

Dialoging About Dialogic Reading: A Lesson Study Approach for Teacher Candidates

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Abstract: This article explores Lesson Study, a professional development tool for teacher candidates. Teacher candidates engaged in a lesson study cycle focused on dialogic reading, an evidence-based literacy practice for young children. Teacher candidates explored the power of dialogic reading on comprehension and language development, collaboratively planned an interactive lesson, identified data collection methods, implemented the lesson in a PreK classroom, observed the lesson, reflected on the lesson, and revised the lesson to be taught again after making feedback-informed revisions. An explanation of the steps in the lesson study cycle are included as well as teacher candidates' insights on the process.

Introduction

This article discusses the professional development of teacher candidates engaging in the process of Lesson Study to develop their teaching and reflection skills and dispositions. All participants were third-year college students in an early childhood education certification program where, upon completion of the program, they will be certified to teach prekindergarten to grade 3. The teacher candidates studied and utilized dialogic reading, an evidence-based literacy practice, by engaging in Lesson Study cycles. Along with unpacking each step of our ECE Lesson Study cycle, teacher candidates' reflections on the process and impacts on their teaching and learning as future ECE teachers also will be shared.

Learning About Lesson Study

Over the course of a semester, teacher candidates in an ECE theory and practice course learned about and implemented multiple Lesson Study cycles. Lesson Study is an educator-led process that aims to improve instruction and student learning by collaboratively planning, teaching, observing and reflecting on lessons. Lesson study originated in Japan, where it is widely used as a professional development practice, and has been utilized by educators around the globe including here in the United States. In a systematic review of nine quantitative studies of Lesson Study and Learning Study, Cheung and Wong (2014) found that the lesson study approach to be impactful on both the examination of teaching practices and student learning.

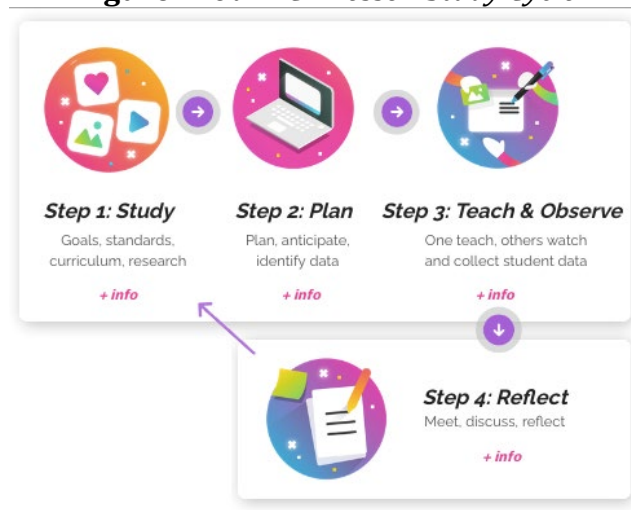
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Lesson Study typically involves a team of educators who work together to identify a goal for students' learning, such as developing problem-solving skills. Participants choose a subject to focus on, and study current research and practices to deepen their understanding of both content and pedagogy. Based on their study, they collaboratively design a research lesson and determine data collection methods. A team member teaches the lesson while other team members observe and collect data. The lesson is the focus of the observation, not the teacher (Education Scotland, 2015). The team then meets to discuss and reflect upon their observations and data collected. Revisions to the lesson may be made and the cycle repeated. **Figure 1** highlights the ECE Lesson Study cycle created for this project.

Figure 1. *Our ECE Lesson Study Cycle*



ECE Dialogic Reading Lesson Study Cycle Step 1: Study

For our first Lesson Study cycle, teacher candidates researched dialogic reading, an evidence-based literacy practice aimed at developing young children's language and literacy skills while also increasing student engagement and motivation. According to Phillips (2022), "Dialogic reading uses shared reading to teach vocabulary, promote children's use of more complex language, and support comprehension" (p. 22). Teacher candidates learned that reading aloud to children is one of the most effective ways to promote young children's language and literacy development. However, they also learned that not all read aloud practices are equally beneficial. Some read aloud practices are more interactive and engaging than others, and can have a greater impact on children's learning outcomes. One of these practices is dialogic reading, a strategy that involves having a dialogue with children around the text they are reading. This dialogue involves asking questions to help children explore the text at a deeper level, including defining new words, analyzing components of a story, and talking about text. In other words, dialogic reading is a form of scaffolded reading where the focus is on interpretive and critical comprehension more than on accuracy and fluency (Whitehurst, n.d.). Along with being beneficial for typically developing young children, teacher candidates also studied the use of dialogic reading with children with disabilities and the powerful impact it can have on their vocabulary development (Towson et al., 2016).

