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School-University Collaboration: Perspectives on a Hybrid Space for Literacy Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing collaboration between a teacher certification literacy course and a local elementary school. Teacher candidates, elementary students, classroom teachers, and university instructors all collaborate to implement a literacy methods course, creating a hybrid space for learning in which university and school personnel work together to the benefit of all participants. The background of this collaboration is described, and literacy learning is explored from the perspective of each participant group. Themes from these perspectives suggest that structured interactions between teacher candidates and elementary students help bridge the gap between literacy concepts and classroom practice, and that participating classroom teachers and university instructors, as well as teacher candidates, learn from the ongoing examination of instructional practice.

Six years ago a teacher certification literacy methods course moved from its university campus location to a K-6 elementary school located nearby. The course instructors hoped that the move would provide increased opportunities for teacher candidates to connect course content to work with children in classroom settings. The school principal and teachers who welcomed the instructors and teacher candidates hoped that their students would benefit from tutoring by the “teacher buddies.” We all hoped that collaboration between university instructors and classroom teachers would provide meaningful professional development opportunities for all.

We had many questions about this project. We were especially curious about whether the benefits of the collaboration would meet our expectations. Our questions were:

1. Does the collaboration between a university and an elementary school support the learning of teacher candidates? If so, how?
2. Does the collaboration between a university and an elementary school support the learning of students at the school? If so, how?
3. Does the collaboration between a university and an elementary school contribute to the learning of both classroom teachers and university instructors?

In this paper we explore the perspectives of teacher candidates, students, teachers, and instructors on these three questions. We also consider themes and implications that emerge from our exploration of these perspectives on learning.

Background

This collaboration takes place in the context of a two-quarter course called “Learning, Teaching and Assessing in Reading, Writing and Communication.” It is the only literacy course required for teacher candidates enrolled in the University of Washington Bothell’s post-baccalaureate K-8 teacher certification program. It occurs during fall and winter quarters, just prior to full time student teaching in the spring, and meets once a week for four academic hours. The course is taught by two tenure-line professors, and covers fundamental literacy topics. There are two K-8 cohorts each year, with teacher candidates taking all of their certification classes as members of a cohort. Teacher candidates in this program have completed their baccalaureate degrees and range in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-fifties.

Juanita Elementary School is in the Lake Washington School District, a suburban district neighboring the city of Seattle. This district is moderately socioeconomically and linguistically diverse, with 36% of students qualifying for free or reduced-priced meals and 13% of students classified as transitional bilingual. This K-6 school has had principals who are supportive of the university teacher certification program. The school has hired several graduates, and principals and teachers serve on various university committees. The principal supports the school-university collaboration by providing a classroom for the literacy course two mornings a week. Approximately 60 teacher candidates, six classroom teachers, two university professors and 150 students have been a part of this experience each year since it began.

Teacher candidates in the literacy methods course meet with Juanita Elementary student “buddies” from three different grade levels (kindergarten, primary, intermediate) over two quarters. Each of the teacher candidates is assigned a student buddy with whom they meet for 30-minute sessions over three to eight weeks as part of scheduled course sessions. During the time with their buddies, teacher candidates administer assessments they have been taught in class and provide instruction based on these assessments. This work is linked to course concepts and is discussed in both whole class and small group settings.

Juanita Elementary teachers provide background on students and share their instructional practices with the teacher candidates. In turn, they receive reports from teacher candidates on their work with their student buddies. Teachers often provide feedback to the course instructors on the validity of the teacher candidates’ reports. Overall, university instructors and school personnel work together to provide a rich learning context for teacher candidates to learn literacy concepts in practice.

Theoretical Framework

There has long been a recognition of the disconnect between university teacher education programs and practitioner work in schools (Bullough, Draper, Smith & Burrell, 2004; Zeichner, 2007). This recognition has prompted some institutions to create “hybrid spaces” in which university and school personnel work together to develop sites where academic (university) knowledge is equally valued and utilized along with practitioner (school) knowledge to the benefit of all participants (Zeichner, 2010). This is what we have been working to create at Juanita Elementary School.

