

## **Coming to Know: One Teacher Widens and Deepens Her Knowledge about Struggling Students**

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Children congregate in front of the elementary school on the first day of the summer session and prior to the opening bell. A debate rages among several as to who is attending summer school and who is not. Individuals who have failed the statewide achievement test in reading are required to attend. Thus, children sit and spend time speculating about who is coming, i.e., who is “stupid,” and who is not coming, i.e., who is “smart.” The scenario represents what is often a result of an excessive focus on testing and the high stakes nature of testing: not only public consequences of grade retention but personal consequences of diminished self-concept and self-image. Direct experience with the children was the outgrowth of a university graduate reading practicum course situated at the school. The practicum provided instructional assistance to these summer school attendees. The purpose of this article is to examine the understandings about teaching reading gained by one university graduate student as she engaged in work with a struggling sixth grade reader within the above scenario.

### **Background**

As part of their graduate studies, university students seeking a master’s degree in language and literacy education enroll in a graduate reading practicum held during the university summer session. In an arrangement with a local public elementary school, practicum participants worked on the school’s campus in a classroom setting and with struggling

readers. Children were so designated by their classroom performance but more so by their failure to reach a passing score on the statewide achievement test in reading. As a way to offer additional help in reading and boost their achievement level, struggling readers were required to attend summer school. Graduate practicum participants provided some of the necessary instructional help that was offered. This arrangement became the means not only to aid struggling readers but also to enable the graduate students to gain further insights into the teaching of reading. Graduate students read the selected course materials—all related to effective literacy theory and practice as well as classroom assessment theory and measures. The readings and the work of the session called attention to “thoughtful literacy” (Allington, 2009, p. 116). Informed by the readings, the graduate students had the opportunity to teach reading approximately 90 minutes a day for an entire five-week summer session.

Following the daily teaching, the university professors in charge of the practicum and the graduate students gathered together for debriefing sessions. The conversations centered on the reading instruction that was implemented and the children’s responses. These daily sessions were a venue for collective reflections and an opportunity for graduate peers to aid each other in further planning of the on-going reading instruction and increasing their knowledge about the teaching of reading. The graduate students also wrote individual reflective journals based on their work with the children and relative to the assigned readings. The daily journal entries further served as an important springboard for discussions during the debriefing sessions.

In sum, knowledge gained from the readings, which served to inform the instruction offered to children in combination with the insights of the collective debriefings and the reflective writing, would enable the graduate practicum students to come to know more about teaching reading. Specifically, they would come to know more about teaching struggling readers.

### **Framework for the Study**

In light of the context described at the outset of this article, one of the goals of the practicum experience was to think about countering what is often the instructional diet provided to struggling readers. As Allington (2009) describes the situation, teachers create instructional environments, even interventions, whereby struggling readers work on reading skills and not on actual reading. According to Allington (2006), teachers need to think about “thoughtful literacy” (p. 116), whereby students read and discuss with a focus on comprehension that results

in higher student achievement. The summer practicum challenged the graduate students to provide the children with reading experiences that would be characterized as “thoughtful literacy.” To aid in accomplishing the latter, a reading workshop format, with its focus on ample opportunity for actual reading, undergirded the daily instruction for children (Roller, 1996; Serafini, 2001, 2006; Tompkins, 2010). Books with a range of reading levels were made available to children, children self-selected books to read, and personal responses to the readings—written and oral—were encouraged and often shared with peers and graduate students alike. Teacher/student conferences to discuss children’s readings were a daily occurrence. Allington’s “thoughtful literacy” thus played out in lesson preparation and in the choice of instructional materials.

