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Student Teachers' Implementation and Understanding of Repeated Picture-Book Reading in Preschools

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Abstract: Research conducted among student teachers during three academic years (2010-2011; 2011-2012 ; 2012-2013) at Israel's Levinsky College of Education sought to ascertain (a) the extent of implementation of repeated picture-book reading (RPBR) with preschool groups each academic year ; (b) how does the implementation of RPBR progress throughout the years of the study ? (c) students' understanding of the value of RPBR; and (d) the perceived benefits and difficulties of RPBR by student-teachers. Of approximately 250 students who completed questionnaires each semester, most reported that they regularly performed RPBR – implementation in 2013; 96% for students in the four-year academic program and 100% for those in the two-year, teacher certification program. Inclusion of children experiencing language, social, behavioural or other difficulties in these groups was high (around 77%) from the second year of studies. Content analysis of responses to the open questions led to defining reflective categories that reveal the students' conceptual understanding of RPBR. Overall, 40% of the responses in 2013 were defined as showing either a 'narrow' or 'extended' understanding compared with 37% in 2012 and 20% in 2011.

Keywords: repeated picture-book reading, teacher preparation, preschools, evaluation

Introduction

Young children's language competencies enable them to get along socially and become active participants in society. They also predict reading competency and school achievement. Comprehension related competencies – vocabulary, knowledge of the social and physical world, and inferential skills that continue to develop throughout life – seem to be responsible for the substantial gaps between children raised in different socioeconomic environments from an early age (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pashek, 2010; Ferland, Marchman, & Weileder, 2013; Lennox, 2013; Paris, 2005). Hoff (2003) claims, that it is the quality of infants' early language environment that mediates the link between SES and children's vocabulary knowledge. What repeatedly emerges in recent studies and reviews is the importance of the quality of reading out loud with children both at home (Dickinson et al, 2012; Heath, 1983; Lennox, 2013; Paratore &

Dougherty, 2011) and in preschools (Weisman, 2011; Whitehurst et al., 1988) as an important source of their future reading comprehension and academic success. Research shows that the effectiveness of repeated book reading partially depends on the children's positive attitude towards reading books (Bus, 2003; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

Repeated book reading or dialogic read-alouds, meaning reading out loud to children in small groups, in a way that enables them to be engaged as active learners (Whitehurst et al., 1988), has been extensively researched in family and preschool settings as a predictor of academic success. When well organized in preschools – the discourse with the children encourages their participation and there are several “sustained, shared thinking episodes” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) – repeated read-alouds have been shown to promote both the children's vocabulary and their understanding of the text (McKeown & Beck, 2003; Sipe, 2008). Nevertheless, intensive, systematic, small-group, repeated book reading that is focused on meaning making and understanding are rare events in preschools (Pentimonti, Zucker, & Justice, 2011; Wells, 2009). Furthermore, we are unaware of any research about the extent to which pre-service student teachers actually perform read-alouds as an integral part of their professional development. The belief in the necessity of including repeated read-alouds in small groups as a foundational, routine procedure in preschools, and the lack of research focused on reading in teacher education, motivated the present study. The goal was to find out the extent of implementation of RPBR in small, heterogeneous groups (heterogeneous in terms of age; cognitive, language, social and behavioral competencies) throughout the study years and across training programs (an academic, four-year program and a two-year teaching certification program for holders of a bachelor's degree). An additional goal was to understand how the student teachers throughout their study years and across programs perceive the benefits and difficulties of implementing RPBR.

Read-Aloud as Promoters of Young Children's Language and Literacy, Cognitive and Emotional-Social Development

Longitudinal studies repeatedly show high correlations between a parent's socioeconomic status and education and, on the other hand, their children's language development and academic achievements throughout the school years (Biemiller, 1999; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Ferland, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995; Neuman, 2011). Language competencies in general, a rich vocabulary, and reading comprehension are the most significant entry cards to successful functioning in the ever changing, fluid life of the 21st century (Biemiller, 2012). Stanovich and his colleagues (Stanovich, West, Cunningham, Cipelewski, & Siddiqui, 1996) have found a correlation between intensive reading and having a rich vocabulary, including an in-depth understanding of the words. Further, Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that early success in reading predicts later success in dealing with complex texts that are typical of school work in higher grades. Biemiller (2012) reminds us that “Unfortunately learning to read written texts is not the same as learning to understand written texts” (p.1).

Numerous studies point to the existence of links between the repeated reading of books to children – reading in which children from a very early age are active participants in a conversation about the content of the book and its illustrations – and the development of language and learning abilities in later years (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Keifer, 1995; McKeown

& Beck, 2003; Sénéchal, 1997; Sipe, 2008). These studies found that repeated reading of the same book contributed to children's active participation in the discussion related to the content of the book, intensive involvement in proposing interpretations of the texts, and greater vocabulary gains; in single readings, however, the children are engaged in attempts to deal with superficial meanings of the text (Pappas, 1991; Phillips & McNaughton, 1990; Sénéchal, 1997). In spite of the fact that three decades ago read-alouds were pronounced "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23) and despite the abundance of studies and interventions focused on emergent literacy, the level of reading achievement has not increased much and gaps have grown between children from affluent homes and those from marginalized and disadvantaged homes (Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz, 2011; Wells, 2009).

