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Caitlin Munn
Brock University

Vera E. Woloshyn
Brock University

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Evolving Beliefs of an Aspiring Reading Teacher as Shaped through Multiple Experiences in a University-Based Reading Clinic

CAITLIN MUNN and VERA E. WOLOSHYN, Brock University

It is essential to provide future reading teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to make sound programmatic and curriculum decisions on the basis of evidence-based practices. To this end, several comprehensive large-scale reviews have been completed in the last two decades (International Reading Association, 2007; Rand Reading Study Group, 2002), identifying components of effective reading and writing instruction. University-based reading practicums can assist these students acquire such critical knowledge and apply it to practice.

Over thirty years of research confirm that learners who experience reading difficulties benefit from participating in tutoring sessions (Fitzgerald, 2001; Roe & Vukelich, 2001; Woolley & Hay, 2007), demonstrating improved decoding, word attack, reading fluency and comprehension. Tutoring also can be an enjoyable and beneficial experience for tutors, providing them with opportunities to 'give back' to the community, make meaningful differences in learners' lives, and develop meaningful relationships (Fang & Ashley, 2004; Jones, Stallings, & Malone, 2004; Leal, Johanson, Toth, & Huang, 2004).

For those who aspire to be educators, tutoring also provides the opportunity to apply theory to practice (Alsup, Conrad-Salvo, & Peters, 2008; Hart & King, 2007; Rogers-Haverback & Parault, 2008). Specifically, tutoring allows teacher candidates to implement relevant instructional strategies, as well as plan and problem solve independently (Gallagher, Woloshyn, & Elliott, 2009; Morgan, Timmons, & Shaheen, 2006). Tutors also can develop increased knowledge and confidence in using different formats of reading instruction and identifying learners' strengths and areas of need (Morgan et al., 2006). In this way, tutoring experiences can contribute positively to future teachers' sense of teaching self-efficacy (Rogers-Haverback & Parault, 2008; Wasserman, 2009). Practicing teachers who demonstrate high self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate instructional sensitivity when working with students who struggle as well as embrace innovative instructional techniques relative to their peers with low self-efficacy (Graham, Harris, Fink, & MacArthur, 2011; Nierstheimer, Hopkins, & Dillon, 2000; Wasserman, 2009). Woolley and Hay (2007) caution, however, that in order for tutoring practicums to be successful and promote teaching efficacy, tutors must receive minimal levels of training as well as be supervised and supported in their efforts.

Participating in a university-based reading practicum can provide future teachers with such a structured and supportive learning environment. This is especially true when such programs are interwoven with coursework (Massey & Lewis, 2011), as providing learners with opportunities to transfer course concepts into practice can promote their meaningfulness and relevancy (Ness, 2011). Carefully designed practicums allow for the integration of theory, practice, and self-reflection (Fitzgerald, 2001), encourage

teacher candidates to explore their personal beliefs about learning, and experience learning events that are different from their own while developing relationships with tutees (Fang & Ashley, 2004; Leal et al., 2004). In other words, such practicum experiences can facilitate changes in future educators' knowledge, self-efficacy, beliefs, and pedagogy (Risko, Roller, Cummins, Bean, Collins Block, Anders, & Flood, 2008).

Like others (Coffey, 2010; Henry, Bruland, & Omizo, 2008), we believe that providing senior undergraduate and graduate students with university-based peer tutor and/or mentor roles (e.g., teaching assistants, reading program coordinators) will promote their sense of teaching self-efficacy and prepare them to become knowledgeable and supportive associate teachers (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Lu, 2010). We also agree with Falk (2011) that not all practicing teachers possess such knowledge, skills and attributes and efforts should be made to promote such capacities at every level of teacher training.

In this study, we describe the experiences of the first author, hereafter referred to as Caitlin, as she participated in various facets of a university-based reading support program. We begin by reflecting on and exploring Caitlin's undergraduate experiences in context of completing a reading practicum. We then elaborate on insights gained by Caitlin as a graduate student as she assumed additional roles associated with the practicum including seminar leader and program coordinator. We document the ways in which these experiences worked to promote her sense of self-efficacy and preparedness as a reading teacher, as well as a peer mentor for other aspiring teachers.

