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## Transformation of Preservice Teacher Identities: The Effects of Authentic Reading Experiences

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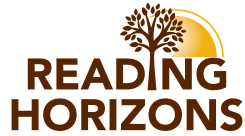
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## **Transformation of Preservice Teacher Identities: The Effects of Authentic Reading Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

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Preservice teachers (PSTs) come to teacher education programs after many years as students in the K–12 school system—a system that is focused on standardized testing and inauthentic literacy practices. These experiences have shaped PSTs’ personal literacy identities and their view of reading pedagogy, many times for the negative. In an effort to address this systemic issue, two university professors at different institutions conducted an action research study ( $N = 40$ ) by redesigning their individual literacy methods courses around authentic literacy experiences with the intention of reshaping PSTs’ personal views of literacy and in turn their preconceived pedagogical ideas of literacy in K–12 classrooms. The findings from this study reveal that by using authentic literacy practices in a literacy methods course, the PSTs experienced a transformation in their reading habits and views of reading pedagogy and began to envision themselves a future reading teachers.

**Keywords:** *elementary teacher education, preservice teacher preparation, literacy methods*

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The aspiring teachers in our university classrooms have experienced a heightened focus on standardized testing in the era of No Child Left Behind for most of their K–12 education (Cho et al., 2020). In a K–12 reading classroom, practices appear as merit-based incentivized reading programs, scripted curricula, and state standardized assessments that, if not passed, lead to retention. Students then enter the university classroom as future educators with varying ideas about reading and in turn reading pedagogy based on those experiences.

The literacy identities (Spitler, 2009) of preservice teachers (PSTs) have been shaped by their experiences with reading, both in and out of school, and the social groups of which they are members (Gee, 2000; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje et al., 2009). These experiences in reading are manifested by the books read to them, the people reading

to and around them, and the reading assignments given. Influential reading experiences can be marked by specific events in the PSTs' history, which often leads to them viewing reading and teaching reading in either a positive or negative manner, depending on the nature of those experiences (Draper et al., 2000). It is essential, then, that teacher educators understand how those experiences, whether negative or positive, connect with the reading identity of a PST because it can determine the beliefs and pedagogy of that future educator (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Benevides & Peterson, 2010; Clark & Medina, 2000; Gupta, 2004).

In a study on reading habits and literacy attitudes of graduate students who were preservice and in-service teachers, Nathanson et al. (2008) found that the enthusiastic readers were more likely to rate their elementary and secondary reading experiences as positive. The most meaningful difference lay with graduate students' former teachers sharing their own love of reading (elementary) or former teachers who placed emphasis on students' reactions and interpretations of literature (secondary). This supports the idea that PSTs' in-school literacy experiences can shape their current literacy habits and in turn their view of the importance of reading as a teacher.

In an effort to address this systemic issue, we initiated this action research study to see what we could do as teacher educators to shift PSTs' literacy identities by cultivating positive and enriching literacy experiences in our literacy methods courses. Thus, we designed authentic, culturally diverse literacy instruction through inclusive and representative book clubs and instruction, with the goal of converging the ideal K–6 and university classroom in literacy education. Collaboratively, we organized our course material and assignments so that the PSTs had opportunities to engage in literacy experiences as students and reflect on their experiences as teachers. Each assignment was designed with purpose, choice, and student ownership in mind, which are underlying values of authentic literacy instruction (Edelsky, 1991; Gambrell et al., 2011a; Purcell-Gates, 2002).

Pedagogical transformation is possible only when teachers inherently believe in a practice and embed that practice in who they are as individuals (Alsup, 2006; Richardson & Anders, 1994; Spitler, 2011). Therefore, the design of this study focused on immersive experiences that reimagined university teaching and placed greater emphasis on literacy beliefs, pedagogy, and identity. Instead of delivering lectures, we provided experiences coupled with short explicit instruction framing the importance, purpose, and theoretical foundations of those experiences. We intentionally chose experiences that could be transferred into the PSTs' future K–6 literacy classrooms, incorporating authentic literacy elements for a diverse population of students.

As researchers, we hoped this study would provide opportunities for bridging the gap between negative experiences from the K–12 classroom and possibilities for reformed changes as this new group of educators enters the profession. Guiding our inquiry was the following question: In what ways do PSTs' literacy identities evolve after engaging in authentic literacy activities in the university classroom? To answer this research question, we employed an action research study across one semester in two literacy methods courses at two public universities in a large state in the southwestern United States.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Concepts related to both PSTs' literacy identities and authentic literacy experiences were essential to best support our research question about the ways in which PSTs' literacy identities evolve after engaging in authentic literacy activities in our university classrooms.