Three meta-analyses, however, have found that reading aloud accounts for only 8% of the variance in reading ability in the primary grades (Bus, van IJzendoorn, Pellegrini, 1995; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). Two explanations might be offered for this finding: First, the contribution of read-alouds depends on the quality of interaction with the children, the quality and suitability of the books chosen, and how systematic and intensive the preschool read-alouds were (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Lennox, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Wiseman, 2011). Second, the impact of early engagement in read-alouds sometimes becomes apparent only after third grade when children need to cope with more sophisticated texts that require comprehension (Paris, 2005; Valencia, Smith, Reece, Wixson, & Newman, 2010).

RPBR in small, heterogeneous groups as a foundational procedure practiced on a regularly basis throughout the school year, in early childhood teacher education and preschools has been developed by the first author of this study to provide the necessary conditions for the children's development of language, literacy and social competencies. (See "Method" below) RPBR was founded on a sociocultural approach to learning which is presented in the following section.

A Socio-Cultural Approach to Learning

A teacher-led, heterogeneous, small-group, learning format for the read-alouds is grounded in a social-cultural approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes both the social nature of knowledge construction and the importance of discourse – oral language as a "carrier" and improver of thought. Heterogeneous groups provide an opportunity to encourage children to deepen their relationships, learn more about their peers in a safe, teacher-led context, and learn from and teach peers. "Knowledge building, whether conducted alone or in the company of others, is thus always situated in a discourse in which each individual contribution both responds to what has preceded and anticipates a further response" (Wells, 2000, p. 16). This principle of "responsivity" is one of the defining characteristics of the dialogue of knowledge building, the mode of discourse in which a structure of meaning is built up collaboratively over successive turns (Wells, 2000). Bereiter (1994) states that

"...trust in students' and children's ability to take an active role in their own learning is obviously an essential prerequisite for the introduction of collaborative knowledge building. But for it to be worthwhile, the discourse must involve more than simply sharing

of opinions. It must also result in progress in the sense that sharing, questioning and revisiting of opinions that leads to a new understanding that everyone involved agrees is superior to their own previous understandings” (p. 6).

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1996) emphasize ever-improvable understanding – the improvement of ideas as the goal of the discourse in the small group. And indeed, Siraj-Blatchford (2010) found that what she called “excellent” preschools encouraged “sustained shared thinking” defined as “any episode in which two or more individuals ‘worked together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative...” (p. 157).

RPBR in teacher education was designed to enable student-teachers to become proficient and reflective small group leaders who engage children representing diverse backgrounds and competencies in vivid discussions focused on picture-books meaning-making. We instructed students, based on our understanding of the sociocultural approach to learning – to listen to the children's interpretations of the text, to encourage discourse among children related to the meanings attributed to the text; to encourage children to offer explanations for their propositions and to make inferences related to other texts and/or to their life based on the interpretations of the text. As student teachers come from diverse backgrounds we suppose that their own interpretations of the procedure may vary. Therefore, findings presented in this article are expected to reveal what are the student-teachers understandings and interpretations of RPBR. We are interested to reveal the extent to which student-teachers appropriate a socio-cultural perspective of learning in the context of leading small groups in an activity focused on repeated children's book reading.

Repeated Children’s Book Reading and Student-Teacher Education

Parallel to the growing trend in teacher education of encouraging educational approaches that perceive children as active participants in learning encounters and preschool life (Bereiter, 1994; Lennox, 2013; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Wells, 2009), we also see a growing emphasis on training paradigms that encourage pre-service student teachers to promote the thinking and active participation of the children (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, 2008). Feiman-Nemser (2001) claims that “If conventional models emphasize teaching as telling and learning as listening, reform-oriented models call for teachers to do more listening as they elicit student thinking and assess their understanding, and for students to do more asking and explaining as they investigate authentic problems and share their solutions” (p. 1015). Feiman-Nemser’s claims are drawn from Dewey’s emphasis on experience and reflection on experience as a core component of professional development: “Only by extracting the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future” (1938, p. 4). Therefore, according to Feiman-Nemser, teacher education programs need to construct in the early stages of their professional development, during pre-service, the infrastructure for students to learn from their experience (2001). Infrastructure for teaching students in their early years of study is defined by Wasley, Hampel, and Clark (1997, p. 45) as “a variety of techniques, skills and approaches in all dimensions of education, curriculum, instruction and assessment that teachers have at their fingertips to stimulate the growth of the children with whom they work.”

