

Stories from the Field: What Prospective and Beginning Secondary Teachers Learned from Working with Struggling Third- and Fourth-Grade Readers

by Gail L. Thompson

Abstract

A study was conducted to examine whether or not beginning and prospective secondary school teachers benefited from working with elementary students who were enrolled in an after-school literacy program. The major findings were that most of the educators found that the program had benefited the children and themselves. Implications are discussed.

Introduction

In education, there is little, if any, continuous contact between elementary and secondary teachers. Nevertheless, both groups of educators have much in common, especially the overall goal of educating students. Embedded in this goal is the need to improve students' literacy skills—particularly reading, the foundation on which all other academic skills are built (Chall 1967; Cunningham 1989; Flesch 1955; Harris and Sipay 1990; Honig 1996; Smith and Dechant 1961). Although reading is a topic of great concern to parents (Harris and Sipay 1990; Ruddell 1999), educators (Gillet and Temple 2000), and policy-makers, most attention focuses on elementary students, despite the fact that numerous secondary students are poor readers. Moreover, Gillet and Temple noted that “many reading problems are not diagnosed until high school” (335). Furthermore, secondary students with reading problems come disproportionately from non-mainstream backgrounds. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results for eighth- and twelfth-graders who were tested during 1998 yielded several interesting findings. Whereas an estimated 23 percent of the total sample of seniors and an estimated 28 percent of the total sample of eighth graders scored below the Basic reading achievement level, substantially higher percentages of African American,

Hispanic, and Native American students did so (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) referred to adolescents from non-mainstream backgrounds as “marginalized readers” (405). Au (1993) revealed that teachers who work in low-income areas tend to spend less time on literacy instruction than do teachers who work in other communities. A logical conclusion is that students who need extensive literacy-building instruction the most are the ones who tend to get it the least.

Orange and Horowitz (1999) found that as a result of misunderstandings, an academic stand-off exists between teachers and their African-American and Hispanic male students. They maintained that “teacher misperceptions . . . contribute to student boredom, disengagement, and minority student achievement differentials” (38).

Roe, Stoodt, and Burns (1998) said that ninth-graders' reading levels can range anywhere from five grades below grade level to five grades above. Gillet and Temple (2000) differentiated among three types of struggling adolescent readers. *Nonreaders* have the poorest skills, a result of limited vocabularies and a lack of word-attack skills. *Disenchanted readers* are unmotivated to read, often as a result of negative reading experiences. *Remedial readers*, who read below grade level, have difficulty understanding content-area textbooks. Gillet and Temple found that adolescents who read below grade level suffer not only academically, but socially as well. Such problems can lead to disruptive behavior and an increased likelihood of dropping out of school.

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Roe et al. (1998) also divided adolescent readers into three categories. *Developmental readers* can read grade-level textbooks and benefit from instruction geared toward helping them refine their reading skills. *Corrective readers*, who may read a year and a half or more below grade level, can read content-area textbooks with assistance from the teacher. *Remedial readers*, who read two or more years below grade level, need the assistance of a reading specialist to work with them on basic reading skills.

Most participants in the study felt that they had not received adequate preparation to teach students to read.

The long-term consequences of poor reading skills, which have been well-documented, follow students after their traditional schooling ends. Kozol (1986), for example, found a high incidence of illiteracy among the prison population. He also noted correlations between low literacy skills and poverty among adults. Harris and Sipay (1990) noted the positive correlation between literacy and employment opportunities. Individuals with low literacy skills are unable to compete for many jobs.

Despite the fact that numerous secondary school students struggle with reading, reading skills are not always taught at the secondary level. Harris and Sipay (1990) said that secondary reading programs have remained basically the same for the past three decades and that they tend to focus on remedial and corrective readers. Roe et al. (1998) found that misunderstandings about reading instruction are common at the secondary level. The authors cited five "Faulty Assumptions about Teaching Reading" at the secondary level: (1) teaching reading is a concern only in the elementary school; (2) teaching reading in the content areas is separate and distinct from teaching subject matter; (3) reading needs in the secondary school can be met through remedial work alone; (4) a reading specialist or an English teacher should be responsible for the teaching of reading; and (5) the teaching of reading and the teaching of literature are one and the same (12-13).

One reason for the lack of reading instruction in some secondary schools is that many secondary teachers do not actually know how to teach reading skills. Thompson (2000) conducted

a study that required educators to respond to numerous questions regarding reading. One of her findings was that most participants in the study felt that they had not received adequate preparation to teach students to read. Roe et al. (1998) also found that many secondary teachers are unaware of how to teach reading. Moreover, they noted that even many administrators are ignorant about issues related to the reading needs of secondary students.

