



The Reading Matrix © 2009
Volume 9, Number 2, September 2009

Insights: Literacy Memories of Preservice Teachers Self-Reported Categories of Impact

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyzed preservice teachers' literacy memories. Each literate person has a history of becoming literate. As university students who plan to be future teachers think about their own literate histories, they begin to construct their own beliefs about learning to read and the teaching of reading and writing. These beliefs may influence how they teach literacy and may be even more important than what they learn in methods classes.

INTRODUCTION

*When I was very young, my grandfather would read to my older brother,
cousin, and I. He would gather the three of us up in his lap and
away we would go with Peter Pan and Wendy on a flying ship.
I believe that he taught us one of life's most important lessons
that we could do anything
just like "The Little Engine that Could."*

—Literacy History #1

Literacy histories provide an interpolated framework for understanding the past experiences of one's life and how these literacy events shape preservice teachers as they take initial steps toward becoming teachers. Poststructuralist theory (PST) portrays life as interactive and multidimensional, helping us understand how previous experiences may influence current behaviors (Ropers-Huilman, 1998). From a PST view, literacy histories provide one of many layers that interact with the developing lives of future teachers. Davies (1993) explains how past experiences continue to shape individuals:

A metaphor for capturing this multiple layering of discourse in our minds and bodies is palimpsest. This is a term to describe the way in which new writings on a parchment were written over or around old writings that were not fully erased. One writing interrupts the other, momentarily, overriding, intermingling, with the other; the old writing influences the interpretation of the imposed new writing and the new influences the interpretation of the old. But both still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted. New discourse does not simply replace the old as on a clean sheet. They generally interrupt one another; through they may also exist in parallel, remaining separate, undermining each other, but in an unexamined way. (p. 11)

We, as teacher educators, study our undergraduate students' literacy histories to assist us, and in turn our preservice teachers begin to *see* underlying literacy layers. Each preservice teacher takes literacy knowledge from our courses and attaches this learning to their unique *self*. It is also importance to remember that preservice teachers continue to write and re-write their literacy histories as they become teachers, parents, college graduates, and graduate students (Munchmore, 1999).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literacy histories have been researched from several different perspectives and for different expectations. Early researchers studied preservice teachers' literacy histories to examine categories of positive and negative influences on literacy development. Positive literacy influences included significance of others, mainly families, and access to reading material. Negative literacy experiences included overuse of worksheets, ability grouping, and robin round reading (Duchain, 1994; McLaughlin, 1994; Manna & Misheff, 1987; Roe & Vukelich, 1998). Meanwhile, Sohn (1999) used literacy histories as a means to know and begin to understand her students. An unintended result from Sohn's research led to her discovery of the diversity of cultural literacy experienced by her students. Another consequence of Sohn's literacy histories assignment was that students begin to learn about themselves. Students found their *teacher voice* through reflecting on past literacy events whether these events occurred at home or school. Additionally, Trotman and Kerr (2001) studied preservice teachers from the perspective of students' personal histories during the student teaching experiences. These incorporated literacy experiences. Trotman and Kerr found "[t]he personal biography of the student teacher acts as a filter through which they screen any academic and theoretical course content, rejecting that which does not resonate with the observational apprenticeship" (ibid, p. 159).

In contrast to researching a group of preservice teachers, Munchmore (1999) studied one in-service teacher. Through this study, the teacher's literacy beliefs emerged and became a lens used to interpret and understand the specific teacher's career. Roe and Vukelich (1998) studied literacy histories at two levels. First, the researchers determined categories of influences. Then, they followed these preservice teachers into the classrooms and attempted to determine if prior experiences with literacy affect decisions as teachers. Initial findings are only preliminary, but show promising results.

