

Through the Eyes of the Preservice Teacher:
Using a Reflective Reading Journey
To Inform Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

Many factors affect attitudes toward reading, including parent and other caretaker support, sibling attitudes, school and library programs, curriculum and instruction, and, of course, teachers. While working with preservice teachers pursuing licensure in pre-kindergarten through adolescent education, it became evident that the students had many preconceived notions about reading, based on their own experiences as children, youth, and young adults, and that an examination of these experiences could be a powerful tool in developing a better understanding of their future students' needs during the various stages of reading development.

In an effort to enable my students to better understand their personal relationship to reading and to create an opportunity for them to think about how their past experiences might affect their future students, I required them to complete a reflective paper. It was my hope that, in reflecting upon their own reading journeys, there was the potential to make these future teachers more empathic, more aware of warning signs, and more attuned to the need to be positive role models and teacher leaders in reading instruction.

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Background

In 1997, in an effort to assess the current status of reading development instruction for overall effectiveness and to make recommendations regarding additional research in the field, Congress assigned a committee to assess the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching reading. The establishment of the National Reading Panel (NRP) resulted in a body of literature released by the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development (2000) focused on the importance of quality reading instruction. Not surprisingly, a section of this evidence-based assessment pointed to the direct impact of teacher education and reading instruction. The importance of the classroom teacher in the reading development process should not be underestimated. This is especially true for struggling adolescent readers who need teachers who understand reading instruction, adolescent development, and concepts of motivation (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

The significant drop in test scores and motivation to read at this stage of schooling is an area of great concern for good reason. “The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years” (Gioia, 2007, p. 5). In the preface to the Executive Summary of the National Endowment for the Arts’ (2007) report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, Chairperson Gioia paints a bleak picture of this continued decline in reading: a lack of reading experience and ability leads to lack of employment, lower wages, and few opportunities for advancement. While this single view of “measurable progress” may be overstated, what is not overstated is that reading for pleasure declines in the late elementary/early middle school stage of schooling.

Early reading experiences are vital to the development of reading readiness skills. Developmentally appropriate experiences are outlined in such documents as “Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children” (International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). There is clearly a strong focus on and push for appropriate experiences for early childhood/pre-kindergarten populations. Additionally, the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 places a strong emphasis on the necessity of establishing reading programs for “students in kindergarten through grade 3 that are based on scientifically based reading research” to ensure a greater level of success in developing reading skill (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2001). There is no

lack of research on reading readiness, research-based programs, and the importance of teacher education programs in producing candidates who can teach reading. What is less frequently studied, but seemingly more problematic, is the failure of an excitement for and an interest in reading to continue into late elementary school and then into the middle and high school years and beyond.

According to research from the National Endowment of the Arts (2007), young adults are reading fewer books in general; reading is declining as an activity among teenagers; and, by the time that they become college seniors, one in three students read nothing at all for pleasure in a given week. Thus, the concern becomes why adolescent literacy takes such a drastic turn when such great emphasis is placed on literacy in the early developmental years? The need to address this concern prompted the publication of *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement for the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association* (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycek, 1999). This document sought to explain why appropriate literacy instruction is not being provided to adolescents and provides guidance for improving this situation. Moore et al. noted:

Exemplary programs of adolescent literacy instruction certainly exist, but they are the exception because upper grade goals often compete with reading development. Elementary schools traditionally emphasize mathematics and literacy instruction, but middle and secondary schools generally shift attention to other matters. (p. 4)

The report notes that middle school programs emphasize an expanded range of student needs, including physical, emotional, and social as well as academic. Despite an often-recognized need for the expansion of literary growth, many middle school programs do not specifically include reading instruction in the curriculum for all students. The report further contends that adolescents deserve (a) access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read; (b) instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials; (c) expert teachers who model and provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension and study strategies across the curriculum; and (d) teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics. If teachers in training are more attuned to the signs of waning interest in reading, especially if they have experienced that very same pattern as students, they may be better equipped to make significant changes for their students.

A desire to examine this in greater depth became a driving force and

an opportunity to focus my teaching on a very specific learning need. I sought to answer several questions: What impact might the perceptions of teachers' own reading development and patterns have on their future teaching practices? How might they use their own positive and negative experiences to help future students? What would it take for them to understand the important role that they would one day play in helping children maintain an interest in and love of reading beyond the early elementary grades? To get beyond the vague generalizations made during class discussions to a deeper level of reflection about their earliest recollections of becoming readers and the development of their "reading selves," students would have to recreate their reading experiences. In recreating their personal experiences, these students would be forced to more closely examine how students become nonreaders as they move through school and beyond as well as to be shown the important role that they would have to play in recognizing such attitude shifts and working toward preventing them. Thus, our journey began.