The complexities of teacher education and published calls for reform in teacher education are well documented (e.g., Chubbock, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001; International Reading Association, 2003). Partnerships between universities and elementary schools are suggested as a means to improve school teaching and learning as well as university teaching and learning (e.g., Goodlad, 2004). At the same time, coming to understand how teachers develop and increase their knowledge base remains unclear, and all the possible avenues that afford this development have not been investigated. We find in the literature that mentor teachers can help novices with their learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), induction programs are heralded (Breux, 1999), and teachers engage in action research projects (Hancock, Turbill, & Cambourne, 1994)—all as avenues for teachers coming to know. Reflection and reflective journals and conversations are also a means for professional development (Griffith & Laframboise, 1997; McMahon, 1997; Sternberg, 1987). It is reflections and conversations that became an important focus for the graduate practicum. Dixon-Krauss (1996) notes the Vygotskian notion of co-knowledge. Individual consciousness takes root and exists only in the presence of social consciousness and language; what we internalize and know is first learned in the presence of others. Hence the importance we attached to the debriefing sessions among university professors and graduate students.

Thus, the purpose of the study was to document how the graduate students met the “thoughtful literacy” instruction challenge presented to them in the course. The following research questions framed the study:

- (1) In what ways did the practicum graduate students assist the struggling readers to shift from a focus on skills to a focus on comprehension?
- (2) How did the practicum experience enrich the graduate student’s own understandings about literacy teaching and learning?

### **Setting and Focal Participants**

The setting for the graduate practicum was a large urban elementary school with a high percentage of low SES students and a predominantly minority population. At that point in time, the school was not receiving acceptable ratings on the statewide achievement tests. Although summer school was not offered at all schools in the district, this particular school held classes every summer with the aim of providing extra opportunities for the children to improve their reading achievement levels. Twenty-five summer school children from all grade levels joined the practicum class, which had an equal number of university graduate participants, thereby affording one-on-one instruction. This article focuses on one student, Rafael (pseudonym), and one graduate student, Jackie (pseudonym).

Rafael had just completed sixth grade, although his promotion to junior high was undecided. He disliked school and had spent more than one third of the previous school year in ISS (In School Suspension) and was absent 50 days. He was required to attend summer school because of his failing scores on the achievement tests. Although all his scores were low and he needed additional help in all subject areas, literacy development, particularly reading development, was an area of concern voiced by his sixth-grade teacher. His diminished self-concept and self-image were tied to the test scores; he did not want to have interactions with anyone who would bring more attention to and reminders of his academic status. However, the school principal recommended that he join the practicum setting because she believed the one-on-one attention might be beneficial.

Jackie was a classroom teacher who had taught in the primary grades for four years and had been an early literacy coordinator for one year. In the latter capacity, she had served as a reading consultant for teachers in her building. She was completing her master's degree, and the summer practicum was one of her final courses in the program. Because she did not have teaching experiences in the upper grades or a perspective on how accumulated reading failure across several grades might affect teaching and learning, she was hesitant about interacting with older students and particularly those who were struggling students. However, she was a skilled reading teacher, and the professors and the school principal believed she could be helpful to Rafael. Rafael was subsequently assigned to her, and she agreed to work with him. She reasoned that with the help of her peers and university faculty she could learn more about literacy development (or lack thereof) across the grade levels while at the same time assisting him. She overcame her trepidation and became eager to begin the summer session. This article

illuminates the learning outcomes for Jackie and ones derived from the practicum experience.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

This epistemological study had a multi-tier design. The top tier consisted of the graduate students working one-on-one with the struggling readers. In this tier, they taught 90 minutes a day for the entire five-week session. Next, the graduate students engaged in daily debriefing and discussion sessions with their peers and the course professors. Finally, the bottom tier consisted of the graduate students working individually on their reflective journals: daily entries plus a final paper.

Jackie's daily reflective journals across the entire summer practicum, field notes taken during the debriefing sessions by the first author, and Jackie's final reflective paper comprised the data set. The field notes served to provide additional context for the analysis. Jackie read the assigned readings, provided daily accounts of her instructional work with Rafael through her reflective journals, engaged in the daily debriefing sessions with peers and university professors, and wrote a final reflection at the end of the summer session.

