
SUPPORTING NEW TEACHERS WITH LITERACY INSTRUCTION: SMALL CHANGES TO GRADUATE LITERACY PROGRAMS THAT CAN HAVE A BIG IMPACT

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Abstract

Since 2018, there has been an increase in the use of the term *Science of Reading* (SoR), which is a method of teaching reading that is connected to an understanding of reading and reading development that aligns with scientific research (Shanahan, 2020). Teachers who are new to the classroom may be unfamiliar with SoR and teaching practices that align with this pedagogy. Institutions of higher education, specifically graduate literacy programs, are in a position to support and mentor new teachers with the current shift in literacy instruction. This article addresses changes that can be made to graduate course content in order to support new teachers, particularly during this shift to a new method of literacy instruction. This article offers ideas for how higher education can play a role in better preparing new teachers for SoR instruction.

Keywords: in-service teachers, teacher education, literacy, reading, science of reading

Introduction

New teachers are a valuable asset to schools because they bring new energy, new ideas, and new hope into the schools where they are hired to teach. New teachers just entering the profession can provide different perspectives and support to veteran teachers by giving them fresh ideas to infuse into their teaching and guidance with innovative technologies and digital platforms that are quickly entering the classroom space. While entering the teaching profession is a challenging endeavor at any time, it is even more difficult at this particular time due to added pressures, curriculum changes, and increased responsibilities. Therefore, in order to better prepare and support new teachers, teacher education programs, specifically graduate education programs, can provide mentorship, particularly in the area of literacy instruction.

Over the last few years, the Science of Reading (SoR) has gained popularity in literacy instruction, and many districts and schools have responded by including more instruction on foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding (Schwartz, 2022). This can

be difficult for new teachers entering the field, who may have learned more about Balanced Literacy methods of teaching reading during college and graduate school. This article seeks to explore how to better prepare new teachers for literacy instruction related to the SoR, particularly in programs of higher education.

Conceptual Framing

This article is framed by sociocultural conceptions of literacy, specifically New Literacy Studies (NLS). NLS has informed the design of the graduate courses I teach as well as my instruction because teaching literacy is more than teaching students the technical skills of reading and writing. Instead, teaching literacy is situated within social and cultural practices (Street, 1984) meaning that people participate and use literacy in different ways depending on their context.

Sociocultural Conceptions of Literacy

New Literacy Studies (NLS) highlights cultural and social aspects of literacy that are connected to specific contexts (Street, 1984, 2005a), and emphasizes the role of power in valorizing particular forms of literacy over others. In terms of education, NLS has expanded the focus of reading and writing in the school context from discrete reading and writing skills to the social practices connected to reading and writing for real purposes across a range of settings (Street, 2005b). Street (1984) distinguished the different perspectives of literacy by the autonomous model and the ideological model.

The autonomous model of literacy views literacy as a set of neutral skills typically taught in schools and learned in order to read or write, which are considered to have a universally positive effect on a person's cognitive skills (Street, 2005a). The autonomous model serves a specific purpose, to pass dominant or Western values onto others (Street, 1984), and schools are considered social institutions responsible for the act of transferring these values onto children. Street (1984) argued that although autonomous models perpetuate normed understandings of literacy, literacy is in fact an ideological construct, intimately dependent on context and addressing the various ways that groups of people participate in the social practices of reading and writing. Through this ideological model, literacy is more than the technical skills of reading and writing; rather, it is a way of taking meaning from an environment (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984), which means that literacy varies from situation to situation (Street, 2005a) and is connected to power, social structures, and particular worldviews (Street, 2003).

It is necessary to consider sociocultural practices as the field of literacy is in the midst of a pendulum swing, and consider ways to support this generation of new teachers as they are learning to teach reading and writing to elementary students.

Review of the Literature

The Evolution of Literacy Instruction

Recently, there has been a shift in literacy education, and schools and districts are moving from Balanced Literacy curricula to SoR programs. Sudden and drastic changes in literacy education are nothing new. There is great public interest in how literacy is taught to students because the ability or inability to read has an impact on students' futures (Shanahan, 2020). Due to this interest from the public, literacy instruction, and particularly reading instruction, has been described as a pendulum that swings between meaning making and phonics (Nichols, 2009). This succession of competing ways of teaching reading, known as the Reading Wars, has a long history in the United States and each pedagogy has strong advocates as well as rivals (Cambourne, 2021). Whole language instruction versus phonics instruction has been the primary way that the debate around literacy

instruction has been framed (Cambourne, 2021). The whole language supporters believe that reading should emphasize meaning making and learning to read will occur naturally for children (Petscher et al., 2020). While phonics proponents argue that learning to read is not a natural process and children need explicit and systematic instruction (Hanford, 2019).

