

Kim Fries, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Education
Final Project Report
Outreach Scholars Academy

PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF LITERACY

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This study will explore how members of one school's K-3 faculty understand children's literacy development, their own teaching practices, and assessment. Seventeen faculty members who work directly with students in grades K-3 have been asked to volunteer for the study. Because this study recently received approval from the University of New Hampshire's Institutional Research Board, data from three sources will now be gathered: interviews, teaching materials, and assessment tools. Data collection and a qualitative analysis will occur simultaneously (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

This public school/university collaboration supports the NEASC standards and the University of New Hampshire's outreach scholarship and goals outlined in its 2003 *Academic Plan for the Future of the University of New Hampshire*.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION/STATEMENT OF THE ISSUES/PROBLEM

Reading instruction has been the subject of much discussion and debate in our society. The debate is often presented as one of whole language versus phonics, however many argue that it is much more complicated and not as dichotomous (Matson, 1996; Miller, 1998). Historically, there have been heated debates over silent reading versus oral reading, the dangers of teaching the alphabet before teaching words, and the value of using stories dictated by children as the first reading text rather than primers (Chall, 1992). Furthermore, approaches such as reading readiness, direct skills instruction, emergent literacy, developmentally appropriate practice, and balanced literacy have all been forwarded (Quick, 1998).

In a nation that values literacy, there continues to be concerns about rates of illiteracy (Commeyras & DeGoff, 1998; Kozol, 1985). It is therefore important to continue learning about the interests, experiences, beliefs, and sources of influence that contribute to how schools and their faculty members teach and continue to learn about literacy development, teaching practices, and assessment.

III. PROJECT DETAILS

A. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

This study will explore how members of one school's K-3 faculty understand

literacy (i.e., children's literacy development, teaching practices, and assessment). This study will address three research questions: (1) how do faculty members at one school conceptualize their K-3 students' literacy development? (2) what teaching practices do they implement and why? and (3) what informal and formal assessment tools do they utilize and why? It is the goal of this study to add to the body of literature on literacy and assessment from the teacher's perspective and to offer information to the faculty of this particular schools' administration and faculty as they make future decisions relative to literacy and assessment. These decisions may include decisions concerning policies and practices related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and more.

B. TARGET POPULATION/AUDIENCE

The target population/audience for this study will be educators (primarily those who teach at the early elementary grade levels), teacher educators, literacy specialists, and administrators.

C. METHODS

This study will take place at the Deerfield Community School, located in Deerfield, New Hampshire. The school has a reputation of being a progressive school that does not align itself with schools that implement a scripted curriculum or prescriptive instructional approaches. Permission to conduct this research has been granted by both the principal of the school and by the University of New Hampshire's Institutional Review Board.

Letters soliciting participants for this study have been sent to 17 faculty members (12 classroom teachers; 2 special educators; 2 reading specialists; 1 speech pathologist) who have direct contact with students in grades K-3. Those who volunteer to participate will be interviewed for 60-90 minutes at their school site. In addition, copies of teaching materials (i.e., handouts, curriculum guides, etc.) and assessment tools (both formal and informal) will be solicited.

All three data sources (interviews, teaching materials, assessment tools) will be analyzed qualitatively, both manually and with the assistance of *HyperResearch*TM (Hesse-Biber, 2000), a qualitative software package. Analysis will begin with a line-by-line coding of the data, followed by co-axial coding (Charmaz, 2000, 2002; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes will be clustered and categorized in order to identify networks of relationships, fundamental configurations, and pattern recognition (Nespor, 2006; Ragin, 2000).

Analysis will move from the recognition of patterns to the pursuit of emerging themes, the discovery of social processes and the inductive construction of abstract categories and/or concepts. Categories and/or concepts will be defined and the conditions under which they operate and how and when the various categories and/or concepts are connected will be specified. Categories and/or

concepts will be further refined via theoretical sampling and then integrated into a theoretical framework or model that specifies relationships among components and/or concepts, as well as their causes, conditions, and consequences of the studies processes (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

D. EVIDENCE OF EXTERNAL COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

I believe that teachers' voices are sometimes overlooked when it comes to decisions made in the field of education. Many times it is policy makers, administrators, textbook publishers, and more who make decisions without consultation with teachers who work on a daily basis with children. In this study I intend to make an attempt at articulating teachers' voices through engagement, empowerment, and respectful interaction with these professionals. It is my hope that their voices will add to the larger conversation in the field of education, as I intent to publish a piece from this work.

In addition, to thank the teachers for working with me on this project, I will be using the majority of my outreach scholarship funds to provide each interviewee with a gift certificate to purchase classroom supplies.

E. EXPECTED IMPACT

I expect that the impact from this work will include this particular faculty's ability to make decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment from the data collected, analyzed, and report on as a result of this project. I will measure this impact based on future policy decisions, curricular decisions, and assessment procedures put into place.

F. SCHOLARLY CONNECTION

Because my area of research includes work on teachers, teaching, teacher education, and teacher research, this project will fit nicely into my already existing agenda. Because my area of study has not typically included the specific curricular area of literacy, I believe this will enhance my own scholarship and learning in a richer and more in depth way.

IV. EVALUATION PLAN

I believe that this project will add to my scholarship and professional development in that it will broaden my study of teachers, teaching, teacher education, and teacher research relative to literacy. I believe that it will broaden my understanding of the field in both breadth and depth.

V. REFERENCES

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