### **Identity**

A PST's literacy identity is defined as "a conscious and confident view of self as responsible for and in control of improving the literacy learning of self and the competency to enact engagements to guide the literacy learning of students" (Spitler, 2009, pp. 129–130). According to Gee (2000), a person's identity can be affected by institutions they are a part of as well as how they are recognized by others and can come from shared affinity groups. This means that PSTs' literacy identities are shaped by their home and K–12 literacy environments and experiences along with the authoritative figures in those environments. It also means that their literacy identities can be affected by any other affinity spaces that they have belonged to or currently belong to. This shows that PSTs' views of literacy are not only shaped before they enter teacher education programs, but are also constantly in flux (Moje et al., 2009).

For many, these environments and experiences were not enough to create positive literacy identities, which in turn can affect how PSTs personally interact with literacy (Spitler, 2009), but also how PSTs view reading pedagogy (Pule, 2020). The university classroom becomes an additional institutional and affinity space for PSTs, and if this space mirrors the same practices that had a negative effect on their literacy identities or led to misconceptions about what best practice literacy instruction looks like, then the chance that PSTs' literacy identities would change to become more positive or include different pedagogical ideas is limited.

However, by providing social interactions and a new discourse community (Gee, 2000) for PSTs to become a part of, teacher education courses have the power to influence and even reshape PSTs' personal literacy identities and their views of literacy education for the positive. By providing a new community that offers positive, authentic interactions with literacy, these PSTs' views of literacy in the classroom and their own personal literacy identities can be positively affected (Pule, 2020).

### **Authentic Literacy Experiences**

Many PSTs' in-school literacy experiences were centered on activities that take place only in schools (e.g., worksheets; teacher-chosen, whole-class novels; reading point systems), whereas authentic literacy tasks, through reading, writing, and discussion, are more meaningful, are more purposeful, and mirror "real-life" literacy (Gambrell et al., 2011a; Purcell-Gates, 1996, 2002).

For this study we used Street's (2003) definition of literacy practices: deeply embedded patterns of literacy use within individuals, families, classrooms, communities,

and cultures. Thus, transforming PSTs' practice (or their ideas of practice) require that (a) teachers believe in that practice, both personally and professionally, and (b) the practice is woven into who they are so they can confidently bring it to life in their teaching (Alsop, 2006; Richardson & Anders, 1994, Spitler, 2011). Positive, authentic literacy practices could counter PSTs' more standardized literacy experiences and have an effect on any preconceived notions they have about literacy pedagogy based on their experiences in K–12 schools.

Authentic literacy replaces many school-only activities with literacy experiences found in everyday life (Gambrell et al., 2011a). As researchers, we determined that this applies to both K–12 classrooms and university classrooms. Many teacher education courses promote more authentic learning for K–12 students, but then mirror the same school-like activities they advise against, such as long lectures, lack of choice for PSTs, and focusing on professor-posed questions rather than PSTs' own inquiry. This is a detriment for PSTs in that (1) there is a disconnect between the university classroom and the K–12 classroom and (2) PSTs do not get to experience pedagogical literacy methods that differ from the way they may have been taught (which could carry on negative literacy views and identities). In order to avoid this disconnect and allow PSTs to experience authentic literacy pedagogy, we decided to weave authentic literacy practices into their literacy methods courses.

Authentic literacy activities involve meaningful reading, writing, and discussion opportunities that motivate and engage students (Purcell-Gates, 2002). Additionally, authentic literacy tasks can be described as having three dimensions: meaning making, purpose, and ownership (Edelsky, 1991; Gambrell, et al., 2011a; Purcell-Gates, 2002). The authentic literacy experiences and practices PSTs experienced in these courses provided opportunities to meaningfully engage in texts as both readers and reading teachers.

### ***Inclusive Book Clubs***

Hall (2009) argued that “book clubs provide a way for preservice teachers to deepen, broaden, and explore their visions of self as literacy teachers” (p. 300). In book clubs, PSTs gather in small groups to read a shared text together, completing readings outside of class and coming together to discuss the ideas. These small-group discussions cultivate environments conducive for “a more thorough understanding about complex ideas” (p. 300), such as diversity and inclusion.

Because one of the issues with in-school reading stems from the lack of diversity in texts, texts selected for use in book clubs should be inclusive and representative of all learners. Students need windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) when they are choosing and reading books. If students don't see themselves in the books they are reading, it is hard to see a personal relevance to reading and to value it in their personal lives (Ladson-Billings, 1990; Bishop, 1990).

Book clubs in school can mimic book clubs outside of school. When participating in a book club, students have choice, agency, and voice about the book they read, how they read it, and what they discuss and write about. This mimics real-world reading where the same components are utilized. Additionally, having choice adds personal relevance about

topics and ideas that students value, which adds another layer of authenticity (Edelsky, 1991).

