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The Role of Mentor Teachers in the National College of Education, Adaptive Cycles of Teaching (NCE ACT) and the Improvement of the NCE ACT.
NCE Faculty Research Residency

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Abstract

This paper reports research on a practice-based curriculum, the Adaptive Cycles of Teaching (ACT), supported by a cloud-based technology that enables coaching and feedback to preservice teacher candidates as they engage in classroom instruction. Specifically, the research explored mentor teachers' perspectives on the benefits and limitations of the ACT literacy model and if mentors' own literacy instruction practices improved through their involvement with ACT. Ten mentor teachers (grades 1-6) were interviewed. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded to address the research questions. Findings indicated that mentors had a positive view of the ACT literacy model, and saw an impact on their students' learning. Mentors benefited by having additional reflective opportunities, and in some cases, learning new literacy instruction practices. Mentors identified challenges in completing all the coaching steps and working with the technology. This feedback has led to refinements in the coaching steps and the technology coaching platform.

Research Report

A challenge in designing learning environments for teachers is achieving a well-coordinated balance between learning theoretical approaches to instruction, and then applying actual practical applications in the classroom. Frequently, teachers learn theory in isolation from practice, leading to difficulties in their execution in actual classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The result is that beginning teachers often struggle to put knowledge gained in preparation programs into practice (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust & Shulman, 2005).

These struggles can persist through the initial years of practice, limiting the impact beginning teachers can have on their students' learning progress. Furthermore, preparing teachers to implement balanced literacy instruction in elementary classrooms demands a rich knowledge base that covers multiple dimensions of student learning and behavior (e.g., language development, phonics, comprehension, text structure) (Kucer, 2001). In response to this problem of practice the National Louis University, Elementary Education BA program has developed and pilot tested a practice-based approach to help teacher candidates master specific high leverage literacy practices (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009; Grossman Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009).

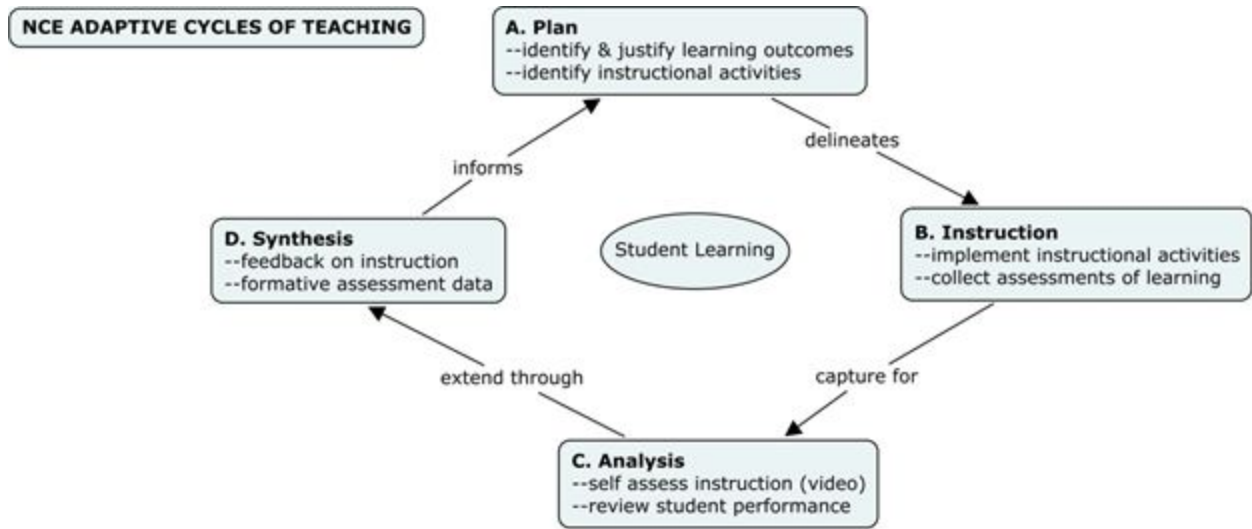
Conceptual Framework

Research on learning and adaptive expertise has informed the curriculum design (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). In contrast to routine experts who develop efficiency