As mentioned, dialogic reading is a strategy that involves having a dialogue—or conversation—with children around the text they are reading. This technique can enhance children's language and literacy skills by increasing vocabulary, oral language, comprehension, narrative skills, and motivation to listen to stories read aloud. Dialogic reading can be used with children of all ages and levels, and with different types of texts. Dialogic reading works by using a series of prompts and questions that elicit children's participation and feedback throughout a reading experience. Dialogic reading is a powerful way to make reading aloud more interactive and engaging for children across myriad contexts and settings.

The core technique of dialogic reading is the PEER sequence, which stands for Prompt, Evaluate, Expand and Repeat (Headley, 2012; Watkins, 2018; Iturbe, 2019). The PEER sequence is the interaction between a child and an adult. First, the adult **prompts** (P) the child to say something about the text, such as commenting on a picture, predicting what may happen next, making a connection, or answering a question. Then, the adult **evaluates** (E) the child's response, by acknowledging the response and providing positive feedback or constructive correction. Next, the adult **expands** (E) upon the child's response by rephrasing it, adding information or asking a follow-up question. Finally, the adult **repeats** (R) the prompt as a way to see if the child has learned from the expansion. This interaction is an essential part of the dialogic experience.

There are different types of prompts that can be used in dialogic reading, depending on the purpose and level of difficulty. Teacher candidates learned to remember prompt types by using the acronym CROWD, which stands for Completion, Recall, Open-ended, Wh-questions and Distancing (Headley, 2012; Watkins, 2018; Iturbe, 2019; Philips, 2022). Below are examples of each type of prompt:

- **Completion:** The adult asks the child to fill in a blank at the end of a sentence. This prompt is used with rhyming or repetitive texts, as well as when students can draw a logical conclusion to fill in the blank, sometimes by repeating what's been read. For example: "Rabbit's favorite food is _____." Completion prompts provide children with information about the structure of language that is critical to later reading (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).
- **Recall prompts:** The adult asks the child to remember what has happened so far in the text or in a previous reading session. Recall prompts check comprehension and support memory. For example, after reading about Rabbit growing carrots and seeing pictures of him planting the seeds and watering the garden to grow carrots, the adult may ask, "What is Rabbit growing?"
- **Open-ended:** The adult asks the child to describe what is happening in a picture or part of the text. Open-ended prompts encourage observation and inference. For example: "What do you notice in this picture?" Open-ended prompts support young children's attention to detail both in print and pictures, and increases expressive fluency.
- **Wh- questions:** The adult asks the child questions that start with who, what, where, when, why or how to elicit specific information or opinions from the text. For example: "How is Rabbit feeling?" Adults also focus on illustrations, encouraging children to make inferences and learn new vocabulary. "Let's look at the picture. What do you think *plowing* means?"

- **Distancing:** The adult asks the child to relate the text to their own experiences or knowledge. Distancing prompts foster personal connections and critical thinking. For example, if your class took a field trip to a farm recently you might say: "Remember when we went to the farm last week. Which of these animals did we see?" Distancing prompts encourage young children to make connections to their experiences or the world around them.

Dialogic reading enhances children's literacy and language skills in various ways. For instance, it increases children's vocabulary by exposing them to new words and providing opportunities for children and adults to dig into word meanings using text and pictures. Dialogic reading also improves children's oral language by modeling phrasing, correct language structure, proper grammar, and accurate pronunciation. It develops children's comprehension by helping them understand the main idea and important details of a text. It further supports comprehension by guiding children's use of inferencing and making connections between the text and the real world. Additionally, dialogic reading fosters children's narrative skills by teaching them how to structure and retell stories, and it stimulates children's creativity by inviting them to make/check predictions and interpretations. Dialogic reading also enhances young children's motivation to read by making reading more engaging and interactive than typical storybook reading.