Because reading is such an important skill at all educational levels, not just the elementary-school level, there is clearly a need to focus more attention on equipping secondary teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to work effectively with marginalized, disenfranchised, corrective, and developmental adolescent readers. In order to make subject matter comprehensible to students, secondary teachers have a professional obligation to utilize strategies that improve literacy skills (Roe et al., 1998). Moje et al. (2000) said it is imperative that educators become more effective in meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Otherwise, these students will continue to struggle with literacy, as reflected in recent NAEP scores.

The current study was conducted in an effort to give beginning and prospective secondary teachers an opportunity to gain practical reading-instruction experience by working with elementary students. Three questions will be addressed: (1) Did the educators think that their work with the elementary students benefited the students, and if so, in what ways? (2) Did the educators think that their work with the students benefited the educators? (3) Did the educators learn anything they could apply to their work as secondary teachers? Implications for secondary educators, students, and educational policymakers will be discussed.

Method

Data were collected from prospective and beginning secondary teachers enrolled in a teacher-preparation program at a comprehensive four-year university in Southern California during the 1999-2000 academic year. All the participants were required by the university to take a reading course, which resulted in their participation in the current study. As part of the reading course, students enrolled during the fall or winter quarter were given the option of earning extra credit and fieldwork experience by volunteering to tutor in

an after-school literacy program at a local elementary school. The university required all students in the reading course to complete ten hours of fieldwork by observing middle and secondary classes. In the typical fieldwork observation, a student passively watches a secondary teacher's instruction and hands in an observation log.

The purpose of the after-school tutorial program is to motivate struggling third- and fourth-grade readers to read by providing them with tangible incentives (Thompson, 1999). The program began in 1999 and the third eleven-week session of the program ended during the spring of 2000. To earn extra credit, the prospective and beginning teachers (who will also be referred to as "tutors" in this article) were required to work with the third- and fourth-graders for at least one session an hour and a half long, and a maximum of two sessions. Sessions, which were conducted on Monday afternoons, were based on a directed-reading lesson-plan model (Roe et al. 1998; Ruddell 1999) that included prereading activities to build interest and activate schemata, guided-reading activities, and postreading activities. Twenty to thirty-five struggling third- and fourth-grade readers from ethnically diverse backgrounds were enrolled in each eleven-week segment of the program. They were recommended by their teachers as a result of their reading scores.

Although all prospective and beginning teachers in the secondary reading course had an equal opportunity to earn extra credit and fieldwork experience by volunteering to tutor for the program, many could not because of work constraints. Students who had emergency teaching credentials and full teaching loads were less likely to volunteer for the program than others who were not working as full-time teachers or who had more flexible schedules. At the end of the third eleven-week session of the program, thirty-seven tutors who were enrolled in the reading course had completed questionnaires. In order to increase the likelihood of candor and honesty, tutors were told that they did not have to include their names on the questionnaires. The tutors' teaching experience varied, ranging from none at all to numerous years as teachers' aides or substitute teachers.

The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions (see Appendix A, page 26) that were designed not only to judge the program's efficacy in helping third- and fourth-graders, but also to determine whether the tutors had found their

work with the elementary children beneficial. The questionnaire's reliability and validity were deemed high because similar questionnaires had been administered to parents and teachers of children in the program during an earlier study (Thompson 1999). The current study utilized four sections of the questionnaire, as well as additional comments. Table I lists the sections of the questionnaire that pertain to this study.

The overwhelming majority of tutors said that their work with the elementary children had been very beneficial to them professionally.

**TABLE I:
Sections of the Questionnaire
That Pertain to the Current Study**

1. Do you think that your work with the Literacy Club has helped the student(s) in any way?
 - a) **yes**
 - b) **no**

2. If you answered "yes," in what way(s) do you think the Literacy Club has helped them? (Circle all that apply.)
 - a) **to become better readers**
 - b) **to enjoy reading more**
 - c) **to earn better grades**
 - d) **to like school more**
 - e) **other** _____

3. Overall, how would you rate your work with the Literacy Club's benefits to you as a new or preservice educator?
 - a) **very beneficial**
 - b) **somewhat beneficial**
 - c) **not beneficial**

4. Did you learn anything that you can apply to your work as a secondary school teacher?
 - a) **yes**
 - b) **no**

Please explain: _____

Results

Did the Tutors Think That Their Work with the Elementary Students Benefited the Students, and If So, in What Ways?

When the questionnaire respondents were asked if they thought their work with the elementary students benefited the third- and fourth-graders, all except one indicated that it had been beneficial. Most tutors believed that the program improved the students' reading skills and made reading more enjoyable for them. Some tutors also felt that the program had made school more appealing and improved students' grades. Table II provides more information about their responses.

