and from practice" (p. 1030). She contends that many beginning teachers have little or no support in their early years of teaching.

The following section begins by describing the teacher education program and the modes of delivery of the literacy courses. We then present the findings on the instructors' beliefs and practices.

Bachelor of Education Program

The university offers a concurrent BEd degree program as well as a one-year consecutive program. Teacher candidates may enter one of three divisions: Primary/Junior (P/J, elementary), Junior/Intermediate (J/I, middle school/junior high), or Intermediate/Senior (I/S, junior high/secondary). The study focused on P/J instructors and students. Students may take all courses on campus or register for the Professional Program Onsite Delivery [PPOD] in which their literacy instruction takes place in elementary schools. All P/J students take a required literacy course that is 54 hours in length and is ongoing through fall and winter semesters. The PPOD students enroll in the 54-hour literacy course plus an 18-hour course on curriculum planning and evaluation with the same literacy instructor. The curriculum course focuses on planning and evaluation of literacy. Thus these students have one full course equivalent [FCE] devoted to literacy teaching and learning. The PPOD students work in classrooms as volunteer literacy coaches one quarter day per week. As well, all teacher candidates may take an 18-hour elective in an area such as drama, early literacy, or communications. In the professional year, teacher candidates have two five-week field placements, one in the fall and the second after they have completed the second term. Teacher candidates do not return to university classes following the second placement.

Instructors' Beliefs and Practices

The three instructors were contract faculty and taught all sections of the literacy course on campus and in the PPOD. All had Master of Education degrees and had extensive professional development in literacy. All were retired educators who had been teachers and principals and had had consultant experiences at the school district level and/or provincial levels. All had a strong commitment to literacy and had worked with their staffs to promote literacy

teaching and learning in their schools. One instructor had taught literacy and curriculum planning courses in the Faculty for 10 years; two had begun five years earlier.

Below we describe the instructors' perceptions of the connections between theory and practice, course content and pedagogy, consistency between the course and field experience, and preparedness for literacy teaching.

Connections Between Theory and Practice

The instructors described their theoretical frameworks in diverse ways. Pamela mentioned balanced literacy as her framework. She also cited several authors: Tompkins, Cunningham, and Hewett. Josie referred to theorists such as Vygotsky and Cambourne and believed that it was important for her students to understand "developmental stages of children" and developmental processes in reading and writing. Fiona explicitly stated that constructivist learning theory was her philosophy for literacy instruction.

The instructors also addressed the relations between theory and practice. Pamela commented that the teacher candidates

need to know that, it's not just the nitty gritty, practical strategies that they're looking for. They need to know why some of those strategies work, and when to apply them, so, so here, it's kind of a combination of the two.

Josie explained,

I probably err on the side of being a bit practical. I do, they certainly get ... some of the theory but I also know I also feel that they need to be able to survive in their first year of teaching. So I'm going to make sure they know how to teach something or that they have a starting place to teach. So I, I usually model any kind of lessons that I expect them to be doing. I model in the classroom so that they see what it looks like.

Fiona illustrated her approach to theory by describing how one class might unfold.

Yeah I'm a hands-on ... We have the read-aloud and that's modeling and we talk about responding to the literature of the day. The students most days are responsible for having read a chapter in a text book. They would be asked to do an application ... OK, so let's say the chapter was on emergent literacy ... One of the things I might do then is to put them in groups and ask them to put together a presentation that they would make for parents on parent night on emergent literacy. What would they tell their parents, the parents? So instead of just talking about it, we would actually have to apply what they learned in the chapter reading to, to some kind of a context. The small groups would report back to the large group or we, I used a lot of cooperative learning strategies so we didn't always have everybody reporting back to a large group. Then after that I would do a mini-lecture on the key concepts so, so points that I really want, wanted to have driven home and then we would, you know, talk about issues or concerns. A question-and-answer kind of period.

Both Fiona and Josie used conceptual tools to enable teacher candidates to forge links with practice. Pamela, on the other hand, mentioned balanced literacy that Grossman et al. (2000) would classify as a practical tool.

