Effective Explicit Strategy Instruction and Co-Teaching Experiences in Teacher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine how reading strategies can be taught explicitly by pre-service teachers enrolled in a reading methods course while they were assigned to a co-teaching delivery model that supported and enhanced literacy instruction for all students including students with special needs. The reading practicum teachers worked together with the cooperating teacher to reinforce, apply, and extend the literacy instruction in order to accomplish an effective joint partnership in the classroom. The results of this study suggested that exposure to co-teaching at the pre-service level provided an opportunity for students with disabilities to receive significantly more individual instruction during co-teaching.

Educational research during the last fifteen years has emphasized the importance of collaboration between cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers (Campbell & Brummett, 2007; Kent & Simpson, 2009; Maltas & McCarty-Clair, 2006). It has been shown that collaboration with classroom teachers can empower pre-service teachers to walk more confidently into their profession feeling well prepared to meet the needs of all students (Kent & Simpson, 2009). Allen, Cobb, and Danger (2003) found that pre-service teachers improved their literacy instruction as a result of reciprocal relationships with the cooperating teachers. Coffey (2010) found that reciprocal relationship helped pre-service teachers feel well prepared to walk into their own classroom and make a difference in students' lives.

An advantage of co-teaching is that there are more opportunities for pre-service teachers to teach explicitly through a greater range of appropriate instructional approaches. In successful co-teaching experiences, pre-service and the cooperating teacher plan and deliver instruction in the classroom through the use of seven instructional strategies:(1) one teach, one observe; (2) one teach, one assist; (3) station teaching; (4) parallel teaching; (5) supplemental teaching; (6) differentiated teaching; and (7) team teaching(Ziff, 2011).Through applications of these instructional strategiespre-service and cooperating teachers can develop a better understanding of how to help all students and especially students with specific learning disabilities (Ball, 2009).

Several collaborative instructional strategies have proven to be successful to guide pre-service teachers who work together in co-teaching partnerships to differentiate instruction. The instructional strategies include: (1) one teach, one observe-where the pre-service teacher takes the lead role and the cooperating teacher gathers observational information or both educators can take on both roles. (2) One teach, one assist-where the pre-service teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the cooperating teacher lends a voice to students if needed and assists with assignments. (3) Station teaching- where the pre-service teacher and cooperating teacher create a variety of literacy stations and divide students into groups. The groups are encouraged to spend a designated amount of time at each literacy station. (4) Parallel teaching- where pre-service teacher and cooperating teacher instruct different heterogeneous groups of students presenting literacy resources using the same comprehension strategies.(5) Supplemental teaching- where pre-service teacher works with students at their expected grade level and the cooperating teacher works with students who have reading or learning disabilities to remediate, reteach or vice versa. (6) Differentiated teaching- where the pre-service and cooperating teachers give students multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. They use the same literacy content but recognize students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning and interests, and modify their instruction responsively.

(7) Team teaching - where the pre-service and cooperating teachers co-teach, actively involved in the lesson, and share responsibility for planning, teaching, and assessing the progress of all students in the class (St. Cloud State University, 2012).

Appropriate use of co-teaching can capture the expertise of both cooperating and pre-service teacher and allows unique instructional opportunities for all students including students with special needs (Ziff, 2011).Numerous studies related to co-teaching have indicated that pre-service teachers gain insight into the realities of the special populations while also learning valuable lessons in planning, accommodating, and instructing students with special needs (Friend, 2008; Ziff, 2011, & Ball, 2009). Co-teaching is a very rewarding experience for pre-service teachers and beneficial to the special needs students as well.

The literacy practicum course normally requires pre-service teachers to work collaboratively with the cooperating teacher and reinforce, apply, and extend the literacy instruction in order to accomplish an effective joint partnership in the classroom. Because the pre-service teachers possess complimentary skills and training, each co-teacher takes the partnership lead in designing and delivery of literacy instruction. The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) recommended five essential reading instruction components for classroom teachers. The NRP and other researchers have also recommended using explicit instruction as an effective model of instruction when teaching the essential components of reading. Torgesen (2004) explained explicit literacy instructionas "instruction that does not leave anything to chance and does not make assumptions about skills and knowledge that children will acquire on their own" (p. 363). Explicit instruction is considered as one of the most effective reading instructions and best among existing instruction tools available to teachers (Archer & Hughes, 2011).Many researchers have contended explicit instruction elements can give learning disabled students an academic advantage when learning to read (Chall, 2002; Coyne et al., 2009; & Torgesen, 2004). In co-teaching, the pre-service and cooperating teachers use explicit instruction to accommodate each individual's unique learning needs for facilitating further literacy development.