In the early childhood education programs at our college, we designed the repeated reading of picture books in heterogeneous groups as a foundational educational approach that should be proficiently employed by students by the time they become teachers. We also note that despite the multiplicity of dialogic reading studies relating to families and educational institutions, to our knowledge there were no studies that focused on the implementation of repeated reading among teaching students in early childhood education.

The goals of this research were to ascertain the following information about students in the early childhood education teacher-training programs at the Levinsky College of Teachers' Education ('The College') – both those in the four-year track and the two-year certification programs – during each of the academic years 2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013: (a) the extent to which they implemented repeated picture-book reading (RPBR) among groups of children each year; (b) how does the implementation of RPBR progress throughout the years of the study ?; (c) the meanings they attribute to RPBR; and (d) the benefits and difficulties they report concerning its implementation.

Method

The Context of Performing RPBR at 'the College'

Student teachers in early childhood education programs at 'The College' typically spend one full day each week in fieldwork and two full days in coursework at the college. An effort is made to align the fieldwork with the course studies to the extent possible. In addition, the four-year-track student teachers have a full week of intensive fieldwork each semester.

Repeated reading accompanies the experience of students at 'The College' in the early childhood programs throughout their years of training. To contribute to establishing small-group RPBR as a foundational procedure in preschools, we believe that these students first have to experience on a regular basis in their teacher education. Therefore, from the first semester of the first year, we instruct the students to perform RPBR in all their fieldwork placements with each group they teach as an initial, getting-to-know-you stage. The RPBR during the first year of training is performed in conjunction with a "Multiple Literacies" course and two "Children's Literature" courses; thereafter, each student is advised to perform repeated storytelling each semester as a basic, routine task under the supervision of their college mentors as a way of becoming acquainted with the children and learning about their dispositions and interests, as well as their language, cognitive and socio-emotional competencies. The basic instruction of these assignments is to offer the children a few, high quality books that the students deem suitable, have the group choose a book, read it many times, and finally think of a way to present the book to the whole class. As of the 2011-2012 school year, students are required to write an analytical review of the picture book to be read to the children either individually or in a small group. They are also required to transcribe the discourse of two of the readings, analyze them, and ponder ways to improve the guidance and mediation of the reading group based on these reflections. Furthermore, college and field mentors usually observe the students performing RPBR and discuss with them and their fellow students in the preschool the quality of the discourse and ways to improve it. RPBR is perceived at Levinsky College as a foundational learning activity that anticipates group learning focused on other topics. Students are encouraged to develop their own

strategies of book reading as long as all children are encouraged to be active participants in the journey of meaning-making around a new book. As part of the RPBR procedure we expect that, starting their second academic year, students include in their RPBR groups a child experiencing some type of difficulty. We do not use the more common term 'special- needs children', as we abstain from attributing children "fixed" labels. We claim that, at any time, in each class there might be children experiencing one or more difficulties (such as social withdrawal or dominance; language delay; difficulty to regulate their attention or behavior; Hebrew as a second language; birth of a young sibling; health problem in the family, and so on). The teacher's and the student's task is to detect these children and to find ways to make them feel safe and comfortable enough in order to actively cope with whatever learning or life hardships they are dealing with. We believe that through sustained, meaningful participation in intimate, learning groups, these children are better able to develop language and social competencies and at the same time they are likely to be perceived by their peers as equals and not as "special -needs" children. However, despite the importance of reading and the expectation that this would become routine in preschool, we noticed that in many fieldwork placements books are often read aloud during plenary sessions, and that repeated reading of the same book is not often practiced. Furthermore, it is very common to find in field placements homogeneous groups in terms of age and perceived language competencies.

Research Design

The research design was mixed, containing both quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitative methods were used to assess the extent of implementation of RPBR throughout the study years and beyond, while content analysis of responses to the open questions was used to better understand the meanings attributed by student teachers to RPBR.

Tools

Analysis was conducted of the responses to the survey questionnaireⁱ submitted anonymously by all students enrolled in the early childhood education programs who attended class when the questionnaire was administered.

Questions were asked about the program in which the student was enrolled (4-year track or 2-year track for B.A. holders), year of enrollment, placement site, whether repeated storytelling was performed by the student (measure a), whether repeated small group picture-book reading was performed at the field placement, the number of cycles of repeated picture-book reading performed by the student (measure b), author and title of each book read, number of children participating in each cycle, number of readings in each cycle (measure c), and whether a child experiencing difficulty was included in the reading group (measure d).

To better understand the implementation trends, we added two questions in the 2012-2013 study: One focused on the role performed by the intern – the fourth year student – as primary teacher or supplemental teacher, and the other concerned the degree to which all children were included in the reading groups. Finally we added an open-ended question asking for the students' comments or thoughts related to RPBR. Content analysis of the responses to this open-ended question was conducted by the two authors of this paper. Inter-

judge agreement was high and significant ($k= 0.90$). A description of categories and themes that emerged in the study has been integrated into “Results” below.