Authors of this article read and reread all of Jackie's accounts using a constant comparative method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each author read the first week of Jackie's daily journal entries and identified codes relating to student self-image and to teacher insights on ways of scaffolding the learning. At an initial authors' meeting, codes were discussed and similar codes were merged. A single list of codes was agreed upon as the preliminary organizing system. This system was then used to code the journal entries of the remaining weeks of the practicum. A second meeting was held to discuss and build a consensus on coding. Subsequently, the authors noted emerging patterns, and codes were ultimately collapsed into categories agreed upon by all authors. Following that determination, the authors read the data set again to ascertain that the categories accurately represented Jackie's thinking. Final categories reflected what Jackie came to know about struggling readers through her work with Rafael: trusting relationships, authenticity, student choice, capacities beyond the test scores, redemption of testing, and something new under the sun.

### **Trusting Relationships**

Oftentimes the cognitive aspects of teaching reading, attention to learning skills and strategies, overshadow all other aspects of reading.

Afflerbach (2009) talks about the non-cognitive aspects of reading, e.g., motivation and valuing reading. These aspects are equally important in helping students develop as readers. Guthrie and Wigfield (2005) have identified constructs that increase students' motivation, e.g., student choice and control in the setting and activities that may influence the situational motivation of students. The development of a personal relationship with students is not noted by the latter authors, but Jackie's trusting relationship with Rafael appeared to be a strong beginning point to increase his motivation, or it may reflect "activities that influence...motivation."

It was clear from the beginning that Rafael did not want to be in the practicum setting. Other school personnel had to cajole him into coming, and they had to escort him to our practicum. By the end of the session, he came to our class on his own accord. He did want to begin junior high in the fall, but that decision was pending and hinged on his attendance and the outcomes of the summer session. He was in a "hostage situation" as described by Jackie. The first time Jackie met Rafael and on the very first day of the session, Jackie realized that building a trusting relationship with Rafael was needed before she could begin helping him with his reading and writing. She wrote that whenever she suggested reading or writing activities, Rafael "gave me a big groan and put his hands over his face and said he didn't want to do that."

To make their first meeting as friendly as possible, Jackie initiated what ultimately became a frequent and reciprocal sharing of family background information. Jackie brought pictures of her family and suggested that her mother might be the same age as Rafael's grandmother. She also talked about her nephew who was about the same age as Rafael. Two days later Rafael brought some family pictures and told of his impending visit to his mother. Jackie realized she needed to be always mindful of ways to befriend Rafael and establish personal rapport. He was interested in sports, and therefore basketball became the topic of discussion for their daily morning conversations. Initially, because of his resistance to reading, and in the interests of developing the relationship, reading about the topic was never broached. However, a big achievement in the short period of time they were together was Jackie and Raphael ultimately sharing the reading of an issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He read portions aloud during class time to Jackie, and she read portions to him. On another occasion later in the summer session, after both practicum graduate students and summer school students had written thank you letters for an event at the school (and before they were posted), Jackie and Rafael exchanged letters to provide each other editorial feedback. Jackie believed the trust had finally paid off.

...letting Rafael check my paper and making [changes] set up the situation where we were both learning and working, and I wasn't the one in control...he wasn't embarrassed or timid about correcting my paper. I think we have built a sense of team. [I came to understand that] having a personal relationship with a child eliminates many discipline problems; therefore, it is much easier to focus on instruction...the most important thing about my relationship with Rafael was the trust factor...[he] trusted me that [I] would help him be successful.

Jackie indicated that his interest and confidence as a reader and writer increased across the summer; she speculated that their relationship was a factor in this change.

The importance of recognizing students' attitudes, motivations, and feelings and considering them an integral part of instructional planning has been noted (see Flippo, 2003; Oldfather, 1993; Oldfather & Dahl, 1995). Oldfather (1993) talks about immersing students in an instructional setting where there is a deep responsiveness to children's expressions: written, oral, and artistic. She terms this "honored voice" (p. 672). Development of thought, a sense of agency, and discovery of self that are integral to trust stem from that "honored voice."