Our literacy history research project examined preservice teachers' written literacy histories with the initial purpose of working with undergraduate students as they examine their past literacy events and experiences in order to create the awareness that it is this prior

knowledge where students hook the understandings of how *to teach reading*. We formalized our study of undergraduate literacy histories to ask the following questions:

1. What are the critical factors in the literacy histories that shaped preservice teachers?
2. How did these literacy events impact the lives of preservice teachers?
3. What implications do literacy histories of preservice teachers have for teacher educators of literacy methods classes?

An unexpected consequence of this research led us to re-think our own schemas of what counts as literacy and what counts as effective literacy practice.

Methodology

A qualitative content analysis research design was used to analyze student literacy histories. Qualitative researchers tend to approach content analysis by starting with text for analysis rather than with a list of preconceived codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Silverman, 2000). As we worked with this research project, we coded literacy histories for any literacy event or experience mentioned in the written text. Weber (1990) said there is “no right way to do content analysis” (p. 13). He further stated that content analysis is strengthened by consistency of text classification and developing a consistent method for analyzing content. Content analysis reliability is based on more than one researcher coding text.

In this research project our systematic coding process was based on the following step: (1) read all literacy histories, (2) code in the margins events that influenced students, and (3) compare our codes. After all literacy histories were read and coded, we compared and determined categories. In order to determine final codes, the researchers followed these steps: (1) re-read all codes, (2) restate key codes, (3) reduce key codes and created categories, and (4) reduce themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Researchers' Background

As literacy professors we believe early literacy experiences help shape understandings and philosophies of teaching literacy. Therefore, it is important to start the semester for our undergraduate preservice teachers with an examination of their own literacy experiences. Through the lens of PST, the past provides layers of self-learning and experiences to which future learning's, knowledge, and experiences attach and connect. These learnings may attach like lint on top of the fabric—loosely and easily brushed off or forgotten, or they may attach like the red juice stain, deeply, becoming a part of the fabric, almost impossible to forget. These stains or learnings, regardless of how they attach, stay with us and provide a place for impending interactions. Exploring prior literacy events provides the background needed to begin to connect the new knowledge and concepts of *how to teach reading and writing*.

Setting

A rural four-year university located in north, central Texas which predominately served Anglo students from first generation college population provided the research population. From

the fall 2005 enrollment management report, the average age of a typical undergraduate student attending this rural university was 26. The majority of undergraduate students, 62.5% were female and 37.5% of the students were male. Anglo students were most of the population at 84.35 with 4.9% of the students African-American, and 7.9% of the students were Hispanics. Participating in the research study were 308 undergraduates either second semester sophomores or first semester juniors (Table 1). All participants were working toward teaching early childhood—4th grade certification, 4-8 grade certification, or some type of secondary certification.

Table 1. Demographics of Literacy Histories

	Females (n=269)	Males (n=37)
Traditional (21-29 years of age)	232	31
Non Traditional (Over 30)	37	6
African-American	3	1
Hispanics	18	-
Middle Eastern	-	1
White	248	35

*2 literacy histories no names

The researchers taught all introductory reading courses and content area reading courses used in the data collection. To introduce the literacy history project, we began with the following prompt from Roe and Vuelich (1998):

Reflect upon your personal experiences as a literacy learner. A literacy history details a person's reflections on his or her emergence into literacy, chronicling its development from earliest memory to today. You might consider such questions as: How did I learn to read? What remain memorable moments in my literacy acquisition? How is literacy related to my adult life? (p 228)

Outside of class, students completed a brainstorming worksheet to help them recall literacy events. Returning to the next class with the worksheet students shared in small groups their remembered literacy events. During this sharing students would remark, 'I remember that,' or 'I did that too.' We found through sharing of our own artifacts and literacy histories undergraduate students would begin to recall memories hidden in brain files that required a little nudge to access. Students continued to add to their brainstorming during this time. Then students completed a first draft to be turned in for teacher comments that we then returned. These were then corrected by students and submitted as final copies.