Research shows that dialogic reading can have positive effects on children's language and literacy development. According to Whitehurst (n.d.), "Children who have been read to dialogically are substantially ahead of children who have been read to traditionally on tests of language development. Children can jump ahead by several months in just a few weeks of dialogic reading" (para. 1). Dialogic reading also prepares children for future literacy skills, such as writing and reading independently (Watkins, 2018; Whitehurst, n.d.). Interestingly, a recent study also found an increased cognitive "boost" in young children who were read to interactively with techniques such as dialogic reading. According to Lonigan (2011),

What we know from the research is that when children are exposed to shared reading using dialogic reading, that they really do acquire greater levels of development in their vocabulary and other aspects of language ... not only is it designed to produce language, but there's a number of research studies that actually demonstrate that children who are exposed to shared reading with dialogic reading, gained more vocabulary skills and other language skills than children who don't get exposed to dialogic reading. And the interesting thing there is that most of the studies had the children who didn't get dialogic reading ... got as much shared reading as the children who got dialogic reading. So it wasn't a difference in being exposed to story books, it was a difference in *how* [emphasis added] they were exposed to storybooks. (transcription from video)

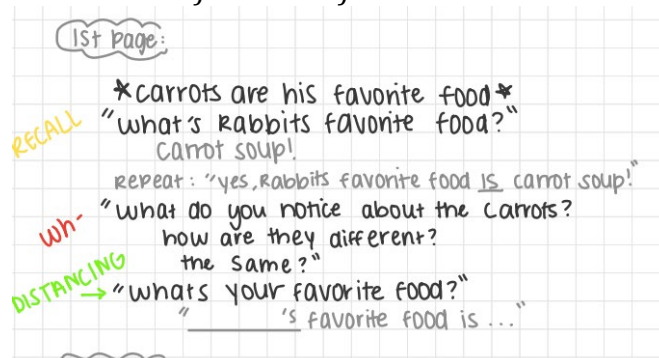
Along with reading and discussing research on dialogic reading, we also watched it in action. The team took notes on what they observed and the types of CROWD prompts asked. We also analyzed the PEER sequence and practiced it with one another as well. We unpacked how dialogic reading is similar to and different from traditional storybook reading. Once we had a firm grasp of what dialogic reading is, what it looks like in practice, and why it's important in the language and literacy development of young children, we moved on to planning our first Lesson Study lesson.

ECE Dialogic Reading Lesson Study Cycle Step 2: Plan

Our first task in planning a dialogic reading lesson for our lesson study cycle was to select a text that was appropriate for the target PreK children's age and interest. We selected *Carrot Soup* by John Segal because it included rich vocabulary, detailed illustrations, an engaging plot, and a range of interesting characters. As the course instructor, I first read the book aloud to the class so they could get a sense of the storyline and complexity of the language. As they listened, they were tasked with considering the kinds of questions that we could ask throughout the dialogic reading experience. On the second read, we walked through the text page by page while the teacher candidates shared their ideas for prompts with one another. As a group, they decided to start with easier prompts such as completion and simple recall, and then moved to wh- questions and open-ended prompts. They decided to only include three distancing prompts—the first at the beginning to connect to the main character, Rabbit. The second distancing prompt focused on a choice made by a character to help children learn a likely unknown tier 2 vocabulary term, *prefer*. The final distancing prompt was placed at the end of the book to wrap up the story after children learn the surprising conclusion. The teacher candidates decided that they wanted to keep the children focused on the story at hand and not pull them out of the story to make connections too often. Throughout the text the teacher candidates were purposeful and intentional with their choice of prompts to support conversation, comprehension and engagement.

As the team created the lesson, they took on roles in the process. One teacher candidate took on the role of Lesson Plan Notetaker using an Apple Pencil on an iPad, as seen in **Figure 2**. After the plan was crafted, she sent the lesson to the full team for final review. Other teacher candidates took on the role of Prompt Writers. They wrote the selected prompts on sticky notes. We had multiple copies of the book, so Prompt Placers took the sticky notes and placed them on the bottom of specific pages where the prompts would be asked. Our Recorders tallied each time we wrote a prompt to identify the type of prompt used. This helped us see if we were overusing or underusing various CROWD prompt types. Everyone was involved in discussing appropriate prompts, refining wording of prompts, and determining how to unpack challenging vocabulary in child-friendly ways. The Lesson Plan Notetaker also included comments about allowing children to point to pictures and initiate comments, as well as highlighted reminders to praise effort, provide positive feedback/encouragement in PEER responses, and made note of different ways to include every-pupil-response (EPR) as well as verbal responses.