For teacher certification candidates, participation in a hybrid space acknowledges the situated nature of teaching (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Smith & Shephard, 1988) and that the variables of instruction change with every context and every child. Duffy (2004) has made the

case that adaptive teachers—teachers who can respond to changing environments and individual students—are needed to successfully meet the complex demands of 21st century literacy instruction. Recent research on exemplary programs in teacher education suggests that programs where field experiences are carefully structured, matched to coursework, and closely monitored help teacher candidates develop the skills of adaptive teaching and an ability to carry out complex instructional practice (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005).

Students may also benefit from the creation of a hybrid space. A number of studies have suggested positive benefits for students participating in structured tutoring programs (Juel, 1996; Lysacker, McCormick, & Brunette, 2004; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). In tutoring situations, students can benefit both academically and socially by interacting with knowledgeable and caring adult tutors. In this situation, the tutoring occurs in the context of students' own classrooms and the tutoring they receive may be linked to their current coursework.

Finally, the creation of a hybrid space, one that recognizes the knowledge and skills equally brought by university instructors and practicing classroom teachers, should extend learning through the formation of a learning community, a group of educators focused on improving student learning in literacy and the continuing intellectual development of participants (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). Learning communities offer a number of elements of effective professional development including ongoing collaboration, an open exchange of ideas, and frequent connections to classroom practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996). Professional development occurring in the context of a learning community draws strength from the range of participants involved, including novice and experienced teachers, teacher educators, and students (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005).

To examine perspectives on the learning of teacher candidates, students, and classroom teachers/university instructors participating in the hybrid space, data were collected from all groups of participants. Data sources, gathered over two academic years, include: teacher candidate written reflections, formal written projects, and written responses to course readings; instructor field notes of teacher candidate-student buddy interactions and conversations with teachers; student responses; teacher, principal, and instructor written reflections on the hybrid-space experience across both quarters of the course. Data analysis involved a two-part qualitative process of first sorting and coding data to identify a set of emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and then examining the viewpoints of individual participants to highlight themes across experiences. This process resulted in a set of emerging themes in relation to learning and the hybrid space from the perspectives of teacher candidates, students, and teachers. In the following discussion we use the voices of participants to highlight these themes.

Discussion

Perspectives on the Learning of Teacher Candidates

Most of the teacher candidates reported that their knowledge of literacy concepts deepened when they made connections between literacy concepts and classroom practice and when they developed an understanding of student buddies as individual learners. As noted earlier, interactions between teacher candidates and buddies focused on literacy assessment followed by instruction. During four sessions with a kindergarten class, for example, each teacher candidate implemented a “getting to know you” activity with their kindergarten buddy,

administered an emergent literacy profile to assess emerging literacy skills, and then taught a lesson based on the assessment. This process was designed to allow teacher candidates to make connections between the stages of early reading development (Ehri, 1995) and the skills of an emergent reader. Shelley, a kindergarten teacher participating in the hybrid space, commented on these connections:

Multiple one-on-one assessments and activities seemed an ideal way for these “teacher buddies” to interweave educational theory with instructional practice in guiding the reading process. It is one thing to read about the road to reading; it is quite another to walk that road with a kindergarten child who is just making sense of the landmarks.

Teacher candidates demonstrated their understanding of early reading development when they reported on the assessment and instruction activities done with their buddies. However, in addition to demonstrating knowledge of literacy concepts, teacher candidates showed an awareness of specific aspects of emergent reading in relation to their student buddies’ reading development. Colleen (teacher candidate and student names are pseudonyms), reflecting on what she had learned about her kindergarten student buddy’s emergent reading, observed, “He recognizes his letters and knows the sound each letter makes. His story prediction and comprehension was great, but he had a hard time with rhyming. I was surprised by this, since he had such a good grasp of alphabetic sounds.” This example shows how Colleen developed knowledge of the various dimensions of early reading and an understanding of the uneven nature of development when she applied literacy concepts to her kindergarten buddy.

When working with intermediate-grade student buddies, teacher candidates’ written reports showed a similar trend of developing literacy knowledge by connecting course concepts to specific details discovered through interactions with student buddies. With these older students, teacher candidates assessed literacy skills through a series of informal conferences focused on aspects of reading including word identification, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation. Mandy, a teacher candidate reflecting on her conferences with Peter, a fifth-grade student, considered the ways this series of interactions had impacted her understanding of the reading process:

It was quite interesting to first gauge the overall abilities of the student as a reader and then closely examine each individual skill in order to determine the areas in which the student can continue to grow and develop as a reader. I am thankful to now possess the knowledge and ability to look at reading not only as one, over-arching process, but rather as a sum of its parts and interrelated abilities, concepts, and processes of word identification, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and ownership.

