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Teacher education for effective literacy teaching

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Literacy educators have many challenges to face as a result of changing values, competing media, the changing family structure and diversification of culture. Former taken-for-granted notions about literacy and literacy education are no longer stable, and changing populations and a proliferation of new literacy technologies are challenging teachers to account for unprecedented rapid changes in language itself (Luke, 1995; New London Group, 1996). In the past two decades, broader and more complex approaches to literacy teaching have been developed which have the potential to result in increased student engagement, greater depth of literacy learning, improved literacy abilities in real-life settings, and continued literacy participation and learning in later life. Social constructivist tenets under-gird many of these approaches to literacy teaching, but the shift they necessitate in teacher education are not occurring without debate. The changing world of literacy teaching creates considerable controversy over how student teachers should be prepared to meet the needs and challenges of literacy education. Increasing the effectiveness of literacy teaching remains a central issue in elementary schools and in teacher education programs.

In this paper, I explore how a selection of student teachers responded to various approaches to literacy teaching in their teacher education programs. I also explore the impact of social constructivist teaching and the impact of their practicum experiences on student teachers' understandings of the theories and practices of literacy teaching.

Approaches to Teacher Education

Richardson (1997) suggests there are two sets of approaches to teacher education: transmission approaches and critical, reflective, constructivist approaches. The transmission approaches provide student teachers with the opportunity to be engaged in intensive direct teaching of what is commonly referred to as basic literacy skills (NCEE 1983; Pinnell & Fountas, 1998). Those who advocate the transmission approaches emphasize providing students with a clear target and then inducing students to work continually to achieve it (Tucker & Coddling, 1998). From the transmission approaches

perspective, the main focus of teacher education is the transmission of subject content (Barr, Watts & Yokoto, 2000; NCEE, 1983).

Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) suggest that the central principles of critical, reflective and constructivist approaches to literacy teaching are captured well by the IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts. The central principles are:

- An open critical approach to literacy
- Teaching for understanding and real-life application
- Skill development in context rather than in isolation
- Student engagement, ownership and choice
- Student talk and collaboration
- Interdisciplinary linkages
- “Learning for all”, through provision for students of diverse interests, abilities and background (p. 29-30)

Few educators today advocate a transmission approach to teaching. Over the years, constructivist approaches have taken on a greater social emphasis, as educators have become aware of the importance of the social factors involved in both the construction and appropriation of knowledge. Social constructivism entails meaningful, critical and holistic approaches to learning and teaching. I try to work within a social constructivist approach in my teacher education practices and I keep in mind that teacher education programs do not provide a “final product”. As Loughran and Russell (1997) suggest, “preservice education is only a starting point in learning about teaching, not an end unto itself” (p.164).

Purpose of the Paper

This paper takes data from a study in which scholars of both teacher education and literacy teaching explored the factors that support and hinder the preparation of elementary (Kindergarten to Grade 6) literacy teachers for their challenging role in elementary classrooms. The paper explores the qualitative data gathered through interviews with student teachers regarding the impact of the program on their

understandings of literacy teaching. I present the student teachers' voices, taken from interview transcripts, as they commented on the literacy courses they took in their teacher education programs and on their practicum experiences. I attempt to determine how the practices of university literacy instructors are perceived by a selection of student teachers in regard to their preparation to teach literacy in elementary/primary schools. The student teachers frequently encountered contradictory realities as they began to move from being student teachers to beginning teachers. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

The Research Context and Selection of Participants

The research project was conducted at two Canadian universities that offered a wide range of basic teacher education programs leading to provincial teacher certification. These included a four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) program, a two-year after degree BEd program, and a one-year after degree BEd program. Some of these programs were offered on the main university campus while others were offered at locations distant from the university (in some cases in rural locations).

In total, approximately 600 students were registered in the elementary route of the teacher education programs at each university. One university's programs were entirely cohort based, while the other had a combination of cohort groups and course-based programming. The student teachers' experiences across these programs varied considerably in regard to instructors, course content, and their own specialization (e.g., music, special education, primary/early childhood education). However, all students were required to take at least one 36-hour course on language and literacy teaching.