The extent of implementation of RPBR was based on the following measures:

- a. Percentage of students’ performance of RPBR.
- b. Mean number of RPBR cycles. A cycle involves the total number of successive readings of an annotated book to the same group of children.
- c. Mean number of readings included in each cycle.
- d. Percentage of inclusion in the RPBR small group, of a child, experiencing difficulties (such as social withdrawal or dominance; language delay; Hebrew as a second language; birth of a young sibling; some type of crisis experienced by the family, and so on) as noticed by the field-mentor or the student teacher.

Two important **categories** that reflect an understanding of the meaning of RPBR emerged from the **content analysis**. These were defined by us as narrow or extended reflective responses. These two categories indicate the depth of understanding constructed in the students’ minds with regard to the cognitive, emotional, and social processes involved in RPBR. Inferential thinking was necessary for the students to discern these categories, and is evident in their own definitions of RPBR as well as their ability to pinpoint difficulties, discover ways of dealing with them, and define principles of operation rather than instrumentalities.

An example of a narrow reflective response is the following statement by a first year, first semester student:

"The results of RPBR can only be seen at the end of the process; throughout the process, there might not be external expressions of learning, but it would be a mistake to think that there is no learning in the process!!!"

This excerpt shows that the student is aware of the existence of latent learning processes; it also indirectly reflects a belief in the children’s capabilities. However, this student’s response is considered narrow because it does not develop into a well formulated definition, but only identifies and shows appreciation of learning as a covert phenomenon.

The following is an example of an extended reflective response that was written by a second year, second semester student:

"RPBR is helpful; through repeated readings, it helps children cope with the text and understand the moral by themselves, as we teachers mediate the story, but do not formulate or transmit the moral to the children. In other words, children reach insights by themselves and the repeated readings enable the expression of diverse views and a rich peer discourse in which children [also] listen to other children’s views".

We considered this second excerpt an extended response as the student offers a detailed, reasoned perception of the social, cognitive, and epistemological processes involved in repeated read-alouds performed in small groups.

Participants

Participants were approximately 250 students each semester who were enrolled at the Levinsky College of Education from 2010 to 2013, in the four-year teacher-preparation program and the two-year teaching certification program for B.A. holders. The distribution of students at each level and in each school year appears in Table 1.

	Four-year track students				Teaching certificate students	Total
	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year*	1 st & 2 nd year	
2010-2011:						
Semester 1	82	70	32	42 Total 24 Levinsky	28	254
Semester 2	71	69	34	13 Total 9 Levinsky	22	209
2011-2012:						
Semester 1	75	55	54	28 Total 15 Levinsky	32	244
Semester 2	75	56	48	17 Total 11 Levinsky	28	224
2012-2013:						
Semester 1	98	55	57	47 Total 20 Levinsky	42	299
Semester 2	96	50	49	20 Total 14 Levinsky	43	258

Table 1- Participants by Program, Year of Studies, and Semester (2010-2013)

*Students from other teachers colleges participate in the 4th year internship workshop that meets weekly at Levinsky. Questionnaires were completed during the final session of each semester, thus all interns in the workshop filled in the questionnaires. The table distinguishes between the overall number of interns who filled in the questionnaire and those who were Levinsky students, so that we are better able to evaluate the impact of the preparation program at Levinsky College of Education.

Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed during one of the final two pedagogy classes of each semester and filled in by the students during these classes. The responses were then coded and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in accordance with the indices described previously in “Research Design” and “Tools” above. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and the main findings were shared with the students and college mentors in an effort to improve implementation of RPBR.

Results

We have tried to delineate the main trends related to implementation of RPBR through three academic years (2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013), and the meanings attributed to this approach by the students in these programs.

Extent of Implementation 2010-2013

The task of selecting data to present was difficult as fluctuations are apparent between academic years, between semesters, and even in relation to the academic mentor. We chose to present the implementation data in each school year without noting changes from the first to the second semester. We also present data from students in the two programs: the four-year academic program and the two-year certification program.

Implementation by students in the four-year academic program.

Table 2 shows data pertaining to implementation of RPBR during the first three years of studies of this group. These students engage in weekly fieldwork during their first three years and then continue their academic courses while completing a paid internship during their fourth academic year. The percentage of students who included children experiencing difficulties in the RPBR groups is shown for the first three academic years (column 5) and the second and third academic years (column 6), as it is during the second academic year that the students are systematically instructed to include children with difficulties.