Due in part to her work with her buddy, Mandy no longer saw reading as a single unitary concept, but rather as a complex inter-relationship between multiple dimensions.

Interaction with student buddies provided opportunities to apply literacy concepts to authentic learning situations. In this hybrid space the literate environments in each of the classrooms were also discussed and classroom teachers provided information about children and curriculum. In some cases, classroom teachers provided advice to teacher candidates as they planned lessons for their buddies. For some teacher candidates these activities went according to plan, while for others the interaction was full of surprises. Either way, teacher candidates engaged in the assessment-instruction cycle and wrote about the experience in a final project report. Shelley, the kindergarten teacher, reflected on the reports teacher candidates generated and shared with both instructors and classroom teachers. She noted, “Reports written by teacher candidates reflect not only a growing perceptiveness of each child’s strengths and abilities but

also a deepening awareness of next instructional steps. The teacher candidates are exploring the critical alignment between assessment, instruction, and learning.”

There were many indications that teacher candidates generally relished getting to know their buddies as literacy learners and as individual children, with unique backgrounds, interests and skills. One indication was that the candidates’ personal interest and care for their buddies translated into a tangible sense of enthusiasm for their work at the school. Paul, the principal of Juanita Elementary, reflected on this heightened level of energy, writing, “For me the beauty of the collaboration lies in the power of seeing eager teacher candidates flooding out of the university literacy class and streaming down the hallways in anticipation of meeting their K-6 buddies.” Most of the teacher candidates developed personal relationships with their buddies that created a tangible reason for them to learn and apply course concepts. Many of them reported that they spent a great deal of time planning their assessments and instruction. Coming to know their students as individuals provided teacher candidates the opportunity to connect course content in a situated way to their buddies’ skills and proclivities, promoting engagement.

The focus on the individual learner also appeared to help teacher candidates reflect more deeply on students’ strengths and needs. Abby, a teacher candidate who had conducted a series of informal reading conferences with her fifth grade buddy Amid, acknowledged that each time she met with him she learned more about his literacy skills. Reflecting on her increasing knowledge of Amid as a learner, she wrote,

Each time we met I saw something new. On our first visit I was struck by Amid’s fluency and word identification. My initial thought was that I had little to offer him. But, as we talked about the text I could see comprehension as an issue...By our third visit I was able to confirm my suspicions. Despite his fluency and word identification skill, comprehension was not at the same level and therefore would be the focus of my lesson.

Working with children one-on-one allowed teacher candidates to focus on individual student learning in a way seldom possible in traditional field placements. With no need to tend to whole-group instruction or classroom management, they were able to pay more attention to the individual learner, developing through the series of interactions a deeper understanding of both their student buddies and related literacy concepts.

Overall, teacher candidates and classroom teachers agreed that participation in this hybrid space supported the learning of teacher candidates by connecting conceptual knowledge to individual students in classroom contexts. These perspectives suggest that the hybrid space promoted the development of a more complex understanding of literacy concepts on the part of teacher candidates than would have been possible if our course were solely located on the university campus.

Perspectives on Student Learning

Classroom teachers and students reported that the hybrid space promoted literacy learning as well as positive relationships between adults and students. Working with a teacher candidate buddy provided students with individualized time and attention from an adult that in our observations frequently resulted in an emotional bond that was motivating to both of them. Paul, the Juanita Elementary principal, reflecting on the student-teacher candidate buddy interactions, wrote,

The memory is completed by the lasting vision of the faces of the many children who are delighted that this special adult is coming to see them. The smiles on the faces and the

powerful connections they make that are both cognitive and relational, make this complex collaboration seem both simple and perfect.

Julie, a kindergarten teacher, discussed these interactions with her kindergarten class, noting that in a brainstorming session her students reflected positively on their experiences with their teacher buddies both in terms of relationships and literacy learning. She noted that even several months later, students generated comments such as, “They helped us read.” “They read with us.” “They were friendly.” “They made us feel happy.” “They made us laugh.” “They made us feel special.” “We colored in our journal together.” “I hope they become a nice teacher!”