### **Authenticity**

Atwell (2007) describes her reading workshop as a place where the only delivery system for reading comprehension is reading. This presupposes that when children are reading stories that are interesting to them, "comprehension—the making of meaning—is direct, and the kids understand" (p. 14). To that end, Atwell suggests that children make choices from many inviting titles available in order to produce a "skilled, passionate, habitual, critical reader" (p. 14).

During the summer sessions, readings for the elementary school students centered on the study of several authors of children's literature, e.g., Janet Stevens and Patricia Polacco. Jackie decided to allow Rafael to use the Internet to browse for information about the authors. Rafael took an interest in reading Janet Steven's website, and, although he was initially reluctant to keep a running account of the topic information in his reading log, he gradually took the initiative to begin documenting information that caught his attention. He shared what he had written with Jackie. It became further apparent that reading and writing for authentic purposes was motivation for Rafael. Following an unfortunate shooting incident in the school neighborhood, Rafael wanted to write a letter to one of the hospitalized victims, another student at the school, whose survival was in question. He wrote the following in his daily journal:



I just can't believe [sic] my good friend...got shot by her own step dad. I have been knowing her since the first grade. This year I have been teasing her and now I regret it. She was full of lafter [sic] and life. She also had a lot of friendship in her. At the end of the year we were getting along great but now she's dying because of her own step dad...she is not going to make it...if her sister makes it the memory of what happend [sic] is going to stay in her head forever and ever.

His intense interest in and strong feelings about the situation and what he had done led him to write what Jackie described as a "[relatively] fluent and expressive" piece of writing unlike earlier journal entries such as "I like to play basketball with my friends. I like to play football with my friends." Jackie noted that students like Rafael "can and will read and write when they are in a real-life situation...authentic learning leads to higher comprehension."

Oldfather (1993) further talks about immersing students in an instructional setting where they focus on constructing the "rich broth of meaning" (p. 674). Serafini (2001) writes that experiences and activities in our classrooms must have a close relationship to events in the real world. He cautions that the things we do in school should not be designed to make us better at school, but better at reading and writing.

### **Student Choice: Let's Not Read "Test Stuff"**

Both Atwell (1987) and Serafini (2001) write of the importance of children regularly selecting books they choose to read. The shared control of choice by teacher and child provides "ownership" of learning. Students need to be in on this type of decision-making in order to gain ownership of their learning. When this occurs, students develop an awareness about their reading and begin to assume responsibility for their growth as readers (Serafini, 2001).

The issue of student choice in reading also became more prominent in Jackie's thinking. The decision about what texts to make available to Rafael was always a challenge in light of his resistance to reading. Jackie wrote that on one hand, she did not want to insult him by offering a book that almost seemed like a "baby" book, and on the other hand she did not want to introduce him to a book that was too difficult. Jackie had always endorsed the idea that primary-grade-level children experienced reading difficulty because the text was not appropriate to their reading level and too much energy was applied to decoding and as a consequence, comprehension faltered. Jackie wrote, "the text has to be at a level where some challenges are presented, but the meaning of the text must not be lost to the reader."



She thought that idea must apply equally to upper grade students but now saw the issue of text selection and choice magnified for older students. As a sixth grader, and unlike primary grade level children, Raphael possessed a level of metacognitive awareness about his own inability to read along with a heightened realization that much of what was read in class was not of interest to him. Rafael was able to demonstrate a level of awareness when he described what he preferred to read: "I like to read poems and sometimes library books, just not the test stuff." Throughout the summer session Jackie provided Rafael numerous poetry books to capitalize on his interests. On one occasion, Rafael selected one of the offerings and chose to read all the poems aloud to Jackie and demonstrated his understanding through conversations. Jackie believed "allowing him to read with his love of poetry has him highly motivated and interested."

According to Worthy (1996, 1999), interest, rather than readability or ratings of the quality of literature, raises reading levels and increases the general knowledge of capable as well as struggling readers. She points out that reading interest stands out as the one factor that promotes positive attitudes which leads to voluntary reading and a more avid reader. This, in turn, leads to the acquisition of linguistic competence necessary for developing students' ability to read more difficult material.