So, how does this shift between pedagogical philosophies happen? Historically, the shift from one way of teaching literacy to the other method of literacy instruction begins when there is an idea about literacy instruction that is said to help all students and this idea has been left out or ignored by the other side (Shanahan, 2020). This can be seen with the rise of SoR and how it has moved into the spotlight. Supporters of SoR argued that Balanced Literacy curricula did not explicitly teach instruction focused on decoding—specifically phonics and phonological awareness—and this deficit is the cause of many students not being able to read at grade level (Hanford, 2018, 2019; Shanahan, 2020). Due to increased concerns from the public about how children are taught to read, SoR has taken center stage and offered instructional solutions to address these concerns from parents.

Since 2018, the term SoR has been more visible in the news and media (Hanford, 2019). However, this term is not new. Science of Reading is a term that has historically been aligned with research on pronouncing and decoding words (Shanahan, 2020). In other words, it is “knowledge about reading, reading development, and best practices for reading instruction obtained by the use of the scientific method” (Petscher et al., 2020, p. 268). Based on these definitions, SoR emphasizes the teaching of matching letters to sounds and word recognition skills. In terms of changes to classroom instruction, at the elementary level, the discussion on SoR has centered on children’s ability to decode words (Hoffman et al., 2021). In practice, this has meant an increase in phonemic awareness, phonics, and high frequency word instruction as well as explicit and systematic instruction on learning to decode. When learned, these skills will support students’ ability to comprehend the texts (Castles et al., 2018).

Teaching literacy is complex, and so are the many students in our classrooms. With the recent pendulum swing to SoR, it is clear that we as a society are still grappling with how best to teach children to read (Shanahan, 2020). This new generation of teachers, therefore, is stepping into a long history of debates around literacy instruction, and which method is best to teach children to read.

Supporting New Teachers with Their Literacy Instruction

One way to support to new teachers with the changes in literacy curriculum is to provide mentorship that improves the attitudes and instructional skills of the new teachers towards the SoR instruction. The first five years of a teacher’s career is a crucial time. Teachers who receive the necessary support in the early years of their careers typically continue to grow throughout their careers as effective teachers for their students.

Brown et al. (2020) conducted a study in Canada where new teachers were supported with mentoring. The new teachers had the opportunity to discuss their experiences in the classroom and share the lessons that they created. From these collaborations, the new teachers were able to develop and increase their confidence as teachers. In addition, the mentors provided the new teachers with ideas for their classroom and instruction as well as helped the new teachers identify areas of their teaching to develop and strengthen. In terms of supporting literacy instruction, Spangler (2013) found that providing students with the space and opportunity to speak with one another about their English teaching and make connections to the literature in the field supported their English instruction. A big take-away from both studies is that the new teachers had a safe and supportive learning environment where they were able to learn from each other and try new lessons in their instruction.

While this work is often done in school districts, there may not be adequate time devoted to mentoring new teachers and spending the time to hear their lesson ideas (Guisse, 2013). Also, some new teachers are hesitant to share their struggles with veteran teachers or with administrators. Graduate schools of education, therefore, are in a position to support new teachers who are enrolled in their programs. However, if schools of education are to be involved in supporting new teachers, then they need to listen to the needs of new teachers as well as to the needs of districts and schools (Rust, 2019). Teacher educators, therefore, can be agents of reform. They can initiate, develop, and promote new approaches to assist new teachers so that they receive the necessary support with their instruction and successfully remain in the field (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018).

Methodology

In this teacher inquiry study (Goswami et al., 2009), I endeavored to document student learning of literacy instruction related to SoR including their implementation of SoR literacy lessons. I wanted to reflect on my own teaching during times of transition in the literacy field and investigate what teaching methods best supported new teachers. For this study, I asked the following research questions: (a) How can graduate literacy programs better prepare new teachers for instruction related to SoR? and (b) What changes to graduate instruction need to be made to mentor and support new teachers with literacy instruction?

