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Extending Relevant Teacher Education Beyond Traditional Schooling

Gail Choice
Stetson University

Rationale

College and University teacher preparation programs struggle with new mandates that tie their effectiveness ratings to their graduates' student achievement scores. As a result, teacher Education and Prep programs are undergoing major reform. According to US Education Secretary Arnie Duncan, "Too many future teachers graduate from prep programs unprepared for success in the classroom" (Our Future Our Teachers, 2011). The US Department of Education's reform proposal addresses one of the strongest criticisms of current Teacher Education programs: Their lack of preparation of willing, young candidates for the challenges into which they are being sent. Deborah Loewenberg Ball, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education further supports this contention, "This [reform] puts the focus where it should be: beginning teachers' readiness to practice independently" (2011).¹

The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) has fully embraced the paradigm that it is primarily the teacher who makes a difference in student success. As the FLDOE seeks to increase accountability for student success, it has expanded its oversight to hold Teacher Preparation Programs accountable at colleges and universities. Teacher

¹**Our Future Our Teachers, The Obama Administration's Plan for** Teacher Education Reform and Improvement, <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/our-future-our-teachers-accessible.pdf> (September, 2011)

Preparation programs are symbiotically tied to teacher and student performance. It is imperative that institutions develop teachers who demonstrate knowledge of teaching domains that positively impact student performance. The Commission for Effective Teaching further exemplifies the point that teacher preparation programs must be judged by the professional qualifications and teaching effectiveness of their graduates and the quality and substance of the preparation program itself (Transforming Teaching, November 2011)²

Effective teacher preparation matters for all content areas and has special significance for reading. In general, there are children who struggle with learning to read in the primary grades and in later grades experience difficulty catching up with their peers. Preparing pre-service and practicing teachers to teach reading has become more multifaceted due to the growing number of children from poverty and diverse backgrounds. The 2009 NAEP results revealed that 33% of 4th graders scored below basic level in reading. The results also showed an achievement gap between those above and below the poverty level. The demands of our education system are further complicated by the current movement towards Common Core Standards. These standards define college and career readiness and define what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Students as literate persons, perform close, attentive reading that fosters comprehension and an aesthetic stance of complex works of literature and critical reading of informational texts in both print and digital formats. Preservice teachers will need to be able to use teaching strategies that help students experience deep, thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and Informational texts to meet these standards.

The complexity of reading instruction and accountability of teachers and teacher preparation programs has added importance and to the supervised field experiences and or practicum. Practicing teachers are often consumed with the routines and schedules of schooling and unwittingly become “fossilized” in teaching schedules and practices. Although field experiences hold great potential for providing preservice teachers the opportunity to practice instructional decision making and reflection, the focus of preservice teaching during practicum often moves toward procedural concerns and routine tasks (Moore, 2003). Preservice teachers can become bogged down with these concerns early in their field experience. This malaise taints their frame of reference for instructional decisions which are primarily based on their own learning experiences. As a result, Moore (2003) purports the occurrence of a phenomenon where these young teachers are less willing to consider new approaches and transform theory into effective practice.

Because of the aforementioned impediments, large numbers of preservice teachers have few opportunities to fully grasp their role in effective reading instruction. A well planned practicum helps teachers of reading fulfill their roles by developing knowledge in the critical areas of reading (Morris, 2011). Several theorists and researchers have identified critical areas that impact reading achievement and support effective reading instruction. Reutzel (2008) refers to these areas as pillars. Reutzel’s pillars are Teacher

² NEA, Transforming Teacher Education,
http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/Transforming_Teaching%282%29.pdf (January, 2011)

Knowledge, Assessment, Effective Practice, Differentiated Instruction and Family/Home Connections. Teacher Educators traditionally teach and support these pillars. In many instances only a few of these pillars are taught with a great deal of attention. The rest are relegated to cursory consideration. The least attended areas include family/home involvement and the effective practices that differentiate instruction, address culturally relevant instruction and summer learning loss. Aspiring and practicing teachers need less stressful and restrictive opportunities to work with diverse learners and explore the least attended areas that are critical factors in reading achievement.