### **Capacities beyond the Test Scores**

Graves (2002), in his collection of essays entitled *Testing is Not Teaching*, suggests that tests cannot tell us important things about students with regard to reading: They cannot tell if children have read books, related one book to another, or applied reading and writing to their own lives. Graves further suggests that testing produces convergent thinking rather than divergent thinking. The latter would be illuminated through the qualities of reading mentioned above.

Rafael's identity was closely aligned with his test outcomes. He had not achieved as evidenced by his test scores, and that, in combination with his school behavior (which no doubt was inextricably linked to his lack of academic success), had resulted in his diminished self-concept. However, Jackie realized he had "a lot of ability and potential" as a writer and a reader. Demonstration of this potential surfaced when he wrote and discussed the tragic shooting in the neighborhood (referred to earlier). She observed that he wrote with feeling and compassion and orally revealed his personal remorse at having teased one of the victims and if she died, he would not be able to tell her he was sorry. He also wrote an informational piece about the author Janet Stevens, for whom he had developed an affinity earlier

in the summer session. He was able to integrate ideas from several sources into his piece. Moreover, he began to develop an understanding about the distinction between informational and narrative text, and his interest in poetry intensified. He wrote a culminating poem and read it to the class on the last day of summer school.

Jackie wrote about Rafael's process of writing the poem. Although he had not heard of brainstorming (for possible topics), their discussion of topics produced a list and included the topic of cockroaches, which he eventually chose. Without her initiation and direction, he reread his poem and noted a problem of sequencing; his level of self-awareness as a writer impressed Jackie. She indicated that emergence of voice in writing, his sense of genre, and developing self-awareness would not have been noted through test items.

According to Graves (2002), there are qualities for twenty-first century learners that cannot be measured by a test. Among those are initiative, which equates to "I can write this, read this, make this, do this"; sensitivity to other points of view and empathy to the feelings of others; self-regulation, which enables a learner to articulate and achieve goals; and ability to discriminate among sources of information and to integrate ideas across sources.

### **Redemption of Testing**

Testing is firmly entrenched in the school district and exists to inform important audiences such as administrators and policy makers about teachers' effectiveness and students' learning. Benefits of testing are well articulated (Phelps, 2005). Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to continue to be aware of the standards that are established and that are measured in the tests. Jackie knew this full well, but, on the other hand, she became increasingly aware of the high-stakes nature of testing and the detrimental effects for students, i.e., the stigma attached to unacceptable scores. However, she knew Rafael needed to take and pass the test, and therefore she wanted to help him learn the necessary knowledge and skills. She wanted to engage in conversations with him about real stories as opposed to what he, in his perceptive way, had already noted in his own instructional history as "fake" stories. As Jackie wrote, "My big realization is that every objective and question on the test is valid and important...we also want them to respond to literature in a personal meaningful way." Thus, she wanted to help him learn the necessary reading skills and strategies with the use of good literature. She wanted this level of authenticity of learning to include a well-established personal relationship with students (e.g.,

treating Rafael “like the young man he is about to become in the next few years”).

Santman (2002) emphasizes the fact that tests remain but quickly points out how incorporating what is necessary to learn can be accomplished through more authentic literacy activities such as reading workshop. Reading workshop, with its elements of reading books, sharing books, and responding to books (Tompkins, 2010), typifies how good literature can be incorporated into reading instruction. The conversations about books, the choice of books, and the ownership of books within a workshop setting is a central resource to help children learn to read (Serafini, 2001). Serafini (2010) further points out that helping students understand testing as a genre can go a long way in helping them learn—and as a means of test redemption (see his discussion of viewing testing as a type of genre). Finally, we remain mindful of Afflerbach’s (2007) point about “other” non-cognitive aspects of reading outside the purview of testing, e.g., motivation, reader’s self-concept, attitudes, and interest.