Each literacy history was coded individually by memories or events that the preservice teacher reported. The codes could be words, phrases, or sentences. Unique codes emerged from the literacy histories. We did not develop a matrix of codes or a list of codes before reading. Since we were using photocopies of the histories, we had individual sets and we coded directly in the margins. New codes emerged throughout the data analysis process, which validated that previous codes did not influence or shape the researchers as we coded. All codes were double checked and with any questions a literacy history might be read as many as three or four times checking for thoroughness of codes. After coding a class set, we collated all codes into an inclusive table of codes grouping similar codes. For example, all codes that mentioned family member influences we grouped together and labeled family category. As we discussed and reduced the categories, three main themes emerged. These codes were family experiences, school experiences, and singular events.

FINDINGS

Through constantly comparing and discussing data sets, over 205 individual codes developed into 3 major themes:

- Singular experiences
- Family experiences
- School experiences

Singular Events that Impacted Preservice Teachers' Literacy Histories

The singular events category encompassed any codes that were reported by preservice teachers as a powerful influence in his/her literacy history. Forty-four codes composed this category, which translated into twenty-one percent of all codes. These codes reflected experiences either in or out-of-school, positive or negative experience, elementary or secondary students, and individual or social events. Positive singular events that shaped preservice teacher literacy experiences included students who remembered looping with teachers who helped them learn to read. There were students who remembered many creative activities like reading magazines, making dioramas after reading and using drama to help with reading.

Specifically, literacy history #199 said,

At the Omni, I had to read my script and memorize my lines. This helped me in reading because I had to understand the words, so that I could act them out to the audience.

One preservice teacher remembered literacy learning from a Montessori Approach. This individual said,

I learned how to identify the alphabet both phonetically and visually ... The students had many learning devices surrounding them, but the teacher did not intervene.
(Literacy History #60)

Some students mentioned negative literacy events like being pressured to read or requirements to read specific books chosen by the teachers. Some students mentioned the lack of phonics in their early reading experiences as negative singular events.

These events made an impact on the preservice teacher's lives that they remembered years later. One singular incident made this importantly remembered impact and influenced the literacy of a student for many years to come.

Family Experiences that Impacted Preservice Teachers' Literacy Histories

Families—mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, grandmothers, grandfathers, and even stepparents, played a crucial role in preservice teachers developing literacy histories. Thirty-four percent of all codes mentioned a family member's influence on literacy learning. None of the research participants remembered negative literacy experiences stemming from family involvement. The only family code that used negative language was the student who recalled getting in trouble for reading beneath the covers with a flashlight when she was supposed to be sleeping. She said,

To this day, I can remember getting in trouble because I would pull the covers over my head, get a flashlight, and read longer. (Literacy History #199)

As expected, mothers especially played an important role in their children's literacy lives. Over 92 preservice teachers reported the worth of their mother's modeling and nurturing for their entrance into literacy. Twenty-two preservice teachers reported mothers, fathers, or siblings who taught them to read before entering school. One preservice teacher remembered her twin sister teaching her to read; the preservice teacher preferred to fill her days playing outside, but her twin sister dragged her into the house,

...she began teaching, me how to read by reading our favorite book, The House in the Hole in the Side of the Tree, to me.

Extended families also accounted for numerous literacy experiences. One literacy history stated,

I always had the help of my aunts, cousins, mom and older brother to read to me every single day. (Literacy History #200)

Grandmothers were also reported as a major influence in developing literacy as reported by this preservice teacher,

My grandmother also read to me. She introduced me to my favorite picture book to this day...Rumplestiltskin. (Literacy History #11)

Families were an important part of many of the preservice teachers literacy histories. These positive memories integrated with reading involved the nuclear families we usually think of, but they also included the extended families we often do not think of like grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and stepparents.

School Experiences that Impacted Preservice Teachers' Literacy Histories

School impact on preservice teachers' literacy histories was by far the largest self-reported category at fifty-five percent and forty-three different codes. School influence included: memories of libraries, teacher relationships, reading aloud, reading for prizes, school events, peer relationships, school programs, and individual perceptions regarding ability, technological programs, different school-related events, handwriting, and spelling.