Home/School/Community Connection

Overcoming obstacles to parent involvement is of increasing legal importance to school districts nationally because districts receiving federal funds are required to inform parents how they can be involved in their children's schooling and to distribute an annual district report card to parents, under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, commonly known as *No Child Left Behind*. The academic advantages for children living in poverty whose parents are actively involved in schools are well documented. Higher student achievement occurs when parent participation is invited and frequent, with meaningful partnerships between families and schools, drawing upon the knowledge and backgrounds of the family (Epstein 2004). In addition, motivation, a sense of responsibility, school behavior, and self-esteem are increased through active and constructive parental involvement in a child's education (Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Perry, 2004; National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1996)

Christenson and Gorney (1996) found compelling evidence that family involvement is equally significant to minority students. They report that rates of parent participation in elementary school of Low-income African American children increased their likelihood to graduate from high school. Similarly, high achieving Latino youth have parents encourage and emphasize the value of education as a way to escape poverty (Weiss, Caspey & Lopez, 2006). Evidence also suggests that school policies, teacher practices and family practices are more important than race. Therefore, teacher preparation must include best practices to meaningfully involve families in matters of student achievement in reading and all academics. As part of their preparation, preservice teachers must evaluate their own assumptions and beliefs about the families with whom they work, develop effective communication skills, be provided staff time to process with others difficult conversations or circumstances. Preservice teachers should participate in neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand the culture, background and children's needs (Epstein, 2004).

Effective family involvement results in parent empowerment. Parents are empowered when they are equipped with activities and skills to help their children succeed. Because parent involvement also includes helping families create homes that get children ready to learn, it is important to provide parents with opportunities to reinforce the learning received at school. In addition to academic support from parents, schools have an obligation to refer parents/guardians for support of programs that help with child welfare such as health, nutrition, housing and financial literacy. Children who live in homes owned by their parents have a strong sense of stability and perform better on standardized tests (Aronson, 2000).

Needs of Diverse Learners

“In 2009, White students at grade 12 scored 27 points higher in reading than Black students and 22 points higher than Hispanic students” (Aud, et al., 2011 *Indicator 11-2011*). For years educators have pronounced causes and solutions for this phenomenon. Flowers (2004), suggests a few causes. He asserts that teachers and parents of African American students do not spend adequate time focusing on reading materials that students value. He also cites Delpit’s (1995) argument that teacher knowledge of diversity issues influences their classroom management and lesson plans. As a resolution, he recommends that research be expanded to determine which aspects of teachers’ knowledge and training are detrimental to African American students and which experiences, values, skills and teacher characteristics positively influence African American students’ reading achievement. There are multiple research questions that could add valuable expansion to the knowledge base. For example, would pre-service teachers benefit from taking courses about the black experience in education to foster academic achievement for students and improve parent-teacher relationships? Do after school and summer programs contribute to improving the reading proficiency of African American students? Does what a child read matter as much as how he learns to read?

Researchers who have begun to investigate these topics report the following findings. Ladson-Billings (1992) found that reading materials must reflect children’s lives, experiences and what they want to read. When African American children do not see themselves or their experiences in text they may begin to question where their families and communities fit into the world of reading (Clark, Walker-Dalhouse, 2011). Encouraging students to ponder their lack of cultural literacy identity by withholding culturally relevant text is contrary to the expressed purposes of education in American schooling. Those purposes are to teach children to read and to socialize them to the culture in which they live (Cook, 2012).

Current research highlights the complex nature of culturally relevant literacy instruction. Field based experience, service learning, strength based mentoring, cross cultural conversations and community based activities are pivotal considerations for teacher preparation programs. A requirement when choosing culturally relevant text is that preservice teachers develop an awareness and ability to respond to students’ social and cultural life experiences. Otherwise, their text choices could contain stereotypical, superficially culturally relevant texts that do not support readers because they are not personally relevant. A field experience that includes the aforementioned pivotal considerations for teacher preparation programs will result in preservice teachers using their knowledge of curriculum and culture to empower students.