Method

Participants

Literature for Children, part of the Educational Leadership program offerings at the Midwest university where I serve as an assistant professor, is one of a number of courses that meets program completion requirements for undergraduate elementary and middle school education students. Sections accommodate 25-32 students each, with both full-time faculty and adjunct personnel teaching the four to six sections offered each semester.

The primary purpose of the course is to help students grow in their understanding of children's literature and the role of literature in the classroom. Ultimately, students develop a repertoire of ideas and materials through some type of annotated resource collection. Specific requirements in regard to the number and types of books students are to read are meant to broaden their experiences and repertoire. Another important purpose of the course is to review for future teachers the developmental stages of readers and the importance of quality instruction and appropriate modeling throughout each stage.

During the Fall 2008 semester, I was instructing two sections of the course, each with 29 students enrolled. The students represented a balance of early childhood, middle childhood, early adolescent, adolescent, and special education majors. The combined sections enrolled 11 males and 47 females, with three of the 58 fitting the category of "non-traditional" students, having initially begun an undergraduate program after age

25. Typical of class make-up at this predominately White university, all students were Caucasian, except one, who was Native American, and English was the first language of all 58 students. Further, eight of the students were of sophomore status, 29 junior, and 21 of senior status.

Documenting Perceptions: The Reader's Portrait

Early in the semester, students were required to develop a Reader's Portrait through which they set parameters of performance and personal goals for the course. Within this reflective essay, they were also expected to ponder in depth their thoughts and feelings on reading, their growth as readers, and the impact that they saw themselves having on the attitudes toward reading of their future students. They were to consider such aspects of reading development as: (a) their memories of experiencing books at an early age; (b) the people who influenced their reading habits; (c) how their reading changed over time in regard to habits, comprehension, and the desire to read; and (d) how they currently feel about reading and the role it plays in their lives.

The Reader's Portrait would allow me to better understand some of their concerns and hesitations in regard to the course assignments and expectations and to get a better idea of their own perceptions about their reading development, the role teachers and others played in that development, and what they see as implications for their own teaching selves as a result of such reflection. This would help me to shape instruction to better serve their progress toward becoming quality classroom teachers.

The narrative also would be important to understanding their past and present relationship with books. Despite the fact these future teachers would be spending a great deal of time reading books to and with children, teaching elements of literature, recommending books, and building classroom libraries, it was evident that many did not see or label themselves as "readers." In fact, despite their drive and determination to teach in an elementary or middle school setting, many of these students did not have any significant "relationship" with children's literature. Even more surprising than their lack of experience with books appropriate for their future students, however, was the clear perception on the part of many that they simply are not "readers" and would therefore struggle to meet the bare minimum requirements of the course. Changing their attitudes and perceptions would be important if they were expected to serve as role models in encouraging their own students to be lifelong readers.

Analysis of Themes

Analysis focused on the themes that emerged from the Reader's Portraits. Themes were extracted through a grounded theory approach

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a qualitative research method aimed at deriving theory through the use of multiple stages of data collection and interpretation. An initial coding and categorization was completed first, wherein units of meaning, in this case several lines or a short paragraph, were identified during an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This resulted in 397 identified units. Once scrutinized for commonalities that could become categories, the axial coding step, interconnections were made among categories, with the focus on determining more about each category as a means to refine the initial list. During this step, I created 21 specific categories divided into both negative and positive experiences associated with individual reading development. As the list was more specifically refined in the selective coding step, I was able to further sort and consider interconnections, until a set of emerging themes could be extracted.

The Reader's Portrait provided me with various insights into my students' perceptions of themselves as developing readers and future teachers. Several interesting patterns were framed within their writings, and extracting them would help me to understand their current beliefs so that we could work together to shape their future interactions with students. I grouped the categories that emerged into the following themes: types of students, influencers, attitudinal changes, and future implications.

Types of students. In my analysis of the reflections, two primary types of students emerged from the mix. The first were students who learned to read at an early age and had seemingly naturally developed a desire to work with young people in the same way that parents and teachers had worked with them, providing a nurturing environment and approach toward learning in general and reading in particular. These students tended to admit to a love of reading but acknowledged that they rarely had time to read. The second type included students who struggled as early readers and developed a desire to prevent the same "mistakes" that they had encountered as students from happening to their future students. These students readily admitted that they do not care to read for pleasure and even struggle to read the required textbooks that they encounter as college students. This highly generalized view of the students did little to shape my instruction.