Libraries

Libraries played an important role in literacy experiences of our preservice teachers making them feel special, giving them access to multiple texts, and encouraging their desires to read more about the world. Sixty-three preservice teachers reported sharing these memories through visiting their school or public libraries. Interestingly, more preservice teachers remembered visiting their public libraries than their school libraries.

One preservice teacher shared this memory,

I can still remember walking up the mountainous front steps of the public library in eager and excited anticipation of the silver and gold held within those front doors. I would search shelf after shelf searching for that perfect book—the treasure that had escaped the notice of all the other kids and was waiting first for me.

(Literacy History #26)

Preservice teachers wrote about the librarians being amazed as they checked out sometimes as many as fifteen books at a time. The libraries held a myriad of books giving these preservice teachers in their early literacy experiences a choice of books to read. This choice of books seemed to be important to the preservice teachers.

Teachers

Teacher impact could be separated into two groups, positive teacher impact and negative teacher impact. One participant's memory of her favorite teachers stated,

Two of my favorite teachers were ones that got the class involved, let us choose what we would learn about within limits, and kept the class exciting. (Literacy History #9)

Another recollection said,

But my third grade teacher, Mrs. Mann, was very patient and kind. She encouraged me to keep trying and even came to my home to have a conference with my parents.

(Literacy History #173)

However, not all teacher memories were so positive and the negative memories included teachers that did not allow choice in reading materials, teachers who labeled students as slow or below average, and teachers who did not differentiate instruction. One negative teacher memory said,

She was a very mean teacher who felt people like me (Hispanic student) had no right to be in school. She decided that I was a horrible reader, and that I needed to be put in the special education class. (Literacy History #37)

Another example was

The absolute worst reading experience of my life was when I was in ninth grade. My English teacher was the devil incarnate. She was very mean to me I remember telling her that I did not understand, and her reply was that some got it and some didn't. (Literacy History #48)

Teacher influence was remembered by these preservice teachers and in the case of negative memories the preservice teachers are determined to make school and learning a better experience than the ones they had. Teachers played important roles for these preservice teachers as they learned to read.

School Experiences

The school experience codes included memories of school events that did not mention a specific teacher, but referred to experiences in terms like 'during my middle school years' or 'during my early school career.' These became school experiences and as such could then be divided into positive or negative events. Peers played an important part in school experiences with literacy. Nine preservice teachers specifically mentioned memories of impact related to their peers in literacy experiences. However, other preservice teachers fondly recalled memories of book clubs, learning with friends, and friends reading or working on literate activities together. Most were positive. However, one of these memories was negative. A preservice teacher recalled her friends making fun of her for being placed in a lower reading group:

I was placed in a lower group than all my close friends, and I hated it. I was a slow reader and made fun of by my peers. (Literacy History #101)

Many preservice teachers recalled specific school programs that impacted their literacy. A conundrum appeared in that these programs could be viewed as positive for one student and yet negative for another and even neutral for some students. As an example, the Science Research Associates (SRA) program challenged students who were competitive and loved working towards a higher level, but were disliked by students who felt unmotivated by the competition. Some students viewed it as laborious reading and answering mundane questions. Several preservice teachers mention that SRA work was considered just part of school life. Specific school programs other than SRA that preservice teacher recalled included:

- UIL participation
- Letter of the week programs
- TAAS practice books
- ESL programs
- New method of teaching reading [No specific names mentioned]

Thirty percent of all preservice teachers experienced some form of earning prizes for reading. The reading for prizes category can be further delineated by the following: positive experiences (39%), negative experiences (23%), neutral experiences (29%), and unique experiencing (8%). Four main programs accounted for the prizes for reading: Accelerated Reading (AR), Book-It Program, Six Flags Trips, and Teacher-generated. Positive comments were along these lines:

This program (AR) drives me to be a more competitive reader, and therefore, I began reading constantly at home and school. (Literacy History #245)

