An Urban Reading Lab Experience for Teachers in Training

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There is a critical need to recruit and train good teachers. Teachers in training need support and encouragement especially outside the university settings in real classrooms. Urban school settings have an especially acute problem with recruiting and retaining teachers. Nearly half of all new teachers quit within five years in urban settings. (Fisher, 2000) gives the following reasons why teachers leave: exhaustion and discouragement, work assignments and expectations which are difficult and very often unclear, isolation, inadequate resources and reality shock. Higher education is not able to cover everything needed to prepare teachers in training to enter into the world of teaching. They need authentic experiences outside the university in schools. These experiences in schools should have components of mentoring, engaging experiences including Service Learning and increasing self-efficacy.

This article describes one attempt to incorporate teachers in training into a service learning experience in an urban reading lab with elementary and middle school students. Teachers in training met with their professor on site for their college course two times weekly. There, the teachers in training were assigned struggling readers who met them in the reading lab on site twice weekly for 30 minutes. This project is one example of how mentoring, engaging experiences and efforts to increase self-efficacy were put to work for teachers in training.
Preparation
As in any new experience, teacher in training preparation activities and associated learning are essential. Teachers in training actively participated in several in-class activities intended to prepare them for this project. In this circumstance the teachers in training were going to participate in a project involving elementary students who were deficient in reading. Activities were determined to orient the teachers in training to personal perceptions, strong communications skills, personality differences, and teamwork skills that related to learning styles. The activities were designed to prepare the teachers in training for the children they would serve, the perceptions of the children, and how the children's perceptions could differ from their own. Further, the students were given enhanced communications skill training,

Perceptions were addressed using illusions art downloaded from Google. The illusion art utilized were examples of optical art having multiple images imbedded in one piece of art. The teachers in training were able to see that people see things differently because they saw different objects in the same design. Thus, as people look at items or circumstances, different reactions are exhibited. Teachers in training see in this session that struggling students vary in terms of what they see and understand. Awareness of perception issues helps the teacher deal with the children's deficiencies.

A one-way/two-way communications exercise (Saulness, 1990) demonstrated the difference between one-way communication when participants had to draw a diagram being described by a sender without being able to communicate with the sender either verbally or visually and two way communications where the same participants could question the sender. The participants perceived and actual results of the exercise showed a greater success when two-way communications were utilized even though the exercise. The value of the exercise for teachers in training was to experience that students will learn a lesson better when they are engaged even if the process takes more time.

In a different class session, the teachers in training experienced the Personality Compass (Turner, 1998) that identifies the differences among people based upon interests and personality traits. The exercise identifies personalities as North, East, West and South and has the participants identify
their personality direction. Once the participant recognized his/her own personality, the workshop gives opportunities to deal with people whose personalities are different and sometimes diametrically opposite to their own. Teachers will deal with differing personalities daily. The workshop gives them the opportunity to practice dealing with different people in differing circumstances.

The teachers in training capped their workshop preparation by conducting the Murder Mystery (Saulness, 1990) teamwork exercise. Participants are placed in teams and given clues to a murder. Each team member receives clues that they could only share verbally. Each participant's clues are different from everyone else's. The object is to answer five questions (who what when where and why) through collaboration and the task is finished when all questions are answered and all members agree on the answer. Reflection on the activity discussed the issues of overly dominant and reluctant members. The discussion then turned to relating the various team roles to students in the classroom and how to deal with those circumstances.

All of the workshops were conducted to prepare teachers in training for differences among their students and circumstances. The simulated circumstances were designed in the short-term to prepare them for the children in reading recovery and in the long-term for dealing with the students in their classes.

**Interviews/Interviewing**

The Associate Dean of Education, Director of the Center for Career and Technical Education and Head of the Human Performance and Sport Sciences Department conducted mock interviews with the teachers in training. The interviews were designed to observe communication skills and professional dispositions of the teacher candidates and then to offer suggestions for improvement in weak areas. The interviews also laid the groundwork to foster mentoring relationships with professionals outside of the department. The administrators were available several times during the semester to talk with the students and observe interactions in the reading lab.

The teachers in training were also required to interview a practicing teacher in the field of physical education, health or counseling. The teachers in
training were given a list of questions to select from during the interview process which included topics such as teacher relationships with students, colleagues and parents, instructional techniques, other topics and background information. The culminating activity was an oral presentation on their interviews.