Book clubs also invite and support authentic discussion, because the ownership of these discussions lies with the students. The students get to decide what they see and deem important in the reading rather than using teacher-chosen questions and ideas to form a manufactured discussion. This is again something that people outside of schools do when reading. Hall (2009) explained, “Discussions, which are the central feature of book clubs, expose teachers to other ways of thinking and help them gain access to each other’s visions” (p. 300). Thus, the authentic discussions occurring in book clubs allow PSTs to safely explore ideas, reflect on their past experiences, and envision themselves as inclusive future educators.

The transactional theory and concept of reader response began with Rosenblatt (1969, 1978) but has since evolved and become a mainstay of effective and authentic literacy instruction. The important part of reader response is how students make meaning from their interactions with a text (Beach, 1993). In book clubs, students use written response as a tool to deepen their understanding of the complex ideas they are encountering as both readers and future reading teachers. As students read authentic texts, discuss what they read, and write in reflection on their learning, they begin to make and take meaning from this experience as students and as PSTs.

The authentic literacy experiences embedded in book clubs not only meet the dimensions of authentic literacy tasks (Edelsky, 1991; Gambrell et al., 2011a; Purcell-Gates, 2002), but also provide opportunities for PSTs to think about their personal literacy identities and how these can affect their future teacher literacy identities.

## **Methodology**

We began this study to explore the ways in which PSTs’ literacy identities evolve after engaging in authentic literacy experiences. The study took place in the spring semester of 2020 with the intention of conducting all research in person. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we shifted gears to an online platform, adapting the design of our study as needed. From this shift, our findings illuminated possibilities for transforming pedagogy and identity in both physical and digital spaces.

We conducted an action research study to explore how these PSTs’ literacy identities evolved after engaging in authentic literacy practices for one semester. Bradbury et al. (2019) explained that action research is “transformative learning with a change agenda... shaping the world *with* others in a more desired direction” (p. 7). In action research, the stakeholders—in this case teacher educators—engage in self-reflective cycles of inquiry within their system, with the ultimate goal of improving practice, understanding of that practice, and the context where ethos practices occur (Bradbury et al., 2019; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Because students, or in this case PSTs, are the primary stakeholders of the context, action research thrives when they are included in the social learning process so that their voices are used to cultivate change.

Thus, action research as a methodology was most appropriate for this study

because we were implementing a new and innovative curriculum into our literacy methods courses with feedback from our PSTs. We examined the effects of that curricular approach through cycles of self-reflective inquiry and with the goal of “improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of the practice, and the improvement of the situation in which the practices take place” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 29).

While both of us had used these same authentic literacy structures in the past as elementary and middle school reading teachers, we were uncertain how it would impact the population of PSTs at a public university. Therefore, the study was oriented toward a genuine action that needed to be taken to address a particular problematic situation (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

As researchers, we were constantly planning, acting, observing, and reflecting throughout the course of the study (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). Drawing on the self-reflective cycles of action research from Kemmis and McTaggart (2007), we implemented a cycle of inquiry to best answer our research questions. Our planning process included frequently scheduled virtual collaboration meetings through Zoom, an online videoconferencing platform, as well as informal discussions through phone calls and text message exchanges. During each planning meeting, we discussed what was going well with our students, what challenges we were encountering, and next steps for our instruction. After each meeting, we implemented changes, if any, to our course and continued observing student response and reflecting on our own practice. This cycle of inquiry was continuous and constant as the semester progressed.

The design of this study was emergent and evolved over time. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that in action research studies “the design continues to unfold as researchers and participants collect and analyze data and make decisions for the next phase of the study” (p. 50). As researchers, we continually involved the PSTs in the process so that they could provide meaningful feedback on the design of the literacy methods course. We also frequently adapted our instructional methods based on real events happening in our classroom. This was especially true after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when we quickly had to simulate a similar experience for the PSTs in a virtual platform.

## **Participants**

Action research recognizes a community as a unit of identity, building on the strengths of that community, and integrating collaboration between all members (Bradbury et al., 2019; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Ivankova, 2015). The participants in this study were members of our classroom community and integral in the design and findings of this study. This study was conducted at two public universities in a large state in the southwestern United States. At each university, we collected data from our own section of a literacy methods course, for a total of 40 participants, 24 from University A and 16 from University B. While our participants included two defined groups of PSTs, the groups never interacted. The demographic data of the participants are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants*

Category	Percentage (N = 40)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic	45.0
White	42.5
African American	7.5
Asian	5.0
<b>Employment status</b>	
Full-time	25.0
Part-time	42.5
Unemployed	32.5
<b>Family history in college</b>	
First-generation college student	47.5

**Design**

Throughout the semester, we immersed participants in authentic reading experiences with literature through the use of book clubs. At the conclusion of each class and the semester, the PSTs reflected on lessons learned both as readers and as future reading teachers. At the start of each book club, we offered the PSTs a choice between six middle-level or young adult novels to read, as presented in Table 2.