	Students who implemented RPBR (%)	Mean RPBR cycles per semester (SD)	Mean readings per cycle (SD)	In academic years 1-3, students who included a child having difficulties in the RPBR groups (%)	In academic years 2-3, students who included a child having difficulties in the RPBR groups (%)
2010-2011 N=463	91%	1.56 (±0.73)	5.22 (±2.22)	59%	77%
2011-2012 N=468	93%	1.47 (±0.91)	5.11 (±2.87)	55%	74%
2012-2013 N=567	96%	1.72 (±0.94)	5.10 (±2.11)	59%	77%

Table 2- Implementation of RPBR by Students in the Four-year Track (2010-2013)

Table 2 reveals high implementation among these students (above 90%). Fluctuations over the study years show a moderate increase from 91% in 2010-2011 to 96% in 2012-2013. The mean number of reading cycles per academic year – roughly three – exceeds our minimal requirement (one per semester, two per year), and the mean number of readings per cycle is just over 5, meaning at least 3 readings per cycle, taking standard deviation into consideration. Thus, the number of cycles and readings per cycle exceeds our basic requirements of the students and suggests stability over the years. As to the inclusion of a child with some sort of difficulties, about 58% of the students included such a child in their reading groups, regardless of study year or semester. Looking only at second and third year students, however, the percentage of inclusion is higher, averaging about 76%. Note that it is only in the first semester of the second year of studies that we explicitly instruct our students to include in their groups, whenever possible, children experiencing difficulties; the students also take a course about social competence of children, which is enhanced by participation in group learning. Therefore, we interpret the higher rates of inclusion in the second and third study years as a likely consequence of teacher training. Table 2 also shows a slight decline in the percentage of inclusion in year 2011-2012 and a remission to previous levels in 2012-2013.

Table 3 examines the record on RPBR implementation in the 2012-2013 academic year for “interns”, the term used in Israel for fourth-year students in the four-year program who have completed all their fieldwork and pedagogy studies. Data gathered from interns through 2010-2013 were somewhat inconsistent and therefore are not fully shown. The number of respondents was low and it was hard to point to robust trends about RPBR implementation during the first two years of the study. We therefore present in Table 3 data about the implementation of RPBR among first-year interns in 2012-2013, when questions about the educational role were added to the questionnaire – were they “primary teachers” or “supplemental teachers”? In Israel, children attend school six days a week – Sunday through Friday – though teachers work a five-day week (or four days every other

week if they are parents to children under age 14). Therefore, in addition to the primary teacher and supplemental teacher, each preschool also has on staff an assistant and a supplemental assistant. Supplemental teachers typically work with 3-4 primary teachers. Interns are offered positions of primary teacher or supplemental teacher, depending mainly on supply and demand. At "The College", we typically advise our students to opt for a supplemental position to allow for a more gradual induction process. As we shall see, however, data from this study suggest that we should be more careful about the advice we give to students.

	% implementation by all interns	% implementation by Levinsky interns	% implementation by head teachers	% implementation by supplemental teachers	% implementation including all the children
1st semester:* Total N=47 Levinsky N=20	36%	45%	57%	45%	67%
2nd semester:* Total N=20 Levinsky N=14	30%	36%	80%	38%	100%

Table 3 - First-Year Interns' Implementation of RPBR by Educational Function and Semester (2012-2013)

*Students from other teachers colleges participate in the 4th year internship workshop that meets weekly at Levinsky. Questionnaires were completed during the final session of each semester, thus all interns in the workshop filled in the questionnaires. The table distinguishes between the overall number of interns who filled in the questionnaire and those who were Levinsky students so that we are better able to evaluate the impact of the preparation program at Levinsky College of Education.

Table 3ⁱⁱ shows that the role teachers perform as first-year interns, moderates the extent to which they implement RPBR. Primary teachers seem to perform RPBR more than supplemental teachers. Moreover, we learn from the data that although fewer supplemental teachers engage in RPBR in the second semester (dropping from 45% to 38%), dramatically more primary teachers perform RPBR in the second semester (up from 57% to 80%), and fully 100% of the teachers include all the children in the second semester reading groups. While the findings are limited by the small number of respondents, examination of the role teachers play in the internship year seems to be a promising direction for further study. The data might be useful in providing guidance to students regarding their choice of educational roles in their first year of internship.

Implementation by students in the certification program. Certificate students already have an academic degree. This program adds pedagogical courses and provides supervised fieldwork for them to earn certification as early childhood education teachers. Their study programs are individualized, depending on the nature of their bachelor's degrees. Data pertaining to the extent these students implemented RPBR during the three academic years are presented in Table 4. The fifth column of Table 4 shows the

percentage of RPBR groups that included a child with difficulties, revealing substantial differences between semesters. They tell a different story than the yearly percentages in the rightmost column.