Influencers. Many students had a clear memory of their earliest experiences, particularly in terms of who had the greatest impact on their reading. In fact, 74% clearly remembered being read to by at least one parent and 29% by a babysitter or other caregiver. These students wrote in great detail about where they read together (e.g., on their bed, in a tree house, under a "blanket fort") and about favorite titles, authors,

and series that they clearly remember enjoying (e.g., Berenstain Bears, Shel Silverstein, Dr. Suess).

The influence of parents was strong in the preschool years. One student wrote, "Reading was very highly valued in my home. Both of my parents had a passion for reading and spent much of their spare time reading something." Some relied on their parents to fill in the gaps and to provide examples of books that they had enjoyed reading together or to remind them of what types of reading experiences that they had shared. Examples of some parents' being able to carry the influence to read beyond the early developmental stages were provided, but this was a rare acknowledgment in the students' written accounts.

A strong memory I have of my younger years and my teen years is the memory of 'book passing' sessions. My mother and I would lay a sleeping bag down on the kitchen floor and sit there while we read a book together out loud. My mom would read the first chapter and I would read the next. On the weekends we would sometimes spend hours reading together. I believe this to be one of the main reasons that I love reading so much. These times were so warm and fun and comfortable that reading was always a pleasant experience for me.

Siblings also played an important role in reading development in the minds of these students. Of the students, 34% indicated they were either read to by an older sibling or had started to develop as a reader when a younger sibling came along for them to read to. Visits to the public library and participation in various library programs prior to reaching school age were noted by 26% of the students in the two sections of the course.

Attitudinal changes. The clearest pattern of all, however, was the change in reading attitude once students reached middle school. This information could potentially have the greatest impact for these future teachers. Acknowledging their own changes in reading habits, particularly in those cases in which the student noted a love of reading at a young age, with a change to viewing reading as a chore, would only serve to help them in the future. The experiences noted by the students in the Literature for Children sections mirrored the research from the National Endowment for the Arts (2007). By middle school, according to the information that they provided in the Reader's Portrait, students stopped reading for pleasure. In fact, 40 of the 58 students (69%) indicated that very experience. Once in middle school, reading for pleasure ended and reading of any kind became a chore. One student pointed to teacher influences as the reason for the shift. "Once I got to middle school, however, my reading habits changed. My teachers didn't stress the importance of reading as much as my earlier teachers had, therefore

making me believe that it wasn't. I eventually stopped reading for fun." Others noted the increase in extracurricular activities that replaced the time earlier spent on reading for pleasure.

I know my reading habits have changed over the years. I used to enjoy reading as a young child, either reading it by myself or listening to a good story before bed. I continued to enjoy reading through grade school, and it was nice to get rewarded for academic achievement. Once I got into middle school, I started to lose time for reading; I was busy playing sports and doing homework. Yet, I still enjoyed it during middle school and read more during the summer. Once I got into high school, I lost touch with reading. There was no time, I had enough to read for my classes, and there was no longer any interest in it.

Yet another reason cited was the lack of freedom in choosing books. "I also blame school assignments on my decrease in interest. Throughout middle and high school we weren't really given any freedom in choosing what we wanted to read. We were just made to read what was given." This lack of freedom affected students in different ways. For instance, one student noted the frustration of not knowing *how* to select a good book because that freedom of choice had so long been withheld. This student wrote:

Middle school was the first place I was given an option, and by that time I had given up. I had absolutely no ideas as to what I liked to read because it was all spoon fed and shoved down my throat when I was younger.

Not all students blamed outside forces (e.g., teachers, extracurricular activities) but rather looked at their own behaviors. "As I ventured into middle and high school my reading habits decreased dramatically. I blame myself for being more interested in watching T.V. or hanging out with friends than sitting down and reading a book."

Future implications. Despite a somewhat hesitant start by some to dig into the memory vault, all were able to articulate some sense of the importance of reading as they venture into the teaching field. A typical example comes from a student who stated:

I know in my heart that teaching children is my dream job but in order for me to teach students I quickly realized that I need to have a large background in literature . . . I need to allow myself to absorb as much literature as I can and build an extensive background. I need to do this so that I can share my knowledge with my students.

