Building bridges from pre-service experiences to elementary classroom literacy teaching: Challenges and opportunities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Stimulated Recall interviews gave insight into instructional influences.
- Knowledge transfer from teacher preparation to teaching fell along a continuum.
- A school's curriculum was a major influence on pre-service teachers' instruction.
- Some instruction focused on teaching reading strategies without a content focus.
- Implications for teacher preparation programs to facilitate transfer are proposed.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated a) the influences on pre-service and early career teachers' literacy instructional decision-making, and b) how and in what ways transfer from literacy methods courses was evident in teachers' instructional decision-making. Although observations and interviews of ten teachers revealed some influence of teacher preparation, the school's curriculum was far more influential. Teaching fell along a knowledge transfer continuum from a conscious rejection of what was taught in pre-service education to some transfer of knowledge to transformation of knowledge. Findings suggest ways teacher educators can design assignments to maximize transfer to the classroom and support novice teachers.

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1. Introduction

As teacher educators, we feel compelled to find out if the learning displayed in pre-service coursework transfers to classroom teaching. Since teacher educators are responsible for building teacher knowledge and that knowledge directly impacts children, it is of the utmost importance to us and other teacher educators, both in the United States and internationally, to investigate (a) what knowledge is influencing students' instructional decision-making once they leave pre-service courses and (b) the ways they transfer the knowledge and the skills gained in teacher preparation to the classroom. Thus, the purposes of this study were to understand if and how pre-service students and new teachers transferred their learning from pre-service courses into classroom teaching and to

generate ideas about how teacher educators can facilitate transfer. Anderson and Stillman (2013) called for future scholarship to focus on what teacher educators "decide and do to ensure" pre-service teacher (PST) development, and how "former PSTs 'recontextualize' what they learned" during teacher preparation "as they move into different settings with different students" (p. 56). Anderson and Stillman's (2013) review of research on student teaching highlighted "a need for studies that incorporate multiple methods in order to offset the limitations of purely self-reported data and the limitations of data that capture beliefs and attitudes absent evidence of PSTs' beliefs and attitudes in action (i.e., their enacted practices)" (p. 56). This research study responds to Anderson and Stillman's (2013) call by exploring new teachers' "recontextualization" through observations of their teaching in action and interviews to understand the influences on their decision-making.

Transferring knowledge from one situation to another is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors. Dewitz and Graves (2014) noted, "In more than 100 years of research,

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students frequently fail to apply the knowledge and skills learned in one situation to other situations" (p. 150). Similarly, Perkins and Salomon (2012) stated, "Considerable research suggests that much of the knowledge-to-go served up by schools does not 'go' that far. Besides just plain forgetting, people commonly fail to marshal what they know effectively in situations outside the classroom …" (p. 248). As they explained, transference of knowledge from one situation to another involves detecting the opportunity to transfer learning, choosing to transfer, and finding a way to do it. Transfer is further affected by an individual's motivation and disposition.

Perkins and Salomon (2012) explained two different types of transfer that are helpful in understanding the challenges pre-service teacher candidates face: "low-road transfer" and "high-road transfer" (p. 251; see also Salomon & Perkins, 1989, p. 115). In "low-road transfer" situations, the transfer context is very similar to the initial learning context; transfer "depends on pattern recognition and the reflexive triggering of routines" (Perkins & Salomon, 2012, p. 251). For example, for this type of transfer to occur, a pre-service teacher might take coursework emphasizing writer's workshop and then student teach in a classroom using this approach. In a "high-road transfer" situation, the application occurs in a context that is quite different from the initial learning context. This type of transfer is more challenging, and "the learner has to do some thinking and make a conscious effort to apply his initial learning to the transfer task" (Dewitz & Graves, 2014, p. 153). In a high-road transfer situation, a student teacher might find herself in a classroom using a scripted program to teach writing and would have to find a way to incorporate her learning about writer's workshop into a very different classroom context for transfer to occur. Summarizing Perkins and Salomon's work for application to literacy teaching and learning, Dewitz and Graves (2014) suggested teachers can assist students with high-road transfer by "bridging" or taking "direct steps to help students apply their initial learning in other situations" (p. 155).