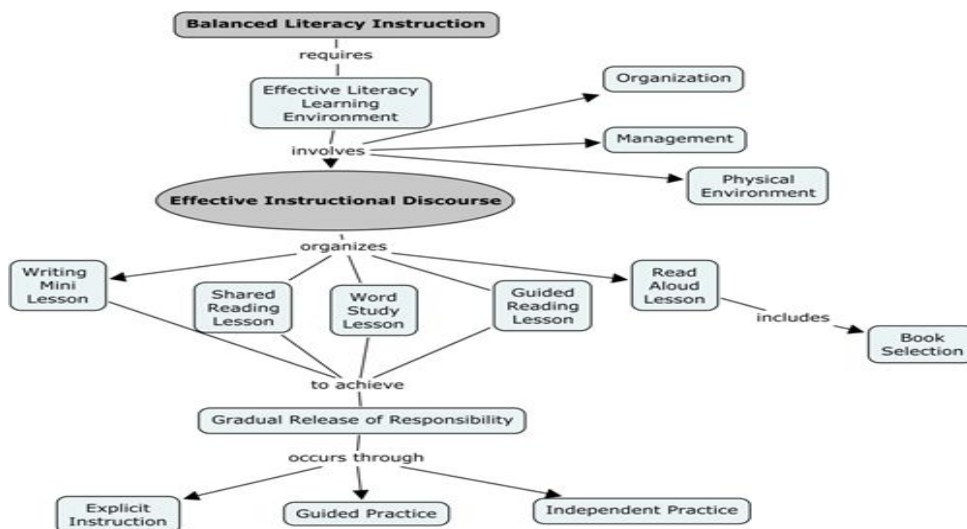
with a static set of core competencies, adaptive experts continually expand the breadth and depth of their knowledge through a willingness to explore and experiment (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Schwartz, Bransford, & Sears, 2005). It can be argued that adaptive expertise in teaching entails systematically learning from teaching to focus and adapt instruction to pertinent emerging demands (Hiebert, Morris, Berk, & Jansen, 2007). Adaptive expertise is facilitated through a learning environment that provides an a balance of stable learning structures to support efficient learning and variability to allow learners to innovate and engage in problem solving - an optimal corridor of adaptability (Schwartz, Bransford, & Sears, 2005; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005).

Distinctive features in the ACT design also draw from practice-based theories, to include *representations* of practice, *decompositions* of practice, and *approximations* of practice that create consistency and predictability in how novices learn to enact core practices (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009). Representations provide novices with a vision for the practice as a whole. In the *ACT* design, novice teachers view video models of specific teaching practices and decompose the practice using teaching performance templates to identify its critical features. Approximations of practice entail guided practice in which teacher candidates engage in repeated cycles of planning, instruction, reflection, and analysis of feedback and formative assessment data.

The ACT curriculum model and supporting technologies attempt to approximate an optimal corridor of adaptability for novice teachers to ensure their trajectory toward adaptive expertise. ACT attempts to interweave stable structures that enable efficient learning with variation that allows novice teachers to adapt to different contexts and student learning demands. The model is enabled by the TREK Learning Experience Manager system, a mobile cloud-based software designed to enhance and integrate experiential learning with formal learning environments. The ACT/TREK system provides teacher candidates with representations of core literacy practices, helps them to focus on key features of each practice, and engages them in multiple opportunities to implement them with students in classrooms. Figure 1 represents the basic reflective learning cycle for teachers implementing classroom lessons. Teacher candidates engage in multiple lesson cycles in each pedagogical content area in order to learn through and about teaching and student learning.



Literacy instruction within the ACT model enables teacher candidates to gain competency in five core literacy practices: read aloud, word study, shared reading, guided reading, and writing mini lesson. Teaching feedback templates have been designed to highlight key features of each practice guide teachers through lesson planning, instruction, video analysis, and analysis of student learning. By gaining proficiency in these practices, teacher candidates are prepared to design and implement balanced literacy in their future classrooms. The NCE Adaptive Cycles of Teaching provides a framework for cycles of learning to implement these core literacy practices using the model depicted in Figure 2.



To date, the curriculum design efforts have focused on the learning needs of NLU teacher candidates. Anecdotal feedback from principals and mentors have suggested that mentor teachers

can benefit from the explicit structure of the ACT model to improve the quality of their balanced literacy instruction. More field research is needed to understand how classroom based mentors perceive the ACT curriculum and the supporting software design and its possible impact on K-12 student learning.

Research Questions

1. How do mentors view the benefits and limitations of the ACT model for supporting professional growth of teachers in their initial years of practice?
2. Did changes occur in the mentor teacher classrooms as a result of their involvement in the ACT model? If so, in what ways?

Method

Context

The Adaptive Cycles of Teaching is the core curriculum for the BA Elementary Education undergraduate program in the National College of Education of National Louis University. During their senior year, teacher candidates in the program complete a series of methods courses (i.e., literacy, math, science, and social studies) and field seminars while engaged two days a week in classroom field placements. The ACT framework supports the field learning experiences, methods courses, and seminar to bring coherence. In the final quarter of the senior year, teacher candidates complete their student teaching.

Participants

Ten mentor teachers who had worked with teacher candidates in their classrooms participated in the study. Four of the teachers were in grades K-2; six of the teachers were in grades 3-5. Four of the mentor teachers taught in urban settings, six taught in suburban settings. The majority of the mentors had been teaching for 5 years or more in their settings.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data sources were derived from interviews with the mentor teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for the analysis. Transcripts were reviewed for common themes across the interviews. Themes are represented in the findings.

Findings

The mentor teacher interviews highlighted several considerations for the ACT practice-centered curriculum model of teacher preparation. The first finding regarded the relative match of the five core literacy practices as defined in the ACT model with the mentor teacher practices at receiving sites. In some cases they were well aligned, in others, less so. When practices were aligned, the teacher candidates quickly integrated into the activity flow and how students were learning. Two mentors observed:

You know the same components that we use in lessons at XXX School, she knows, like she already came in with in her toolbox and the kids react to.

