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Creating Strategies: Designing Lessons for the Elementary Classroom

The author highlights three reading strategy lessons that were designed and implemented by preservice teachers to support students in the elementary classroom.

Introduction

“Where do we find literacy strategies to teach?” is a common question asked by preservice teachers. Since Fall 2016, I have taught a clinically-rich literacy methodology course to undergraduate students who are working towards their Childhood Education (grades 1-6) certification. The course introduces preservice teachers to instructional strategies related to reading and writing in the elementary grades. In order to accomplish this goal, the preservice teachers and I meet weekly at a local elementary school where each preservice teacher is assigned to a classroom teacher. The classroom teacher, in turn, assigns the preservice teacher an elementary student partner to work with for the semester. Prior to the preservice teacher and student partner pairing, the classroom teachers and I agreed that instead of the classroom teacher giving the preservice teachers a specific lesson to teach, allowing the preservice teachers the choice and freedom to design the lessons provides them a taste of the autonomy they will experience in the future. The lessons that the preservice teachers create come from the content that is taught through the methodology course. Recently, schools of education have included clinically-rich courses into teacher education programs as a way to bring preservice teachers into schools and classrooms before student teaching (Flory & Burns, 2017; Zeichner, 2016). The school-university partnership model provides

preservice teachers with opportunities to apply what they are learning in their teacher education programs (Waitoller & Artiles, 2016), while developing communication skills with students (Morphis, 2020). For literacy methods courses, in particular, the clinically rich model provides the opportunity for preservice teachers to design innovative strategies and apply them, in real time, with students. This immediate application of learning alongside elementary student partners cannot be accomplished if preservice teachers never leave the university classroom setting (Waitoller & Artiles, 2016). Additionally, preservice teachers have the benefit of receiving support from the university instructor and the classroom teacher. This article discusses the creative literacy strategies that preservice teachers in the clinically-rich methods course designed and implemented for the elementary classroom. These strategies may be useful for inservice teachers as well.

Teaching Literacy Strategies to Elementary Students

Like many teachers, when preservice teachers enter my course, they want to know what skills and strategies need to be taught to elementary students. In order for preservice teachers to plan strategy lessons for their elementary child partner, they need to develop an understanding of the academic goals they are working towards addressing through individual lessons. Routman

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(2018) argues that in order to break a goal into smaller activities or lessons, teachers need knowledge of the skill they are working towards. Therefore, when working with an elementary child partner, the preservice teacher needs to have an idea of the larger goals that students are working towards learning. This broad understanding allows the preservice teacher to identify and implement incremental learning benchmarks. Some reading skills that students may need support working towards include activating prior knowledge, predicting, sequencing, inferring, and summarizing. Learning and practicing skills, such as those mentioned, can be accomplished through specific strategy lessons (Serravallo, 2015).

The differences between skills and strategies helps preservice teachers understand the bigger concepts (skills) and the smaller lessons (strategies) that they will need to plan in order to address and support the development of the skill. Skills, are the actions, which are often automatic, that readers use to complete a task or develop an understanding (Afflerback, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). Once a student has command of a particular skill, little thought or awareness is needed in order for it to be implemented. Serravallo (2015) identified certain reading skills and several strategies that can be used to teach them. Below is a chart outlining a few examples.

Skills	Strategies to Teach the Skill
Summarizing	Determine what a character wants
	Determine the main idea and supporting details
	Determine the main topic, the subtopic, and the details that connect the topic and subtopic
Sequencing	Using the pictures as stepping-stones to connect one page to the next
	Determine what happened first, next, and last
Activating Prior Knowledge	Consider what you already know (about the book/series/author)?
	Connect the new information the author is giving in the book to what you already know

A variety of strategies can be taught to support students as they work to become more comfortable and competent with a new skill. The preservice teachers in my course learn that they will need to make decisions and select strategies that will most effectively support the reader or writer. Therefore, they need to have an idea of what skill needs to be supported so that they can plan individual strategies.

Creating Strategies for the Elementary Literacy Classroom

Below, I present three preservice teachers and the strategy lesson that each prepared. The strategies were designed to address the skills of communication, summarizing, and reading

comprehension, while learning more about the elementary student partners and keeping them interested in the reading and writing work.

