

The Impact of a Literacy Strategies Course Taught in a Public-School Setting on Teacher Candidates and Students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders

Stephen Wills, Georgia College & State University, United States
Pat Wolf, GNETS of Oconee, United States

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Abstract

This study describes the impact of a literacy strategies course taught at a local public school that involves special education teacher candidates working with students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) on literacy strategies that are taught in the classroom portion of the course. Within the framework of the course, participating students with EBD receive 45 minutes of small group literacy strategy instruction from special education teacher candidates each week as they implement the instructional strategies taught in the course. The teacher candidates work in pairs with groups of 2-3 students with EBD and teach literacy strategies within the context of a book that matches students' interests and reading level. The results show that EBD student participation in the reading strategies activities increased over time as relationships were formed with the teacher candidates. Data on the impact on teacher candidate growth include positive ratings on course evaluations on the school-based literacy strategies course when compared to sections of the same course taught on the college campus and the results of a questionnaire given to teacher candidates at the conclusion of the semester that show the positive impact of the course on their professional growth as well as their attitudes toward students with EBD.

Keywords: literacy strategies, school university partnerships, emotional behavioral disorders, teacher education

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The Impact of a Literacy Strategies Course Taught in a Public-School Setting on Teacher Candidates and Students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders.

School-university partnerships have been among the most frequently recommended approaches to educational reform. From the university perspective, the goal of these partnerships is to bridge the disconnect between what teacher candidates are taught in on-campus courses and what they implement in P-12 settings with students. Effective partnerships have been shown to enhance the development of pre-service teachers with strong, applied classroom experiences, and increased opportunities to work with diverse students (Price, 2005). In-service teachers benefit from increased opportunities for on-site professional development, opportunities to put research into practice, and work in settings that reduce isolation and encourage collaboration, often with experts in their field (Price, 2005). The current study describes the impact of a literacy strategies course taught at a local public school that includes special education teacher candidates working with students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) on literacy strategies that are taught in the classroom portion of the course. Within the framework of the course, participating students with EBD receive 45 minutes of small group literacy strategy instruction from special education teacher candidates each week as they implement the instructional strategies taught in the course. With this collaborative effort, our teacher candidates benefit from implementing the strategies covered in the course in an authentic context with students with disabilities under the direction of a teacher in the field. In addition, the P-12 students with EBD benefit from needed individualized literacy strategy instruction.

Even in the best of situations, students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) can be challenging, demanding, and frustrating for teachers (Bakken, Obiakor, & Rotatori, 2012). EBD affects virtually every aspect of a student's life. Students with EBD traditionally have difficulty developing and maintaining positive peer and adult interpersonal relationships as well as mastering academic skills (Farley, Torres, Wailehua & Cook, 2012; Otten & Tuttle, 2011). Academic performance has consistently been shown to be inversely related to problem behavior beginning early in a child's schooling (McEvoy & Welker, 2000) and severe problem behaviors have been found to correlate with long-term academic failure (Fleming et al., 2005). Approximately 38% of students identified as EBD have been retained by the time they reach secondary school (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein & Sumi, 2005) with most 1.5 to 3 grade levels below same age peers (Coutinho, 1986). For these students, EBD will persist over time often disrupting social, academic, and community functioning (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski & Epstein, 2005). Students identified with EBD are consistently found to have the highest school dropout incidence rates in children and youth identified with disabilities (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Skills in reading and literacy serve as the fulcrum for a majority of other learning demands. However, approximately 60% of elementary/middle school children with EBD perform in the bottom quartile on reading measures with 85% making up the bottom two quartiles (Wagner et al., 2005). Conversely, students with poor reading skills are more likely to experience negative behavioral and or antisocial outcomes in the future (Good,

Gruba, & Kaminski, 2001). The early identification and prevention of academic deficits, particularly in reading, may even ameliorate the development of behavioral problems. If not overcome, these deficits in literacy development, which increase over time, place students with EBD at risk of failing to learn the necessary literacy skills that are important for future success in society (Griffith, Trout, Hagaman, & Harper, 2008). Adding to the problem, most elementary age students who struggle with reading respond positively to interventions, but students with or at risk for EBD appear to profit less from these supports (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2002; Benner, Nelson, Ralston, & Mooney, 2010). This unresponsiveness to literacy interventions may be the result of behaviors that interfere with learning, including inattention and child-teacher conflicts (Miles & Stipek, 2006). High quality classroom supports, particularly early in a child's schooling may help improve reading achievement by creating more time for learning and increasing student engagement (Farley, et al., 2012; Fruth, 2014) and counteracting the effects of behavior problems.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of having teacher candidates work with students with EBD on evidence-based literacy strategies on an individualized basis on students with EBD as well as the teacher candidate's perceptions of the impact of the course on their teacher preparation. We investigated the following research questions in our study.