Course Content and Pedagogy

The three instructors used approaches to teaching that embodied strategies associated with social constructivist learning theory such as modeling best practices, experiential learning, and collaborative problem-solving. The three instructors believed in the importance of modeling best practices and in the value of experiential learning. All read picture books aloud to their students and stressed the importance of children's literature. Fiona highlighted the intertextual connections between illustrations and text. She also assigned the creation of a child's picture book or a poem. Josie had a similar assignment in an on-campus course section.

The instructors demonstrated approaches such as guided reading, shared reading, and how to conduct teacher-student conferences for discussing students' pieces of writing. All would bring resources to their classes for in-class activities. Pamela explained,

An example would be a literacy block and, what we do is we give them the materials, and then show, demonstrate, how they would do literacy in a two or two-and-a-half hour block of time and they do that in class.

Her students would then share the work they had done in the class. The instructor monitored carefully students' understanding of the concepts.

The three instructors focused primarily on language and print literacy. All addressed topics such as oral language, early reading, comprehension, vocabulary development, the writing process, and language across the curriculum. All required students to incorporate digital literacy (beyond word-processing) in a literature-based unit assignment. However, digital literacy did not appear to have been discussed explicitly in the classes. With the exception of Fiona, who made connections between text and visual representations, the literacy courses did not incorporate media, multiliteracies, or critical literacy topics on course outlines. Fiona had students respond to picture books through multiple sign systems such as drama.

The three instructors used a wide variety of resources. Two commented specifically on how the PPOD classrooms to which they were assigned in the elementary schools enabled them to house their teaching materials, trade books, and simulate real classrooms. Fiona explained the value of an authentic classroom context for teaching literacy.

When you walked into my classroom, it was like any other classroom in the school. The bulletin boards had things on them, I had appropriate instructional materials around the classroom. When students did some assignments, they went up on the bulletin boards. It was like an ordinary classroom, and it was another wonderful way to model. And one of the things that I'm really big on is organization and, and how with, particularly a primary grade, but any grade, you handle resources. If you're going to have a hands-on classroom, you have to have lots of resources. But you have to have kids who know how to treat the resources, how to store the resources or whatever, those routines need to be established. So I had an opportunity to do that. We had a morning message every week. So I was just able to model a whole lot of strategies because I had the classroom to do them in.

She contrasted this setting to the bland classrooms at the university where she was unable to expose students to the wealth of resources available to the PPOD students.

All instructors used a popular Canadian language arts methods text as well as current provincial documents and special reports on literacy. Josie also used documents produced by a local school board and authentic samples of children's writing given to her by colleagues. Pamela shared with students examples of units and report cards prepared by a colleague.

The instructors worked with colleagues in the field. Pamela made arrangements with the designated literacy teachers in the elementary school to allow her PPOD students to attend the workshops they offered to classroom teachers. Fiona worked closely with an outstanding grade 1 teacher who demonstrated practices such as guided reading and running records. The school principal would visit often and give mini-lessons. Josie had guest speakers and also collaborated with a grade 5 teacher on an *e-pal* project to encourage writing between the elementary students and the teacher candidates.

Two of the instructors mentioned their willingness to share their resources with teachers in the schools as well as with their students. Pamela also shared with her colleagues outstanding long-term plans prepared by the teacher candidates. Fiona offered to give workshops to literacy teachers in the partner schools. Unfortunately, this plan was not realized because of particular clauses in the teachers' collective agreement.

Assignments in the courses included required readings, lesson and unit plans, keeping a writing folder, and documenting the stages of writing as the pieces evolved. It was not clear from the interviews or course outlines whether all instructors devoted class time to discussion of the readings or to a readers'/writers' workshop approach. All instructors gave at least one quiz mid-term and/or a final exam. Several assignments related directly to the weekly literacy coaching experience in the PPODs and/or the field experience.

Josie and Pamela emphasized best literacy practices in their courses with little reference to theory. They perceived their role largely as one of preparing candidates for the early years of teaching. Thus they introduced students to a breadth of experiences, materials, and approaches. As Pamela explained,

They know that, right from the very beginning I tell them we are just going to scratch the surface. I don't have time to go long and deep with you on some things. They hear my frustration throughout the whole year.