An All About Me Game to Form Relationships & Facilitate Communication

When she first entered the fifth grade classroom, the cooperating teacher assigned the preservice teacher, Angela (all names are pseudonyms), three English as a New Language (ENL) student partners. The students had recently arrived in the United States and the cooperating teacher believed they would benefit from small group reading and writing instruction. Based on the material covered in the methods course prior to entering the

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elementary school, Angela knew the importance of learning about the students' interests and backgrounds. For this reason, she chose to create an interactive game.

The All About Me game was a strategy that allowed Angela to learn about the three students, as well as, promote discussion amongst them. Facilitating discussion among the students was an important element of the strategy and it directly supported the skill of communication. Angela felt that "playing a game with fifth graders was the best way to learn about them" and she put herself in the students' place when designing the game. The prompts that Angela included were ones that she considered whether or not she would feel comfortable answering in front of a new person. She explained, "when I first meet someone, I am shy. I tried to think of what a student who has never met me and who may not feel comfortable speaking in English would be comfortable answering with both me and his/her peers." Some of the prompts Angela included addressed the students' general interests, such as a favorite movie or game. Other prompts probed a bit deeper asking the students to think of something they want to learn or something they did not like learning. While playing the game, Angela and the other students would use follow-up questions which enabled Angela to learn more about each student. For example, while playing the game, the topic of immigrating to the United States arose. Angela explained that the students told her



Figure 1: All About Me game

One of the reasons Angela wanted an interactive strategy for her first time working with the

students was to show them that she was truly listening to them and their responses. She believed that "it was important that the three students knew I was listening. They needed to know that I really wanted to get to know them and who they are as individuals." Creating and implementing the game with students provided Angela with the opportunity to reflect on how this strategy worked with a group of students. After the game ended, Angela felt as though she had learned about each of the students and had insight into each students' personality. She also believed that the game enabled her to form a connection with each student. But, the moment that solidified this experience for Angela was when one of the boys walked back to Angela as she was packing up and thanked her for creating the game and shared how much fun he had playing with everyone in the group.

Using Student Interests to Drive Instruction

Allison, another preservice teacher, was placed in a second grade classroom and partnered with a boy named Jaden who she described as "a child who would not open up or say much until he knew what kind of person you are and trusted you." The classroom teacher partnered Allison with Jaden because he was struggling with reading and could benefit from individualized lessons to support his reading. During her first lesson with Jaden, Allison shared stories about herself, which then allowed him to open up and share his stories and interests. Allison learned that Jaden enjoyed reading funny books, playing basketball, Spiderman, and eating lots of vanilla ice cream. Since Allison wanted Jaden to be engaged in the lessons she taught, she was determined to include his interests.

When planning a lesson on main idea and supporting details to support the skill of summarizing, Jaden's interests drove Allison's instructional decisions. For example, Allison selected the book *What if Everybody Did That?* by Ellen Javernick. Allison selected this text because it

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is funny and would likely capture Jaden's attention, keeping him engaged. She also chose the ice cream graphic organizer for Jaden to apply his understanding of main idea and supporting details because Jaden had shared his love of vanilla ice cream. Finally, Allison brought markers because Jaden shared his preference of markers over crayons.

After teaching a lesson on main idea and supporting details, Allison and Jaden discussed the main idea of the book and began to create the graphic organizer. Then, after working collaboratively, Allison asked Jaden to identify three details from the book that support the main idea. For this part of the lesson, Allison asked Jaden to find the supporting details on his own. From this experience, she learned that through giving Jaden agency over his work "he was more engaged because I was not dictating exactly what he needed to write. I stepped back and gave him the space to do the work on his own. I provided support when he needed it, but he wrote the details that he wanted to include." This was an important learning



opportunity for Allison because she realized that, by stepping back and allowing Jaden to apply the concept on his own, she was supporting his understanding of summarizing the text.

Figure 2: Main idea and supporting details graphic organizer

When reflecting on how the ice cream strategy worked with Jaden, Allison felt that Jaden was "more engaged in the lesson because it focused on his interests." During this class, the preservice students were required to design their own lessons and Allison explained that "having the freedom to brainstorm, think, and plan lessons for our child

partner really helps them learn. I learned that it's something so simple - you get to know your child partner and take the information you learn to plan the lesson accordingly."