Research Methods

Forty-seven student teachers from the two universities were interviewed. Thirty-nine were women and eight were men. Many were 'mature students' (the average age of students in the programs was 29) with a wide range of education and work experiences. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed by applying open codes and then determining the categories into which the responses could be grouped (Sowell, 2001). The categories of response selected for discussion in this paper are:

- Student teachers' perceptions of their literacy education courses
- Student teachers' understandings of literacy learning and teaching
- Students teachers' responses to their practicum experiences
- Student teachers' transition to the role of beginning teacher

The student teachers' perceptions of their literacy courses, in the main, were very positive. They found the literacy courses relevant, practical, broad and thorough. Most of the students were excited to try new ideas, and many commented on how much they had enjoyed participating in novel studies, literature circles, and writing activities in their classes. They appreciated the poetry and drama ideas their instructors introduced to them. However, issues were raised by the student teachers that clearly constitute challenges for teacher educators. As a result, it is these challenges I focus upon in the presentation of data below.

Student Teachers' Perceptions of their Literacy Education Courses

What it Means to 'Teach Literacy'

The student teachers entered their teacher education programs with a range of perceptions about what it means to teach literacy and about what their literacy education courses should do for them. Many of them held preconceived notions of what it means to be a teacher, notions derived from their many years of observation as students in classrooms. Some of the student teachers experienced frustration with the social constructivist orientation to teaching and wanted to see a more transmission-oriented approach in their literacy courses, including more direct teaching (just tell me what to do), the provision of packets of resources that could be used directly in a classroom, lesson plans and units, and a clear step by step approach to teaching the various literacy skills laid out in the program of studies.

Sometimes the student teachers' naïve beliefs lingered, as evidenced in their continued perception of knowledge about teaching as learning the 'tricks of the trade', or believing that current classroom practice should lead teacher education. There was an often-mentioned notion that university instructors should take their lead from individual

teachers' classroom practice. In addition, some student teachers felt the literacy courses were too theoretical.

Teresa: *I would say [both the students and instructors should] go out to the classrooms and see what different teachers are teaching, and how they are teaching, and then bring back some of those teaching strategies and what is being covered.*

Some of the student teachers maintained an extremely narrow view of the knowledge teachers require and some appeared to be resistant to social constructivist approaches.

Lori: *I didn't need that group component. I've had lots of group components just in life and being in school with my children. So that I found it very tedious and a big time-waster for me because I was serious, I was here for a reason and these [students would] get together in groups and then decide to do nothing. That was a huge time waster and I think I did not benefit from that at all. In fact, it held me back. Just let me soar on my own, I can get this done.*

Loughran and Russell (1997) describe their experiences of consciously 'meeting student teachers on their own terms' when they write:

We share a view that our practices as teacher educators must acknowledge, develop and challenge the various perspectives that preservice teachers [student teachers] bring to the task of learning to teach. We also believe that experience precedes full understanding, so that part of meeting new teachers on their own terms involves showing them how experience extends their understanding and enables them to use it to guide future teaching. (p. 164)

Bransford, Darling-Hammond and LePage (2005) evoke the metaphor of the orchestra conductor when they write that, from the point of view of the audience, the conductor appears to have the easiest job on stage. A 'novice' audience would be unaware of the many skills required to lead an orchestra successfully. Interestingly, one of our student teachers commented:

Melanie: *I don't think that I knew what I was doing last year. I was just like a band leader up there with a whole bunch of different instruments in front of me, not*

knowing what I'm doing. Where this year, I felt more confident ... I felt like a teacher. Last year ... I felt like a student. And this year, I felt like a teacher.

In her first year of teacher education, Melanie did not have the knowledge or skills to successfully take what she was learning and create meaningful classroom practice from it. She began to view herself as a teacher only when she could transform her intentions into deliberate actions.