Pamela also stated explicitly that she believed that faculty should have little choice in the skills they teach:

I don't believe in this academic freedom stuff when it comes to the professional year. I'm sorry. My beliefs are, I mean you need to go out and deliver the Ministry of Education documents, guidelines, expectations. So you don't have freedom.

Fiona anchored her teaching in theory and endeavored to make explicit the relations between theory and practice. In describing how goals for the course had changed over time, this instructor explained her shift in emphasis from breadth to depth.

I went from wanting to give my students everything that I possibly could to understanding that what I could give them was limited and I ... better make every minute count. So I've gone from wanting to provide a huge bank of information to distilling it down to wanting to make sure that they walk away with these few major concepts or beliefs about language learning.

Although the theoretical frameworks of instructors varied, as did the degree of emphasis on connections between conceptual and practical tools, the topics addressed in all courses and strategies demonstrated were similar. This is not surprising in that the instructors had collaborated for a number of years on planning their courses. Fiona also mentored her colleagues during that time.

Consistency Between Literacy Courses and Field Experiences

PPOD. On paper, the opportunity to tutor appears to be an ideal strategy to promote connections between concepts taught in the course and the field experience. During year one of the study, there had been problems with the implementation of the PPOD strategy. Fiona, who had been instrumental in conceptualizing the PPOD program, explained, "This year what happened was that principals and teachers saw my students as another pair of arms and legs and ears and eyes and my students were used mostly as reading buddies." There appeared to have been less communication that year among the partners about the goals of the PPOD and responsibilities of the faculty and school personnel.

Field experience. All three instructors supervised teacher candidates' field experiences. They gave students assignments to do during the practicum. For example, Pamela required students to keep a running record and to assess four samples of children's writing. The teacher candidates were then expected to include instructional plans for the next steps in promoting each child's reading and writing proficiency. She also required students to keep a log of the literacy coaching experience.

Josie indicated that the field was "fairly compatible" with the goals of the literacy course. However, she expressed concern that literacy practices in some associate teachers' classrooms were not consistent with the intent of the approaches. For example, guided reading was being implemented more as round-robin reading than strategy instruction.

Fiona noted that her students saw a lot of traditional teaching.

Yes. I know that a lot of the strategies that I use in my classroom they're not going to see ... What my students see on placement is pretty traditional teaching. It's what they grew up with. So I use a lot of cooperative learning strategies ... This is a really common bit of feedback I get. They go into their placement. They want to try a cooperative learning strategy, or let's say they want to try a literature circle, that's a pretty basic one ... but the teacher, the associate teacher, will say, "Well, my kids aren't ready for that" or "This is a low group of kids and they can't really handle literature circles." And I, that just makes me crazy.

The lack of congruence between courses and field placements has been identified by a number of researchers as problematic to teacher candidates' development as teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Harste, Leland, Schmidt, Vasquez, & Ociepka, 2004; Grossman et al., 2000; Smagorinsky, Wright, Augustine, O'Donnell-Allen, & Konopak, 2007).

Perceptions of Teacher Candidates' Preparedness for Teaching Literacy

The instructors were asked to comment on their perceptions of the students' abilities to teach literacy and on their responses to the course. All three instructors were confident that the teacher candidates had the foundations for teaching literacy. Fiona reported,

The feedback I get from associates is that my students are well prepared. Because balanced literacy is the way we're going in this province, I give my students a good founding, a good basis in balanced literacy. We look at the strategies, the read-alouds, the shared, guided, and independent reading and writing strategies ... Also literature circles or comprehension activities responding to literature and inward study [reflection]. They, they know what that is. They know what running records are. They know what leveled books are. They have the vocabulary to go into the field and hold their own in a conversation. My students had a lot of training that many classroom teachers right now haven't had in terms of balanced literacy. So I, I think they've got a good, a good foundation in understanding what's happening in the province and in understanding what that looks like.

The instructors also found that students responded positively to their classes as evidenced in class discussions and on course evaluations. One noted that her students

Think the workload is fair ... They think the workload is practical and will help them when they're teaching ... They talk about how they always like the tone of the classroom and that I support them in their endeavors to become good teachers.