Coyne and colleagues (2009) examined explicit literacy comprehension instruction and concluded that the explicitness with which teachers teach comprehension strategies makes a difference in learner outcomes, especially for low achieving readers. A few researchers investigated how pre-service teachers used explicit strategy instruction to improve the quality of comprehension instruction while they reassigned to a co-teaching delivery model. The purpose of this paper was to examine how reading strategies can be taught explicitly by pre-service teachers enrolled in a reading methods course while they were assigned to a co-teaching delivery model that supported and enhanced literacy instruction for all students including students with special needs.

The Research

Co-teaching has been used as an instructional approach to support all students especially students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms (Strogilo & Stefanidis, 2015; Ploessl & Roc, 2014). Many educators have used co-teaching as an instructional strategy for educational service delivery to meet the needs of all students. To establish a successful classroom environment for all students, co-teaching teams should engage in active communication, co-planning and preparation, and share in instructional delivery and assessment, and conflict resolution (Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013). As increasing numbers of students with reading disabilities are taught in general education classrooms, co-teaching has been used an established method of special education service provision. Many cooperating teachers believe this shared approach of working side by side with a pre-service teacher can be a rewarding experience. The co-teaching techniques can enhance teachers' interactions with the collaborative partners and, in turn, improve educational outcomes for all students (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld, & Blanks, 2010).

A large percentage of study was conducted to identify teachers' and students' perspectives of co-teaching and the efficacy of this teaching approach (Ashton, 2003; Barth, 2006; & Friend, 2007). The results of these studies suggested significant differences in student academic and behavioral performances in comparison between the year before co-teaching and the year of co-teaching. Based on the results of these studies, co-teaching appears to be an effective instructional delivery option for meeting the needs of all students (Hang & Rabren, 2009& Friend, 2008).

Luttenegger (2012) said that teacher modeling is most effective when both co-teachers explicitly work on decoding, focus on comprehension and fluency strategies, encourage students to interpret texts, and demonstrate how to self-monitor as they read.

Duke and Pearson (2002) identified six common features of explicit strategy instruction that support developing readers: prediction/prior knowledge, think aloud, text structure, visual representations, summarizations, and questionings. In explicit comprehension strategy, both pre-service and cooperating teachers choose strategies that are intensive, persistent, and closely aligned with the text while students read. Modeling is followed by guided practice, directed by the co-teachers, who work with students to help them figure out how and when to use the comprehension strategy themselves. Students are encouraged to plan or set purposes for reading, clarify, summarize, visualize, confirm predictions, and continually monitor their understanding while reading (Pressley, 2002).

Practicum in Elementary Reading Instruction: A Reading Methods Course

The purpose of the practicum course was to design, plan, and implement instruction using a variety of materials, including technology, that addressed International Literacy Association's guidelines and discussed the nature of the reading process. The pre-service teachers collaborated with the cooperating teachers and/or peers to provide the optimal literacy environment for students within the classroom setting. The theme of literacy/reading was stressed throughout every course activity as pre-service teachers learned how to facilitate elementary children's literacy development (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, visually representing). The themes of diversity and closing the achievement gap were addressed through lesson planning which included support for all learners and accommodations for those learners with special needs.

The pre-service teachers completed 20+ hours of field/clinical experiences. They provided instruction in reading to groups of students at a local elementary school. They were expected to prepare a lesson plan in collaboration with the cooperating teachers for each field experience session. The pre-service teachers reflected on each lesson using the teacher performance analysis and reflection format and submitted those in their reflective journal. In addition students practiced co-teaching procedures and completed co-teaching plans.

Methods

A reading methods course was offered by a mid-western university's Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education. Fifteen undergraduate students were enrolled in the practicum course and the age of the enrolled students ranged from twenty to forty years. All were white male and female pre-service teacher candidates. The pre-service teachers developed an understanding of local, state, and national policies that affect reading and writing instruction including the Common Core Standards. Data were comprised of the researcher's supervision of the practicum as well as weekly written lesson plan and reflections by the pre-service teachers. The researcher observed each pre-service teacher twice per week and collected an average of 240 pages of reflections for each pre-service teacher including lesson plans, hand-outs, and work sample.

The data revealed important factors to consider as this study provided a framework for future research in the area of teacher education. In her course, the researcher spent several weeks teaching pre-service teachers how to teach comprehension strategies including making/confirming predictions, asking questions, creating visual images, drawing inferences, retelling, and utilizing self-monitoring strategies. Along with explicit strategy instruction, she emphasized a variety of teaching methods including (a) direct explanations, (b) modeling, (c) guided practice, (d) independent practice, (e) feedback, and (f) discussion. One of the most important features of explicit instruction was the teacher's gradual release of responsibility. The pre-service teachers were taught the gradual release of responsibility model of instruction and learned how to shift from assuming "all the responsibility for performing task … to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson,2002, p. 211).The researcher introduced the assigned text and discussed the purpose of the think-aloud strategy. She demonstrated how good readers monitor their understanding by rereading a sentence, using context clues, and reading ahead to clarify confusion (Wilhelm, 2001). After modeling a think aloud for the class, she invited pre-service teachers to participate in reading a text and illustrated their thinking and decision making to their peers for narrative and expository texts.

