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Case Studies of At-Risk Middle Grades Students and Literacy Applications Including Technology

Francine Falk-Rose, Principal Investigator
School of Education, Pace University

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Final Project Report

Case Studies of At-Risk Middle Grades Students and Literacy Applications Including Technology

Cornerstone I: Expansion and Enhancement to the *Thinkfinity* Platform

Principal Investigator: Francine Falk-Ross

School of Education – Literacy

November 16, 2011

Original Objectives and **Progress Notes to Date**:

A) To identify and share the educational needs, personal interests, and learning attitudes of middle grade students having literacy challenges on the *Thinkfinity* website;

   On the original timeline for the grant, June and July of 2011 were the assigned times for the analysis of the data and the preparation of the case studies, or profiles, of the students, and August and September were assigned for the posting of the profiles. The formalization of the results has been completed.

B) To identify and share the assessment process and results of informal surveys and running records as they target the literacy needs of middle grade students having literacy challenges on the *Thinkfinity* website;

   The data has been collected and the transcriptions of interviews were received in May 2011. The results of students' running records (i.e., the reading assessment data) have been collected and analyzed.

C) To provide undergraduate (specifically TCH 410-Reflective Literacy Methods focused on intermediate and middle grades students) and graduate degree (specifically ED 755B-Literacy Methods for Middle Grade Students in Literacy and ED 656-Content Literacy in the MAT program) candidates on the Pace University campuses and on other campuses with models of assessment and instruction through case studies for discussion in university classrooms.

   The data has already been provided to the two classes in Fall 2011 in packets. The plan for this data is to provide the raw data of the case studies to the university students (i.e., preservice and practicing teachers) to have them build the recommendations for instruction as an assignment. Although I will not be teaching the undergraduates in the TCH 410 class, this information will be made available to them for a lesson plan. For the ED 755B class, the assignment will be in preparation (i.e., a model) of a profile of a student. This information is already collected and compiled into packets.

   The goal for sharing this information with other groups will be made available on the *Thinkfinity* website and at the Northeastern Educational Research Association in Connecticut in October, 2011.

D) To provide teachers in school districts (Pace University partnerships and outside educational forums) and other educational settings with professional

development opportunities to learn more about middle grade students who struggle with literacy achievement.

I scheduled several dates in June to follow-up the case studies with strategy instruction. I have obtained a small grant to provide new tradebooks (short novels or biographies) purchases for the students and strategy textbooks for the teachers of those students who participated in the study, and these books have been purchased. Hopefully, the impact on students and teachers will increase once the profiles are posted on the *Thinkfinity* website in September 2011. I have used these profiles in my ED 755B class (Middle Grades Literacy and Technological Applications); many of these students are already practicing teachers.

E) To provide parents and community members a section on the *Thinkfinity* website that addresses the concerns for their middle grade children's literacy development and achievement, and suggests online applications that they may use at home.

This has not occurred yet, and will be completed following the posting and advertisement of the Profiles on the Thinkfinity website in December 2011.

F) To develop publications that share/disseminate the above information and advertise the pace university *Thinkfinity* website for many applications.

The presentation of this information at the Northeasetern Educational Research Association's conference in October 2011 has occurred. The Pace University Thinkfinity website will be advertised at the conference, and the information will be shared. Hopefully, this same information will be written up for a publication for the NMSA's several journals.

Impact on Students:

The teachers of the students have already commented that the students appreciated the individual attention to their reading challenges. During the interview, the students were observed to talk more about their interests and attitudes about reading than usually occurs in this resource classroom. In response to the students' needs, I have obtained a small grant to provide new tradebooks (short novels or biographies) purchases for the students and strategy textbooks for the teachers of those students who participated in the study. Hopefully, the impact on students and teachers will increase once the profiles are posted on the *Thinkfinity* website in December 2011.

Impact on Faculty:

Except for my example supporting students in a partnership school, there has not been an impact on the faculty yet. The plan is to share this information at one of the Fall 2011 SOE Faculty Sharing sessions that occur before (or just after) each faculty meeting each month.

Summary of Results:

Fourteen middle school students having diverse challenges to literacy development, including linguistic differences, cultural differences, speech/language difficulties, and learning disabilities from two school districts were selected and interviewed about their attitudes and interests toward reading at the discussion tables in their classroom and to respond to their performance results on a passage reading. There were six 6th graders, two 7th graders, and six 8th graders. Assessment included using the *Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile*, (Pitcher et al., 2007), a running record, and *Retrospective Miscue Analysis* (RMA, Goodman, 1996) to determine trends in their stated challenges and perceived reading strengths. Students were invited to a small roundtable at the edge of the classroom to complete the survey protocol and to respond to the semi-structured interview questions. Following our 'table talk,' a running record was administered. A week later, each student was seen for an additional 30 minutes for tutoring. The results of the running record were discussed at the table with each of the students individually so they could respond to their miscues or misunderstandings and to direct the content of the following instructional periods . The students were tested in May 2011, and tutoring sessions occurred in June 2011.