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a comprehensive college outside of New York City. It is a public liberal arts college that enrolls approximately 4,500 students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In terms of the School of Education, degrees and certifications are offered for undergraduate students and graduate students. The Graduate Education Literacy Program is a five-semester program that leads to professional certification in Literacy Education. Upon completion of the program, the students earn their literacy specialist certification and can work as classroom teachers, literacy specialists, or literacy coaches.

During the Fall 2022 semester, 17 students were enrolled in the reading course I was teaching. Sixteen students in the course were new to the teaching profession and in their first five years of their teaching career. These 16 students completed their undergraduate degrees during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many students taught in virtual or hybrid formats. Additionally, these students learned about Balanced Literacy during their undergraduate courses. During the course of the Fall 2022 semester, they were beginning to teach through SoR programs and curricula. Many of the students were questioning how to best support their own students with literacy instruction.

Researcher Positionality

Dyson and Genishi (2005) ask researchers to consider their roles and identity within the classroom space. I approached this study aware that I have overlapping identities which include identifying as a white female with middle-class roots, a Greek American, and a former elementary school teacher. I am a literacy professor and the coordinator of the Graduate Education Literacy Program.

I approached this teacher inquiry study from a similar place as the students in my course. At the start of my teaching career, there was a shift to Balanced Literacy curricula, and I experienced the quick change from one pedagogy to another, just as my students were facing. As a new teacher, who was not in graduate school, I had to learn about the teaching methods and practices that aligned with Balanced Literacy, without support or mentorship.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected during the Fall 2022 semester. This study was designed as a teacher inquiry study so that I could take account of my classroom practices during this time of change in the literacy field. I made modifications to my teaching and collected data in the form of observations of the students during class sessions, student work from assignments, and student reflections at the end of the semester to determine if the changes I made to my teaching helped prepare the new teachers for literacy instruction related to SoR. In order to reflect on my teaching and the changes that I was making to my teaching, I kept a teacher journal where I recorded my thoughts on what I observed in my teaching and in the students' reactions to the lessons as well as notes about what is happening in the field of literacy education, and personal notes about the changes in instruction that the students shared with me from their schools and classrooms.

Data analysis began at the same time as data collection so that it did not accumulate (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005; Goswami et al., 2009). I read through and organized my notes and the students' work after each week's class (Hubbard & Power, 2003). As I read the data, I looked for categories from my observations and the students' work. The category that occurred most frequently was the connection between the class readings, assignments, and activities to literacy instruction. The following section explains this category in more depth.

Findings

In order to support new teachers, the curriculum in the literacy class I was teaching needed to shift to meet their needs and support their understandings of SoR. Just as in the elementary grades, literacy in higher education is more than the technical skills of reading and writing. I had to connect the content to the students' teaching backgrounds and implement teaching practices that aligned with the context of what was happening in schools.

Readings to Address Teaching Strategies that Align with SoR

In Fall 2022, many elementary schools where the students in my course were teaching began to make curriculum changes to literacy programs. Many districts and schools were moving from Balanced Literacy programs to SoR curricula. In their schools, they were hearing different definitions of SoR, and had many questions about how to implement strategies that aligned with SoR. In order to give the students an understanding of SoR and concrete ideas that they could incorporate into their instruction, I decided to include two books into the course. The first was Jan Burkins and Kari Yates's (2021) book *Shifting the Balance: Six Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom*. This book outlined shifts in Balanced Literacy instruction that align with SoR and address the foundational skills that may be missing from a Balanced Literacy curriculum. The next book that I included in the course was Julia B. Lindsey's (2022) book *Reading Above the Fray: Reliable Research-Based Routines for Developing Decoding Skills*. This text provided the concrete strategies that the students wanted to learn and were ready for them to implement quickly. In order to make the reading of these texts as collaborative as possible, I made the decision to teach in the form of book clubs. The students were grouped by the grade levels they were teaching, and each week they were assigned to read a few chapters. As they read the books, they were asked to try out a strategy from the books that they found helpful into their teaching. The students were expected to come to class with the strategy they tried out and either student work or some type of documentation of how the elementary students did with the strategy to discuss with their groups. The goal of this exercise was to immediately connect the readings into the students' classroom instruction.