1. What was the impact of the literacy strategy instruction by the teacher candidates on the reading comprehension of the students with EBD as measured by pre, medial, and post intervention curriculum-based assessments administered by the teacher candidates?
2. What is the impact of the individualized literacy strategy instruction on the academic engagement of the students with EBD as relationships are formed with the teacher candidates?
3. What is the impact of the school based literacy strategies course and working with the students with EBD on teacher candidates as measured by course evaluations and a teacher candidate questionnaire in which they describe the course's impact?

Participants

The participating teacher candidates were 20 undergraduate students enrolled in a special education Literacy Strategies class. The class met for three hours one morning per week for fifteen weeks. The weekly schedule consisted of the teacher candidates taking part in classroom literacy strategy instruction for approximately 140 minutes followed by 40 of working with students with EBD on select literacy strategies in small groups. Each small group consisted of 2 teacher candidates with 2-3 students with EBD. This configuration was chosen because the small groups could continue functioning even if a teacher candidate or a student were absent.

The participating school part of the Georgia Network of Educational and Therapeutic Supports (GNETS) program for students with severe EBD. GNETS is best described as a special school for students with EBD whose IEP has determined this setting to be their least restrictive environment. The school serves all grades. Each classroom has between 5 and 10 students and all of the students in the classroom are in the same grade level except for the high schoolers. The high school students, are provided instruction online and the classrooms consists of students from multiple grades in a computer lab setting. The participating students ranged in grade from second grade to twelfth grade and were chosen by the director of the school based upon having low reading ability.

Materials and Procedures

A key component to the success to the program was a strategic pairing of students with teacher candidates in order to establish a positive mentor relationship. The school director, classroom teachers, a teacher candidate who had been to the school for an internship, and the researcher constructed one on one pairings of teacher candidates and students with EBD. These pairings were based upon common interests and personality traits. During the first meeting with the students with EBD, the teacher candidates carried on a conversation with their paired students in order to establish rapport and then conducted a reading interest inventory. Based on the student reading interest inventory, reading level, and age, groups were formed and appropriate books were chosen in collaboration with the students. and establish small groups that read the same book. Examples of books that were read by the groups included *Bud Not Buddy*, *Goosebumps*, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Junie B. Jones*. Afterward, on a weekly basis, the groups read the books in their groups or one-on-one depending on which is most successful for positive student engagement. Examples of literacy strategies that were implemented within the context of reading the books were, partner reading, paragraph shrinking, prediction relay, story mapping, questioning the author, question answer relationships, directed reading and thinking activities, the LINC'S vocabulary strategy and the PATH writing strategy.

Class sessions were held in the cafeteria of the school and lasted three hours. The beginning of the class sessions were spent on literacy strategy instruction. The second portion of the class was spent in book groups preparing for the sessions with the students. The third part of the class sessions were spent working with the students with EBD reading and working on the chosen literacy strategy for the day. During the first class session, the director of the program gave the teacher candidates an orientation on how to effectively interact with students with severe EBD and how to de-escalate potential situations and what to do if a situation does occur. Curriculum based assessments on reading comprehension using *Easy CBM* were conducted with the students with EBD during the third session with the students before reading, during the eighth session before reading, and during the fourteenth session before reading. The fifteenth and final session was a celebration with food and music.

Impact on Students with EBD

During the first reading session with the students, teacher candidates conducted curriculum based assessments to determine baseline reading comprehension levels. The grade level of the CBMs were determined by their classroom teachers and individualized for each student. The initial administration of the CBMs revealed very few valid scores. The students with EBD, for the most part, did not give adequate effort determine their baseline reading comprehension. Of the twenty-four students with EBD who took the assessment, only 18 completed the assessment and teacher candidates reported that several students attempted to answer the questions without adequately reading the paragraph. The classroom teachers reported that this was a common occurrence, even when taking high stakes assessment. In addition, during the initial three weeks of reading, several students refused to participate or read. On week one, 9 students, out of the 24 participating students, refused to read with many of the students refusing to read after finding out that peers were refusing to read. This possibility of this situation occurring was talked about in class in preparation for the first reading session after the classroom. The classroom teachers alerted us of problems with getting several students to read. In these situations, we were told by the director to not escalate the non-compliance into an adversarial situation and to just read aloud to the students. During the initial two reading sessions, several students were read to while the students often had their heads on their desks. However, by the fourth reading session, all but one student with EBD read at least some of the book and all students had their heads up. The one remaining student who refused to participate was attempting to disrupt the reading of others so he and his partner were moved to a nearby office to read on-on one. This student still refused to read but did agree to play the “hang man” game using vocabulary from the book with his mentor teacher candidate. This student expressed an interest in hunting so he was allowed to read from a hunting magazine for the remainder of the sessions instead of reading from a work of fiction. By the fifth session, all the students in every group were reading and participating in the strategy instruction. The second CMB administered on week 8 showed much greater effort and participation with 22 of the 24 students completing the assessment. For the remainder of the semester all students with very few exceptions, participated in the readings and activities. On the final CBM 22 out of the 23 participating students completed the CBM.

