

IMPROVING READING SKILLS OF SECOND GRADE STUDENTS: INTEGRATING ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL READING INSTRUCTION WITH A PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues of accountability and assessment in elementary education from three perspectives: (a) improving struggling second grade students' reading ability; (b) providing pre-service elementary education students with the opportunity to assess student needs, design instruction, and evaluate gains for the efficacy of instruction; and, (c) addressing state and national licensure standards for future teachers, which require the ability to assess student needs, design instruction to meet these needs, and then to assess instruction. The paper summarizes the ways in which these three perspectives influenced the development of a school/university reading program and the importance of balancing these aspects as one plans for such a collaboration.

RATIONALE

Unarguably, learning to read is central to student success in schools. When young children are unable to begin reading successfully in the early grades, they frequently loose ground academically, ground they fail to make up during their school years (Morris, 1999). One way to address the need for additional reading support in the early grades is through the use of volunteer tutors, either from the community or from teacher preparation programs, to work with children individually (Adler, 1999; McKenna, 2000; Johnston, et al., 1998; Jones et al., 2004).

Similarly, future teachers need to learn the basis for effective reading instruction and have the opportunity to apply these fundamental basics and assess their efficacy while working in supervised field placements (Darling-Hammond, 2007). State and national licensing agencies also require future teachers to learn, and apply appropriate assessment strategies to use in instruction and diagnosis for student achievement. Finally, teacher education programs must consider ways to measure the effects of their reading tutorial programs led by pre-service students to provide feedback for cooperating schools. Attempting to create a venue to address these goals opens the door to several issues.

BACKGROUND

For the past five years, pre-service elementary students (tutors) have been enrolled in a tutoring program designed to work with struggling second grade readers (tutees) in a local elementary school. Approximately forty university students are divided in groups of 10-12 meeting weekly with a cohort of 10-12 second grade students. They

meet Monday through Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. for a minimum of 10 reading tutorial sessions during a semester; thus the tutees potentially have thirty to forty hour-long sessions with tutors during the semester, barring excessive absences

As it is easy to see, the logistics of organizing such a program present challenges: timing sessions for maximum instructional effectiveness for the tutees, initial pedagogical instruction for tutors, provisions to measure progress with tutees, ways to organize tutoring sessions for maximum effectiveness for tutees, and ways to communicate daily work of tutees between tutors. While changes have been made during the past five years of program implementation, certain aspects of the program remain the same: the initial and ongoing instruction for pre-service teachers, and the content of the tutorial sessions, which include daily monitoring of fluency, directed reading instruction, word study, and writing. Tutors keep daily journals of the work with their tutee, which serve as a record for other tutors assigned to their tutee and also for each tutors' final field reports.

PROCEDURES

The program described in this discussion was first implemented in 2003.⁹ The tutees eligible for this program are identified based on results from the Woodcock-Johnson Reading Inventory (2001). The pre-service students are enrolled in a Fundamentals of Reading class during the same semester they are tutoring, although the tutoring placement does not officially serve as a field experience for the class. The pre-service students are assigned two texts to use during the semester accompanying the tutoring: Duffy, *Explaining Reading* (2003) and Cunningham, *Systematic sequential phonics they use: Learning phonics through word wall and making words* (2000).

Tutoring sessions are led by the faculty member of record, a graduate student, and the elementary school principal. Pre-service students are supervised by the elementary school principal and at least one graduate instructor from the University. Each morning pre-service students are provided with an overview of the day's activities (based on Duffy and Cunningham selections) along with a lesson plan and the records of the previous tutors' work with the children.

The sessions begin with a time for tutors to review previous work of their tutees, to complete plans for the day, and to discuss and model the assigned parts of the Duffy and Cunningham texts. Sessions begin and end with a timed reading from *Quick Reads* (Pearson Learning, 2003), providing systematic documentation of fluency (as measured in Words per Minute, WPM), and then including reading for comprehension and word study, and concluding with a writing sample if time allowed. The WPM component was added after the first year to serve as one way of measuring tutee progress as well as providing the tutors with a useful diagnostic tool. Over time, we have found that the data collection (WPM) provides concrete documentation for both tutors and tutees

9 This paper discusses five groups of tutors working in the program between 2003 and 2007 (N= 40/per year, or 200) with 5 groups of second grade students (N= 10 per year, or 50); numbers are averages and differed slightly each year.

and served to motivate both groups of students as they worked on improving reading skills.

FINDINGS

Initially, the focus was on providing a placement where tutors could apply varied reading strategies working with tutees, who were struggling readers. From the outset, documenting each day's work and communicating this information from tutor to tutor was critical. Analysis of records kept in the first year of the program showed that while tutors felt a sense of accomplishment with their tutees, they needed more specific evidence of the kinds of gains they were, or perhaps were not, making. The researchers also were cognizant of the need to introduce pre-service students to formal assessment strategies as part of their licensure requirements, and introducing record keeping in the form of WPM was a useful way to do this. The final compilation of WPM scores also gave the school a profile of tutee progress.