While many of the student teachers spoke favorably about their literacy courses, nearly all agreed that an elementary education program requires an extended period of time in language arts course work in order for them to become more comfortable with literacy instruction. Some student teachers in the course-based program felt that the one required literacy course they took was rushed, and that too much material was presented.

Candice: Some days there was, like, seventeen concepts that we just talked about in one day, but I don't feel like I fully understood as much as I could have.

Students felt there was little or no time allowed for reflecting upon the new concepts addressed. They implied that instructors were sometimes transmitting large amounts of information without connecting it to practice.

Modeling

Modeling is a powerful strategy that teachers use to scaffold learning. The student teachers in this study often recognized that their instructors' modeling was behind the successes they experienced in their literacy courses.

Tammi: He would read us poems, he would read us books, he would give us word puzzles, things like that. And there were different spelling things that you could do. He was just shooting us with so many different activities that we could do. And that's how I remember language arts, not theory. And I'm glad he didn't teach us theory because really I think I just learned the theory naturally because we were doing activities.

The student teachers experienced a wide range of reader response activities such as using drama as a tool for learning, and facilitating literature circles. Instructors modeled critical literacy activities by using questions intended to disrupt taken-for-

granted assumptions and points of view, and by raising issues of power, identity and social justice. The instructors also modeled practices to help student teachers understand how to integrate language and literacy across the curriculum.

Brian: *Drama components, very helpful incorporating that and across curriculum as well in the social studies ... it was combined drama and social studies, integrated units. Things that we did I really remember as opposed to just sitting and listening.*

Understanding Resources

Student teachers commented upon the ways in which they were provided with instructional resources as part of their literacy courses. Many of them did not perceive their textbooks as resources for teaching. The student teachers emphasized that their instructors must mediate the texts so that the information contained therein is accessible to them. It cannot be assumed that because student teachers have ‘learned’ portions of a text, they can transform that information into practice.

Rachel: *We were just asked to read the textbook, we didn't actually ever learn how to use it effectively ... You've got all these terms and half of them you haven't touched on; haven't touched on maybe a tenth of them. You've got no idea how to use it. You've got a fantastic compilation of information with no way to use it. It's like trying to get on the Internet without your password.*

Some student teachers commented that few resources were provided to them – these students interpreted ‘resources’ as ‘gifts’ – bundles of materials given to them in a package or folder for direct use in the classroom. They did not recognize human resources or sources for finding more material and ideas as ‘teaching resources’. However, by the end of the program most student teachers felt they had gathered a good collection of literacy resources that would be helpful to them as they began teaching.

Student Teachers' Understandings of Literacy Learning and Teaching

In this section I address how the student teachers’ grappled with concerns and notions about what it means to teach literacy. The student teachers were beginning to attend to what they might include in their classroom repertoire. In some cases, they were

able to clearly identify what they had come to understand about literacy learning and teaching. In other cases, the student teachers had not yet developed the ability to clearly articulate their understandings. Many struggled with the social constructivist theories of language and literacy learning.

Support and Collaboration

In the cohort communities in this study, the student teachers were helped by having the support of both the instructor and the peer group as they worked to transform their literacy learning into a coherent way of thinking about literacy teaching. It was not until after the analysis of the transcripts that the clear difference emerged between the majority of students in the cohort based programs and those in the course-based programs. Students in course-based programs appeared, among other things, to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of students they encountered in the program. Pat, in a course-based program, made the following comment.

The number of people, it's quite big here. Just the size of it surprised me because I was in my fourth year classes and there were faces I still didn't know and I'd been going to school here for three years.

On the other hand, students in the cohort programs felt supported and felt that belonging to a cohort was like 'coming home'.

Claire: *I liked the small classroom atmosphere, a lot of peer support as well as teacher support ... I don't think I anticipated how much support you got from all the peers. I didn't anticipate that for sure, how close everybody would get in helping each other and working together.*

In the course-based program, while collaboration with classmates was valued, several students found that scheduling time to work together in groups outside of class time was extremely difficult. The students were taking five different courses at different times, and with different groups of students. In addition, many course-based students held jobs off campus. Relationships were more difficult to create and even more difficult to sustain.

