

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Literacy Practices as Humanizing Pedagogy

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Abstract

This pilot study investigates content-area preservice teacher perceptions of literacy practices as humanizing pedagogy. Findings from open-ended survey questions and a focal interview suggest preservice teachers see the connection between literacy learning and the teaching of their content area. They also have a budding understanding of how literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy can be linked. The research suggests preservice teachers and new teachers will need additional tools, training, and support to enact literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy. Educator preparation programs can be part of that work and support system for new teachers.

Keywords: educator preparation, humanizing pedagogy, literacy practice

Calls for teacher education to evolve to serve better culturally and linguistically diverse students are not new but continue to be needed to counter constant dehumanizing practices faced by students. Standardized test scores, school ratings, and accountability measures remain the reality for most public schools, narrowing the curriculum and its assessment (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). These are among the dehumanizing priorities that unfortunately “renders [teachers] complicit in reproducing relations of domination and subordination” (Kitts, 2020, p. 83). As a result of this, learning how to use humanizing pedagogy during educator preparation is necessary. Humanizing pedagogy is rooted in the work of Freire (1970) and focuses on praxis, a combination of action

and reflection to help create critical consciousness or understanding of the world. Freire and Macedo (1987) identified literacy as playing a key role in this process with their focus on emancipatory literacy. This is a literacy where learners are subjects, not objects. In practice, this can include centering on the learner’s reality, critical consciousness, value of diverse sociocultural resources, trusting and caring relationships, mainstream knowledge, student empowerment, and challenging inequity (Salazar, 2013).

Thus, literacy educators and their literacy practices play a key role as historically literacy has been used as a weapon of domination or a tool of liberation (Riley & Crawford-Garrett,

2015). Teachers and teacher educators can consider how to integrate literacy practices to achieve more humanized classrooms. This work can begin in educator preparation programs (EPP) but that task is rife with tensions with even well-intentioned programs reifying problematic viewpoints and deficit thinking (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Essentially EPPs are imperative to help support the teachers of the future to better humanize and empower their students. With these ideas in mind, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions current preservice teachers have about the use of literacy practices as humanizing pedagogy.

Research Questions

With literacy as a driver of either domination or liberation and a necessary skill for students, it is important to survey what current preservice teachers understand about both literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy and how they can work for or against each other. Leading up to their full-time classroom experiences, what do preservice teachers feel and understand about these two concepts? This study focused on the following research question: What are preservice teachers' perceptions of literacy practices as humanizing pedagogy?

Theoretical Framework

Humanizing pedagogy is the theoretical lens for this work and is a pedagogy that “considers how to integrate lived realities of students in the pursuit of the co-construction of knowledge within the social, cultural, and political realities of school and life, and in the pursuit of praxis” (Reyes, 2016, p. 340). It is meant to counter dehumanization. Bartolomé (1994) identifies the most important concept as not specific methods but rather political clarity, which is “the process by which individuals achieve a deepening awareness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to recreate them” (p. 178). She further contends that with political clarity, educators can teach strategically and enable students to consciously monitor their learning.

Operationally, humanizing pedagogy involves instruction delivered by a teacher with political clarity who values students' lived experiences and identities. This approach examines how meaning is constructed, integrates critical reflection, and includes instruction in metacognitive skills that help students monitor their learning. Literacy practices - such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking - are key to students being able to share these elements within the classroom. Furthermore, literacy also supports student voice and empowerment throughout their lives beyond the classroom. In this article, the definition of literacy encompasses multiliteracies and multiple modalities, encompassing both multimodal and digital texts.

Literature Review

Giroux and McLaren (1986) make the case for teacher preparation programs helping teachers become “transformative intellectuals” (p. 215), particularly when addressing practices that emphasize standardization, mandates, and narrowly defined performance skills. Carter Andrews et al. (2018) highlight the need for preservice teachers to be able to facilitate discussion. This includes what is considered controversial topics as they learn about creating classrooms that are safe spaces for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse students, and supporting youth as they learn about social justice. There are also calls for a more diverse teacher corps and different forms of teacher certification (Liu & Ball, 2019). These various demands have emerged during a time of increased focus on accountability, especially with the advent of No Child Left Behind (2002).

Preservice teachers may be exposed to a variety of different pedagogical perspectives and backgrounds, including culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2001). These frameworks reject deficit views of students that are grounded in who they are and emphasize the strengths they and their families bring to the school. Humanizing pedagogy can encompass

these perspectives as well as broaden their application to different classroom contexts. It makes connections to pedagogy that center not only on student identity and experience but also positions the teacher as a co-learner to challenge inequity and aid in student agency.