The first research question related to the impact of the literacy strategy instruction by the teacher candidates on the reading comprehension of the students with EBD as measured by curriculum-based assessments administered by the teacher candidates. With many students refusing to give their best efforts on the baseline assessment, no conclusions can be drawn relating to the increases in the CBM scores. Student scores increased significantly from the initial CBM to the medial and end CBM administrations. However, it cannot be concluded that these increases were the result of growth in reading comprehension and not the result of increased student effort. However, if the increase in CBM scores is due to increased effort, then these results provide further validation to research question two dealing with the impact of the individualized literacy strategy instruction on the academic engagement of the students with EBD. As the students with EBD established relationships with the teacher candidates, participation levels in reading,

participation in literacy strategy activities and participation in CBM assessments all increased. The director of the program and the classroom teachers were amazed at the level of engagement in the literacy activities replying “that’s hard to believe, I am thrilled” when walking down the hall and looking into classrooms of students reading with their mentor teacher candidates.

Impact on Teacher Candidates

Research question three relates to the impact of the school based literacy strategies course and working with the students with EBD on teacher candidates. The previous year, this same course with the same content was taught as a traditional course on the college campus and involved no interaction with students. The course the previous year was taught by a different instructor, however, the instructor was a tenured associate professor. Student course assessments are given on a five point Likert Scale with 1 = Definitely False, 2 = False, 3 = Neutral, 4 = True, and 5 = Definitely True. One prompt states: “As a result of this course, I have more positive feelings about this field of study”. The School based section average was 4.6 while the campus section averaged 3.8 and the subject average for this question was a 4.0. In addition, this section of this course was significantly higher than the subject average of 3.8 for this question. Another prompt from the course evaluation was, “Overall, I rate this course as excellent”. The school based section average was 4.6 while the campus based section was 3.3. Finally, in the course evaluation prompt, “Overall, I rate this instructor as an excellent teacher”, the school based section average was 4.8 while the campus based section averaged 3.3. and the subject average for this question was a 3.8. The results make it clear that the teacher candidates recognized the benefit of learning and practicing the literacy strategies in an authentic context and recognized the benefit of the strategies and the benefit of working with the students with EBD at their school. In addition, at the end of the course evaluation survey, the instructor added qualitative open ended questions about the course and the way the course was delivered. The results included one teacher candidate replying, “I was initially very worried about going out to GNETS for this class. I had heard rumors. Now I look forward to meeting with my group each week. I have really bonded with them.” Another candidate wrote, “Although it was difficult at times, we benefitted from working with students as well. It is a much different learning experience to work with actual students than just talking about strategies in a classroom. Working in a school taught us more about applying strategies than we could have learned in a college classroom.” Other comments included, “It gave us a chance to be put in the field and experience things for ourselves, It also gave us a different perspective from placement because we were with our other classmates” and “I Loved having this class at GNETS – very interactive”. The only comment that could be perceived as negative was “I think we should spend more time in the classroom with the students. There were a few times we were rushing our student, so we might not have seen his full potential”. Again, based on these results, it is clear that the teacher candidates valued the hands-on experience of working with the students with EBD and applying what they learned in the classroom portion of the class.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

This method of instruction for teaching this class was done without any grant money or without any special material. When issues arose, such as the arrival of new students or other students being placed back in their local school, they were worked out. If a student was having a bad day and needed to be left alone, they were left alone. The biggest lesson learned by the instructor and the teacher candidates was to be patient. When the candidates reported back that the students refused to take the initial CBM and refused to read the book, I was thinking that this was an experiment that went wrong and that we were going to claim our classroom back on campus. However, the director assured me that this behavior was typical and that they were overall very responsive even in those initial weeks of uncertainty. When all of the students started reading and participating in activities, the teacher candidates realized the importance of relationships in teaching. They also realized that the students with EBD had academic potential and that it was possible for that potential to be actualized through planning and caring.

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