	Students who implemented RPBR (%)	Mean RPBR cycles per semester (SD)	Mean readings per cycle (SD)	RPBR groups that included children with difficulties, by semester (%)	RPBR groups that included children with difficulties, yearly (%)
2010-2011	98%	1.59 (±0.71)	4.60 (±1.58)	78% (1 st sem.) 89% (2 nd sem.)	84%
2011-2012	97%	1.96 (±0.94)	5 (±1.81)	76% (1 st sem.) 71% (2 nd sem.)	74%
2012-2013	100%	1.53 (±0.80)	4.65 (±2.40)	55% (1 st sem.) 88% (2 nd sem.)	72%

Table 4- Implementation of RPBR by Students in the Certification Program (2010-2013)

Table 4 indicates that RPBR was implemented by almost all students registered in the certificate program: 97% or 98% implementation in the years 2010-2012 means that only a few students did not engage in this activity at all during the academic year, probably related to attributes of individual students rather than to the program itself. As to the mean number of reading cycles, students reportedly performed about 3 cycles of RPBR throughout the academic year, which exceeds the minimum 2 cycles required by the college (one cycle of RPBR each semester). The mean number of readings is 4.6 or more per cycle. Although the data in 2011-2012 show a somewhat higher number of cycles and readings per cycle, we tend to attribute this to a particular group of students that year. With regard to the yearly mean for inclusion of children with difficulties, the percentage seems to decrease, but an examination of the fluctuations per semester indicates that the starting point of the first semester in 2012-2013 was relatively low (55%), but leaped to 88% by year end. Another increase, though more moderate, can be seen in the 2010-2011 academic year. However, in 2011-2012 we witness a moderate decrease from the first to the second semester in the percentage of reading groups that include children with difficulties. Interestingly, as seen in Table 2 and discussed above, a similar decrease was found among students in the four-year track program. We discussed these findings with the college mentors at the beginning of the 2012-2013 academic year, but the nature of these fluctuations is still not clear to us. One conclusion is that it is important to collect data twice a year and monitor changes that might occur from the first to the second semester.

Meanings Attributed to RPBR by Student Teachers

Perceptions of RPBR. About 36% percent of the questionnaires throughout the three years of this study included an open question. Analysis of these responses shows that student teachers understand the scope and processes involved in RPBR as:

- *An inquiry-learning context related to language:* “RPBR enables children’s inquiry and contemplation of the story, which is full of understanding...” (third year, second semester student); “The fact that the process included repeated readings helped children understand the plot and enabled them to rediscover themes in the book and learn new words” (third year, second semester student).
- *A socio-cognitive process:* “...[RPBR] offers the children the opportunity to understand the story from various perspectives and exposes them to a different point of reference in how the book is mediated [compared to the usual way of reading books in preschools]” (third year, second semester student).
- *Based on dialogic discourse:* “It is important to emphasize to students that the discourse among the children is the most important thing in RPBR...” (second year, second semester student); “Only through the experience of group encounters with children can I understand that encouraging the children’s participation is the most important thing, rather than reading through the entire book each encounter” (second year, second semester student).
- *A socially inclusive endeavor that contributes to group cohesiveness:* “I think that [RPBR] encounters contributed to the group cohesiveness and enabled less dominant children to participate and find interest in book reading” (second year, second semester student); “...friendships among children were formed as a result of the reading group encounters” (third year, second semester student).
- *A learning process and an opportunity for growth and learning for both students and children:* “Throughout the first two years, RPBR felt like a kind of ‘punishment’ for me and the children both. Only this last year have we come to understand how to perform RPBR and its meaning both for ourselves and for the children...I have no doubt that I will continue to perform RPBR when I become a teacher” (third year, second semester student); “At the beginning it was hard for me to use open questions to activate discourse among children...Slowly I learned how to ask open questions, to guide but not interfere with the group discussion” (certificate student, second semester).

The students’ best understandings of RPBR are compatible with the research literature emphasizing the use of read-alouds for thinking and reading comprehension (Biemiller, 1999, 2012; Lennox, 2013; Paris, 2005). However, as presented below, not all students share these interpretations.

Reflective Thinking Related to the Implementation of RPBR

In Table 5, we show the percentage of narrow and extended reflective comments (see Tools subsection for definitions) raised by students from 2010 to 2013. The percentage of narrow and extended reflective comments is interpreted by us as a reflection of the students' understanding of RPBR as a socio-cognitive, inclusive endeavor.

	2010-2011		2011-2012		2012-2013	
	1 st semes- ter	2 nd semes- ter	1 st semes- ter	2 nd semes- ter	1 st semes- ter	2 nd semes- ter
(1) Narrow narrative	13%	18%	23%	13%	13%	19%
Narrow, entire year	15.5%		18%		16%	
(2) Extended narrative	4%	4%	9%	29%	23%	25%
Extended, entire year	4%		19%		24%	
(1+2) Both narratives	17%	22%	32%	41%	36%	44%
Total, both narratives	19.5%		37%		40%	

Table 5- -Narrow vs. Extended Reflective-Constructive Responses about RPBR, by Year and Semester (2010-2013)

¹ The questionnaire is attached-see Appendix 1

¹ Students from other teachers colleges participate in the 4th year internship workshop that meets weekly at Levinsky. Questionnaires were completed during the final session of each semester, thus all interns in the workshop filled in the questionnaires. The table distinguishes between the overall number of interns who filled in the questionnaire and those who were Levinsky students so that we are better able to evaluate the impact of the preparation program at Levinsky College of Education.