Also relevant to the notion of transfer in teacher preparation is Kahneman's (2011) theory of System 1 and System 2 reasoning. System 1 thoughts and mental actions are accessed quickly without effort and originate without much attention. System 2 thoughts and mental actions require more attention, effort, and deliberation; they are not automatic. Kahneman (2011) explains that much of what individuals think and do begins in System 1, but System 2 is needed when difficulties and complexities arise. This theory suggests that teacher preparation should stimulate both types of reasoning in teacher candidates. Teacher preparation programs need to provide as much practice as possible in important skills (such as conducting a running record of oral reading) so that pre-service teachers' reasoning becomes automatic (System 1) and so they develop content knowledge (what to teach) and pedagogical content knowledge (how to teach) to make informed decisions (System 2) when faced with the complexities of working in schools. Field experiences requiring the invocation of both systems are critically important so teacher candidates can practice integrating System 1 and System 2 thinking during actual teaching.

With both "high road transfer" and System 1 and System 2 thinking in mind, our university's elementary teacher preparation program emphasizes the development of knowledge in the context of "real world" situations to facilitate application of course learning to classroom practice (e.g., Ball, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher candidates learn that teacher-student interactions in the classroom are critical factors in children's achievement and that the skills related to providing emotional support, instructional support, and organizing the classroom are essential (Pakarinen et al., 2014; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). For example, teacher candidates assess a child's literacy development (including affective dimensions of literacy, such as motivation and interests) and, in response, create

and teach a guided reading lesson in a field placement classroom. They analyze videos of actual lessons and discuss the opportunities for learning afforded to the children and how they might respond if they were the teacher. But do these steps go far enough to enable teacher candidates to transfer coursework to later classroom teaching, particularly in "high-road" transfer situations that require System 2 reasoning? Using course assignments, teacher educators can identify pre-service teachers' growing content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, "the subject matter knowledge *for teaching*" (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Reutzel et al. (2011) clarified the difference between this inert knowledge that can be assessed through multiple-choice tests (or coursework), and enacted knowledge, the knowledge used as teachers interact with and instruct children. Without understanding teachers' enacted knowledge in the classroom, teacher educators cannot identify gaps in knowledge/skills or specific problems in the transfer of knowledge and skills to actual teaching.

Several studies of new teachers in the classroom have identified specific problems in the transfer of knowledge learned in teacher preparation to teaching. Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) investigated the experiences of 21 new teachers of color and found that the teachers, initially committed to social change, were "kept from acting on their commitments" by the conditions under which they worked and the "schools' responses to state and federal accountability policies" (p. 139). Other case studies of novice teachers suggest that classroom management, mandated curricula, and the demands of state test practice can interfere with the implementation of knowledge and methods learned in teacher preparation (Massey, 2006; Pierce & Pomerantz, 2006). Studies such as these suggest that school and district mandates and conditions may supersede knowledge gained in teacher preparation when it comes to making instructional decisions. As Perkins and Salomon (2012) noted in their review of research related to transfer, "social contexts erode the mind-sets and behaviors that have been acquired. It's not that the ideas have been forgotten or become obscure in a conceptual sense. Rather, commitment to them falters in the face of counterforces" (p. 255). The challenge of maintaining teacher agency in the context of reductive curriculum practices is one shared by teacher educators in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States where teachers "are caught between conflicting guidelines for teaching and assessment and are put under increased professional pressure to make crucial decisions for their students" (Simpson, 2016, p. 5).

Previous research helps to understand the "counterforces" or challenges faced by new teachers as they negotiate the school context, as well as the complexities involved in the transference of knowledge from one situation to another. In light of this research, we, as teacher educators, wonder about our recent students' experiences and challenges, particularly in regard to literacy instruction when they enter the classroom. Previous research also raises questions about how to facilitate transfer and application and help new teachers make the leap from inert to enacted knowledge. Teachers' ability to make this leap from inert to enacted knowledge is particularly important now that our state has set the following goal: By 2022, candidates leaving teacher preparation programs will enter classrooms "on par with peers in their third year of teaching" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2015, p. 1). The state's *Elevate Preparation: Impact Children Initiative Overview* goes on to explain:

> Our first-year teachers are not as effective with students as their more experienced peers and these teachers are more likely to be assigned to teach our most vulnerable students. Given that improvement in teacher performance is most steep at the