Jean: *Although many times working with others is really great and I'm grateful for the experience, many times working with others in such large groups can be very, very difficult. I remember ... we worked with quite a large group, five or six of us. And we're all taking five classes and we have to get together for group work to get this assignment done. I'm working so my hours are very few and far between. I think that it's much easier for me to do my work assignments on my time, rather than trying to fit other peoples' schedules into mine.*

Many other student teachers, however, saw the value of social constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978) and spoke about the social nature of language, scaffolding learning events, encouraging peer support, and the nature of small group work.

Lee: *Literature and language arts and the learning of language is such a social event and that's why I like the literature circles and the opportunity for the students to do so much work together. Even writing of stories where they can brainstorm together, is because this whole theory is that they learn together and they build, like they can help each other scaffold. The ideas don't always have to come from the teacher.*

Developing a Philosophy/Approach to Literacy Teaching

A number of the course-based student teachers had difficulty in articulating an overall approach to teaching literacy or in describing a philosophy of literacy teaching. These student teachers had taken only one required course in literacy teaching, while the cohort student teachers had two or more required literacy courses. When asked if they remembered a particular theory or researcher/writer in the area of literacy education, student teachers commented: "There's so many names floating through my head", and, "I have a note of them at home". Students held vague notions about generally improving children's skills, developing a love of reading and writing, and of increasing children's enjoyment of reading. Overall, these student teachers thought of literacy activities in terms of them being "fun", with little concern for the literacy concepts and strategies taught through the activities.

Dale: *Philosophy of literacy, um, you have to make kids enjoy, well with any subject you have to find ways so that they'll enjoy it, so you need to be able to read well, you*

need to be able to enjoy reading and that's tough sometimes because if it's difficult you don't enjoy it usually.

There was a range of understandings of literacy among the student teachers. In one cohort program the instructor presented a broad definition of literacy.

Sylvia: *She taught us about using a song ... and putting up the lyrics on the overhead ... and having them do a variety of activities. Let them listen to the song and make it a more modern song, and then they have to write an essay or write a response to the lyrics ... and how it makes them feel.*

Student teachers commented on the importance of literacy teaching and how so much hinged on their successful teaching of literacy. They were also aware of how much time is devoted to literacy teaching in the primary grades.

At the end of all their courses, many of the student teachers were still grappling with a number of issues in the teaching of language and literacy, primarily assessment and the accommodation of students with special needs.

Assessment

Assessing student progress proved to be a challenging prospect for many of the student teachers. A number of them expressed their concern about language arts assessment being “subjective”. They appeared to have a rudimentary understanding of summative assessment, but understandably they had not developed the professional judgment to evaluate student learning and achievement. The successful use of assessment tools is dependent upon the teacher’s abilities to understand what constitutes, for example, an ‘acceptable’ piece of writing or a child’s strengths and weaknesses in reading.

Wendy: *That's the one area where I just felt the very nature of language arts is so subjective. I graded stories that the children had written, and then we both [mentor teacher and student teacher] did them. Most of the time we came fairly close but there were times when we were far apart . . . So that subjectivity in there, it's just so hard . . . Even though you have the rubric to go by, which is supposed to make you more objective.*

Some student teachers commented on the attention paid to assessing the process of student learning but not on assessing the final product:

Leah: I think that there was a fair bit of emphasis on formative assessment. How to continuously see how a child's achieving. There was a lot of emphasis on things like checklists and rubrics. But more during the actual process, and I don't remember a great deal on grading the final product or on exams, there wasn't a lot of talk about those kind of things.

Many of the student teachers commented that assessment would probably be a personal challenge for them, and believed it was a stressful point for everyone. Some said they still needed to know how to assess early literacy learners, in particular. Some participants commented that assessment was one of their weakest areas.

Jane: How do you take the results and find out what grade level the child is functioning at and stuff like that?