A major necessity in teacher preparation is building cultural competence. Preservice teachers need cultural competence to provide culturally relevant instruction. The purpose of cultural competence is to establish classrooms where developmentally appropriate teaching and learning procedures guarantee social justice, human rights, educational equity and democratic principles (Gallavan, 2011). When provided the requisite instructional and field experiences, preservice teachers can use the curriculum to empower African American students, especially those who have faced major challenges.

To realize this goal, teachers must have high expectations, make curriculum interesting, comprehensible and relevant. According to Thompson (2010), this can best be done with problem based learning, on a theme or topic such as racism, where students read, discuss and write about it, brainstorm solutions, develop related projects and conduct related research.

Summer Learning Loss

Another impediment to reading proficiency for learners is the traditional school schedule. The 9-month school schedule currently in use in the United States began in 19th and 20th Century society when 85% of Americans worked in agriculture. This schedule is irrelevant since fewer than 3% of Americans are currently involved in agriculture. Research on the 9-month schedule shows that students' learning is negatively impacted by the 3-month block of time spent away from school. Recent research shows that the impact of summer learning loss may be greater than shown in earlier studies (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003). Allington and McGill-Franzen labeled summer reading loss as the "smoking gun." Allington has reported that the cumulative effects of summer reading loss can mean that struggling readers entering middle school may lag two years behind peers in their ability to read. Additional research (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007) links the achievement gap between high-socioeconomic and low-socioeconomic 9th grade students to the loss in reading proficiency that occurred over the summer months in the elementary grades. Summer learning loss across the elementary school years accounted for more than 50% of the difference in the achievement gap between students from high-socioeconomic and low-socioeconomic families.

Correlational studies suggest that the more children read they become better in comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. In *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research (2004)*, Tim Shanahan, recommended that researchers turn their attention to various ways schools might encourage children to read more. Findings from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress confirm that students who are highly engaged in reading can overcome barriers including low socio economic status (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). As we try to narrow the achievement gap, educators must find ways to increase reading engagement to benefit all students regardless of their economic status. We need to promote an equitable solution to increase reading engagement for all learners because the evidence is clear. Students who read the least experience the most reading difficulties. Efforts to increase reading engagement have met challenges. For instance, teachers face schedule impediments that limit the amount of reading done in school. So educators continue to look for ways to encourage more independent student engagement with text outside of school. Educators have tried to encourage reading outside of school with partnerships with libraries and sending books home. Many times their best efforts have not been successful and they must acknowledge that there are many reasons why students fail to do so. Never the less, it remains important to find ways to increase reading volume beyond the traditional school year. An additional way to promote reading is to provide year round access to high-interest reading materials all year long. Providing student access to interesting relevant reading materials encourages students to become year round readers and counters alliteracy.

As educators, we are consumed with accountability concerns. However, our quest to improve standardized assessment performance should merge with preparing students for the pursuit of becoming life-long readers, thus, diminishing the summer learning losses. If this occurs, teachers could gain back the time lost at the beginning of the school year (which represents a 22% time loss), enabling them to begin new instruction earlier (National Summer Learning Association, 2004).

An Emerging Concept

An opportunity to address summer learning loss by engaging students with culturally relevant text during the summer months is available with the CDF Freedom School concept. This program received the Johns Hopkins University's first excellence in Summer Learning award of summer learning opportunities for children and youth in 2004. *CDF Freedom Schools* programs are six-week, no cost to families, literacy-based summer learning programs designed for inner-city children who may be at risk for school failure. The risk factors these students face include poverty, minority status, lower academic achievement as measured by grades and on standardized tests, lower graduation rates, and difficulties with reading and literacy. College Interns and early career teachers receive professional development in implementing reading curriculum, cultural sensitivity and engaging parent, family and community in reading and increased student achievement. Key Elements of the program are related to factors that assist the development of preservice teachers to effectively fulfill their roles as teachers of reading. In particular the key elements of Freedom School address the following factors that are not given a great deal of attention in traditional field experiences and internships in teacher education programs.