Ball and Ladson-Billings (2020) focus on teachers' lack of understanding of how to build on students' cultural practices to advocate for change in teacher preparation programs. They see this knowledge and desire as crucial for creating positive, caring relationships with students and supporting positive student identity development. In addition, they summarize Liu's (2011) research that illustrates the need for dialogical spaces that support critical reflection and transformation. This work echoes Ball's (2006) earlier work to prepare future teachers to effectively teach culturally and linguistically diverse students. In the past decade, the percentage of students who identify as Black or Hispanic has increased (TEA, 2023). For example, between 2012 and 2023, Hispanic enrollment in the state of Texas increased to 12.1% while White student enrollment decreased by 6.9% (TEA, 2023). The number of emergent bilinguals (EB) has also increased.

Bartolomé (2004) writes of the importance of "infusing teacher education curricula with critical pedagogical principles in order to prepare educators to aggressively name and interrogate potentially harmful ideologies and practices in the schools and classrooms where they work" (p. 98). She claims many teachers uncritically accept the way things are. Bartolomé interviewed four high school teachers labeled "exemplary" by administrators and colleagues. She found these teachers who were aware of these harmful ideologies, including unequal power relations, questioned the Western idea of meritocracy, and rejected the deficit views of students, as well as the dominant views of White supremacy. She concludes that preservice teachers need explicit study in ideology and need to be able to take a counter-hegemonic stance for the good of the students.

Researchers have also explored how teacher educators enact humanizing pedagogy in their classrooms. Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2015) implemented a humanizing curriculum with their undergraduate preservice teachers at their two respective universities. They concluded that teacher educators need to become more aware of having to become facilitators of "unlearning" and "rereading" (p. 75). Babino and Dixon (2021) specifically focused on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students by incorporating literature circles with a text that features a plot that depicts violence against a teenager who identified as queer. Within this practice, they purposefully engaged in critical consciousness as they led their students to also "unlearn" and "reread." By the end of three semesters, they found all students with high levels of commitment to teaching and serving minoritized [researchers' term] students.

Additionally, Riley and Crawford-Garrett (2022) used ten years of qualitative practitioner research (and their previous study summarized above) to develop a framework for teaching preservice teachers how to implement humanizing pedagogy in a literacy methods class. Their framework outlines three key elements for this: critical, locally contextualized, and content-rich. They also emphasize that teacher educators must humanize themselves in the process.

While research has explored the implementation and effectiveness of humanizing curriculum with preservice teachers, this work is far from complete and remains theoretical. Research into how to use literacy practices as humanizing pedagogy is in its early stages. Thus, this study adds to this emerging research to inform the work of teacher educators by providing empirical evidence of preservice teachers' perceptions of literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy.

Method

This study aimed to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy. Specifically, this study asked the

following question: What are preservice teachers' perceptions of literacy practices as humanizing pedagogy?

To answer this question, a mixed methods design was used in this study (Clark & Creswell, 2015). The qualitative (an interview) and quantitative (a survey) components of the study were completed concurrently. The survey was designed to address the perceptions of different kinds of literacy practices that were not addressed in the open-ended questions of the interview. Similarly, the question about the importance of professional development was included in the survey, not the interview.

The survey consisted of Likert scale items. The study was posted online using Google Forms. The researcher was available to answer questions about the study at the beginning of the participants' class time. If the students wished to be part of the interview process, they added their contact information to the Google Form survey. The interview was conducted via Zoom. The interview questions were designed to gain deeper insights into the nature of the participants' perceptions and what informed their responses.

Participants and Setting

Participants were preservice teachers enrolled in two literacy education classes at a large public university in South Central Texas. One class was disciplinary and content literacy course candidates seeking grades 7-12 certification, and the other group was for grades 4-8. In the 7-12 class, all preservice teachers are seeking to teach a class other than language arts. In the 4-8 class, students are seeking certifications in individual content areas or combined subjects, such as social studies and language arts.

The survey was provided to students during class and posted on the online learning management system. A total of 45 students had access to the survey and twenty-three students completed the survey. Seven students volunteered to participate in the interview. One student completed the interview within the

course of the semester. The interview lasted about 20 minutes and was conducted on the Zoom application.

Data Collection

Data was collected using a survey and an interview (Appendix B). The survey was administered to the two classes during the middle of the spring semester. Students in these two classes were provided a link during class to complete the survey. The interview was semi-structured with set questions and follow-up questions to probe for more information. The respondent's survey questions were also used to verify and triangulate the survey responses.