As we interpreted the student teachers' voices in regard to their fears about assessment, we realized that they needed to understand that assessment is subjective. As O'Connor (2002) explains:

Grades are as much a matter of values as they are of science – all along the assessment trail, the teacher has made value judgements about what type of assessment to use, what to include in each assessment, how the assessment is scored, the actual scoring of the assessment, and why the scores are to be combined in a particular way to arrive at a final grade. Most of these value judgements are professional ones; these are the professional decisions teachers are trained (and paid) to make. It should be acknowledged that grades are, for the most part, subjective, not objective, judgements. (p. 19)

O'Connor suggests that we must acknowledge and not apologize for the subjective nature of grading, but this means that we must work toward defensible and credible professional decisions throughout the assessment process. Most student teachers are still learning that many of their assessment questions are complex because they are bound to specific purposes and contexts. We can provide students with a plethora of

assessment strategies but they need to develop a clear understanding of the purpose of each assessment tool (O'Connor, 2002).

Teaching Students with Special Needs

Many student teachers felt unprepared to deal with special needs students in the area of language and literacy. Some student teachers were ambivalent about special education programs in the schools, feeling some frustration at having students pulled out of their classrooms for special instruction. Others expressed a misinformed concern at the prospect of not being able to raise special needs students to 'grade level' by the end of the school year.

Brian: *No matter what program you're in, you're going to be teaching kids that are gonna have difficulty with language arts ... The objective of the course should have a lot to do with that because that's the biggest issue with language arts ... it's just an issue that everyone encounters, not just special ed teachers.*

Although most of the student teachers had taken a mandatory course on inclusion and addressing the special needs of students, the student teachers still expressed their concerns about their preparedness to meet the diverse individual literacy needs of their students.

Student teachers' responses to their practicum experiences

Many of the student teachers viewed the practicum experience as the most important component of the program. Frequently, they could not recall the literacy strategies and practices taught in the literacy courses they had taken. They explained that most of the literacy teaching strategies they used in their practicum placements came from their practicum experiences rather than the literacy courses.

Dale: *Get everything you can out of your practicum. Get through your courses and just jump through the hoops. Get through them. Your practicum is where you're going to make your impact, that's where you learn the most. So use your mentor teacher, grill them, grill them until you've tapped as much knowledge as you can. And talk to your peers because I think that's where the most knowledge is. It doesn't necessarily come from the textbook, it comes from doing it and being in the classroom.*

For one student teacher, there was an awareness of a mismatch between her personal knowledge and her experiences in the practicum. By feeling pressured to adopt her mentor teacher's literacy practices, she missed out on a crucial part of her development as a teacher:

Jane: *I did what he told me to do. I didn't plan it. I remember doing a mystery unit and they had to read and answer questions, learn how to write a story ... It was good but yet it didn't help me. Not like this year. I had resources to go by, but I still felt my own way through it. Where last year I don't think that I had that freedom. I just taught what I needed to teach and that was it.*

Other student teachers felt pressured to adopt a teacher's literacy practices because these were programmed and routine, or because student routines were deemed to be inflexible and established, and because the teacher was dominant. As a result, students were hesitant to make changes.

The field experience appears to socialize the student teachers into the profession of teaching. For some, this socialization was difficult, for others it was an enriching experience:

Pat: *Because so much of it was new and she was such an experienced hand at it, I followed very closely what she [did].*

In some instances there was a disconnection between what was taught in the course and what was observed in the school. One student teacher described her teacher as drawing from things considered 'old school' and "not something that I think now the university would encourage." Many students mentioned the primary use of worksheets. For one student teacher, the literacy programs seen in her field experience were disappointing:

Sally: *The literacy programs . . . were old and weren't innovative and it was not at all what you'd read about in a textbook or what I was taught at school. It's very behind. Which is not surprising because everything we take at university, we don't realize it at the time, but it takes years to translate into society. I learned that doing my first degree, but I was still disappointed and, talking to the teachers, they didn't have a clue what I was talking about. They're scared about the whole balanced literacy...It's a bit disappointing.*