Theoretical framework

This study was conducted within the theoretical framework of social constructivism where relevant social interactions assist individuals to derive meaning from experience (Vygotsky, 1986; Wink & Putney, 2002). We also draw upon the concept of teacher self-efficacy as derived from Bandura's (1986, 1997) theory of social cognitive theory that situates learners as capable of regulating their behaviours and thoughts. Accordingly, teachers develop self-efficacy through their interpretations and emotional responses to prior teaching experiences as well as through the vicarious experiences and verbal feedback of critical others (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk, & Hoy, 1998). In context of the university-based tutoring program described here, tutoring interactions were intended to promote undergraduate tutors' teaching efficacy. The extended reading clinic instructional experiences provided to the first author were intended to further promote her sense of teaching efficacy, in part, through opportunities to mentor and support junior peers.

Method

Research design

Case study involves the in-depth exploration of an activity, event, process, or individual based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2011; Yin, 2009) and is undertaken when researchers want to understand a particular phenomenon that is unique or unusual. In this study, case study methodology was adopted to gain insights into Caitlin's evolving beliefs and experiences as shaped through her collective experiences within the reading clinic.

Instructional context: researchers, reading course and practicum

We are two educators who share common interests in reading instruction. At the time of this study, Caitlin completed a five-year teacher education program and was in the final stages of completing her Master of Education degree. Her decision to earn a graduate degree was influenced by the lack of available teaching positions (67% of first-year teachers in Ontario report being unemployed or underemployed with similar concerns reported by those graduating within the past five years: McIntyre, 2012; Ontario College of Teachers, 2012) and her continued desire to engage in the profession. Vera was a professor whose research interests and scholarship included developing and implementing strategic instruction and associated teacher professional development. Vera initially came to know Caitlin as an undergraduate student completing her reading course. Later, Caitlin worked with Vera as a course seminar leader and program coordinator in the reading clinic where Vera was the director.

The reading course that Caitlin completed was required for undergraduates completing a 5-year education program (junior-intermediate division), with the majority of undergraduates completing this course in their third year of studies. The course was intended to serve as a precursor to a fifth-year language arts course, familiarizing undergraduates with the reading process and evidence-based reading instruction. Over the 12-week term, undergraduates participated in weekly, two-hour lectures and one-hour seminars.

The course also provided undergraduates with the opportunity to complete a 10-week reading practicum at the university's reading clinic. The practicum required students to apply course concepts in context of working with a school-aged client with reading difficulties. Several program coordinators (mostly graduate students) and a faculty director supervised the practicum. They provided undergraduates with formative feedback with respect to their instructional programming, modeled evidence-based practices, and coordinated scheduling, resources and communications among stakeholders.

Data collection and data analysis

Throughout each of her various roles and capacities, Caitlin communicated regularly with Vera with respect to her duties and responsibilities and interests in reading instruction. Caitlin maintained systematic documentation related to her experiences in the reading course and associated practicum. Data collection also included documentation of Caitlin's experiences as seminar leader and practicum coordinator

including formative feedback provided to undergraduates. Finally, Caitlin participated in a series of 90-120 minute open-ended, reflective interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis, with these reflections continuing throughout the writing of this article.

Data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the course and seminar materials, program coordinator notes and interview transcriptions in order to develop a holistic understanding with respect to the Caitlin's evolving beliefs and experiences (Creswell, 2011; Yin, 2009). After reviewing the data independently, the researchers met to present their interpretations and arrive at a shared understanding of the themes and associated conclusions. Four themes emerged from the data including (1) evolving beliefs about learning and reading (2) realizing the value of the reading practicum (3) developing as a mentor, and (4), developing as a reading teacher.

Findings

Caitlin experienced several revelations about herself as a learner and the nature of reading throughout her journey from undergraduate tutor to program coordinator. She also honed pedagogical skills related to providing effective instruction and formative feedback as well as communicating with educational stakeholders.