Intermediate-grade students also had favorable reactions to their interactions with teacher candidate buddies, expressing an awareness of the learning support these experiences provided. Teacher candidates introduced themselves to their sixth-grade buddies by conducting an informal writing conference in which both teacher candidate and student buddy shared a draft of a recent written project. Carol, the classroom teacher, noticed that her students were working on a writing project similar to the one that teacher candidates were sharing, allowing her students to quickly associate with their teacher buddies. She noted that these interactions became even more productive, observing, “During the second session my students reported back to me that they enjoyed the instant positive feedback, their teacher buddies had helped with lots of ideas, and had helped turn brainstormed ideas into phrases for poetry; some even found closure to the project with dedicated revision assistance.”

Sometimes the positive experience of these interactions appeared to spread, over time, into the general classroom setting. For example, after several sessions Carol noted that with their teacher candidate buddies her students were able to experience “what the theory tell us a classroom should look and feel like – everyone is engaged in productive work that has meaning for them.” Carol continued,

This experience was repeated on several more occasions and I noticed my students became more adept at recreating this sense of productivity during group and independent work time. Literature circles, for example, were far more on task, with my students demonstrating a deeper understanding of their books as evidenced by the level of questioning they utilized in the groups.

These sixth grade students also shared what they had learned with their teacher candidate buddies, providing feedback on the interactions and suggesting ways the adults might improve their teaching skills. Describing a discussion she had with her students, Carol noted,

Some of the feedback suggested that the teacher candidates should speak slowly and clearly and also moderate their vocabulary. They also wanted more eye contact. At the same time, my students agreed that this was a great social opportunity; they enjoyed getting to know their teacher buddies, they made connections in the work they were both doing, and they found they had lots in common with each other.

Both students and classroom teachers believed that the buddy interactions had a positive impact, both academically and socially. The hybrid space seemed to help literacy learning become more interesting and engaging to students, not just during interactions with teacher candidate buddies but also across the school day.

Teacher and Instructor Learning

Classroom teachers and university instructors both said that they benefited from the connections made by working together to support the learning experiences of teacher candidates and students. For classroom teachers, participation in the hybrid space provided the opportunity to make connections between daily classroom practice and underlying literacy concepts. Teacher candidate questions about particular students or activities, for example, prompted teachers to think about the rationale behind their instructional actions. Classroom teachers were also able to reflect on their knowledge of individual students based on feedback provided by teacher candidates. Considering this type of feedback on her kindergarten students' emergent reading, Julie reflected,

I have received interesting perspectives on my students—some on target and some I didn't agree with—and excellent food for thought. Getting feedback from teacher candidates regarding my pupils has sometimes even sent me back to my textbooks! It has given me a chance to reflect on my students as individual learners. Having the chance for one-on-one time with them is an opportunity I envy. As a teacher in a bustling classroom of five and six year olds, I cherish the small snippets of time I am able to garner for each individual.

Shelley, the other kindergarten teacher, reflecting on the relationships between her students and their teacher candidate buddies, wrote:

Teacher buddy visits have been more than an academic exercise in effective teaching. Genuinely interested in establishing a nurturing relationship, they have quickly established rapport with their kindergarten buddies. Recently, as I read each teacher candidate's report, I was amazed to learn things about my students that were never shared in the classroom! For example, one student told her teacher buddy that she had a baby brother who had died years ago. Sharing this intimacy with her buddy reflected the trusting relationship created within a very short time.

Classroom teachers had the opportunity to learn more about their students instructionally and personally and also to make connections between classroom practice and underlying literacy concepts. For Nancy and Tony, the university instructors, learning was supported through connections in the opposite direction—from key literacy concepts to the realities of classroom practice. They realized that they learned a great deal as instructors, having to substantially modify their syllabus to incorporate the hybrid space and change course readings and projects to better match this learning opportunity. Nancy wrote:

In dropping some content to make room for interactions with students, we had to decide what is most important to teach. The resulting tension between breadth and depth caused us to think about our values and what we ultimately want our teacher candidates to learn from the course.