Get to the Teaching Point

The preservice teachers have 90 minutes of time to work with the child partner so they must use that time efficiently. This was an important aspect of the course for a third preservice teacher, Vivian. She explained that, in previous classes that did not require her to teach the lesson she had planned to a child, her lesson plans "went on and on and I wondered what I am doing this crazy stuff for because I felt like I was just repeating myself." She quickly learned, "you have to know what you are teaching and get to the point. I learned that getting to the point cuts out the confusion and effectively gets to the heart of what you want to teach the child." That is just what she did with her first grade child partner, Adam. Adam was an ENL student who had recently completed a reading recovery program. He was paired with Vivian so that he continued to make progress with his reading.

Vivian planned a strategy lesson that focused on some of the elements of a story, specifically the characters and the setting; she also included character traits to support Adam. Vivian started the lesson with an anchor chart that reviewed characters, setting, and character traits and gave an example of each that connected Adam's interests. Her anchor chart was color coordinated: characters were in blue, setting was written in green, and character traits were in purple. After teaching the story elements, Vivian read the leveled book, *Smaller and Smaller* by Ned Jensen. She read the book with Adam so that he could write in the book and underline the characters, setting, and character traits in the colors that aligned to the anchor chart for consistency.

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Character	Setting	Character Traits
Batman	park	funny
cow	zoo	adventurous
goat	hill	silly
cat in the hat	house	worried
Spiderman	farm	cool
Pig		kind
duck		helpful
Grammy		
Ana		

Figure 3: Anchor chart for the lesson

Vivian wanted Adam to apply his understanding of characters, setting, and character traits, so she created a strategy lesson in the form of a hands-on game that allowed Adam to move around. Vivian had written out 50 flashcards with examples of characters, character traits, and settings that she had pulled from areas of Adam's life, as well as, from books that they had read together. Adam had to select an index card, read the word out loud, and then say if it was a character, character trait, or a setting. Once he correctly identified the index card, he could throw a bean bag into the correctly labeled bin. The bin was also color-coded to align with the anchor chart. For example, "Spiderman" was written on the index card. Adam had to read "Spiderman" and identify Spiderman as a "character" before throwing the bean bag into the bin. Vivian wanted to include oral language into the lesson giving Adam the opportunity to read the words on the index card. This also allowed Vivian to check Adam's understanding of each concept and clarify any misunderstandings in the moment.

Adam, who the classroom teacher told Vivian was rarely engaged in literacy lessons, was incredibly motivated and did not want the lesson to end. Vivian credits the success of her strategy lesson to connecting to Adam's interests and directly addressing the teaching point. Vivian learned the value of discovering "the interests of the child and including them into the lesson." Furthermore,



Figure 4: Color coded bins for the beanbag game

Vivian realized how essential it is to be direct about the teaching point. She explained, "I used a positive tone when I explained what we were learning and doing, but I was clear and direct, which helped keep the lesson focused for Adam."

Discussion and Conclusion

For both preservice and inservice teachers, this work highlights three important components of planning and implementing strategy lessons for elementary students: connecting to students' lives and interests, facilitating communication with and between students, and focusing on the lesson objective. Regardless on the skill being addressed through the strategy, when the lesson is connected to students' interests and background knowledge, engagement in the lesson will increase (Routman, 2018). As Victoria learned, "it's important to find out what interests the students in the class and add it to your lessons. For me, I like coffee. If you put coffee into the lesson, then that would already have me wrapped into and focused on the lesson." Including oral language into lessons, as each of the preservice teachers did, is essential because talking is how children make meaning, and help make sense of the world. Talk between the students and preservice teachers was encouraged during each of the lessons. As Victoria learned, "students really benefit from having a teacher sit next to them, listen to them talk about their lives and interests, and then when you teach lessons that include their interests, it shows the students that you cared and

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listened.” Routman (2018) discusses the importance of teachers being clear with students about what they are learning so that the lesson’s intentions are clear. Creating lesson plans with clear teaching strategies is important so that young learners understand what they are learning and what work they must complete as part of the lesson. Finally, having an understanding of the *big picture* (i.e. the skill) that needs to be supported allows preservice and inservice teachers to create effective and targeted strategy lessons for elementary students.

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