TABLE II:
Ways in Which Educators Thought the Program Had Helped Students

Answer	Percent
To become a better reader	78.4
To enjoy reading more	86.5
To earn better grades	29.8
To like school more	43.2
Other	37.8

Note: Percentage totals exceed 100 because multiple answers could be circled.

More practical fieldwork experience, particularly that involving children from diverse backgrounds, might better prepare secondary teachers to work more effectively with students from non-mainstream cultures.

A number of the tutors also listed "other" benefits of the program. Among these benefits were improvements in self-confidence, writing skills, oral reading skills, and vocabulary. A tutor who had taught for two years also mentioned that the program gave students an opportunity to socialize and share ideas with others. A tutor

who had no previous teaching experience wrote that the program had also helped students "to know that reading is important and that the instructor cares." A substitute teacher said that it had helped students to develop their ideas. Another substitute teacher said a vocabulary word in the story the children were reading on the day that she volunteered gave her an opportunity to discuss conflict resolution with the students. Another tutor who had spent several years coaching tennis but had no classroom teaching experience said that the program helped the third- and fourth-graders "appreciate integrity" because the story for the day that the tutor volunteered "dealt with a moral theme."

Did the Tutors Think That Their Work with the Students Benefited the Tutors?

The overwhelming majority of tutors said that their work with the elementary children had been very beneficial to them professionally. A smaller percentage said that it was somewhat beneficial. None of the tutors, including the one who said that the program had not been beneficial to the children, said that it had not benefited the educators. One tutor, however, left this section blank. Table III provides more information about their responses.

TABLE III:
How the Tutors Rated the Benefits of Their Work with the Children to Themselves

Answer	Percent
Very Beneficial	78.4
Somewhat Beneficial	18.9
Not Beneficial	0.0
No Answer	2.7
N= 37	100.0

Did the Tutors Learn Anything That They Could Apply to Their Secondary Classrooms?

When asked if they learned anything from tutoring the elementary students that they could apply to their work as secondary teachers, the majority said they had. Only 8 percent of the tutors said they had not (see Table IV). All three

wrote explanations. One of the educators who said “no” wrote, “It seems as if this setting is completely different than what I might experience in my classroom.” Another wrote, “[I] have received extensive training in guided reading techniques for elementary age.” Another wrote, “I’ve been a teacher for two years.”

TABLE IV:

Whether or Not Tutors Thought That They Learned Anything That They Could Apply to Their Work as Secondary Teachers

Answer	Percent
Yes	89.2
No	8.1
No Answer	2.7
N= 37	100.0

Conversely, the majority of the questionnaires contained examples of how the tutors could utilize what they learned from the tutoring sessions with secondary students. Most had to do with the affective aspect of reading. For example, tutors cited the important roles of praise and encouragement in reading instruction more than any other example. A tutor who had taught adult education for two years said, “There was enthusiasm here even among those who did not read well. We have to encourage that enthusiasm on every level.” One tutor wrote, “Students respond very well to praise related to accomplishments. Have fun! It makes the work easy.” Another wrote, “All students need to receive attention and praise.” A third wrote, “Praise and encouragement go a long way in motivating students.”

Others said that they had learned lessons regarding class control that could be applied to secondary classrooms. One tutor who had no previous teaching experience wrote, “You have to get control of the class in order to get something accomplished.” A tutor who had worked as a substitute teacher for two years said, “I began the session by setting limits. If they raised their hands, I called on them and explained that raising hands was important. I praised them when they were trying.”

Other tutors wrote that they had learned ways to motivate students. One tutor who had no previous teaching experience wrote, “I got more



insight into when I should push a student to get a concept and [when] I should let it go.” Another mentioned learning “the steps to take to interest students to read and ways to help them enjoy reading.”

Several tutors also said that they liked the directed-reading lesson model or components of it and believed that it would prove useful in secondary classrooms. Others said that they had learned the importance of patience in working with students. Some also said that they had learned the benefits of having students work in small groups. Others mentioned that they had learned the importance of time management as an effective instructional technique. A tutor who had worked with adolescent delinquents for two years said that his work with the elementary students taught him that “all children want to learn.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The feedback from prospective and beginning secondary teachers who volunteered to tutor struggling elementary-school readers through an after-school literacy program yielded several interesting findings. These findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and students.

The fact that most of the tutors said that the program was beneficial to the elementary students as well as to themselves is important for

several reasons. First, their observations corroborate the findings of an earlier study of the program's effectiveness, in which most parents and teachers said that the program was beneficial to the children (Thompson 1999).

Second, they also indicate that more collaboration, contact, and dialogue between the elementary and secondary sectors of the education system are desirable. Such contact can be mutually beneficial.