Table 5 reveals that the overall percentage of reflective comments about RPBR doubled from the first to the third year – from almost 20% of the total in 2010-2011 to 40% of them in 2012-2013. A closer look shows that the major change happened between 2010-2011 and 2011-2012, and that more extended responses were the main contributors to this change. The increase in extended reflective responses between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 was modest. However, in 2011-2012, most reflective comments had been found among third year students, while in 2012-2013, such responses were spread throughout the study years and programs (both four-year track and certification programs).

Perceptions of Benefits, Facilitators, and Stumbling Blocks of RPBR

Analysis of the student responses to the open question revealed a relatively high percentage of positive and negative reactions to RPBR, reactions that were related both to the children and themselves. We extracted the following three themes from their comments: (a) benefits attributed to RPBR; (b) factors seen as facilitating RPBR; and (c) factors viewed as impeding RPBR. Addressing these themes might lead to a better understanding of the students' perceptions of RPBR and steps that could be adopted in the teacher education program to improve the students' understanding of the RPBR approach, thereby improving the quality of implementation.

Student responses to the open question revealed that they believe RPBR benefits both the children and themselves. The benefits ascribed by the students to their own learning include greater familiarity with the children, particularly their abilities, and a deeper understanding of the stories in light of the book-related discourse. Students also asserted that RPBR contributes to the children's thinking, meaning-making, and learning ("they constantly discover new details and themes"), attention and perseverance, memory, vocabulary, communication in general, extended discourse in particular, knowledge of the world, and "ownership" of the book as they are able to "read" it. Moreover RPBR was seen as an activity that strengthens the children's belief in positive values, enhances a child's self-confidence, and fosters cooperation with other children.

Among the factors facilitating RPBR, students cited the rereading of texts as it contributes to a better understanding of the story, better skills at guiding the discourse with the children, helping children make connections between illustrations and verbal text, and selecting high quality, engaging books for RPBR (students did not cite their criteria for high quality books).

Also cited were factors that, according to the students, impede the implementation of RPBR. Among these: children bored by the repetitions, the children's age (sometimes a younger age was believed incompatible and sometimes being older – 5 and above – was regarded as unsuitable for RPBR), and a large number of children in the preschool. Several claims reflect a lack of understanding of the basic epistemological assumptions of RPBR, particularly the failure to assume that children would better understand the story through repeated learning and inquiry. For example, one student wrote that repeated readings of the same book constituted "disregard" for the children's intelligence. Beyond the "deterministic" perceptions of what impedes RPBR, such as the child's age, some students mentioned stumbling blocks that could have been overcome. These included too rigid planning of the readings (i.e., preplanning the student teacher's questions and reactions), apparent incongruence among courses with regard to the expectations from student teachers, and field mentors' skepticism, lack of support, and failure to model RPBR.

Discussion

Summary of Data and their Meaning

Data in this study clearly show that RPBR is regularly performed by the early education student teachers across the programs and study years. Four-year track students

complete their studies having performed about ten documented and reflected upon cycles of RPBR, while certificate students perform about six such cycles before embarking upon a regular teaching assignment. Moreover, about three-quarters of our second and third year students and certificate program students report that they include a child experiencing some difficulty in their reading groups. The inclusion in reading groups of children having difficulties is likely attributable to the education courses of these teachers, as the percentage is higher for advanced than first year students. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that in line with Feiman-Nemser's recommendation (2001) we have succeeded in establishing RPBR in small, heterogeneous groups as a foundational procedure in our teacher education programs. RPBR has become an infrastructure for teaching students to learn from their experience about the quality of dialogic discourse in small groups.

Data related to the performance of RPBR by interns (fourth-year students) in various academic years has been somewhat sparse and inconclusive. Nevertheless the questions added to the 2012-2013 survey concerning the educational role assumed by the intern (primary teacher or supplemental teacher) and the inclusion of children in the repeated book readings helped identify the role as a possible moderator of RPBR. Responses from 2012-2013 interns suggest that not only do primary teachers perform RPBR more frequently than supplemental teachers, but that RPBR implementation increases from the first to the second semester, whereas the implementation of supplemental teachers, whose work is divided among several preschools, decreases in the second semester.

Data from this study further suggest that the students' deep understanding of RPBR – as indicated by the reflective comments – improved through the years of the study. Their understanding of RPBR is congruent with the view that read-alouds are a pedagogical approach that facilitates dialogic discourse about books, which generates improved understanding of themes, life situations, and words, together with intimate relationships among children (Bereiter, 1994; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1996; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Wells, 2009).