**Self-Efficacy Survey**

Bandura's Theory of Social Cognition states that in difficult situations, people who have high self-efficacy are more likely to view the situation as something to overcome rather than to be avoided. Self-efficacy has been defined as our belief in our ability to succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1977). Teachers in training who have experienced high self-efficacy tend to be less judgmental of students and work longer with a student who is struggling (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). When a teacher in training believes he/she has what it takes to succeed, they know they can be successful if they persevere. The perception one has about one's teaching performance tends to reflect on future experiences. Therefore, teachers in training who experience high self-efficacy tend to be more patient with struggling students and less judgmental of them as well. On the other hand, failure, especially if it occurs during educational training wears away one's sense of self-efficacy.

The teachers in training completed a Tschannen-Moran and Hoy Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale before the project began and after it was completed. This measurement of teacher self-efficacy is designed to gain a clear understanding of the kinds of things that create difficulties for teachers in school settings. Items on the scale measure self-efficacy by evaluating student engagement, instructional practices and classroom management. Scores are totaled for each area and divided by the number of items to calculate a mean score. Scores are compared to find any gains in self-efficacy in student engagement, instructional practices and classroom management.

**Training in the Lab**

The final preparation step put the teachers in training into a hands-on training in the Reading Lab. The clinic director, and designer of the process, oriented the teachers in training to the clinic, gave the five-step process for intervention, shared techniques and games to use with the children, allowed
them to practice the process and presented the record-keeping protocols establish to track the students and report reading growth. The teachers in training had the opportunity to practice with the materials in the actual lab setting before the children were brought in. As a part of the training, teachers in training learned they would be assigned a particular child who they would mentor for the balance of the semester under the guidance of the clinic staff and their professor. The teachers in training had their class and their mentoring experiences in the clinic until the last week of the semester when they returned to their campus classroom, giving them not only a clinical, but a simulated residency experience.

**Experience: Reflections from Teachers in Training**

- I am very anxious and nervous. I am not sure if the child will be responsive to me.
- On a personal level, I believe that helping a student will be very rewarding and will help prepare me for the different types of students I will encounter while teaching.
- Someone helped me to get to where I am today and I want to help someone get somewhere.

The teachers in training were extremely nervous as they prepared to meet the classroom teacher and mentee the first time. They practiced going into a classroom, making introductions to the teacher and mentee and welcoming the mentee to the reading lab. The first three experiences were tense and rather quiet but on the fourth visit, smiles and laughter began to erupt in the lab. Both mentor and mentee began to relax and enjoy the process.

Helping the mentor to move from the knowledge domain into the evaluation domain and higher order thinking skills, the teachers in training were asked to write reflections at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. Some of the questions related to how the teacher in training was feeling and growing in confidence as a mentor. Other questions were related to the experience itself and how it was impacting the mentee and the school environment.

**Experience: Reflections from Mentees:**
I get nervous reading in front of someone.
I don't want to go. The other students make fun of me.
Would you come to the Thanksgiving lunch at school with me?
He brought me a book about art. I told him I loved art!

The mentees were chosen by the reading specialist and were considered three or more years below their group in reading levels. Some were 4 and 5 years below the reading level of their peers. The students were as nervous as the teachers in training on the first few visits but seemed to relax as got to know their mentor and felt comfortable in the lab.

Observations of Staff
Being a mentor to struggling readers led to teachers in training becoming more aware of their own teaching beliefs and practices and more secure in their abilities to engage students, improve instructional practices based on individual needs and manage behavior. When applied to the study of teachers in training, the Theory of Social Cognition can be used to describe the direct effect of mentoring on improving teachers in training own sense of self-efficacy.

As the teachers in training began to see increased comprehension and reading skill with their mentees, they experienced success. The mentors began to seek new ways to motivate learning and growth. They began to show up early to the Reading Clinic in order to prepare for the 30 minute session. They began asking for specific books that their mentee might enjoy reading based on their conversations. They were also able to recognize their own reading weaknesses and adapt some of the same strategies used with their mentees to improve their reading and comprehension skills.

Mentoring is a powerful influence on both the mentee and the mentor. In this type of win-win relationship, one mentor described a change in the way he valued education and its role to impact the individual student and potentially a community. The mentees began to enter the reading lab with smiles on their faces as opposed to the trepidation grimaces from the beginning. The lab became a place of concentrated time with one on one interaction that facilitated a renewed interest in reading. It was delightful to sit in the lab as the Instructor and see instruction taking place in each and every
cubicle. The teachers in training were not only observing the power of mentoring and modeling but also taking an active role in the engagement.

Many of the teachers in training said their experience as a mentor was one that any teacher in training interested in growing needs to go through. Positive feedback to the teachers in training helped them gain confidence in their abilities to teach and adapt to the individual. Hearing remarks from the mentee such as, "I am so glad you came to pick me up today," and, "What book are we going to read today?" thrilled the teachers in training and positively motivated consistent attendance and enthusiasm for the project. In fact, several teachers in training expressed the desire to serve more than one mentee. When scheduling allowed they were able to do so.