Third, when prospective and beginning secondary teachers have opportunities to perform practical fieldwork with younger children, they reap invaluable dividends. They get personal glimpses of the early reading difficulties that their future secondary students might have experienced. This experience could motivate secondary teachers to be more compassionate and patient in dealing with struggling adolescent readers. For example, numerous tutors mentioned that the most important thing they learned from their work with the children was the importance of praise and encouragement while working with struggling readers.

An estimated 61 percent of eighth-graders and 68 percent of high school seniors said that their teachers did not review their progress in reading.

Additionally, at a time when funding for secondary reading programs is a lesser priority than for elementary programs (Moje et al. 2000) and when secondary teachers tend to be less prepared to teach reading skills and strategies than elementary teachers (Roe et al. 1998; Thompson 2000), giving secondary teachers opportunities to gain practical strategies through fieldwork experience is imperative.

NAEP reported numerous findings regarding the reading experiences of secondary students that emphasize the need for policymakers to provide more funding and opportunities for secondary teachers' training and practical fieldwork experience in literacy strategies, methods, and theories, among others. For example, an estimated 63 percent of the high school seniors who were tested in 1998 said that they had never been given time to read books that they had self-selected (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). Researchers, however, have stressed that when students are allowed to choose books that

interest them, reading motivation increases (Krashen 1993; Roe et al. 1998).

NAEP also reported that an estimated 19 percent of seniors said their teachers never helped them to understand new words when they were reading. Moreover, an estimated 35 percent said their teachers never asked them to talk with other students about what they read (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). Conversely, the social aspect of reading is important—particularly for students from diverse backgrounds, such as African-Americans, whose average reading achievement scores at the elementary and secondary levels trail those of all other groups (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). Hale (1986) and Comer and Poussaint (1992) said that the expressive African-American culture mandates literacy-building activities that permit student interaction. Therefore, more practical fieldwork experience, particularly that involving children from diverse backgrounds, might better prepare secondary teachers to work more effectively with students from non-mainstream cultures.

One of the most troubling NAEP findings is that an estimated 61 percent of eighth-graders and 68 percent of high school seniors said that their teachers did not review their progress in reading (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). This finding suggests that many secondary teachers, as noted earlier, could benefit from assistance in both the theoretical and practical underpinnings of reading instruction. Directed-reading lessons (Roe et al. 1998; Ruddell 1999) and mini-lessons can be successful instructional techniques for secondary students (Roe et al. 1998). Moreover, knowledge of schema theory could encourage secondary teachers to help students activate their prior knowledge about content areas and make connections between new information and schemata. Furthermore, familiarity with readability could enable secondary teachers to make wise choices about how to use textbooks more effectively, as well as how to avoid pushing students to their frustration level of reading (Roe et al. 1998).

Although the current study is limited as a result of sample size and the limited contacts the tutors had with the elementary students, it is clear that new and prospective secondary teachers have much to gain from a stronger emphasis on reading-instruction strategies. Finding additional ways for them to gain practical experience is important.

Finally, there appears to be a need for additional ways to strengthen ties between the elementary and secondary sectors of education. Giving teachers at both levels opportunities to interact and share stories from their experiences might also enable educators to mitigate the transition that students must make from elementary school to secondary school.

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Appendix A: The Literacy Club Tutor Questionnaire

1. During what month did you work with Literacy Club members?
a) Sept. b) Oct. c) Nov. d) Dec. e) Jan. f) Feb. g) Mar. h) Apr. i) May j) June
2. How many Literacy Club sessions were you involved with?
a) one b) two c) three d) four e) five f) six g) seven h) eight
3. Approximately how many students did you work with during each session?
a) one b) two c) three d) four e) five f) six g) seven h) eight
4. Do you think that your work with the Literacy Club has helped the student(s) in any way?
a) yes b) no
If you answered "yes," in what way(s) do you think the Literacy Club has helped them?
(Circle all that apply.)
a) to become better readers
b) to enjoy reading more
c) to earn better grades
d) to like school more
e) other _____
5. Would you recommend this program to parents?
a) yes b) no
6. Would you recommend this program to other new and/or preservice teachers to gain tutoring experience?
a) yes b) no
7. What did you like most about the program?

8. What did you dislike?

9. What areas should be improved?

10. Overall, how would you rate your work with the Literacy Club's benefits to you as a new or preservice educator?
a) very beneficial b) somewhat beneficial c) not beneficial
11. Did you learn anything that you can apply to your work as a secondary school teacher?
a) yes b) no
Please explain.

12. Do you think that the Literacy Club model and philosophy would be successful with secondary students?
a) yes b) no
Please explain.

13. How much teaching experience have you had?

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