I was really involved with this program (AR). I always wanted to be on top. (Literacy History #67)

Personal Pan Pizzas, small toys, stickers, gummy bears, and pieces of candy motivated many preservice teachers to read in elementary school, however once they reached junior high the small prizes and pizzas seemed to no longer motivate them to read. Preservice teachers' negative experiences with reading for rewards brought out intense feelings. For example,

In eighth grade, I specifically remember...the 'Reading Nazi.' We were forced to read a certain amount of books from week to week and take test over them. ... I had a very difficult time because I did not enjoy the books that we were being forced to read. (Literacy History #249)

Another example,

...my high school adopted the AR program. I absolutely hated it. I was forced to read books. If we didn't reach half of our goal by mid-six-weeks, we had to go to tutoring. Instead of getting an hour-long lunch, I only got 30 minutes. I was devastated the first time that I had to go to tutoring...I began to read at the lowest level possible because they were faster reads. (Literacy History #254)

Many preservice teachers remembered reading for prizes as a typical part of the school experience. We coded these memories as neutral because they did not reflect that students were motivated by prizes nor did they stop reading because of prizes. These preservice teachers read because this was part of the school experience:

I never really read for points. The majority of my reading during these years (4th, 5th, and 6th grades) was done purely for enjoyment and completely on my own. (Literacy History #293)

Another dimension of shaping preservice teachers literacy histories emerged from school actions that influenced students' perceptions regarding their reading ability. In earlier grades, reading fast seemed to be the goal and as students moved to upper grades, the lack of comprehension became apparent. Upon arrival in middle and high school, these preservice teachers struggled until they learned to compensate for their lack of comprehension. One preservice teacher shared,

By the time I was a fourth grade I could read fairly fast. I wasn't great at comprehension, but I could say the words really quick. (Literacy History #314)

Other preservice teachers wrote about being able to comprehend and always passing the questions, yet not being able to read quickly enough to pass the timed test or being a voracious reader and reading every spare moment in every classroom.

Technology seemed to be lacking in the classrooms of these preservice teachers. Three codes referred to technology recollections: books on tape and computer educational games. All technology memories were reported as positive. A memory that reflects the computer educational games was from Literacy History #237:

We went to the computer lab once a week. We used the computer program to help out with spelling words. I liked the station because we could work at our own pace.

Several codes formed the miscellaneous school impact. These codes did not relate to any of the previous school-related codes mentioned. The largest codes were book fairs, spelling and handwriting, and reading aloud. Book fairs were a very important place for preservice teachers to get books for home. Twenty-six preservice teachers recalled the anticipation of attending books fairs. On participant said,

I know that I did love when Scholastic would come into town and we could all attend the book fair. (Literacy History #93)

From fifty preservice teachers' public school experiences, they defined their literacy experiences in terms of spelling and/or handwriting ability. Forty-three preservice teachers, only 14%, reported that writing was important in their literacy history. One preservice teacher lost confidence in her school ability because of the constant criticism of her handwriting. Specifically, she said,

the teacher was calling me back to her desk to criticized my handwriting because it wasn't like all the other students who came from 3rd grade there at that school. (Literacy History #45)

Some students saw spelling as a help in learning to read,

The teachers began to give spelling tests to practice and help me master both reading and writing at the same time. The spelling test also helped me to learn how to sound the words out. (Literacy History #84)

In this research project, reading aloud refers to when a student reads aloud (or out loud) in the classroom. Preservice teachers' memories of reading aloud category developed from three main codes: positive, neutral, and negative experiences with reading aloud. By far, negative experiences with reading aloud outnumbered the positive and neutral experiences with reading aloud. The majority of reading aloud experiences stemmed from content classes in middle and high school.

Forty-five preservice teachers had negative reading aloud experiences. One preservice teacher had a particularly dramatic occurrence. She recalled this experience,

my early reflections of learning how to read are dreadful. I loathed reading out loud... I stutter and become very embarrassed because other children would make fun of me. (Literacy History #5)

Several preservice teachers remember positive experiences with reading aloud, mostly because they were fluent readers, and some had similarly neutral experiences.