Table 2

*Book Club Text Options*

Book club round	Text options
<b>Middle-grade novels</b>	Gino, A. (2015). <i>Melissa</i> . Scholastic.
	Kelly, L. (2019). <i>A song for a whale</i> . Delacorte Press.
	Rauf, O. Q. (2019). <i>The boy at the back of the class</i> . Delacorte Press.
	Rhodes, J. P. (2018). <i>Ghost boys</i> . Little Brown Books for Young Readers.
	Warga, J. (2019). <i>Other words for home</i> . Balzer + Bray.
	Yang, K. (2018). <i>Front desk</i> . Scholastic.
<b>Young adult novels</b>	Acevedo, E. (2019). <i>With the fire on high</i> . Quill Tree Books.
	Gratz, A. (2017). <i>Refugee</i> . Scholastic.
	Saenz, B. A. (2014). <i>Aristotle and Dante discover the secrets of the universe</i> . Simon & Schuster.
	Sanchez, E. L. (2017). <i>I am not your perfect Mexican daughter</i> . Knopf Books for Young Readers.
	Thomas, A. (2017). <i>The hate u give</i> . Balzer + Bray.

When selecting texts for book clubs, we drew on what we know about texts serving as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). It was important that the text options included recently published trade books that featured diverse characters and were written by authors from diverse backgrounds to present a wide array of titles that featured many different types of characters and their experiences. While we hoped that the PSTs could replicate the instructional design of the book club experience, it was not our intention that they would use these exact titles in their future classrooms. Instead, we discussed our methods for selecting titles and the importance of representation in our classroom libraries.

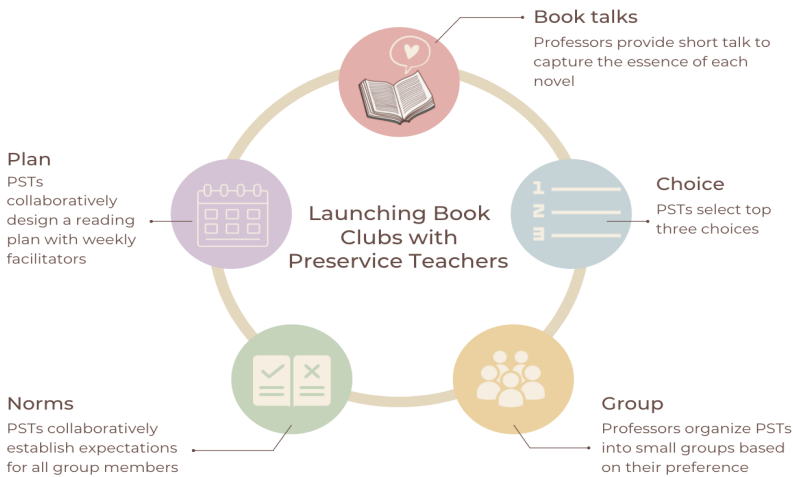
Because diversity is often absent in books published for young readers (Huyck & Dahlen, 2019), and in turn it is absent in schools, we knew that the book clubs should feature inclusive and representative text choices that portrayed diverse characters, were written by diverse authors, and included detailed accounts from traditionally marginalized populations. When children do not have books that reflect who they are, we are communicating that their stories and voices don't matter (Miller & Sharp, 2018).

As teacher educators, we wanted the PSTs to see themselves and other diverse characters in literature to affirm the importance of this for their personal reading and for their future students' reading lives. The hope was that these PSTs would leave the semester understanding that providing choice and inclusivity is a powerful and important combination.

To launch the experience of book clubs with PSTs, we designed a simple process to introduce the texts, organize the groups, and facilitate ownership in the design of the experience. Figure 1 captures each step in this process.

Figure 1

*Process for Launching Book Clubs With Preservice Teachers*



Initially, these book clubs took place during our scheduled in-person class meetings for 30–40 minutes once a week. During that time, participants would discuss the text together as we listened and took field notes, as needed. As each university shifted to an online platform in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second round of book club meetings was held via Zoom and organized by the participants. At times, we participated in these virtual meetings, scaffolding conversations as needed, but all meetings were facilitated by the participants. Each Zoom meeting recording was uploaded to a collaborative blog space on the class learning management system, Blackboard.

## Data Sources

The data sources for this study were a survey, written reflections, and researcher field notes to answer the question of whether collaboration within these authentic literacy practices converge experience and pedagogy, and mold future teachers' literacy identities.