Some student teachers were able to apply what they had learned in their literacy courses to their field experience by providing lots of opportunities for their students to read, using a range of assessment tools, and incorporating spelling and drama strategies

across the curriculum. Making connections between the field experience and the course was easier when the courses had been presented as workshops. The majority of student teachers from one university program found a fair amount of consistency between their instructors and what they observed in their practicum classrooms. Comments ranged from “there was a lot” – “quite a bit” – to “fairly consistent”. Some student teachers mentioned that one placement was compatible with their language arts coursework but the other was not.

Jane: *It was actually surprising in my second practicum. My mentor teacher didn't go to my university but I'm like, "Did you go to Mid-town?" because honestly, everything that we had seen, down to even books that she used in her literature circle, was used there. And I'm just like, "Wow". It was eerie almost. Like so many things overlapped.*

Rachel: *My mentor teacher's perspective was more, 'They're in Grade 6, if they're not doing Grade 6 work they're gonna get marked for not doing Grade 6 work'. There were several special needs students in the classroom, but I never saw her modifying anything. The only modifications really were for ESL. The ESL students didn't have to write the short story that everybody else did because they didn't have enough language. It was more, 'You're in Grade 6, pull up your bootstraps'.*

One student teacher stated that most of what she learned in her literacy courses was not applicable to her practicum placement, and another suggested that what he learned was perhaps unconsciously at the back of his mind, but not guiding his practicum teaching. Although a few student teachers attempted to bridge the gap between what they had learned in their courses and what they were observing in their practicum, most of the literacy teaching strategies students used, remembered, and articulated during the practicum came from their mentor teachers rather than from literacy course instructors. In many cases, teaching literacy seemed to be dependent on the resources and programs available in the schools.

Many student teachers referred to the use of commercialized language arts programs. Many student teachers adopted these programs without assessing their appropriateness and value. One student teacher perceived that knowledge of commercialized programs had job market currency. Another felt disadvantaged because she had no familiarity with a specific program and had to teach it.

Student teachers perceived the impact of the field experience on literacy teaching as significant:

Candice: It probably helped solidify the importance of literacy to me, gave me a little bit more confidence in being able to teach language arts . . . I guess what's changed is I probably see myself moving a lot further away from the curriculum in teaching language arts and more so doing my thing because the curriculum's broad enough I'll almost for sure be covering what I need to cover.

Claire: Just teaching literacy and seeing how the students learn is, I think, the best way that I'm going to learn how to teach it. By being with the students and responding to how they're being taught. More so than the course work, I guess.

For some student teachers, their practicum experience highlighted insufficiencies in their own language and literacy learning. They commented that it made them realize how little they knew. In spite of that, they somehow had confidence that they would be able to teach language arts:

Dale: Reading is the only thing that I have a massive deficit in teaching, or mostly reading to the students, which I believe is a really important component of teaching reading, and I really struggle in that area. But overall, teaching language arts, I feel quite comfortable. I enjoyed it, it comes natural to teach that, I find.

The literacy practices seen by the student teachers in the schools spanned a wide range of approaches and included journal writing, guided reading, read-aloud, shared reading, phonics workbooks, drills on sight-words, creative writing, novel studies, letter writing, editing, brainstorming, spelling groups, reading groups, spelling tests, silent reading, group reading, drama, and literature circles. Some student teachers saw marks being given for student work rather than feedback to the work. In some classrooms, boys and girls were separated. In some classrooms there was nothing but textbooks whereas in other classrooms children were encouraged to read for pleasure from a large classroom library.

Student Teachers' Transitions to the Role of Teacher

From the transcripts, it became evident that the student teachers were gaining confidence in their understandings of what it means to be a teacher. Through the support of instructors, the student teachers' ideals and accepted wisdom, acquired prior to entering the program, had been refined and even transformed. Some of the voices

demonstrated that the student teachers' learning had become more conscious, realistic and complex as they used both their everyday knowledge and their newly acquired literacy knowledge.