Evolving beliefs about learning and reading

When first asked to describe herself as a learner, Caitlin indicated a need to put forth continuous effort and time in order to succeed, "Learning wasn't easy . . . I could do well . . . but I had to work extremely hard." Completing the reading course and practicum provided Caitlin with a unique opportunity to "try" many of the reading strategies and learning processes advocated for younger readers.

A lot of the particular strategies that we would be learning, I would try them on myself. Not all of them worked, but some of them did . . . and it was amazing to realize I could be applying them to my own learning.

Through this process of trial and error, Caitlin came to view the use of such strategic processes as critical to her academic success and time management.

Realizing that I understand how I learned and I can work on my strengths, and I can work on my weaknesses, that I can be successful if I just apply these approaches. I've been successful before, but now I can be successful quicker or successful in a way that I will remember it [content] after. . . . I learned a lot about how students learn and how to help students, but I also learned a lot about how to help myself.

Seemingly inconsistent with her overall reflections of herself as a learner, Caitlin also identified herself as a competent reader who enjoyed engaging with text. She equated her reading successes to her ability to decode print materials across a variety of subjects and content areas while undermining the importance of comprehension.

I think of the different courses I took in university whether it be in math or history, or geography, I could read these texts with no problem . . . so it was almost as if I didn't see comprehension as being part of reading. Because for me,

I thought, well, I'm an excellent reader. You can give me anything, and I can read it.

Like many other beginning and aspiring teachers, Caitlin demonstrated a vague understanding about the nature of reading (Fang & Ashley, 2004) and she needed to be provided with contradictory information in order to dispel inconsistencies in her beliefs. For instance, she was encouraged to consider the connection between her reflections of self-as-learner versus self-as-reader. Through these discussions, Caitlin came to consider comprehension as part of the reading process and connected it with her perceived learning struggles.

It takes me a long time to read things. For example, if I have to sit down and read an article, I probably have to read it twice, then I have to highlight it, and then I have to go back, and then I have to make notes . . . whereas some of my friends, it [understanding] always came so quickly for them.

This new realization also increased her understanding and empathy for clients at the reading clinic, "I think it helped me a lot when I was tutoring because I realized that I understood that for a lot of students, sometimes it takes longer."

I think one of the biggest changes for me was actually thinking about comprehension as part of reading. . . . that's one thing I've definitely come across a lot in the reading clinic with different students is that they can read; say they can read really quickly or they can get through all the words, but then you ask them after, 'what was it about?' . . . they don't remember any of that.

As program coordinator, Caitlin discovered that some parents held similar beliefs about reading – assuming that their children's difficulties were decoding ones exclusively and that these difficulties could be "remediated" over the course of several sessions. It was Caitlin's responsibility to provide them with a broader definition and understanding of reading.

Some of these parents don't understand we're working on comprehension as well as decoding . . . they have that understanding that reading is simply decoding. . . . They just need someone to explain that this is a gradual process.

Participating in the reading practicum increased Caitlin's understanding of the complexities of reading including the importance of comprehension as well as decoding. This is an important realization in context of previous findings (Fang & Ashley, 2004) indicating that teacher candidates as well as beginning teachers often overemphasize the importance of decoding and word attack processes over comprehension, especially when working with students who experience reading difficulties. Such practices and beliefs can be resistant to change in the absence of contradictory experiences and supported reflection (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010; Osipova, Prichard, Boardman, Kiely, & Carroll, 2011; Linek, Sampson, Laverne-Raine, Klakamp, & Smith, 2006). Completing the reading course and associated practicum also provided Caitlin with insights about herself as a learner. These insights, in turn, promoted a sense of connectedness when working with clients at the reading clinic, consistent with earlier observations that shared struggles can create a sense of

shared learning between tutoring dyads (Jacobson, Thorpe, Fisher, Lapp, Frey, & Flood, 2001; Juel, 1996; Paterson & Elliott, 2006). Collectively, these metacognitive realizations and genuine experiences promoted a sense of 'know how' that enhanced Caitlin's efficacy as a reading teacher (Rogers-Haverback & Parault, 2008; Wasserman, 2009).