Educational Enrichment and Cultural Awareness

At CDF Freedom Schools, children read books that include a wide variety of cultures and experiences. The text collection reflects students' self-image and focus on the theme I Can and Must Make a Difference! This collection of books is part of an Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC). During IRC, the learners who are called scholars read the texts and engage in cooperative group discussions and perform related reading and writing tasks that are geared towards problem solving. Servant Leader Interns use the IRC to teach children conflict resolution and critical thinking skills. It is also used to engage learners in community service and social action projects. In the afternoons scholars participate in art, field trips and athletic activities, and Servant Leader-Interns help children to develop an ending program exhibition in which every child is given the chance to show their accomplishments.

Parental Involvement

Recognizing that parents and families are critical partners in their children's education, the CDF Freedom Schools program offers parents the support and expertise they need to help their children succeed. Parents demonstrate their commitment to the program and to their children's education by engaging in the daily CDF Freedom Schools events. Parents and community members serve as guest readers and support the children's social action

and community service projects. An important feature of the program is parent participation in weekly workshops where they learn about the educational and social development of children, financial literacy, relationships and obtain the necessary skills that empowers them and their families to succeed. Servant leaders interact and communicate with families about health, nutrition and academic concerns. They also have exposure to community agencies that support families in those areas.

Intergenerational Leadership

CDF Freedom Schools programs are staffed primarily by college-age adults, many are education majors. Preservice teachers obtain relevant Training coordinated by the Children's Defense Fund® national staff young leaders provides Servant Leader-Interns with expertise in the integrated reading curriculum, social justice, parent empowerment and cultural competence in the Afro American experience. These concepts, when paired with the IRC, are the basic elements that make up the diverse CDF Freedom Schools experience.

Daily Staff Debriefing

On a daily basis, the Site Coordinator and Servant-Leader Interns meet to share and discuss successes and creatively resolve the challenges of the day. This meeting gives Interns an opportunity to reflect on their individual instructional practices and the effectiveness of their encounters with families, children and peers.

Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC)

Reading is an important social factor in America. It has been dubbed, “the new civil right”. At CDF Freedom Schools, children read a book collection that reflects a wide variety of experiences, cultures, and characters. The principal theme of the curriculum is "I Can and Must Make a Difference" with sub-themes including "I Can and Must Make a Difference in My: Self, Family, Community, Country, World and Hope.” The goal of the curriculum is to help both readers and nonreaders develop a love for books, perform close reading and instill in nonreaders a desire to read.

Servant-Leadership Development

The staff members of Freedom School are primarily College-age young adults. They serve as positive role models, instructors and mentors. These Servant-Leader Interns attend a ten day training on how to use innovative teaching strategies to engage children in ethical thinking, critical thinking and conflict resolution. The program training model helps Interns become informed about the academic, cultural and emotional needs of children, and teaches them how to effectively respond to the needs of diverse learners.

Related Research

In December 2010, a two year study was conducted for children enrolled in CDF Freed Schools programs in Charlotte, North Carolina and Bennetsville, South Carolina. It was reported that more than 65% of the children tested improved or showed gains in independent reading by the program's end, while 25% did not exhibit summer learning loss. Preliminary data from summer 2011 programs in Charlotte show that 90% of the program participants suffered no summer learning gains for the third year in a row and more than 60 percent made increased gains in reading. In an earlier evaluation of the Kansas City Freedom School Initiative, scholar assessment data demonstrated significant improvement in reading performance.

Objectives and Research Questions

In 2010 an agreement was formed with a local organization to host a *CDF Freedom Schools* program and become a part of a national assessment to measure the impact of the CDF Freedom Schools program. Specifically, CDF is measuring reading achievement as measured by the Gates MacGinitie Reading (MGR) assessment. The MGR assessment is a Norm-referenced reading assessment that provides results on student achievement in vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Objectives and Research Questions

During a six week CDF Freedom Schools program, the goals are to meet the following objectives for the K-8 students (Scholars) enrolled and their Servant-Leader Interns: 1) To provide opportunities for in-service and preservice teachers to gain knowledge and practice to effectively perform their role as effective teachers who provide culturally relevant reading instruction 2) To maintain or to increase children's reading levels from the end of the school year until the beginning of the proceeding school year and 3) To increase children's engagement with text during the summer months. The research questions that guided the evaluation were the following:

1. Did Freedom School Summer Program Scholars show any change in their general level of reading as measured by the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test?
2. Were there positive student reactions to the opportunities for daily independent reading and book discussions as a result of daily engagement with culturally relevant texts?
3. Did Freedom School Instructors increase their performance in their current and future practices of culturally relevant reading instruction?