Apprehension

Many participants mentioned feeling somewhat overwhelmed at the prospect of being a teacher in charge of their own classroom. Many felt scared because they understood the responsibility they would be undertaking. On the whole, however, they felt prepared, and felt they had sufficient resources and knew the strategies they needed. It was the unknown parts of the situation that made them anxious; whether or not they would have a job, where it would be, not knowing what grade level they would be teaching, and what their students would be like.

Nicole: Yes, I feel prepared and I'm extremely excited. At the same time, I'm really scared because it can be very overwhelming. Yeah, it's huge. And I guess I feel like I have all of these ideas and we've been given all these amazing strategies and but I'm just like, "When it comes down to it, what am I going to do? How am I going to implement it? What's going to make sense in that first year?" I just will start, I can see myself just roll.

Making Transitions

As the student teachers made transitions from being university students to beginning teachers, they reflected on their experiences and spoke of the gains they made in knowledge and confidence.

Jennifer: How have I changed as a language arts teacher? I think I've just increased my desire to take some more courses, to become more knowledgeable in that area. I would still like to have a very much literature-based classroom.

One student teacher recognized "that there's so many ways to be a language arts teacher", and went on to describe experiences with the language arts curriculum, the course work and practicum.

Beth: Before this year I really didn't have a chance to look at the curriculum a great deal in language arts, and then you realize how open-ended it is, and how much

can be done with those objectives they tell you that you need to meet. Having the instruction, the curriculum course, and then the practicum, you're really getting a feel for how one sort of expectation can be met in a variety of different ways, and they might all be equally good, and they might all be necessary, depending on who your students are.

Summary of the Data

Some instructors taught by example and used modeling frequently, providing many new literacy strategies for the student teachers. Through careful selection of strategies based in social constructivism, the literacy course instructors scaffolded their students' understanding of social constructivist practices. When student teachers were given the opportunity to work in their zone of proximal development, they could work through preconceived notions and transform them into new and relevant understandings of literacy learning and teaching. They appreciated in a new way the different literacy activities they experienced: activities such as chanting poems, working in drama, contributing to literature circles, and integrating literacy across the curriculum. However, if instructors are not convinced of the value of social constructivist approaches, they are not likely to provide that kind of thinking and learning for their student teachers. Student teachers reported that when their instructors used transmission approaches, and expected their students to learn large numbers of concepts in isolation without practical support, many of them experienced frustration.

Many student teachers demonstrated an understanding of literacy teaching through the comments they made. However, the assessment of literacy learning caused them considerable anxiety and they were struggling with knowing how to use the numerous assessment tools provided in textbooks and course instruction.

Student teachers commented on the transitions they made throughout their teacher education program. From both their practicum experiences and course work, students gained knowledge and confidence. They felt prepared to be beginning teachers.

The practicum experiences were the highlight of the program for most students and many believed they learned more about teaching through the practicum than through the course work. For many students, the material they learned in the university courses

seemed to be irrelevant once they were in their practicum classrooms. These student teachers took their lead from their mentor teachers and used the mentor teachers as a resource and guide.

Questions Arising From The Study

The most challenging findings, for me as a literacy educator, are briefly presented below.

- Most of the students viewed the practicum experience as the most important component of the teacher education program.
- Frequently, student teachers could not recall the literacy strategies and practices taught in the literacy courses they had taken.
- Most of the literacy teaching strategies the student teachers used in their practicum placements were gained from their mentor teachers rather than from the literacy courses.
- Student teachers sometimes felt pressured to use the strategies and ideas suggested by their mentor teachers, even if they were not comfortable with the strategies/materials.
- Some student teachers voiced resistance to social constructivist teaching and wanted a more direct “transmission” type of teaching.