**Post Experience Reflections**

One mentor reflected, "I think that this experience will help both of us. Hopefully, I can help him to become a better reader and also show a good example to him. Also, I believe the more I work with children, the more I will become a better teacher. And you always want to master your skill of teacher." Another reflected on her reluctant mentee, "The first day I went to get Miss Alexander from her class she was EXTREMELY influenced by her peers and felt the need to act out. I believe her words were, 'Why I gotta go, dis is stupid, I don't wanna go.' Well, I noticed that, addressed it and took the time ask how she was feeling about what her peers were saying and how she REALLY felt. Long story short, she has been nothing but smiles every time I have gone to get her from class. Eager, even!" The mentors were beginning to see changes in their mentee which encouraged their own feelings of success.

Another mentor reflected, "My mentee is a very smart girl. She just feels that being smart or at least showing it is not cool and by me coming to help her she is starting to think differently about school." The mentee benefited by seeing how important it was to set herself a part from those who teased her intelligence. Even though peer approval is critical in middle school, the mentorship relationship has given this young girl a bigger and better vision for herself.

"My mentee comes to learn with me but she doesn't just learn from me, I learn from her also. She is starting to behave better and she is improving her
reading skills. I'm learning to be patient with the ones in need no matter how difficult or how long it takes to get it done. I won't quit and I can see myself a great mentor in the future." In this case, the mentor has found meaning and a sense of perseverance in working with all types of students.

"I feel that in the case of my mentee he needs someone to help mold him into not only a better reader but he seems to need a big brother. I feel that I have gained much insight from my student. He has taught me a lot about myself and why I really want to become a teacher." The mentoring relationship has not only increased self-efficacy but also given the students a broader vision of the world and how important it is to reach out beyond one's self.

**Service Learning Component**

One instructional strategy utilized in education is Service Learning. Service Learning is a teaching method that provides opportunities for students to acquire academic, career, social and personal skills through community service projects (Cuthforth, 2000). It follows the belief that students learn best by doing rather than simply considering a concept in the classroom. Service-learning adds the concept of reflection to the learning (Cuthforth, 2000) and involves teachers in training with a community partner who is the recipient of the service from which the students are learning. To be a true service learning experience, the service provided needs to be directly related to the learning objectives of the teachers in training while fulfilling a real need by the partner. Service-learning incorporates aspects of both volunteer work and internships (Driver, 2007).

In the service-learning activity teamed by the authors, teachers in training combined efforts to tutor struggling students in the university reading clinic. Participation in service learning as an instructional strategy creates that connection and offers the community solutions to often un-met needs (Authors, 2009). The children served in the clinics were classified as struggling readers whose deficiencies were hurting them in all aspects of their education. Cuthforth (2000) found that when teachers in training engage children in meaningful service learning activities the pre-service teachers are making a valuable contribution to the young children?s lives as well as benefiting themselves as aspiring teachers.
Survey Results
Results from the Teacher's Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale showed increases in student engagement, instructional practice and classroom management. For student engagement mean scores showed an 8.7% increase over their initial perception. Self-efficacy instructional practices showed the most gain with 13.1% over initial perception. Lastly, self-efficacy in classroom management had a 5.8% increase over initial perception. On an average for all three categories from the initial perceptions, each category showed improvement.

Conclusions
This project describes teachers in training experiences with off-site mentoring in an urban school setting with struggling readers. Results show teachers in training experienced an increase in self-efficacy toward student engagement, instructional practices and classroom management. This class based experience for teachers in training was an all-around win for everyone involved. The children being tutored, all identified as struggling readers and all of whom were at least one grade level behind in reading, grew and improved their reading scores. The Clinic reported that 100% of the tutored students gained in reading scores (Lipsey, 2009 Dissertation). In addition, the children benefited from the consistent involvement with a mentor who took an interest not only in their reading skills, but in them as a person. The Reading Clinic (community partner) benefited by allowing the teachers in training to serve children as trained reading mentors. In addition, the clinic provided space for the classes to be held on-site. That allowed the teachers in training efforts to be reinforced by their university professor and the clinic staff during their regularly scheduled classes in their service setting, utilizing the clinic's materials and resources all of which supported the clinic's methods and protocols. The university benefited by offering the teachers in training a research-based clinical residency taking the students beyond their traditional experiences while providing service to a strong partner, the Metro-Nashville Public Schools.

The teachers in training served struggling reading students, moved outside their box to grow as teachers, and experienced the value of helping someone else, all while improving their professional skills. Finally, adding the experience to their credentials when applying for a teaching job can offer not only strong teaching experience but mentoring and support for struggling
students through support and empathy.

References