Data Analysis

Qualitative results

The open-ended responses from the survey were open-coded. Initial themes were first developed by the researcher. These themes were then grouped into three thematic categories: content; pedagogy; equity, identity, and student-lived experience. These themes were also considered during the analysis of the quantitative data.

Quantitative results

The eight Likert-scale items on the survey were analyzed for descriptive statistics. These are represented in Table 1 (Appendix A). The quantitative data supports the findings in the open-ended portion of the survey and the focus interview. While the difference is not large, writing ranked lowest among all the literacy practices, with more preservice teachers choosing to *agree* than *strongly agree* for that practice alone. Overall, preservice teachers had positive perceptions of literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy.

Findings

Survey

The findings are presented using the three themes that emerged from the data analysis of the survey: content; pedagogy; equity and

identity, and student-lived experience. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to report data.

Content

Respondents focused on the deeper knowledge of content, enhancing disciplinary content learning, and expanding vocabulary. For example, Max noted, “Literacy practices are important in science and math because it helps students understand the content on a deeper level as well as allowing them to not just memorize the problem, by genuinely understanding the content.” Jenna built on that idea, wanting her students to also be creators in the classroom. She specifically wrote about literacy practices while teaching history. Other respondents also focused on their specific literacy practices to support students in reading and writing like historians, scientists, and scholars as well as the importance of students learning vocabulary within their content areas and beyond.

Pedagogy

Respondents also saw humanizing pedagogy as a means to help students make connections to the material, communicate effectively, and as culturally relevant pedagogy. Adam writes about making “it more personal to students who view history and social studies as boring, not for them, or they feel like they are not represented enough.” Jenna elaborated on this idea by writing, “humanizing pedagogy helps students frame the content they learn in my classroom in a way that makes it applicable to all other walks of life... my students’ unique walks of life,” and additionally, “Literacy can be used to demonstrate many different forms of understanding... It is important to help humanize these forms of literacy, so students see they already use them.” Respondents also identified specific connections between literacy practices in humanizing pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy, which as mentioned above focus on student identities and strengths. James added to this idea by writing, “Students should be able to understand and interact with texts

varying in genres, authors, background, perspective, cultures, and more.”

Equity, Identity, and Student-Lived Experience

Respondents also made deeper connections to equity, identity, and student-lived experiences, all key factors in humanizing pedagogy. Preservice teachers wrote about the need to connect with students, learn from and listen to students, as well as make sure students are represented in the curriculum. Stephanie wrote that literacy “plays a significant role in reducing gender, race, nationality, and religious inequality that favors one group over another in access to education, property, employment, health care, legal and civic participation.”

Other respondents reflected on themselves as learners in the classroom and understanding student identity and needs. Mark discussed humanizing pedagogy in the class as “Doing so means to reflect students’ own identities as well as introducing them to new ones. Texts should be chosen as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors [Bishop, 1990] to understand and affirm identity and perspective.” Mark wrote about student lived experience as an important aspect of humanizing pedagogy and instruction. He explained students “have lived through their own histories and can produce their historical knowledge” to learn and analyze. Respondent 8 writes about the potential for a positive impact on students and the student experience and an opportunity to own their learning and change the classroom culture, if not the school’s culture.

Additionally, respondents saw humanizing pedagogy as a way for students to feel valued in the classroom and create a symbiotic relationship between teacher and students. Stephanie saw humanizing pedagogy as “crucial” for the “academic and social resilience of students” and powerful with its ability to enable agency. This was echoed by Natalia who wrote that teachers need to create a space where students feel empowered to acquire knowledge on their own.

Focus Interview

One of the survey respondents, Alana, also participated in a focus interview. Her interview revealed her commitment to social justice and a critical literacy approach to pedagogy particularly within her specific context/community. She related that her current campus placement is home to a large Muslim refugee population, and if she were to teach there she would want to consider that community's needs. She said, "You would want to make them feel at home" (5:50-5:55).

More broadly, she spoke about the San Antonio community and its Latinx majority and the need to approach content and pedagogical choices based on that community. She elaborated saying she would start by focusing on the messages of social justice leaders in the community. She shared a project she was working on with a classmate where they were having students create a newsletter to send home to their parents. This supports the equity, identity, and student lived experience theme identified in the survey.