Valuing of reading practicum

Theory to practice bridge. Caitlin admitted that as an undergraduate student, the practicum brought with it a combined sense of excitement and anxiety. While she was excited about the opportunity to gain experience in the field, she worried about her abilities to meet the needs of her client and be accountable to parents.

I was extremely excited about it, and I still remember that my friends were really excited about it, and I think we were nervous too . . . I started thinking, 'I'm actually going to learn. I'm actually going to learn how to teach, how to do it and work with a student' . . . but I also have this sense that I am representing the university and think, 'What if I don't know enough?'

Participating in the tutoring practicum promoted a shift from student to teacher (Alsup et al., 2008). Specifically, it represented a shift from practicing literacy instruction in the context of hypothetical cases to real-world application – a component that seemingly was missing in some of Caitlin's other courses. This experience, in turn, provided her with increased passion and confidence as a reading teacher.

I felt as if I didn't have that passion about it [other courses] because I was planning a hypothetical unit that I wasn't actually being able to use . . . it was difficult to plan without actually having a student or having a class to plan for.

I liked having research and the application. I have confidence using it [instructional technique] knowing it's been researched. . . . I know I understand something when I am able to apply it . . . once I was able to take what I learned in class and apply it to my lessons with a student, that's when I knew I understood it.

Finally, Caitlin reported feeling well supported during the practicum. Beyond access to instructional ideas and resources, she was appreciative of the formative feedback that she received. She spoke highly of approachable seminar leaders and program coordinators, confirming the importance of training and supervision in the delivery of such practicums (Wasik, 1998) as well as the need to minimize negative emotions such as anxiety and stress while promoting positive ones in order to promote self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

I think what stood out to me about it being part of the university was I knew that we would be well supported . . . if you didn't know what you were doing, right away there'd be someone you could go to. There was someone that would help. . . we knew there were support people in the clinic and the reading clinic had resources . . . everything was there.

Learning about children and families. Throughout her varied roles, Caitlin had many opportunities to work directly with the families enrolled in the reading clinic. These experiences prompted Caitlin to be cognizant of a variety of family structures as well as how to communicate effectively

with parents and other caregivers. As program coordinator, she became aware of “how busy children’s lives are,” including the multitude of after-school and extra-curricular activities that many children attended and the sense of fatigue and stress that sometimes followed.

I still remember one mother I talked to about how stressed out her daughter was about not being able to read . . . her daughter had woken up in the morning and she had a bald spot on her head. It was because she had been ripping her hair out because she was stressed.

Caitlin especially was struck by how some of these families differed from her own—insights that she believed were also new to many of the other undergraduates participating in the practicum.

I come from a family setting where my mom stayed at home and she was there with us and made sure we did our schoolwork. . . . For them [undergraduates] it’s gaining understanding about the different types of families . . . understanding the role that grandparents have in the children’s education . . . or even sometimes an older brother or sister. I remember them [undergraduates] talking to me about that. . . it was a different family structure that they grew up in.

Caitlin came to understand parents’ deep concerns for the well-being of their children, their need to talk to others, and their sense of “helplessness” with respect to their children’s reading skills. In this way Caitlin become more aware of the importance of understanding the whole child, including his or her home life, school life and interests (Carr, 2003).

It’s interesting how much they [parents] tell you, and I think maybe some of them just need someone to listen to them . . . they don’t know what to do . . . how much the parents worry. . . . They hurt over the fact that their child is struggling and they have tried things, and they can’t change it themselves . . . for a lot of them that was heartbreaking . . . being able to discuss that with them, that was definitely a new experience.

Caitlin drew upon these insights when dialoging with friends and peers who had secured positions (usually as supply teachers) in the school system, challenging their assumptions about what they perceived to be “dysfunctional families” and/or “unconcerned” parents.

She [peer] ranted, ‘That’s your child. How do you not care? How do you not do that?’ I had to stop her and tell her there’s far more factors than we know. ‘Maybe that parent doesn’t have the time. Maybe that parent can’t necessarily help them. Maybe the parent doesn’t understand how.’