However, even though the students' deep understanding of the procedure improved, this does not seem characteristic of all the students. Although frequently performed, RPBR is not deeply understood by all the students who implement it on a regular basis. The ideal would be that all students understand the procedure. Therefore, continuous effort should be invested in deepening the students' understanding as well as ongoing improvement of the implementation.

Monitoring RPBR Implementation as a tool to continuously improve the teacher preparation

The ongoing monitoring of the implementation and understanding of RPBR by student teachers has been used by the staff of the program to continuously improve the preparation of student teachers, based on the findings obtained at the end of each academic year. The results obtained annually have been used to improve our guidance of both mentors and students. The following actions have been adopted as part of our efforts to continuously improve the implementation of RPBR in the teacher preparation programs:

Following the 2010-2011 study, we addressed student criticism of the training processes, such as the perceived incongruence between courses, and called for discussions to be held among literature lecturers, multiple literacy lecturers, and college mentors.

Also, at the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year and following the results of the previous year's study, meetings were held – attended by the second year student teachers, college mentors, and department head at the time (C.T.) – to address the criticisms and questions raised by the students during their first year. For example we addressed the perception raised by some students of the rigidity of the procedure (e.g., to always complete four readings) by reaffirming the goals of RPBR and emphasizing the flexibility that was not only possible but necessary for successfully engaging in RPBR. We followed the same procedure at the beginning of 2012-2013 based on criticisms and questions raised by the previous year's first year students.

In addition, following the 2010-2011 study and the relatively low proportion of reflective narratives in the open-ended comments, we decided to focus on two main areas to enhance the mentors' and students' understanding of RPBR: (a) We initiated a compulsory analytical review by students of each book prior to performance of RPBR; all college mentors went through the same process prior to their work with the students; and (b) we emphasized properties and analysis of dialogic discourse in staff meetings and pedagogy classes. We sought to reframe difficulties raised by students that focused on children's characteristics (such as their age – too young or too old for repeated readings) as a problem that called for sharpening the teacher's ability to lead dialogic discourse in groups.

Following the 2012-2013 study, we continued to strengthen skills related to dialogic discourse and focused on encouraging mentors to pay attention to the inclusion of children with difficulties into the reading groups, as the percentage of inclusion had slightly declined in the previous academic year.

In the wake of the 2012-2013 results, we sought to sharpen the mentors' responsibility for the performance of RPBR. Each mentor received the anonymous comments of his or her students from the previous years and was encouraged to ponder ways to discuss them in class with the students and use them in their fieldwork guidance of students.

Finally, we shared with our staff the preliminary data related to the differential implementation of RPBR by primary teachers as opposed to supplemental teachers, and asked them to use this information in their discussions with third-year students who plan to apply for early childhood education internships.

Beyond the changes introduced into the training process based on the evidence produced by the study, we believe that the study contributed to the adoption of actions by student teachers and mentors that enhance social justice in their daily practice. We claim that the contribution to social justice is evident both in the extended application of dialogic discourse aimed at improving thinking and comprehension of all children participating in the group and by the widespread adoption of an inclusive approach. We believe therefore that implementation of RPBR in small heterogeneous groups is aligned with requirements of inclusion as a process that "is about equal opportunities for all, whatever their age, gender, ethnicity, disability, attainment and background" (UNESCO, 2000, p. 4). Both the high percentage of inclusion of children having difficulties into the daily reading groups and the

open comments indicate that students have developed an inclusive approach toward children, and toward an ever evolving and more just educational practice (Nofke, 2009). Our task, however, is not yet done, but rather we perceive it to be an evolving process that aims at improving the students' understanding of the procedure and their attempts to transform it into a better practice.

One of the major limitations on drawing inferences from the findings of this study is our inability to monitor an individual student's professional development throughout the study years due to the anonymity of the data collection. It would have been important to know, for example, the transformations experienced by each student in gaining understanding of the RPBR approach. To begin to understand personal professional development, we carried out a small-scale case-study focused on an analysis of the changes in discourse and reflection related to RPBR from the first to the third year of study of 3 student teachers (Tal, 2012). Findings indicated that, over the three years, all three students relaxed their control of the discourse, allowing for more continuous literary discourse among the children. Furthermore, all three students also developed a genuine concern for the children's wellbeing and participation in the group. This study needs to be expanded to a larger group of students.

The importance of the present study stems from an institution of a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) including students and staff in early childhood teacher education at Levinsky College; a community of practice engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise: implementation of RPBR in small, heterogeneous groups as an inclusive practice.

Nevertheless, we need to follow-up on the performance and interpretations of RPBR by students and interns a few years after completion of their studies to learn whether RPBR has become a foundational procedure in the preschools led by our students.

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