To gain insight into the participants' existing reading habits, experiences, familiarity with children's literature, and reading self-awareness, we conducted a comprehensive survey (Stocks, 2011) at the beginning of the semester. This survey was chosen because it

provided insight into the PSTs’ personal literacy lives before the course. The survey was administered through Qualtrics, an anonymous survey program used to collect and analyze survey responses. The survey questions collected demographic information and addressed PSTs’ reading attitudes and development, reading habits, knowledge of literature, and reader self-awareness. The survey questions were structured using a Likert scale while also containing an optional open-ended response section for potential explanation of a given score. Figure 2 shows an example of the survey questions that addressed reading attitudes and development.

Figure 2  
*Survey Example of Reading Attitude and Development*

As a child...	Never	Occasionally	Regularly	Very Often
I recall books being accessible in my home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I observed family members engaged in reading.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I visited the public library or bookstore.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was read to at home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I read books independently.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I read other materials (magazines, comic books, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I recall books being available in my classroom for leisure reading.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I observed teachers engaged in reading.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was read to at school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My teacher(s) encouraged reading for enjoyment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My teacher(s) encouraged reading for grade fulfillment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Open-Ended Response:

What home or school experiences contributed to your development as a reader?

In addition to the initial survey, we collected written reflections from participants throughout the semester, which were generated using a variety of platforms. At times, participants reflected informally on a sticky note exit ticket, writing about what they learned in class that week. Other times, participants reflected in an online journal format, adding reflections on field-based experience and course readings. At the end of each book club and the semester, participants wrote culminating papers to capture their experience and reflect on their growth as readers and reading teachers. All three reflective platforms allowed us, as researchers, to capture what the participants were learning about literacy and teaching literacy. While these written reflections provided a safe space for the participants to process and digest information, they also provided formative assessment data to better tailor the course to meet the needs of the PSTs.

Another form of written reflection was kept using a collaborative blog space. Since the participants often met in collaborative groups, such as book clubs, without the consistent presence of the professors, we asked them to summarize their discussion on the blog each week. The PSTs also uploaded their book club recordings to this blog space after the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We listened to each book club meeting and captured relevant information relating to the evolution of the PSTs' literacy identity. The data gained from this platform shifted our lens from single participant reflection to a group of participants.

Finally, both of us kept detailed field notes to capture big ideas and observations from the PSTs. These notes helped us separate our observations from interpretations as well as begin identifying emerging patterns and themes from the conversations.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive because this action research study was emergent and unfolding across the semester. Therefore, we continually discussed and analyzed the data collected as a way of making meaning from what we were observing and to further the design of the study.

At the start of the study, we used the data and analysis features in Qualtrics to examine our own data from our sections. Then, we noted any patterns or trends across our group. Next, we consolidated the data to view the results as a collective whole across both sections. Finally, we analyzed the open-ended questions that were answered by participants to note any further explanation for some of the quantitative findings. We used the survey data to drive our planning and curricular design for the course.

After collecting data, each of us used open-coding techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to look for initial patterns and themes in our data. Because we were not analyzing data by participant but as a whole, we combed through the data by type. For example, we coded all student reflections at once before moving onto our field notes. After combing through our data using open coding, we collapsed our codes into categories, which allowed us to pull the data into more meaningful units of analysis.

To triangulate our findings, we returned to our quantitative data to see how our findings from the survey aligned with our results from the qualitative measures throughout

the study. We were able to look at the data through the lens of before and after the immersion experience to truly answer our question about how PSTs’ identities evolved across the semester. Each of us brought our initial data analysis findings to the next phase of data analysis.

In the final phase of analysis, we came together to compare our initial patterns and themes to see what trends we noticed overall. We were able to collapse many patterns and reword others to truly capture our findings. Table 3 shows our initial codes, then categories, and finally overarching themes.

Table 3  
*Pattern Coding*

Initial codes	Categories	Theme
Reading for pleasure	Pleasure/leisure	Transformation in reading habits
Enjoyment	Time	
Time spent reading	Choice	
Negative to positive experiences	Discussion	
Love of reading		
Independence		
Autonomy		
Collaboration		
Attitude		
Habits		
Children’s literature	Literature	Transformation of reading pedagogy
Choice	Choice	
Books	Pedagogy	
Types of texts	Diversity and inclusion	
Teaching possibilities		
Magic of books		
Inclusion		
Diversity		

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Characters as teachers	Identity as teacher	Transformation from student to teacher
Teaching moves		
Implications for future practice		

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## Findings

The findings from this action research study reveal that the literacy identities of PSTs evolved in the way they transformed their reading habits and their views of reading pedagogy across the semester as well as how they transformed from viewing themselves as students to teachers of reading. The findings reveal that after engaging in a semester of authentic literacy practices, the participants had more of an interest in reading for pleasure personally and seeing the value of reading for their future students.