We had to read out loud in many classes and I found myself ahead of many of the other students. (Literacy History #235)

An important code was the decline in middle and high school reading due to extra-curricular activities. As preservice teachers became involved in extra-curricular events, the time for reading decreased. School events were as varied as the students of the study, many positive and many negative, each dependent on the individual student and the unique classroom in which the event occurred.

DISCUSSION

As reading teacher educators who practice reflective teaching, we discuss and share our own past literacy events and experiences along with our daily experiences of teaching literacy classes. We realize that our students are unique in that they will graduate from college. However, as we looked for the answer to our first question, *What are the critical factors in literacy histories that shaped preservice teachers?* there were two categories that continually forced us into discussions. These were the importance of family and singular events that shaped our students. We prepare preservice teachers in an environment that has spurned scripted programs to teach reading and the belief that there may be one best way to teach reading. Yet, our research has challenged our thinking in this area with the possibility that there may be multiple methods of learning and teaching reading.

First, families, including extended families, appear to be critical in supporting their children in the desire to learn to read as they begin the early exposure to literacy through reading and writing at home. Not one student reported a negative literacy memory from home. Families provided unique literacy experiences for their children. Families shared literacy experiences. They read with their children, even if these reading and writing experiences were different from the expected academic reading and writing experiences.

Another discussion that threaded itself throughout this research project was, *What counts as effective literacy practices?*, literacy practices that we considered as supplemental such as competitive reading programs or incentives could under the right conditions be effective literacy practice for some students. In many schools where our preservice teachers get jobs, incentives are the only reading programs for the school. Without the incentives there are no formal reading programs. For the competitive child who enjoys working toward a goal, this kind of approach may work, but it may keep many students from reading who see themselves as unable to ever meet the goal or reach the number of required points. It also appeared to hinder comprehension when the focus was on speed. In addition, if the required points are keeping students from reading other texts that they may enjoy reading more, then perhaps the program needs to be examined. For example, if all the competitive books are narrative and a student enjoys informational text, it is imperative to know the student rather than blindly following a program or method. Perhaps future research projects should examine the uniqueness of an individual's journey towards literacy.

Our second question, *How did these literacy events impact the lives of preservice teachers?* lead us to questions our own classroom experiences. Singular events that shaped our

preservice teachers continually had us questioning ourselves. Had we unknowingly damaged a student's developing literacy by an unintentional action or comment? From our preservice teachers' memories singular events were powerful. Yet, we teach in a time that stresses passing one test. Teacher time for the shy student or a student who may be going through a difficult time personally is not as unlimited as it once was and a classroom teacher feels the stress of making sure her class is ready for the test. Stressed teachers may say or do something that is remembered as a singular event years later in a student's life. As Johnston (2004) has said: "Some of us have to think more carefully about the language we use to offer our students the best learning environment we can (p. 1).

As researchers we found the answer to our third question was much more complicated than we first believed and would require more research. The question, *What implications do literacy histories of preservice teachers have for teacher educators of literacy methods classes?* continues to lead us to discussions. Certainly, additional research is needed that includes examining literacy histories from students that are both college graduates and non-college graduates. As literacy educators we must continually reflect on our practices and the literacy practices that we support. Additional research directions include following these preservice teachers into their classrooms as first year teachers and beyond. Do their classrooms reflect their previous literacy experiences?

We found it interesting that there seemed to be so many different paths to effective literacy in this time of the great search for one right way to teach all children to be literate. We found that the implications were numerous, including that as teacher educators we must continue our own research and learning. We know that working with students as individuals is imperative to being an effective teacher for the student's learning journey. How to follow best practices in the classroom, meet needs of the individual students, and ensure that each student has an exceptional literacy history as they learn to read and write is a worthy goal for both preservice teachers and their literacy methods educators.

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