Instruments

Twenty three scholars were pre-assessed within the first week of the program by independent, non-staff members. Post-assessments were conducted by the same

assessors during the last week of the program. Pre- and Post-Assessment consisted of administration of Forms S and T of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests.

Three servant Leader Interns and a Site Coordinator participated in daily discussion during debrief and the Site Coordinator performed weekly lesson observations to ascertain their position and growth in two indicators of the N and NW compass points on the Gallavan (2010) checklist for Cultural Competence (see Appendix A). Servant-Leader interns were scored as novice, emerging or proficient for each indicator. The N indicators for Notice Culture and Cultural Characteristics of learners are: 1) recognized and accept all students with respect for their individual and shared cultural characteristics and 2) ensure that all learning connects with individual academic and cultural backgrounds. Indicators for the NW indicators for Nurture and Welcome Challenges and Changes are 1) Teach all students how challenges exist through all parts of the curriculum and 2) Teach students skills related to conflict management.

Findings

Student Reading Gains

One of the most exciting reports from the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test is the positive gain that scholars make in reading. While the gains are not large, they are significant. They are also widespread, occurring among scholars in each age group. Children's Defense Fund Statisticians are currently analyzing the data reported from this site and from 39 evaluation sites throughout the United States. The final report is due this fall. The oral report for this participating site is that the fifth grade, Level Two scholars showed on average six months growth in both vocabulary and comprehension subsets of the Gates MacGinitie Reading Assessment. These results are slightly below the expected trajectory when compared with students who participated in Kansas City's summer CDF Freedom programs for three consecutive summers from 2003-2005. The Kansas City students increased an average of 2.2 grade levels over three years.

Student Reaction to Independent Reading

During the first week of independent reading, more than 50% of the students in all three levels showed an actual aversion and off task behavior to independent reading as evidenced by the amount of time they exhibited on task reading behaviors and times Servant-Leaders had to verbally bring students back to the task of reading. Servant leader interns reported more than 90% compliance and on task independent reading for weeks two-six. It is also reported that students' had more favorable views of reading as a recreational and fun activity.

Servant Leader-Interns reported gains in their feelings of efficacy for teaching reading with consideration for diversity and individual student needs on the pre and post evidence boxes on the Gallavan Checklist for Cultural Competence. The pre- program checklist evidence reported for all three of the Servant Leaders showed little or no evidence for noticing culture and cultural characteristics for learning within the context of culture. The examples given by Servant Leader –Interns as evidence of their cultural

competence did not show considerations of teaching by making connections to individual learner academic and cultural backgrounds. Lesson introductions in the curriculum guide provided surface level connections. Debrief discussions and modeling by the Site Coordinator of academic connections deepened Servant Leader-Interns proficiency on this indicator. Interestingly, the servant leaders struggled to move beyond the idea that they must differentiate instruction for cultural background. The Interns more easily accepted differentiating for academic diversity and engaged in instructional considerations for individual academic backgrounds with greater ease. The weekly themes provided in the CDF Freedom School Integrated Reading Curriculum and the accompanying culturally relevant texts led the Servant-Leader Interns to provide information and opportunities in the context of culture and connected learning to individual academic and cultural backgrounds. The Servant Leaders moved from novice to proficiency ratings on both assessed indicators by the conclusion of the program. Observations of the Servant Leader-Interns and the intricacies of their lesson plans support the post program proficiency rating.