### Theme 1: Transformation of Reading Habits

At the beginning of the study, only 25% of participants indicated on the survey that they read for leisure very often or regularly. Many anecdotal comments on the survey revealed that PSTs did not read for pleasure because of a negative experience in school. For example, one participant said, “My fourth-grade reading/writing teacher made me feel like an imbecile, so I began to hate reading and stopped.” This participant was one of many who described a negative experience in school affecting her attitude toward reading.

Also in the beginning of the study, most participants indicated that any time they currently spend reading is dedicated to their college coursework. In fact, on the Qualtrics survey, 80% of participants selected that they read for academic purposes very often or regularly. One student explained that due to the amount of courses she was taking and the workload that went along with those credit hours, she simply did not have any time left over to read for pleasure.

At the conclusion of the study, there was a noticeable transformation in the participants’ desire to read for pleasure. In several written reflections across the semester, participants expressed a new love of reading. In a reflection halfway through the semester, one participant explained, “This is the first time since sixth grade that I’ve read a book to the end and I really enjoyed it!” This reflection was prompted at the conclusion of her participation in the book club that read *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018). In a final written reflection at the end of the semester, another participant said:

I used to read a lot when I was younger, but as I got older, reading for enjoyment became less of a priority. Now that I’ve been a college student, all of my reading is textbook material, so reading a good fiction book for enjoyment was a nice reminder.

Students, whether in K–12 public schools or higher education, need time and opportunity to read so that they develop a love of reading (Hiebert, 2009; Spiegel, 1982).

Because the texts selected for the book clubs were relatable, PSTs experienced greater transformation in their reading habits. In fact, after reading *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (Sanchez, 2017), one PST explained that the emotional tie she felt with a character in the novel allowed her to become more engaged in daily reading activities. She said, “I simply couldn’t stop reading!” In her final reflection, this student expressed the empathy that took over while reading the text on her own: “As a reader I was able to understand how Julia felt throughout the book and a little inside me hurt when she tried to commit suicide.”

Similarly, a PST who read *With the Fire on High* (Acevedo, 2019) experienced the same inability to put the book down due to the emotional ties with the character: “It is crazy how this book made me feel. I felt a roller coaster of emotions.” Developing empathy with a character transformed students who previously had not read for pleasure into readers who looked forward to reading and talking about books with peers.

In many initial reflections, the PSTs were anxious about carving out time to read and actually fulfilling this assignment. By the end of the semester, students commented on their surprise at how easy it was to make time to read for pleasure. In fact, one PST said she learned about pacing and reprioritizing her day to intentionally spend time reading. In her final reflection she said she surprised herself because once she got into the story, it was so hard for her to put the book down. Often, she found herself longing to read just one more chapter, but because she was on a pacing schedule with peers in her book club, she was forced to close the book and wait. The weekly meetings with her peers helped transform her reading habits because she did not want to let them down by not completing the reading and eventually by not reading ahead and spoiling the ending.

Because the participants had access to high-interest texts, opportunities to self-select the texts, and time spent in dialogue with peers, they became more engaged in the reading experience. Most participants credited the book clubs as their favorite authentic literacy experience because of the opportunity to choose their own text, collaborate with peers, and discuss real-life content.

## **Theme 2: Transformation of Reading Pedagogy**

Another finding from this study illuminates the PSTs’ transformation of reading pedagogical practices, specifically the way the PSTs understood how to use literature in their future classrooms. Not only did they develop an understanding of how to incorporate authentic literacy practices into their future classrooms, they began envisioning possibilities for using literature to create safe and inclusive classrooms that celebrated the diversity of their future learners.

At the start of the study, 80% of the PSTs read online texts regularly or very often and 60% read informational texts regularly or very often, while only 30% read fiction. These results align with previous findings that most of the reading work done before this semester was for academic purposes or social media use. When asked how frequently they read children’s literature, only 23% of PSTs said regularly or very often, which is similar to findings about how often they read adolescent literature (20%). Furthermore, only 5% of

PSTs indicated they read poetry regularly or very often. While this survey did not address current pedagogical understandings for teaching reading, it did reveal important information about the types of literature the PSTs were most familiar with. And at the start of the semester, the PSTs' knowledge of children's literature had been limited.

At the conclusion of the study, there was a noticeable transformation in the participants' understanding of the power of authentic literature. In a reflection after engaging in a book club with *Melissa* (Gino, 2017), a PST beautifully captured the potential of literature in a classroom when she said, "Books can bring you into a whole new world." Similarly, in an exit ticket reflection, a PST said, "There is power in a book! All you need is a good book!" She went on to explain how books can be used to teach all areas of literacy. Many exit tickets mirrored this same realization of how books can be used to teach just about anything. Later in the semester, students began building more complex ideas about reading pedagogy by drawing conclusions about the reciprocal nature between reading and writing. One student reflected, "The most significant thing I learned...is the importance of reading because it impacts student writing."