The researcher led the co-teaching training to expose pre-service teachers to the techniques, models, and best practices for implementing appropriate co-teaching instructional strategies. She also collaborated with the school partners to discuss various planning techniques for effective implementation of a successful co-teaching model. Both pre-service and cooperating teachers on the co-teaching team were responsible for differentiating the instructional planning and delivery of literacy instruction.

Some co-teaching approaches (e.g., differentiated and team teaching) required greater commitment, flexibility, collaborative planning, and role release. When deciding which approach to use, the goal was to improve the educational outcomes of all students through the selected co-teaching instructional strategies. Many pre-service teachers wanted to start with parallel teaching because this approach involved less structured coordination among the co-teaching team members. As co-teaching skills and relationships strengthen, pre-service teachers were more comfortable in implementing the differentiated and team teaching approaches that required more time, coordination, collaborative planning and trust in one another's instructional and interpersonal skills.

The researcher discussed the importance of modifications and accommodations of instructions as well as the goals and objectives to ensure all students succeed in the classroom. The pre-service and cooperating teachers worked together in meeting the goals and ensuring adequate students' progress. In the same way, the cooperating teachers discussed with the pre-service teachers their goals for each student. Both educators addressed the goals, objectives, and mandatory literacy curriculum for the primary grade level.

Results

The purpose of this paper was to examine how reading strategies can be taught explicitly by pre-service teachers enrolled in a reading methods course while they were assigned to a co-teaching delivery model that supported and enhanced literacy instruction for all students including students with special needs. It was crucial that pre-service and cooperating teachers used comprehension strategies: prediction, prior knowledge, think aloud, text structure, visual representations, summarizations, and questionings in order to better prepare students to apply strategies effectively in their reading of a variety of texts (Nichols, Ricklman, Young & Rupley, 2008). The pre-service and co-teachers engaged in six types of instructional methods in efforts to apply explicit strategies: a) direct explanations, (b) modeling, (c) guided practice, (d) independent practice, (e) feedback, and (f) discussion. The researcher found that the use of such strategies were essential to facilitate further literacy development.

Data were comprised of the researcher's supervision of the practicum as well as weekly lesson plan and written reflections by the pre-service teachers. The data analysis led to the conclusion that 95% of pre-service teachers made strong detailed connection between students' achievement and co-teachers' instructional contribution. Ninety-two percent of pre-service teachers analyzed the impact of explicit instructional strategies and instructional decisions on student learning. Ninety percent of pre-service teachers described specific student results from the lesson assessment, levels of student achievement, and specific explicit strategies for improving student learning. Ninety-eight percent of pre-service teachers said that the co-planning process encouraged two educators to bounce ideas off each other in order to deliver the explicit comprehension instruction in a most creative way (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004), .

Ninety-two percent ofpre-service teachers said that exposure to co-teaching at the pre-service level provided an opportunity for students with disabilities to receive significantly more individual instruction during co-teaching. The results of the study suggested that co-teaching has great potential for promoting the effective inclusion of students with disabilities (Friend, 2008). The pre-service teachers reported satisfaction with the efficacy of co-teaching. Ninety percent of pre-service teachers said that co-teaching allowed more opportunities for small group and one-to-one learning, and stronger modeling for special need students during lessons. Ninety-eight percent of pre-service teachers wrote that co-teaching helped make accommodations or adaptations more convenient for meeting the diverse needs of their students.

In their lesson plan, the pre-service teachers described the pattern of student performance relative to the lesson objectives. They also described how they used formative assessment data to monitor students' progress and guide explicit instruction throughout the lesson. In their lesson impact and refinement, 90% of pre-service teachers reported that reading difficulty was reduced when explicit instruction was provided at the beginning of the lesson followed by interventions that were more intensive, explicit, repetitive, and supportive (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007).Based on pre-test and post-test analysis of lessons, 90% of pre-service teachers reported that low achieving and special needs students gained 10% to 16% and regular students gained 30% to 45% towards the end of the semester (Figure 1). The gains were significant when cognitive strategies were taught through co-teacher think aloud and re-teaching or guided practice was provided with a gradual release of responsibility (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Figure 1: The Data Found Explicit Instruction Elements gave a Special need Student an Academic Advantage when Learning to Comprehend