The students found the format of the book clubs helpful. One student, who is a second-year teacher, said that "having sessions in which new teachers can share, collaborate, and converse about

what is happening in the field of literacy education is really essential.” He continued that “this is a way that professors can help facilitate events or times for students to receive support and rely on one another for guidance.” Being a new teacher during a time when literacy instruction is shifting is challenging. The choice of texts allowed the students to understand why reading instruction was shifting as well as how they can make modifications to their current instruction. Another student commented that this format of instruction provided “material that I can bring directly into my classroom. This was something that really matters to my teaching.”

At the end of the semester, I invited Julia Lindsey, the author of *Reading Above the Fray* to speak to the students. This was a powerful teaching moment for the students. After giving an overview of her work, she took time to answer questions from the students. This gave them the opportunity to ask about the strategies from her book that they implemented with their elementary students. After the discussion, one of the comments was that this experience was “constructive because it allowed us to ask about the scenarios we face in our own classrooms and with our students.”

Observations of Literacy Instruction

As new teachers, my graduate students are observed by the administrators in their school districts. A few teachers commented that it is challenging to ask questions if they do not understand the administrator’s feedback after a formal observation. They wanted support on their literacy teaching, and they particularly wanted feedback about whether or not their lessons aligned with SoR. One student shared, “I want to make sure I am providing appropriate and meaningful instruction within the classroom. I could use support so that I know I am making the right decisions in the classroom and feel confident in my reading and writing lessons.”

In order to provide new teachers with support on their literacy instruction, an assignment was included where they had to video record two of their literacy lessons. The goal of this activity was to support the students and help their teaching grow. They were able to select any type of literacy lesson to record. But the lessons had to connect to the strategies that they learned in *Shifting the Balance* (2021) or *Reading Above the Fray* (2022). After teaching the two lessons that aligned with SoR instruction, students were partnered up. First, they met to discuss the lessons that they taught and explained the goals of the lesson and how they connected to SoR instruction. This was structured like a pre-observation meeting that teachers have with administrators. Part of the discussion centered around the areas of their teaching that were successful and then addressed the modifications that could be made in future lessons. The students also shared their reflections on whether or not the elementary students understood what was taught. The next step was to view each other’s lessons and provide their partner with feedback. Finally, the students came to class with their feedback and shared it verbally and provided each other with written feedback that they could use in the future.

The format of this assignment allowed each student to receive feedback from a peer as well as from me. Furthermore, one of the benefits that I did not anticipate was that the students saw how their peers approached literacy instruction connected to SoR and were able to take ideas from their peer’s lessons. After the feedback was given, I asked them to reflect on the experience. One student commented that, “having time to share, compare, and listen to one another was extremely beneficial. This was a properly facilitated environment, and being able to openly discuss the highs and lows of our literacy instruction had numerous benefits for the individual who was sharing and for the other partner who was part of the discussion.”

The context matters when teaching, and I took that into consideration for this assignment. In order to tap into the social nature of literacy and the collaborative nature of teaching, this

assignment took place towards the end of the semester so that the students were comfortable with one another and thus were open to sharing their teaching.

Implications

This study contributes to the conversation of new teacher mentorship, and specifically focuses on how graduate schools of education can support new teachers with their literacy instruction during a time when there is a shift in pedagogy and instructional practices. Teaching in the field of teacher education and working with students who are new teachers during this current iteration of the Reading Wars has reinforced the need for teacher educators to make connections to the literacy field, particularly the instruction that is needed in the classroom. Teacher educators, therefore, must address new theories and methods of teaching literacy and provide students who are new teachers with an understanding of how these changes occur in classroom instruction. A big take-away from this study is the need to have a strong connection between the content in graduate courses and the field. Particularly during times of change, schools of education need to pivot and implement pedagogy that aligns with what is being taught in elementary schools. If we truly want to support young students and teach them to read, then this work needs to be covered in schools of education.

The findings from this teacher inquiry study show that graduate schools can be responsive to the needs of new teachers and implement instruction and resources that will enable new teachers to understand different methods of literacy instruction, in this case SoR, and how to design literacy instruction that connects to this pedagogy. Additionally, this study highlighted that in order to mentor new teachers, graduate course content must align with the field of literacy education. An area that this study did not address was the quality of new teachers' literacy instruction, as it related to SoR. Therefore, an area of future research that could further contribute to the field is to study the role of mentorship from graduate education and how it contributes to the quality of new teachers' literacy instruction over time.

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