The reading clinic practicum served as a forum for bridging theory to practice (Alsup et al., 2008; Rogers-Haverback & Parault, 2008; Hart & King, 2007), with Caitlin’s comments underscoring the value of providing such opportunities to aspiring teachers early in their teacher training programs. The supportive environment provided by the reading clinic worked to promote positive tutoring experiences and reduce anxiety associated with first-time teaching, thus promoting Caitlin’s teacher self-efficacy (Coffey, 2010; Wasserman, 2009). The extended experiences of serving as a program coordinator provided further insights

about the nature of students and their families (Carr, 2003) which in turn, inspired Caitlin to assume the role of family advocate or at least challenge her peers’ beliefs and tendencies to “blame the parents” when students misbehaved or struggled at school (Nierstheimer et al., 2000; Rohr & He, 2010; Sutterby, Rubin, & Abrego, 2007).

Developing as a mentor

Caitlin was enthusiastic to use the insights that she had gained while completing the reading course and practicum in her role as a seminar leader. She believed that the competitive nature of the academic program might leave many undergraduates reluctant to experiment with the evidence-based strategies and/or share their learning and tutoring experiences with peers, “it is so competitive and everyone wants to be the best of the best.” Caitlin committed to sharing her personal learning struggles and experiences as a seminar leader. She believed that sharing such narratives would further convince undergraduates about the effectiveness of evidence-based practices and provide them with encouragement to apply them when working with clients or when reading independently.

At first, I was embarrassed to tell them [undergraduates] about using the strategies myself . . . but it was something that I came to emphasize in seminar. . . . ‘You’d be amazed at how many of these things may work for you . . . whether it’s mind mapping or whether it’s highlighting or skimming’ . . . I told them [undergraduates] that because I had actually had that experience of using it, I was able to share that experience genuinely when I working with young students.

Caitlin believed that by modeling reading instructional practices, the undergraduates would be willing to participate actively in seminar and would be more likely to succeed in the practicum. In her own experience, the opportunity to try strategies in seminar and ask questions without judgment increased her confidence as a tutor and she wanted to the same opportunity for those in her seminar group.

I was demonstrating various resources, whether it was the reader’s theater or whether it was reading-by-analogy, or being a word detective. And when I was showing them [undergraduates] the resource, I’d ask how can we apply it for the students that you’re working with?

In order for tutors to collaborate with others (Hart & King, 2007) and to learn and grow as professionals (Morgan et al., 2006), it is essential to create a sense of safety and community. To this end, Caitlin recognized that many undergraduates possessed relevant experiences working with children outside of the classroom and encouraged them to consider how they could adopt these experiences to course content and the practicum. Caitlin also became aware that she needed to provide the undergraduate tutors with guidance about classroom management and student motivation – areas that she had not considered as part of reading instruction in the past.

They [undergraduates] would say, ‘Here is my lesson, my client won’t do it.’ So I would say, ‘Well, switch it up. Try using the volleyballs and writing words on there. Or try doing a scavenger hunt’ . . . Once they switched it up and

made it active, they were able to complete the lesson. They understood what they should be doing with the client. It was just having that experience. . . I think a lot of the times those behavioral issues can be fixed.

Providing formative and nonjudgmental feedback was also an important component of these roles, especially when working with undergraduate tutors who were struggling and/or seemingly disengaged. Caitlin often left lesson ideas for individual tutors and offered to co-tutor, emphasizing that the offer was a supportive effort versus a punitive or evaluative one.

I would like to offer to teach the first 20-25 minutes of your session . . . to see if I can develop some strategies and suggestions to help your client get focused and on task . . . don't worry about losing marks. . . This is just to help out since you have a challenging situation. I look forward to tutoring with you.

Assuming the roles of seminar leader and program coordinator reinforced Caitlin's understandings of reading and reading instruction, reinforcing that personal learning is improved through teaching and mentoring others (Deaton & Deaton, 2012; Henry et al., 2008). Equally important, these roles provided Caitlin with the opportunity to provide emotional and social support to other inspiring teachers – skills and attributes that are consistent with effective mentors/associated teachers (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Licklider, 1995).