Content analysis of the first year's cohort of pre-service projects provided a picture of 'cycles' through which all subsequent groups went (Dellinger, 2004; Green & Murphy, 2005; Hatfield, 2006; Long, 2007). Tutors' reports showed that after the initial enthusiasm, along with some confusion about expectations, wore off, there was a dip in attitudes as well as in tutee gains made during the early sessions. Tutees were frustrated by reading aloud and anxious to become better readers. After this period of the first four weeks, tutees became comfortable working with their tutors, and by the time of the sixth session, both tutors and their tutees reported feeling more confident about ability to spell and to read aloud. Parents informally reported seeing changes in their child's attitudes towards reading. A more productive trend appeared for the last 4 or 5 sessions, perhaps due in part to the timing of several school and university breaks!

Tutors report feeling confident about their instructional preparation; their strongest area of concern over time continued to be tutee's motivation, which manifests itself in behavior problems such as inattention and refusing to do work. Tutors have asked for more classroom management instruction to work with this. Tutors also expressed a desire for more specific observation on the part of university supervisors, although this was of key importance for all of us each day.

With few exceptions, tutors identified areas in which they grew in self-confidence and reasonable progress with their tutees. Informal feedback from the participating school (Stavitski, 2004) indicated the tutees made gains to place them at the same reading level as their peers, but as noted below, there has been no systematic study of long-term gains as measured in standardized tests.

The most important programmatic change was made after the first year when tutors reported uncertainty about the kinds of gains their students were making. Introducing a way to measure fluency (WPM) provided more direction in subsequent years. The use of data to guide tutoring sessions gave evidence of effective intervention strategies used over the semester and showed that the majority of tutees made gains in reading fluency and improved their reading comprehension level.

While attempting to refrain from quoting too much from the tutors' final case studies, the following one reflects the tenor of many:

I feel that with my guidance, my student made progress over the course of the semester. Although, according to the pre and post spelling assessments we took throughout the semester, he only made minimal progress with regard to spelling skills, I consider this only one piece of the bigger puzzle. His writing skills definitely improved. He began to put a period at the end of one thought before going on to another thought. He also became more apt to start his sentences with capital letters. [Although his frequency/WPM improved], he needs to continue to practice working on his fluency and intonation. In addition, he also could benefit from continued instruction of reading comprehension and vocabulary strategies. This semester of tutoring has been so rewarding for me, and I know based on observable results that it was also rewarding for my student.

This response illustrates the central goals of the tutoring experience: to provide pre-service students with opportunities to design and assess instructional strategies based on analysis of relevant data.

DISCUSSION

Research on pre-service tutoring programs with elementary school children is conflicting: in most cases, the effects for the tutors are positive, and they report their instructional skills for working with children individually are enhanced (Jones et al., 2004; Rogers-Haverback, 2005). The tutors participating in the program described here have reflected these findings in terms of overall increased self-confidence about their abilities to diagnose and remediate instruction with struggling readers.

Determining the gains made by the tutees is more of a challenge. It certainly stands to reason that after a semester's experience in the reading tutorials the tutees would have made gains, but how to measure the lasting effects is a question debated by researchers and policy makers (Jones et al., 2004). It is possible to document the tutee's growth in reading based on end-of-semester fluency scores, but a more comprehensive analysis of long-term programmatic effect is needed.

The unanticipated aspects of creating programs such as this are considerable, and obviously reflect and affect the need for constant course evaluation and flexibility in planning for all who are involved. Course instructors need to confer with school personnel at length about the school's needs, remediation programs already in place, ways to identify students for tutoring programs, such as the one described here, ways to evaluate the programs, and ways to help with supervision. It is as critical for placements such as this to meet the needs of the school and the tutees, as it is to meet the programmatic needs of the tutors' course of study. It's not an easy task to provide the placement of over forty tutors working with tutees weekly over the span of a semester. Collaboration in the truest sense of the word is essential as is on-going communication about the work being done.

This paper really is a discussion of a 'work-in-progress' as much as it analyzes data from a tutoring program. Hopefully this paper will encourage conversations with other

schools and teacher education practitioners about ways they have found to address the challenges of creating field placements that enhance both pre-service students' teaching and elementary children's learning (Jones et al, 2004). With the added importance placed in reading instruction nationally,¹⁰ programs such as this also answer the need for accountability in teacher preparation. Creating, sustaining, and evaluating programs such as this require willingness to cooperate and adjust and be flexible on the part of the elementary school as well as on the part of the university instructor. Benefits for the children involved are of course the most critical piece of any program, but benefits for the future teachers in terms of using data successfully to guide instruction and then assess the effectiveness of their instruction is equally important.

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