By reading different types of children's and adolescent literature, the PSTs had opportunities to envision possibilities for their future classrooms. They began looking at the texts they were reading with a different lens, noticing the author's craft moves and paying closer attention to their own reading process. For example, the PSTs noticed how the text structure of both *Melissa* (Gino, 2017) and *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) was intentional and directly impacted the way the story was interpreted by the reader. The participants also began asking questions while they were reading and doing research after reading to learn more about the topic. Because the PSTs were engaging in authentic literacy practices as students, they were better able to envision possibilities as future teachers.

Many of the conversations that occurred after engaging in authentic literacy practices helped the PSTs build a repertoire for teaching the reading standards in authentic ways. For example, in a group discussion one day a student explained that she had always seen story elements taught through worksheets. However, after reflecting on her experience in class, she said, "Book clubs are actually more effective in teaching story elements because students are discussing the elements and applying that learning to different books across the year."

The PSTs also noticed the importance of providing choice in reading classrooms. In a final reflection after reading *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), a PST explained, "I think it is important to give students choice in reading. I believe that you get more from students when choice is a part of instruction." Another PST said in a reflection, "When we have the power to choose the books we want to read, it makes it more enjoyable because we are reading something that struck us with interest." The PSTs began to see the connection between authentic literacy practices and the power of choice for students.

Transformation of reading pedagogy was most evident in the way the PSTs spoke about social issues relating to diversity and inclusion. In a reflection after reading *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (Sanchez, 2017), a PST wrote about the importance of providing students with diverse texts that include diverse characters:



Books that include diverse characters allow students that come from diverse backgrounds to feel a sense of connection and acceptance through the texts that they read. It allows them to relate to a book and its characters in a meaningful way they may not have been able to do with other books. Additionally, diversity in books allows other students to learn about different cultures and people that they may not have had the opportunity to interact with. This allows them to explore new ideas and perspectives through the characters they read about in books, which can in turn help students understand other people's experiences a lot better. This allows students to become more tolerant and mindful of others, as well as create a sense of community in the classroom.

Through this experience as a reader, the PSTs were learning how to effectively incorporate literature into their classrooms to provide rich and meaningful experiences for their own future students. Additionally, they were uncovering important truths about how books can be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) for students. In a whole-group conversation, a student passionately stated, "I know people are scared of conversations about diversity and inclusion, but we should embrace it and books can help safely create those conversations."

### **Theme 3: Transformation From Student to Teacher**

Finally, the PSTs experienced a transformation from viewing themselves as students to viewing themselves as teachers. In an exit ticket reflection a PST wrote, "The most significant thing I learned this week is not to doubt myself when teaching because I know I am capable and making a difference." This reflection revealed that the PST was beginning to envision herself as a teacher. In a final reflection after engaging in a book club on *Refugee* (Gratz, 2017), a PST demonstrated awareness of her own future self as a teacher:

Books create a warm emotional bond between teachers and children....As a literacy teacher I will make sure that my class spends a lot more time reading books and definitely going to find a way for each of my students to have a love for reading because books are not just a reading tool but much more.

The transformation from student to teacher went beyond pedagogy and addressed many invisible skills required by teachers. For example, when considering methods for teaching reading in their future classroom, many of the PSTs explained how sharing books together creates a community of learners. One PST reflected on the experience of bonding over literature and how it allows students to make friends, share different thoughts and perspectives, and develop an understanding of the world. In the same way, another PST reflected on the need to "leave her bias at the door." This experience guided future teachers in considering not only how they would implement these practices in their future classrooms, but also what skills they need to develop to be able to create safe classroom spaces that celebrate differences and invite dialogue from diverse perspectives.

Many of the conversations about teaching moves stemmed from the texts used in book clubs because many of the texts featured a supporting character that was a teacher. The PSTs began noticing those teaching moves and reflecting on what they might do

as teachers in that situation. Several participants became angry or disappointed in the decisions made by the teacher characters in their books, arguing for a different approach that would be more supportive and inclusive. For example, in the book *Front Desk* (Yang, 2018), the participants were angered by the stereotyping and prejudice demonstrated toward the main character.

This reading experience opened up conversations between the PSTs to discuss how they might approach these same situations if the characters were students in their classroom. Not all texts featured negative examples of poor decision making by teachers. In fact, many students who read *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (Sanchez, 2017) revealed the lessons they learned from teachers in the novel. One PST said, “Julia’s teacher was a great example in the book on how he built that one-on-one connection with Julia.” Others reflected on the role of other support staff in the school, like campus administration. When reading *Melissa* (Gino, 2015), several participants were disturbed by the gender-specific instructional practices in the teacher’s classroom management style but surprised by the kindness and support shown to Melissa by the school principal.