She came in doing many things that the school was doing with their curriculum. It was a nice transition for the kids.

Even when practices were well aligned, some logistical challenge remained regarding the teacher candidates field site days and the classroom schedules. The days teacher candidates were present in schools was not always the same day and time that a core practice was planned. Hence, in addition to examining the specifics of the core practices, daily and weekly class schedules need to be considered in designing a practice-centered curriculum. There are implications for the days in which teacher candidates attend placement sites.

A second important finding was the shared learning that occurred between the teacher candidates and their mentors. In some instances, mentor teachers were learning how to implement the core practice for the first time and this presented a learning opportunity for them. One teacher articulated this by saying they were “learning together.” Another mentor observed that the teacher candidate “was reading Daily Five– It was new to me and we shared learning about this together.” Instances where mentor teachers appropriated the ACT core practices into their own repertoire were particularly noteworthy. These mentors saw a chance to improve their own literacy practices by adding new instructional strategies into their practices. Examples where this happened include shared reading, interactive read aloud and word study with “Word Their Way.”

I really liked all of her shared readings. And I ended up buying one of the books that she had for one of her classes..... I did a lesson about asking questions for my observation earlier this year with our principal, so I certainly gained something from it professionally.

....really impressed with the SR lessons (Most powerful practice) So simple but so effective

In other instances, mentor teachers were engaged in their own reflection about teaching and learning whether through their own graduate studies or their own independent thinking. In being reflective with the teacher candidate, mentors had the opportunity to reflect further on their own knowledge and skills and what they had to offer novice teachers. One mentor observed:

Jan is really receptive to anything I had to teach her or tell her. She’s extremely reflective and sometimes she already knew what she did, but I was able to help her with like some management tips or like if the lesson is going on too long, things like that.

The use of videos is a central feature of the ACT model. Teacher candidates must video each lesson cycle and analyze this to learn. Interestingly, many of the mentor teachers found the watching of videos to be useful for their learning as well, particularly about their own classrooms and their students’ behavior. Watching videos of the teacher candidates teaching in their classrooms provided mentors with the opportunity to step back and see their students and classroom events from a different point of view.

..... both watching the video and from being the observer while somebody else was teaching my own kids- people that were engaged more than I thought they might, so positive things that I saw, tracking who was participating. How much people were participating. It gave me a chance to look at girl to boy ratio, students with IEPs versus students without IEPs....

Across multiple interviews, the mentors shared ways their K-8 student learning was impacted. They shared ways the teacher candidates made specific impact with the children across all of the core practices.

Writing Mini Lesson – stands out / modeling revision, kids are going like gangbuster. Not surface, really get to the meat of it. (Kids are /Thesaurus addicts.)

The technology platform for video review and coaching was new to all the mentor teachers. They found this aspect somewhat challenging to learn. Feedback suggested that the number of prompts they needed to review and respond to be streamlined. They also felt it would be beneficial to receive more orientation and training prior to mentoring candidates.

Summary and Implications for Teacher Education

This research investigated the experiences of the mentor teachers with the Adaptive Cycles of Teaching curriculum model - an innovation in the way NCE is preparing its undergraduate Elementary Education teachers. Feedback from the mentors indicated that their experience mentoring novice teachers through the ACT model was valuable. The core literacy practices as outlined in the ACT were important practices that clearly had an impact in their students' learning. Moreover, the opportunity to mentor around these practices allowed mentors to strengthen and extend their own literacy practices. While the mentors appreciated the opportunity to review videos lessons in their classroom, they found using the technology less than intuitive and professed a need for additional orientation and training to feel comfortable with the ACT/TREK technology system.

Based on these findings, the ACT faculty team is designing a stronger mentor orientation experience. Specifically, we have started to construct a short learning path in the TREK system for mentors designed to orient them to the core literacy practices, their high leverage features and the reflective lesson cycles that the novice teachers complete in their classrooms. In having mentors complete this learning experience shorter than, but parallel to what the teacher candidates experience, we believe they will understand the coaching process more fully, feel more confident with the technology, and have a fuller professional development experience for themselves with regard to the literacy practices in the ACT model.

A second major area of improvement based on this and other research has focused on the technology platform. The ACT/TREK system has a newly organized platform for coaches that attempts to make the TREK system more intuitive for instructors and mentors. For example,

there is a new coach dashboard to assist mentors and other coaches to quickly see teacher candidate portfolio submissions that need to be reviewed.

The ACT model and associated technology platform seems to offer multiple benefits. Teacher candidates have structured practice opportunities that impact student learning. The process of mentoring teacher candidates seems to offer specific professional development benefits for a mentor teachers' own literacy practices. It is important to explore how elements of the ACT model might be incorporated into other teacher preparation programs in the college. In addition, future research needs to more closely examine the views and practices of teacher education faculty as they adapt their instruction to incorporate the Adaptive Cycles of Teaching.

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