Tony added:

We have also learned the limitations of theory overviews and in-class discussions, which only develop teacher candidates' understanding to a certain level. Beyond this we must always consider ways to scaffold instructional approaches and pedagogical techniques necessary for our candidates to work successfully with their buddies, even if time is short. Instead of introducing literacy concepts and then hoping students will successfully apply these concepts in the field, we have realized we must dedicate class time to scaffolding concepts that will be immediately applied to learning situations with real students.

In these situations, the Juanita teachers helped guide the practice of the university instructors. For example, during year two of the collaboration, Carol helped Nancy learn that she had not provided enough scaffolding for teacher candidates who were creating questions for buddy discussions around a classroom novel.

Work in the hybrid space appeared to keep the university instructors grounded in the realities of teaching and learning in school. Nancy said, “Each week we are reminded that our course is about children and their learning when we see and hear children all around us.” This theme ran across all participants when examining perspectives on the ways in which learning was supported by the creation and utilization of this hybrid space. Essential literacy concepts were made more real when connected to individual students in classroom contexts and when the opportunity was provided for feedback, discussion and reflection.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper examined the perspectives on learning that occurred in a hybrid space created by school-university collaboration. Our exploration of teacher candidate, student, teacher, and instructor perspectives suggests positive benefits to all participants in the collaboration, with several prominent themes emerging from the data.

First, collaboration appears to lead to the development of literacy knowledge grounded in practice. The hybrid space fosters a situation in which teachers construct their understandings and transform content in ways that meet the learning needs of their students. Research suggests that this active and dual approach to content and student learning encourages thoughtful teacher decision-making (Garet et al., 2001; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Richardson & Placier, 2001). It also may make possible the development of pedagogical content knowledge, the “... knowledge base of teaching that lies at the intersection of content and pedagogy” (Shulman, 1987, p. 15). The ways that interactions are structured in this hybrid space plays a role in the way that the various participants are able to learn from the experience. The teacher candidates take part in a course that tightly links course content and assignments with student tutoring. The classroom teachers receive feedback on their students from the teacher candidates and discuss coursework with the university instructors. The university instructors learn from the classroom teachers and receive feedback on what their students are learning from the project reports. The application of course content to individual students in this structured setting appears to provide teacher candidates, classroom teachers, and university instructors with the opportunity to develop a more complex understanding of literacy development and instruction.

Second, working with children one-on-one allows teacher candidates to examine individual student learning. This work supports the development of a teaching-learning framework among teacher candidates that emphasizes relational thinking focused on facilitating constructive learning processes for students (Oser & Baeriswyl, 2001). Additionally, one-on-one interactions in the hybrid space promote an emphasis on the characteristics of highly qualified teachers, including placing a high value on students’ identities, connecting learning to students’ lives, using active learning strategies, and caring about and respecting students as individuals (Nieto, 2005). Like many tutoring experiences connected to teacher education courses (e.g. Lysaker, McCormick, & Brunett, 2004; Nierstheimer, Hopkins, Dillon, & Schmitt, 2002) it is tightly connected to course content. However, unlike many tutoring situations that occur in reading labs, the class practicum is conducted in the school itself as part of a whole class activity. The collaborative relationship seems to support teacher candidates in appreciating instructional

contexts for their buddies.

Finally, the hybrid space being created between Juanita Elementary and the University of Washington Bothell provides for a form of professional development that is ongoing, connected to classroom practice, and focused on student learning. Unlike the traditional model of single-session professional development workshops, this long-term connection between school and university makes possible the kind of sustained interaction that is essential to innovative and meaningful professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2009). The grounding of literacy theory in classroom practice seems to deepen the learning of teacher candidates, while at the same time university instructors and collaborating classroom teachers are developing a more complex understanding of the interplay of situated literacy concepts and pedagogical strategies. In this collaboration, classroom teachers and university instructors join in asking questions about students and instruction. The promotion of an inquiry stance within this hybrid space appears to enable teachers to “learn in and from practice” (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p.10), no matter at what level they teach or at what stage they are in their careers. We believe that such an inquiry stance is an essential trait of skilled teachers, especially during this current time of increasing reading and writing demands and evolving definitions of literacy.

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