A special need student outcome has focused on reading instruction
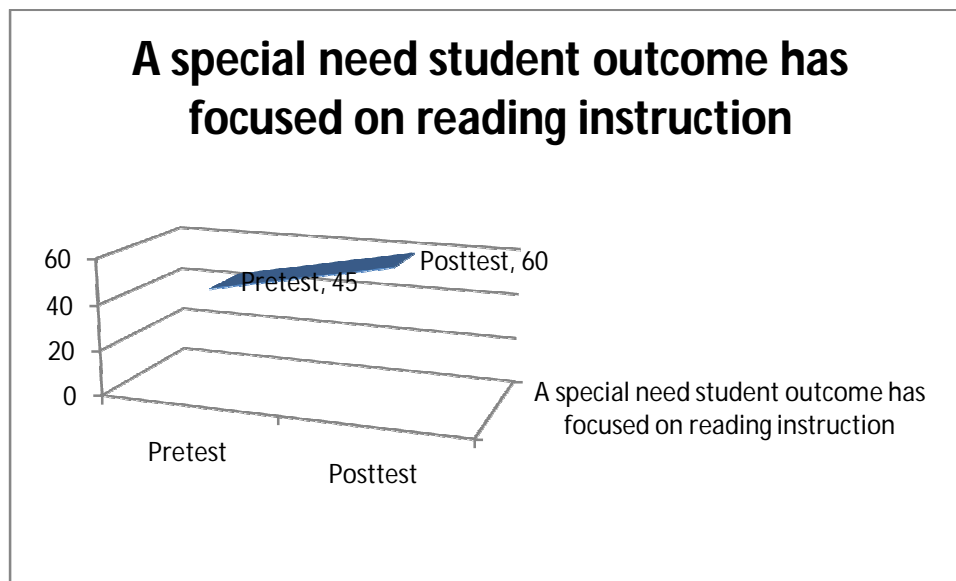
Based on analysis of the university's observation instrument, the researcher could draw the conclusion that the cooperating teacher gave pre-service teacher adequate support for remediating struggling readers and offered guidance or support during differentiated and team teaching. Throughout observation, at least 92% of co-teachers demonstrated explicit instruction in relation to the teaching of fluency and comprehension. Ninety-five percent of pre-service teachers reported that with the support of cooperating teachers, they became more explicit in explaining how to use reading skills as strategies and that explicit explanations resulted in greater student awareness of literacy (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000). Ninety-four percent of pre-service teacher reported that co-teaching has the potential for promoting student achievement of disadvantaged and low achieving students in literacy instruction. These findings were consistent with the previous research that suggested comprehension instruction associated with the explicit instruction provided by co-teachers was very effective for increasing student achievement (Friend & Cook, 2007, Hoover & Patton, 2008).

Recommendations

Based on data analysis, it was contended that the explicitness with which comprehension strategies were taught through a co-teaching model affects learner outcomes, especially for low achieving students (Trembley, 2013). However, many co-operating teachers who were willing to collaborate with the pre-service teachers did not have a similar philosophy or approach to teaching reading as the teacher education program (Luttenegger, 2012). Many cooperating teachers were more comfortable to implement a traditional basal program paradigm of mentioning, practicing, and assessing. These differences in philosophy greatly hindered the co-teaching process. Before starting the co-teaching process, the teacher education program should offer professional development training for both cooperating and pre-service teachers to discuss explicitness of instruction across all five of the essential components of reading in order to become an effective team.

Invariably, many pre-service teachers needed more university classes to learn how to model cognitive strategies or how to use guided practice with some form of scaffolding to achieve the increased student outcomes (McGill-Franzen &Colleagues, 2006). A very few lessons focused on the comprehension strategy of modeling although there was more modeling recommended. The pre-service teachers needed a great deal of practice to achieve exemplary status in using explicit instruction effectively, more likely years of practice. Many pre-service teachers provided too little guided practice, little or no scaffolding, and few suggestions for differentiating instruction according to students' needs.

The amount of time to plan, the time spent developing a lesson plan across all five of the essential components of reading, and the time spent to prepare for co-teaching and develop a professional relationship can all greatly impact the co-teaching process (Friend, 2008).

Even when a designated period was established for co-planning, many cooperating teachers reported that some pre-service teachers communicated via e-mail and others failed to show up on time or always arrived late. This lack of commitment hindered the teaming process. One suggestion made by the data analysis was to designate a day or a half-day every 4 weeks when cooperating teachers can meet extensively with the pre-service teachers to plan explicit literacy instruction and discuss the progress of students as well as changes in their instructional practice.

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