Figure 2. A section of the notes from our Lesson Plan Notetaker



After the team created the lesson, the teacher candidates decided on data collection methods to be used to observe and document student learning throughout the lesson. In this Lesson Study cycle, we decided to use video recording, an observation form (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2011), and anecdotal notes. Other data could have included student work samples or interviews.

ECE Lesson Study Cycle Step 3: Teach and Observe

One of the teacher candidates volunteered to teach the research lesson in their mentor teacher's PreK classroom, while I observed, took notes, and video recorded the entirety of the lesson which was posted to a secure collaboration site. The other team members observed the lesson by watching the recording and collected data on student thinking and learning using the observation form. I reminded the class that we had all designed the lesson, so we were all responsible for what worked and what did not work well in the lesson. See **Figure 3** for a picture of our first dialogic reading lesson.

Figure 3. *A Teacher Candidate Teaches our Dialogic Reading Lesson in a Public Title I PreK Classroom*



ECE Lesson Study Cycle Step 4: Reflect and Revise

After all teacher candidates had the opportunity to observe the lesson, our team met to discuss and reflect on data. To begin the reflection process, the teacher candidate who taught the lesson shared her insights on what worked and what did not work from her perspective. She also shared her mentor teacher's feedback as well. Then, the other teacher candidates shared their comments about and reactions to the lesson and student engagement. After all of the teacher candidates provided their responses, I shared my feedback and insights as well.

As a group we then identified the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson, as well as the implications for future instruction. We revised the lesson by incorporating the feedback. Another teacher candidate then volunteered to teach the revised lesson in

another mentor teacher's PreK classroom to test the collaboratively developed lesson improvements. This cycle was repeated several times until the team was satisfied with the results of the lesson improvements, and multiple teacher candidates had the opportunity to try dialogic reading. After conclusion of the dialogic reading lesson study, teacher candidates were encouraged to plan dialogic reading lessons with other texts throughout the semester. Teacher candidates use dialogic reading with *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt in the PreK classroom on our college campus.

Teacher Candidate Takeaways from Our Lesson Study

Through the dialogic reading lesson study cycles, the teacher candidates learned about the power of collaboration and feedback, and also learned to take risks. The teacher candidates grounded their instructional decision making in evidence-based practices by engaging in meaningful study prior to collaboratively developing lessons. At the end of the lesson study cycle teacher candidates shared their insights through anonymous questionnaires. All responses were read and then coded to identify common themes that emerged from the data. When asked what was learned from this experience, one teacher candidate shared,

I always knew it was important to ask questions during read alouds to engage the children, but dialogic reading takes it a step deeper. Before, I thought dialogic reading was just a fancy term for reading a story to your students. I have learned about CROWD prompts and PEER sequence and its role in dialogic reading. Dialogic reading is such a great way to set high expectations for your students while also keeping them entertained and completely engaged. Actually, reading the story, I feel like it is also a great way to build a connection to your students because you're really talking with them and building on their ideas and interests. The different prompts allow students to really think about what the story is portraying, then going beyond and expanding on their comprehension. (personal communication, 2023)

Another teacher candidate shared, "With intentional questions and prompts, I got to see the children light up with excitement to answer questions, talk about the story and really know what was going on in the story" (personal communication, 2023).

Teacher candidates also noted the importance of knowing students when planning lessons. One teacher candidate commented on how she learned how lessons can be tailored to particular contexts. She stated, "From doing Dialogic Reading I got to hear experiences from other pre-k classrooms, the lab school, my public pre-k, and a private pre-k. This gave me many new tools to take into consideration when teaching in various places" (personal communication, 2023). Another teacher candidate stated:

Before this experience, I had not heard of dialogic reading, but from teaching I can see how beneficial it is for the students when reading. I was able to create this lesson with my classmates to not only fit the students at the lab school, but to fit with my students as well. With this I was able to practice scaffolding the lessons before going in to teach based on my prior knowledge of the students' skills. I was also able to see the students thrive on the lessons we were working together to create. It was also very helpful to be able to hear about how the lesson went with a different group of students with less structure, so that moving forward I am able to see what worked and what didn't for a

more structured group versus a less structured group. (personal communication, 2023)