### **Something New Under the Sun**

Jackie related that teachers of middle grade students at her school often reported they had “tried everything under the sun” with struggling readers and nothing worked. In the short amount of time Jackie spent with Raphael, she came to understand that with upper grade students and their longer history of struggling to achieve, something more was required. Jackie believed what had been “tried” overlooked what we know from psychology about the importance of the personal realm or the affective domain, an area that needs to be considered to a greater extent for struggling readers. Moreover, the elements of authenticity and choice take on increasing importance. In reading tasks and writing tasks these elements appeal to students and increase their motivation and engagement, hallmarks of “thoughtful literacy” (“Not test stuff” as Rafael termed the imposed classroom reading materials). Again, teachers’ assessment needs to look at indicators beyond what is on a test. As noted by Johnston (2005), test scores remain silent about literacy identities, values, dispositions, and relationships. Furthermore, Jackie came to better understand, through the intent and purpose of the practicum, that reading instruction does not come in a package or a program, but should pose a view of reading and learning that requires teachers to become reflective practitioners (Schon, 1991) and thoughtfully adaptive teachers (Duffy, 1998).

### **Discussion**

Through Jackie's lens in the practicum setting and the categories that emerged—trusting relationships, authenticity, student choice: let's not read "test stuff," capacities beyond the test scores, redemption of testing, and something new under the sun—we have reported her insights, her coming to know. Much of what she came to know is supported by the existing literature, but we cannot overlook the fact that all graduate students and professors alike saw an extension of the literature in a way unique to the setting we all experienced first-hand. The authors further believe that the procedures of the practicum—the teaching, the reflecting, and the debriefing conversations—more readily afforded the graduate participants opportunity to expand their knowledge about struggling readers and the teaching of reading to struggling readers.

Learner-centered instruction has been defined by numerous researchers and educators (see Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Pierce & Kalkman, 2003; Strickland, 1998) and can be thought of as a focus on both the learner and learning. The experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, and needs of the learner are considered along with knowledge about effective teaching practices to bring about individual achievement. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments (Bandura, 1997), develops as a result of feedback from school and learning interactions throughout the developmental continuum. What Jackie came to know about struggling readers through the practicum experience relates to the idea that instruction must be learner-centered and that interactions between teacher and student need to be of a nature that enables students to view themselves as capable and achieving readers and writers. Her goal while working with Rafael was to help him with reading achievement and at the same time gain insights about teaching reading through the practicum experience. She knew about early literacy teaching and learning with its attention to decoding, but the complexities of mounting reading failures across grades and across increased testing brought her a broader view of reading instruction, critical knowledge for working with struggling students. The use of this knowledge has the potential to offset the literacy-diet-of-skills often provided to struggling readers.

The argument can be made that a setting as described for our summer practicum and the one-to-one relationships among university graduate students and elementary school students cannot be transported to a classroom of 20 students. Thus, the appeal and outcomes of our setting may be lost in a regular classroom environment. We can only point out that Rafael and his many counterparts who clearly make up a popula-

tion of school failure require nothing less than the implementation of classroom practices that afford relationships and conversations about books and ideas. They deserve a focus on “thoughtful literacy” as opposed to addressing only cognitive test objectives or unchallenged curriculum of inauthentic reading and reading instruction.

The first author cannot forget a point made in a *Time* (2003) essay that seems to perpetually ring true in a climate of high stakes assessment where summer school and summer reading programs are an effort after helping students pass tests. The essay writer proposes that summer should be “a season of grace” for children. It should not “count,” but be a time when students make mistakes, cross them out, try again, and no one keeps score. Most importantly, they read for fun and the books are not on someone’s list, nor are they aimed to help remediate reading struggles. This stands in stark contrast to our report of the children on the opening day of summer school. Too ideal to implement, too outdated a notion?

How teachers come to know, the sources of their pedagogical knowledge and orientation to knowing, has been a part of our thinking and we believe the practicum experiences are a means to widen and deepen teachers’ knowledge and particularly their knowledge about what is needed to assist struggling students. Of greater importance is the attention to struggling readers in a high stakes testing climate and the insights provided by Jackie. What she came to know can go far in providing ways to think about reading practices and if not a season of grace, perhaps a season of reason.

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