Additionally, the PSTs developed an understanding of the individuality of the students that will make up their future classrooms. Reading *Melissa* (Gino, 2015) helped one PST understand the importance of getting to know individual students: “You never know what students are going through in their personal lives, and it is important to watch the way they are acting and reacting to things at school.” This reflection reveals that the PST was able to step into the perspective of a teacher through the experience of reading the novel.

The reflections focused on the teaching moves made by characters in the novels, and many considered what they might do differently in their own classrooms. The language in many reflections shifted from “The teacher should...” to “As a future teacher, I will...,” demonstrating transformation in their identity as future educators.

## Discussion

This action research study aimed to answer the question: In what ways do PSTs’ literacy identities evolve after engaging in authentic literacy activities in the university classroom? We found a transformation in PSTs’ outlook on reading (for some their personal reading habits), their views of literacy pedagogy, and reflections in which they started to identify as literacy teachers.

We found that many students who had a negative view of reading started using more positive language about reading. Many even realized where their views of reading originated and, through the use of authentic reading activities, they walked away from our courses with a more positive view of reading, in schools and in their personal lives. Additionally, by connecting those authentic experiences with classroom instruction, they were able to experience and understand that these authentic activities are possible in the K–12 classroom and that they would make for a more meaningful reading experience for their future students.

## **Implications for Teacher Educators**

We believe there is evidence in this study that by using authentic literacy activities and providing these experiences for PSTs, teacher educators can help not only transform how students see literacy pedagogy, but also transform their personal views of literacy. These two things are needed to create a pedagogical transformation (Alsup, 2006; Richardson & Anders, 1994; Spitler, 2011). And that is what some of our students need due to how their K–12 schooling (and continued university courses) have shaped their personal literacy identities and in turn how they view reading pedagogy. It is important that teacher educators mirror what an authentic K–12 literacy classroom looks like and provide these experiences for their PSTs.

Additionally, in order to create that personal investment that is needed for authentic literacy experiences to take place (Edelsky, 1991; Gambrell et al., 2011a; Purcell-Gates, 2002), inclusive and representative literature and texts have to be incorporated. For many of our students, this experience was powerful and joyful because they were finally able to see themselves in a book, something that we found in itself can transform a person's view of reading. While the push for the publishing world to become more diverse really started moving forward in 2015, not all schools are as quick to follow this path. This means that teacher educators have to incorporate inclusive and representative literature into their classrooms, for PSTs to experience but also so that we can teach them how to do the same in their future classrooms. PSTs have to learn how to be advocates for their future students, and this can be best learned in the university classroom through modeling and experiences.

## **Implications for Future Research**

There is still much to discover through the use of authentic literacy practices in teacher education and how it affects PSTs' literacy identities and views of literacy pedagogy.

Because inclusive and representative literature is so important and powerful for PSTs and all students, just openly discussing these books and social issues is not enough. We need to also bring in research and model how to have meaningful and productive conversations about social issues. If we don't do this then the work becomes surface level and meaningful change will not come about in the classroom or in society (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).

Additionally, book clubs were only one of the authentic literacy experiences we explored for the purpose of this study. Several other literacy practices could use further exploration. Specifically, we are curious about the connection between our PSTs' reading lives and their writing lives and how this affects their identity as future literacy teachers.

We also believe that teacher educators need to take a deeper look at how to use digital/online spaces for authentic literacy practices with PSTs (and how this can be transferred into the K–12 classroom). Many of us were forced into this type of learning by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is merit to creating a more purposeful and fulfilling online space for students.

## **Conclusion**

PSTs enter teacher education programs with a myriad of experiences. These experiences have shaped their personal literacy identities (Spitler, 2009) and in turn their ideas about reading pedagogy, many times for the negative. In order to help students see the positive side of literacy practices inside and outside of school, it is important that teacher educators cultivate authentic and enriching literacy experiences in literacy methods courses.

This action research study incorporated authentic literacy practices such as book clubs, utilizing texts that live outside of the in-school context, making sure that these texts were inclusive and representative, and encouraging small-group dialogue among PSTs. By providing these practices in the university classroom, we not only paralleled what would be best for K–12 literacy practices, but also gave students a chance to make meaning, have a purpose, and own their literacy experiences. This instructional design provided an authentic literacy environment (Edelsky, 1991; Gambrell et al., 2011a; Purcell-Gates, 2002) that allowed PSTs to reflect on their personal literacy identities and to then rethink the ideas of reading pedagogy that were instilled in them from their K–12 literacy experiences.

## **About the Authors**

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