Fiona commented on the connections her students made between their experiences in the course and their own personal growth as literate human beings.

But I think back to why the students enjoyed the course, they saw the practical application to a classroom. They could see that, that's the strategy I could take and use. They also did a lot of reflecting on how they learned reading and writing and they often said "Gee, I ... wish we did this" or "I wish my teacher did that when I was learning. It would have, it would have made learning a lot easier." Students in my class often self-identified as being kids who had problems or as being a student or a younger person who had problems with reading or with spelling or whatever and we talked about that a lot. [We] talked about how some strategies today are available for kids who are struggling or reluctant or whatever. I, I think, because we're all readers and writers, I think they could all go back to their own understanding, or their own experience ... and relate it.

Discussion

The faculty of education in the study clearly values literacy education. This is evident in the inclusion in the BEd program of a minimum of a 54-hour course or a 72-hour course in the PPOD option on literacy teaching and learning. As well, teacher candidates may also elect to take other courses such as drama and early literacy. The PPOD option has the potential to provide teacher candidates with literacy coaching experience. Unfortunately, during the year of data-collection, the program was not being implemented as intended. This points to the importance of greater communication between partners in the program (Kos-

nik, Beck, Diamond, Kooy, & Rowsell, 2002) if the program is to be effective as a relevant bridging experience between courses and field placements.

The literacy instructors had varied frameworks for their courses. One held a social constructivist view of learning and attempted to make theory explicit. The other two aimed to prepare their students for the initial years of literacy teaching. All three had fairly similar course content and used social constructivist strategies such as modeling, demonstration of cooperative learning, and experiential hands-on learning. An analysis of the instructor interviews and course outlines indicated a gap in course content and pedagogy concerning multimodalities, critical literacy, and students' out-of-school literacies. Only one instructor read picture books aloud every class and connected the print text to the visual representations. This instructor also had teacher candidates respond to the books through a reader response approach (Rosenblatt, 1978). In the light of recent developments in the field of literacy noted above, the instructors' beliefs and practices portray a narrow view of social constructivism and literacy teaching and learning bounded by oral language and print literacy.

Grossman et al.'s (2000) constructs of conceptual and practical tools provide a lens through which to deconstruct the relations between theory and practice in the courses. In the one course, Fiona attempted to provide conceptual tools and to link these to practical tools. In contrast, the other instructors focused on preparing students for literacy teaching by introducing them to a range of practical tools. Without the foundation of conceptual tools to draw on, we question whether novice literacy teachers will have sufficient understanding of the content and pedagogical knowledge they will need for "designing responsive curriculum and instruction" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, pp. 1028-1029), and "enacting a beginning repertoire in purposeful ways" (p. 1029).

There were strengths in the instructors' approaches. For example, the instructors of the PPOD created authentic classrooms in elementary schools where they were able to immerse teacher candidates in literacy learning environments and class routines. As well, they worked closely with colleagues to model best practices and worked with the teacher candidates to establish a community of learners.

The instructors perceived their roles as preparing students to teach in Ontario. Thus there was significant emphasis on ministry documents and initiatives. One instructor explicitly commented on the imperative of teaching to ministry expectations and to eschew the "academic freedom stuff." We believe that if we are educating teacher candidates to be autonomous curriculum decision-makers and reflective practitioners, our foci must be reflective of current literacy research and research on teacher education rather than limited in scope to a single provincial department guideline and documents. These should be addressed in the context of literacy courses, but the emphases must be more inclusive.

Kosnik and Beck (2007) contend that we need to prioritize our goals for literacy courses and that "there must be a coming together of the research on literacy education and teacher education to determine a pedagogy for teacher education, especially as it relates to literacy education" (p. 14). It is critical that the faculties of education set in place strategies to promote dialogue among

literacy teacher educators to set priorities and to provide opportunities for professional development that broaden teacher educators' understanding of the research on teacher education and their roles as teacher educators. This becomes increasingly significant in faculties of education where contract lecturers teaching the courses related to language arts and literacy may not be engaged in ongoing research.

Researchers must further investigate the beliefs and practices of literacy instructors as well as the preparedness of graduates for literacy teaching.

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