While it is certainly important for the future teacher to make such an acknowledgement, what is more important is a need for these students

to acknowledge the significance of maintaining the love of reading. The words of another student emphasize this point:

Once I got to middle school my reading habits changed. My teachers didn't stress the importance of reading as much as my earlier teachers had, therefore making me believe that it wasn't. I eventually stopped reading for fun. I won't let that happen to my students. If I can work with other teachers in my building to make everyone think more about keeping the kids reading, then that's what I'll do.

It will take an even deeper reflection on the part of many to move beyond the "I love to read so I'll make sure my students love to read" belief or even the "I hate to read so I'll make sure my students love to read" belief. What is needed is the realization that students will pass through a developmental stage in the late elementary/early middle school years, during which they will be presented with numerous activities and choices.

Discussion

What will it take to keep adolescents reading and enjoying what they are reading even when they are exposed to myriad opportunities outside of academic pursuits? What can future teachers take from their own experiences to meet the needs of the adolescent learner? Encouraging students to closely examine their growth and development as readers and then to translate their personal experiences into better teaching is a complicated process. A simple awareness may be enough for some pre-service teachers, while others may not understand the implications until well into a teaching career. My students have been given a nudge toward greater understanding early in their teacher preparation program in the hope that a closer examination of their own developmental stages and the reflections of their travels through those stages can guide them to better understanding their students' journeys as well. A thorough analysis of the emergent themes brings me to the development of several objectives that must be clarified, expanded upon, and used as the groundwork for more effectively teaching this course in upcoming semesters:

As future teachers, my students must be knowledgeable about a wide variety of reading materials so that they can readily recommend titles to their adolescent readers. The course requires students to read, analyze, and prepare annotations for a minimum of 30 books from a variety of genres. This is a good start in being able to recommend appropriate titles to students. In addition, they have been provided with tools to help them find

an array of books, covering an array of subjects, for students throughout the Pre-K-8 spectrum.

As future teachers, my students must have a knowledge and skill base that will assist them in exposing students to increasingly complex materials. Time is spent throughout the semester on issues of reading development and the need to increasingly challenge readers at developmentally appropriate stages. Students in my classes understand that reading is not a “one-size-fits-all” activity but one that must be tailored to meet very specific needs. Studying best practice approaches to keep students reading should be a regular part of their teaching experience. Also important is helping these future teachers understand that they can and should be leaders in their schools and districts in regard to reading.

As future teachers, my students will build on experiences that will help them model and provide instruction in reading and study strategies across the curriculum. This course is one of several that will expose students to the tools that they will soon need to provide quality reading and study strategies. Time is spent in class on the importance of reading across the curriculum. Within their annotated records, students include potential classroom activities for multiple grade/interest levels and varied curricula. Reading is not just the responsibility of a reading teacher or a language arts class. Reading should be required in all coursework, but it should be accessible, enjoyable, and instructional.

As future teachers, my students will remember their own reading journey so that they can better remember the unique nature of being an adolescent reader and apply current theory to respond to those differences in adolescent students. Providing an assignment that guides students to reflect upon their own experiences, both good and bad, gives them a unique lens through which they can view their students, the curriculum, and the goals and objectives that they have for their students. Expanding upon a technique I currently use might prove helpful in reaching this goal. During an exit interview that I use as a final exam alternative, students are required to explain how they will use the knowledge and skills obtained in this class. Future students also will be asked to articulate how they can use their own stories of experiencing reading to help them inform instruction.

Improving instruction to increase student learning is ongoing. Quality teaching means immersing oneself in this continuous improvement cycle. Assessing the acquisition of knowledge and insight that the Reader's Portrait provides remains a work in progress and my continued focus in teaching this course. To get some idea of student growth from the initial semester during which this became a focus, individual exit interviews were conducted. Students responded to open-ended questions regarding their learning during the semester and the impact that such learning would have on their continued progress toward becoming teachers. These interviews provided some valuable information that will help shape the future of the course. Each student acknowledged in some way the three concepts that I hoped that they would internalize: they enjoy reading again; they know that they must read a large number of books to be valuable resources for their students; and they know that they must be attuned to their students' reading habits, interests, and attitudes to prevent, or at least minimize, the late elementary/early middle school drop in for-pleasure reading.

Preparing students to be life-long readers—lifelong readers who understand the pure joy that books can bring—is a daunting task. Gaining theory through coursework and practice through field experiences are important steps. Guiding future teachers to take a look at their own reading experiences and development adds another dimension to the preparation process and one that has clearly provided added direction for me in the Children's Literature course development and delivery. There is potential for future teachers to benefit from this new dimension added to their journey.

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