Developing as a reading teacher

Participating in the reading practicum also extended Caitlin's knowledge and skills related to being a classroom educator and reading teacher. When reflecting on her final year in the teacher education program, Caitlin acknowledged that she and her peers who had completed the third-year reading practicum engaged in their language arts course differently relative to those who had not participated in the practicum. Specifically, she believed that she and her colleagues were more confident in their abilities to lesson plan for an entire classroom while simultaneously responding to the needs of individual students through differentiated instruction. Her responses endorse previous findings that well-structured reading practicums can promote teaching self-efficacy and positively affect teacher candidates' instructional practices (Gallagher et al., 2009; Hoffman, Roller, Maloch, Sailors, Duffy, & Beretvas, 2005).

Absolutely every single person in that program would say they were prepared to teach reading and the language arts . . . or at least feel more prepared . . . because they had that background [practicum]. . . For us, it was more about differentiated instruction and how to meet the needs of all your students because we had worked one-on-one, and we had seen that there were students that may be really great at decoding but struggled with comprehension or had other needs, so we were looking more to those aspects. I guess we held a different perspective.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend the value of the reading practicum as a valuable complement to undergraduate reading courses (Dawkins, Ritz, & Loudon,

2009; Jones et al., 2004) and teacher preparation (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010; Fang & Ashley, 2004; Leal et al., 2004; Massey & Lewis, 2011). The practicum provided Caitlin with the opportunity to bridge the theory-practice gap by developing a refined understanding of the reading process (Massey & Lewis, 2011), gain confidence using evidence-based pedagogical practices (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010), and provide individualized instruction (Alsup et al., 2008). While most teacher candidates participate in some form of teaching practicum as part of their final year, we believe that the gains associated with the reading practicum described here were especially meaningful in that they occurred relatively early in Caitlin's initial teacher education studies. Early experiences using evidence-based practices can reinforce individuals' motivation for the teaching profession (Atkinson & Colby, 2006), as well as their empathy for those who struggle with the reading process (Juel, 1996). Such early experiences also can prompt future educators to critique and challenge their existing beliefs about reading and reading instruction, working to dispel misconceptions that otherwise would likely impede the implementation of effective reading programming (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010; Linek et al., 2006). Collectively, these experiences worked to promote Caitlin's sense of teaching efficacy and are consistent with Bandura's (1997) recommendation that teacher self-efficacy be developed in the early stages of teaching.

Caitlin's learning gains also were extended and intensified through additional opportunities to participate in the practicum as a graduate student. Assuming the responsibilities of seminar leader and practicum coordinator provided her with an extended experience to model evidence-based practices by serving as a facilitator and guide for undergraduate tutors. Coordinating the practicum provided Caitlin with insights and sensitivities related to the needs and concerns of undergraduate tutors as well as the opportunity to participate in the creation of a safe and nonjudgmental learning environment. The creation of such learning environments are important for the success of university-based reading clinics as tutors respond positively to supervisors who possess similar and relevant reading instruction experiences and who were willing to provide ongoing, formative feedback (Fitzgerald, 2001; Johnson, 2010; Roe & Vukelich, 2001). We believe that participation in these learning environments is also important for ongoing teacher development and may provide salient experiences for their future roles as mentors and associate teachers (Henry et al., 2008).

For these reasons, we advocate for continued learning experiences within structured, university-based reading practicums that extend beyond the role of tutoring whenever possible. We believe that by providing undergraduate and graduate students with comprehensive experiences like those described here, they will develop into well-prepared educators who are able to meet the needs of multiple learners and educational stakeholders.

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Ms. Caitlin Munn is a Learning Strategist at Assiniboine Community College and on-line facilitator for Brock University's Adult Education program. Her primary research interests include teacher preparation, disability and inclusion, narrative inquiry of mental health issues, and effective learning strategy instruction.

Dr. Vera Woloshyn is a Professor and former Director of the Reading Clinic at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. She teaches teacher-preparation and graduate-level courses in reading, learning, and cognition, and research methodology.

Her primary research interests include the development and implementation of effective learning and teaching strategies for children and adults.