The NW indicators on the Gallavan Checklist assessed the Servant Leader-Intern's proficiency in assisting learners in welcoming challenges and changes and managing conflict. Servant Leader- Interns were initially rated at the novice level when asked to provide evidence that they teach students how challenges exist in the curriculum. The IRC curriculum guide did not identify complexity level of texts or activity challenges. So servant-Leader Interns developed a plan to discuss perceived curricular challenges for the next day's lesson during each debrief session. It was noted that by the end of the program, the Interns were proficient in giving supporting evidence of the teacher talk and actions they planned to use to help students recognize and address curricular challenges. They also noted the teacher talk in their lesson plans.

Effective instruction of conflict management is the second NW indicator that was assessed. Conflict Resolution is embedded in a few lessons in the Freedom School Integrated Reading Curriculum guide. Although the guide has suggested ideas for connecting problem solving activities with conflicts in the text story line, Servant-Leader Interns initially skipped these activities and openly complained about the awkwardness of implementing these activities. During debrief, the Interns began to discuss the previous lesson and exchanged ideas and suggestions on how they would teach concepts for conflict resolution. They also shared how they encouraged students to use the same techniques in the classroom to resolve their own conflicts. Servant-Leader Interns moved from novice to emerging ratings for this indicator. The lack of information Interns included in the evidence and planning columns in the Gallavan Cultural Competence Checklist led the Servant Leader-Interns to determine that they need additional professional development to increase their proficiency ratings for the indicators.

Implications for Practice and Future Directions

The staggering attrition rate of between 40 percent and 50 percent within the first five years for new teachers in high-poverty schools has resulted in a lack of staff mentoring and support for new teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Most new teachers in high poverty schools report feeling unprepared to work with parents and families (Cochran-Smith, 2006). Consequently, teacher preparation programs need to aggressively support Preservice teachers in this area. The real life exposure to parents through meetings and community interactions that exist in the CDF Freedom School model enhanced the Interns knowledge. Servant-Leader to Parent relationship discussions recorded on the daily debrief forms showed fewer interactions listed as challenges. The debrief discussions chronicled how Servant Leaders' knowledge about home factors and their student's backgrounds increased. Interns also improved in their use of innovative solutions to resolve challenges in the home school connection. These results from the CDF Freedom School program are particularly encouraging because the Servant Leader-Interns came from social, cultural and income backgrounds that differed from the student participants.

The findings also add to the growing body of evidence that culturally relevant curriculum and instruction can have a positive impact on student performance in reading. Additional factors worthy of consideration for increasing student reading performance include providing opportunities for students to engage with text year round, motivating students' reading engagement by matching students with appealing text and ascertaining the value of and effective contexts for independent reading. A question for future consideration has emerged from this discussion on independent reading: How can independent reading best be used to effectively curb aliteracy?

Servant Leader-Interns' commanding participation and success with the Daily Debrief activity serves as a reminder of the power of reflection. Although reflection is a well-known and accepted component of Teacher Education, there is evidence that it can be used in a matter of fact manner which causes it to become ineffective. How can we reinvigorate reflection by incorporating its use in new and innovative ways?

As educators begin to address the demands of the Common Core Standards and teacher preparation institutions prepare for increased accountability with limited resources, we are confronted with the lack of a resource that has eternally plagued K-12 schools, "time." How can institutions find additional time to provide preservice teachers with experiences that assist them in developing their roles as effective reading instructors? Identifying this time is vital because of the increased emphasis on linking student achievement to teacher pay, promotion and retention. This "new" reality gives Teacher Educators the purview and an imperative to support the use of evidence based practices that expand schooling to engage students with text beyond the traditional nine month school calendar and include deep learning of the salient aspects of educating diverse populations in teacher preparation programs. Advances in these areas of research could lead to the development of new models for afterschool and weekend literacy activities that accelerate learning for all students.

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Appendix A
Gallavan Checklist for Cultural Competence (Adapted)

N: Notice Culture and Cultural Characteristics	Evidence	Plan
1. I recognize and accept all students with respect for their individual and shared cultural characteristics		
2. I ensure that all learning connects with individual academic and cultural backgrounds.		
NW: Nurture and Welcome Challenges and Changes		
1. I teach all students how challenges exist through all parts of the curriculum.		
2. I teach all students skills related to conflict management.		