In general, the results of the informal testing and interviews indicated the students' word identification challenges (important for decoding new content words), disinterest in school and in reading (important for motivation to achieve), a lack of knowledge and practice with technology (important for involvement with new literacies and a comment on access issues), and confusions with content vocabulary (that is important for reading comprehension). Individual tutoring addressed each area of concern.

In response to the miscue analysis, their reading levels range from 2-3rd grade to on-grade level. Many of the students have failed the State ELA and many of the students had difficulty with writing, as well. Findings indicated that in their reading aloud, all 14 students, including the student who had a hearing impairment, were strongest in their decoding (or 'calling') of tier 1

and tier 2 level words than for tier 3 taken from grade-level vocabulary, and they were strong in their overall sequencing of events in narratives. For example, Luis (not his real name), who is in the seventh grade miscued the words *suffering, struggling*, and *wailing*, each of which is less common in simpler stories but which expected to be known for his grade level, and which might have been read correctly if he had read more widely since these words represent experiences in readings for middle graders. Eleven of the 14 students were most challenged by vocabulary meanings of tier 2 and tier 3 words, and deeper meaning of the storylines. For these classmates, according to the students' explanations, their family members were not proficient in reading and writing in English. For the other four students, second language literacy use was modeled in both languages (i.e., multilingual, bi-literate) in the home. When these vocabulary words that were unknown and miscues were explained to the respective students during the RMA, they were eager to try to make connections and link to similar words. For example, when the word *desperate* required a teacher correction (because Franco could not find cues/clues), he later shared that it sounded like *desperation* and *desperado* which were in his oral vocabulary. Following tutoring focused on patterns of word identification miscues with connections to topics discussed previously in the classroom, the students were eager to try to make connections and link these word part patterns to similar words. Each of the students received a new tradebook appropriate to his or her interest and reading level (chosen by the classroom teacher).

The second result focused on students' comments during the interviews and tutoring sessions that there are not the choice of books that 'work' for them because they cannot read (i.e., due to level of material) what some of their friends read, and members of their families may not be able to help them with their reading (i.e., due to language differences). More specifically, the students commented following questioning that they didn't read or talk about reading/books with family or friends outside of school, and didn't read independently; although they all noted that they liked to discuss reading and books with their resource room teacher who matched them with books they found interesting, and that she (i.e., the teacher) initiated conversations that they thought of as important. They shared their lack of knowledge of vocabulary. Half the students noted that they struggle with writing activities in school, which is consistent with observations of their work in content area classrooms. In addition, two of the students noted that the reading material in their homes were in a second language, which is not a negative influence but confusing as they struggled with English vocabulary. Following tutoring and modeling of lesson plans for both teachers, were provided with two reading strategies text appropriate for middle level learners' interests in their classrooms.

Books that were ordered for the teachers included textbooks that they specifically listed as important to their teaching needs: Reading Strategy

Lessons for Science and Social Studies (Robb, 2009), Making Science Accessible to English Language Learners (Carr, 2006), Reading and Writing in Science (Grant & Fisher, 2009), A Land We Can Share: Teaching Literacy to Students with Autism (Kluth, 2007), Drawing a Blank: Improving Comprehension for Readers on the Autistic Spectrum (Iland, 2011).

Implications of the Tutoring Project:

The individual nature of the support and the matching of books to their interests supported new learning and challenges finding reading material. A discussion of these findings reveals that these marginalized students may, from their own accounts, be missing key literacy experiences and new literacies competencies during their middle level school years, a time that represents the presence of significant transitions in maturation of learning habits. Individual conferencing periods with attention to specific 'learning to read' strategies (such as morphemic analysis for identifying word roots, word parts, affixes, etc.) is still necessary for middle school students with learning disabilities and listening challenges. Collaboration among teachers , reading specialists, and librarians to develop lists of tradebooks to motivate 'reading to learn' practices is also a strong implication to ensure independent new learning and to prevent the beginnings of pre-dropout behaviors at this critical age. These practices are consistent with best practice standards.

Next Steps:

Presentation of selected case studies through inservice meetings and faculty workshops to:

-members of the School of Education

-students in spring 2012 courses

-educational faculty and graduate students at the national NMSA/AMLE and regional NERA conferences

-other departments at Pace University and in school districts

THANK YOU!