These findings prompt me to ask the following questions:

1. How can teacher educators deal with the problems that arise when student teachers are at cross-purposes with instructors in regard to their theoretical orientation?
2. How can we create learning communities within course-based programs, where students and instructors can support each other and where scaffolding is appropriately provided for student learning?
3. How can we bridge the gap between the students teachers’ need to learn how literacy is taught in schools today and how instructors believe literacy might more effectively be taught in the future?
4. How can we “unpack” the myths of literacy teaching so that students can work through their preconceptions to a solid understanding of literacy theory, concepts, and strategies?

5. How can we encourage student teachers to approach literacy education as a ‘discipline’ to be seriously studied and explored?

Discussion

Beck and Kosnik (2006) state that cohort programs are social constructivist in nature “because the social and communal dimension of learning is emphasized. Part of the social constructivist approach is helping to integrate different aspects of students’ experience, notably the social with the professional and the theoretical with the practical” (p.21). There were clearly two ‘camps’ of student teachers in this study: those who saw and experienced the value of social constructivism and those who valued a transmission-oriented approach to teaching. The transmission-oriented student teachers experienced frustration with the use of social constructivist strategies, frustration that was reflected in their dislike of group work and need for more direct teaching ideas, and packets of resources (i.e., activities for the classroom).

It can be difficult to create a cohesive learning community in course-based programs, because students are likely to be with different students in each course they take. There was clear frustration among some of the student teachers in the course based program because of their perception that instructors were not teaching the kinds of literacy learning they had observed in their mentor teachers’ classrooms. They wanted the instructors to replicate that teaching rather than introduce them to more theoretically sound literacy practices. The way in which these students saw the Faculty of Education was not that of creator and disseminator of new knowledge but rather that of a vehicle for reflecting the status quo in current practices in the field. They certainly did not see the Faculty as occupying a leadership role in literacy education.

Overall, it is clear that instructors need to “unpack” the myth of literacy teaching. Some student teachers enter the education program with a set of expectations about what constitutes literacy teaching (spelling, grammar, reading, writing, poetry etc.). Even at the end of their program, there were student teachers, noticeably those in the course-based program, who thought of literacy activities as being “fun”, making minimal connections with literacy theory, concepts, or strategies. These student teachers were also the ones who expressed the greatest confidence as beginning literacy teachers. Possibly, they

believed they could do a better job of literacy teaching by staying with the skill-based models they brought with them into the program. The role of Faculties of Education must be, in part, to examine student teachers' expectations, and negotiate with the student teachers to reach a deeper understanding of the breadth and depth of literacy teaching and learning. Faculties also need to emphasize that the teacher education program is only a starting point in a journey and not a destination.

In a social constructivist preservice teacher education program, it is important to acknowledge the prior knowledge student teachers have in regard to teaching. Knowles, Cole and Presswood (1994) stress the importance of using the relevant knowledge student teachers possess when they enter a preservice teacher program, and suggest that this should be used as a starting point for reflection, discussion and inquiry. When student teachers are encouraged to reflect on their previous life experiences and relate them to their view on literacy education they are participating in a social constructivist approach. The approach suggests that new ideas should be related in part to old ideas. Student teachers are then more likely to perceive learning to teach literacy as a gradual process rather than a sudden initiation through receiving the "tricks of the trade". This process takes time, and is unlikely to occur in one three credit university course.

I believe that the underlying philosophy of a literacy program should be continually discussed, revised and reinterpreted in order to address the ever changing needs of our diverse university and school populations. The more voices participating in the conversations, the better. When faculty members discuss issues together, they learn from each other so that programs can be refined and inconsistencies reduced. When the voices of the student teachers' are included in this discussion, we can begin to address ways of alleviating their fears and frustration. The voices of our students inform us about their continuing needs as they move from students to beginning teachers.

It appears from this study that there is no clear checklist of items that together will create an effective program for teaching preservice teachers to become successful literacy teachers. What student teachers bring to the program is almost as important as what instructors bring to it. It is clear, however, that dialogue, hands-on experiences and time to reflect on teaching strategies and learning experiences will add enormously to the

likelihood of success for student teachers when they graduate from their teacher preparation programs.

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