The interview also supports the theme of learning content, but Alana expanded on that idea to include literacy for life. She noted that in her current college jobs (retail, etc.) she still relies on literacy, as do members of the working-class community. She also extended the idea of literacy beyond just the job, focusing on the need for citizens in a democracy to have literacy skills. She said, "When it comes to civic duty and whatnot, as well, you need to also, you know, you need to be able to read and like listen and be able to decipher what some of like, you know, your local politicians and like community members are saying as well" (13:40-13:56). While this can be linked to her content area of social studies, it goes beyond what happens in the classroom.

Despite her openness to humanizing pedagogical practices, Alana admitted it would be challenging in the current political climate in Texas, particularly in light of the current legislative efforts to limit what is taught in classrooms (HB 3979, 2021), including what

books can be used (PEN, 2023). She explained she would have to carefully consider the verbiage she uses and focus on setting up student dialogue where students look at different perspectives and look for inaccuracies themselves. Alana plans to approach her pedagogy by utilizing multiple perspectives and listening closely to her students.

Discussion

Preservice teachers attending these two literacy classes recognized the connection between literacy practices and content learning. They understood that reading, writing, listening, and speaking can assist them in teaching their content, support vocabulary development, and meet disciplinary standards. This is not surprising considering the content and focus of the class they were currently taking and in which they took the survey. This supports Salazar's (2013) framework which includes that mainstream knowledge and discourses continue to matter for students in the classroom. In helping their students gain what she deems "insider" knowledge, K-12 teachers are helping students navigate through the educational system and beyond. In this way, the focus on content can still be incorporated into humanizing pedagogy.

These preservice teachers were also potentially on their way toward the political clarity that Bartolomé (1994) asserts is necessary for humanizing pedagogy. This political clarity includes understanding that teaching is not neutral, that schools mirror larger societal norms, including unequal power relationships, and that teachers understand that they can either help maintain the status quo or work to transform at least their classroom if not the school. Teachers must understand that they "can support positive social change in the classroom" (p. 178) in what they do in the classroom. Preservice teachers' responses in the survey as well as the interview show at minimum an awareness of their power and role in the classroom. Many of their responses also align with Salazar's (2013) principles, including valuing students' sociocultural resources,

making content relevant, linking to students' prior knowledge, and challenging inequities.

Preservice teachers' responses also suggest an emerging awareness that literacy practices can support them in creating a humanizing pedagogy. They wrote about strategically choosing texts, having students share their histories, and fostering communication. While they broadly understood the concept of literacy practice as a component of humanizing pedagogy, many did not share any concrete ideas of what this looks like in practice, at least in the survey responses. Additional interviews could offer deeper insight into this particular part of the research question. Regardless, the responses reflected a need for preservice teachers to receive explicit instruction on how to effectively use literacy practices to create humanizing classroom environments.

Implications

Preservice teachers may have a general idea of what role literacy practices and humanizing pedagogy play in their teaching, but that does not necessarily mean they have the political clarity that Bartolomé (1994) calls necessary for humanizing pedagogy. They may also need additional tools and practical strategies to implement these strategies effectively. This implies the need for teacher educators to directly teach these ideas and approaches in their classes. Of course, this does not mean that preservice teachers will not encounter challenges either in their field of work or when they lead their classrooms as in-service teachers, as the research of Williamson and Warrington (2019) illustrates.

Limitations

The sample of the study was limited because all the participants attended the same university. The department has a clear mission of social justice and thus, students may be more likely than those at other universities to view approaches such as humanizing pedagogy as essential to their teaching. One respondent specifically credited their classes with shaping their perceptions. Additionally, all students were

currently enrolled in a content and disciplinary literacy course when the survey was administered. This context could have influenced their responses about the importance of literacy practices in the teaching of their content area.

Future Research

More research needs to be done into how to counter dehumanizing forces in education including teacher education. This research can include the investigation of concrete ways teacher educators can support students in their implementation of humanizing pedagogy and other critical pedagogy approaches. This will likely need to include how to support preservice teachers in this current political climate and the potential pushback they may receive from others.

Conclusion

Educators continue to face immense pushback on the current dehumanizing practices proliferating in public education despite the challenges. This is why teacher educators must equip preservice teachers with the tools necessary to create humanizing classrooms that work to make all students feel welcomed and valued.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Kristen Henry is a passionate literacy educator who has served as a high school language arts teacher, a district curriculum coordinator, and now an instructor and supervisor of preservice teachers. She is currently completing her Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Her research interests include humanizing practices in the language arts classroom, which is the subject of her dissertation.

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