Furthermore, excitement about building on the ideas of peers and the power of collaboration through the lesson study experience was shared by multiple teacher candidates. One stated, “I was able to use my peer’s [sic] ideas and support for what they thought would work well for a lesson or what could be changed not only before the lesson was taught but after as well so it could be improved” (personal communication, 2023). Another shared, “I really enjoyed watching my classmates teach their lessons and discussing them in class to see everyone’s perspectives. There were times my classmates brought something up that I had missed while watching the videos, and I was able to take note of it in my journal” (personal communication, 2023). This was echoed by a third teacher candidate who stated:

Lesson study greatly increased my understanding and appreciation for team planning meetings. I never fully understood the point of these and thought they were just to discuss student progress and ensure each class was on the right track. While this is true, it is also an opportunity to run lesson ideas past each other, brainstorm together, and even discuss lessons that will reflect across all of the classes for the team to later circle back to and discuss. This was also such an eye-opening process to help understand the importance of ‘your people’. As a new teacher you are not as alone and isolated as it may feel, because you have all of these other teachers to turn to for ideas, guidance, and feedback. This was such a vital step in my teaching journey. (personal communication, 2023)

One of the teacher candidates who taught our lesson built on the impact of collaboration, I learned that collaboration is the best way to get the best results in the classroom. Working with other teachers and educators that have their own insights, helps the lesson be stronger than if one teacher alone planned it. Then we came back together and fixed what was needed to help the lesson flow better. When I came back to class, I was able to share with my fellow classmates what went well and what could’ve changed to improve it. This is the best part of the lesson study, because each teacher can come in and share what happened and we can see what the lesson looked like when it was implemented with the students. From here you make corrections and can try again. (personal communication, 2023)

Another teacher candidate combined the power of collaboration with insights about the benefits of dialogic reading. She stated:

I learned that collaboration is key to create the best lessons. Different educators will have different ideas to try in a lesson. I liked how there was a lot of freedom for trial and error and also in every lesson the teacher was pleasantly surprised about reactions and responses to parts of the lesson. I learned that dialogic reading can be beneficial for their reading comprehension as well as oral language. (personal communication, 2023)

A final comment on collaboration built on this idea of trial and error or experimentation. This teacher noted: “Lesson studies taught me how to experiment with ideas, while also building on my collaboration skills” (personal communication, 2023).

Overarching Benefits of Lesson Study

Lesson study has many benefits for teacher candidates, partner schools and the children they serve. The Lesson Study Group at Mills College (2022) sums up the impact by

stating, “As a team collaborates to improve instruction, they deepen their knowledge of content and student thinking and their commitment to working together to improve instruction.” Additional benefits include: (1) Enhancing teacher candidates’ knowledge and understanding of content, pedagogy and student thinking by engaging in deep study, use and reflection of evidence-based practices; (2) increasing motivation and confidence by allowing teacher candidates to experiment, observe and refine instruction based on evidence and positive, constructive feedback; (3) promoting student engagement and positive outcomes for all children including typically developing children, multilingual learners and children with disabilities—by exposing them to high-quality lessons that purposefully challenge their thinking and scaffold learning, and (4) fostering a sense of collaboration and professionalism by creating a community of inquiry in which mentor teachers and teacher candidates take risks and improve their practice.

Conclusion

Lesson study is a powerful professional development practice that can improve instruction and student learning by engaging teacher candidates in collaborative research cycles. By embedding lesson study in a teacher preparation course, teacher candidates studied the evidence-based practice of dialogic reading—what it is, why it is effective, and how to use it in real classrooms. By actively participating in the four steps of our ECE lesson study cycle, teacher candidates learned firsthand the impact of collaborating with peers, participating in job-embedded professional development, designing effective lessons that intentionally engage all learners, and the power of deep reflection.

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Note

The study was reviewed by Hood College's Institutional Review Board and received an exemption.

About the Author

Kristine M. Calo, PhD, is Professor and chair of the education department at Hood College. Her areas of research include the use of informational texts with young children, teacher candidates use of effective literacy practices, and literacy coaching. She has taught literacy methods and assessment courses at both the graduate and undergraduate level.