


May 2020

Content Area Literacy: The Effects of Focusing on Preservice Teachers' Literacy Identities

Heather Pule
University of Houston Clear Lake, pule@uhcl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte>

 Part of the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Pule, Heather (2020) "Content Area Literacy: The Effects of Focusing on Preservice Teachers' Literacy Identities," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: [10.15760/nwjte.2020.15.1.5](https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2020.15.1.5)

Available at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte/vol15/iss1/5>

This article is brought to you for free and open access. Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

Content Area Literacy: The Effects of Focusing on Preservice Teachers' Literacy Identities

Heather Pule

*University of Houston
Clear Lake*

While secondary preservice content area teachers are passionate about their content areas, many are still resistant to learning about and using literacy in their future classrooms (Moje, 2010; O'Brien & Stewart, 1990, Spitler, 2011). This could be due to a struggle with high level literacy skills (American Institute for Research, 2006; NAEP, 2015) or a lack of literacy in their personal lives. This study examines a university content area literacy course that focused on preservice teachers' literacy identities and on providing a community that offered positive interactions with literacy through authentic and purposeful reading experiences. A study of survey data reflects how these preservice teachers' views of literacy in the classroom and their own personal literacy identities were affected by specific literacy lessons and assignments.

Keywords: content area literacy, preservice teacher, literacy, identity

Introduction

While secondary preservice content area teachers are passionate about their content areas, they are not always as passionate about literacy practices. Using literacy strategies in middle and high school content area classes is beneficial for student learning, but many content area teachers are still resistant to learning and using literacy in their future classrooms (Moje, 2010; O'Brien & Stewart, 1990, Spitler, 2011).

The most recent results of the NAEP achievement test (2015) for high school seniors showed that only 37 percent of twelfth graders were at or above proficient in reading. The Literacy of America's College Students study reported that the majority of student participants who were enrolled at 2- and 4-year institutions tested at an intermediate literacy level. These students successfully completed literacy tasks such as consulting reference materials to find specific information, but they struggled when comparing viewpoints in two editorials or interpreting a table (American Institute for Research, 2006). The latter literacy tasks are examples of the literacy skill level teacher educators expect preservice teachers to be proficient in to successfully "situate content-area literacy instruction within domain specific disciplinary practices" (Bogard, Sableski, Arnold, & Bowman, 2017).

Based on these reports, there is a chance that many students in content area literacy courses struggle with high level literacy skills, which could hinder their understanding of the importance of literacy in the content areas. Considering that teacher's own literacy lives and beliefs play a role in how literacy is utilized in their classrooms (Sulentic-Dowell, Beal, &

Capraro, 2006; Ulusoy & Dedeoglu, 2011), a lack of literacy in preservice teachers' lives may play a role in their acceptance and use of literacy practices in their future classrooms.

Content area literacy courses tend to focus on literacy strategies that help students read and understand content area texts. While strategies are needed for successful instruction, simply providing literacy strategies for content area preservice teachers may not be enough for them to understand the importance of literacy in all learning and to believe that literacy instruction will make a difference for their future students.

Transforming practice requires that (a) teachers believe in that practice, both personally and professionally; and (b) that the practice is woven into who they are so they can confidently bring it to life in their teaching (Alsup, 2006; Richardson & Anders, 1994, Spitler, 2011). To that end, preservice content area teachers need more than just strategies. They need to experience literacy to understand its purpose, hopefully enjoy it, and choose to use that practice in their own lives. Content area literacy classes must include a focus on the literacy identities of preservice teachers.

Teacher literacy identity can be 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). A teacher's literacy identity can be shaped by a person's previous interactions and experiences with literacy.

“Identities are built within the social interactions one has within a particular discourse community” (Gee, 2000; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Additionally, a person's identity is always in flux (Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009) depending on these discourses and literacy experiences. For many college students, their literacy identities were “built” in the reading communities they grew up in – their schools. For many these environments and experiences were not enough to create positive literacy identities, which in turn could affect how a preservice teacher not only views literacy, but also how they personally interact with literacy. By focusing on preservice teachers' literacy identities in a content area literacy course and providing a new community that offers positive social interactions with literacy, these preservice teachers' views of literacy in the classroom and their own personal literacy identities could be positively affected.

Content Area Literacy Course Study

In order to focus on students' literacy identities, educators must understand how each student views their personal literacy habits and skills and must provide meaningful interactions with literacy that can shape not just students' literacy habits and skills, but also their beliefs of literacy and their literacy practices in a positive way.

When planning and teaching a recent content area literacy course, I devoted much of the course instruction to focusing on students' literacy identities. The course included classroom reading, literacy skill lessons, experiences with different texts, choice reading, and class time devoted to independent reading. The goal of these interactions with literacy was that students would see their personal literacy in a positive light, cultivate their own literacy skills, and understand the purpose of literacy in their future content area classrooms. At the end of the course, students were asked to complete an anonymous survey that asked questions about how their personal literacy was impacted by specific literacy lessons and assignments, and also to predict how their future teaching was impacted by the literacy lessons and assignments. Sixteen of the 24 students enrolled in the course elected to take the survey. All of the preservice teachers

in this course were planning to be middle or high school teachers of one of the following subjects: math, English language arts, science, history, art, or physical education.

The following sections detail the literacy lessons, literacy assignments, and, based on the survey results, describe the impact each had on students' personal literacy lives and on their future classroom literacy practices.

Literacy Skill Lessons

Throughout the semester, literacy skills lessons were used to explicitly teach the following reading skills: annotating, monitoring comprehension, background knowledge, inferencing, and determining importance. I also taught reading lessons that engaged students in thinking about various texts. These lessons are based on the stages of reading a text, before, during, and after, which guide students through the thinking processes effective readers use (Daniels & Zemelman, 2014). The purpose of these lessons was to support students in the growth of their own literacy skills by helping them recognize the skills they were already using and adding additional literacy skills to their personal reading practice while modeling reading lessons they could use in their future classrooms.

Each literacy skill lesson was taught as a mini lesson using the gradual release of responsibility framework (Plaut, 2009). Students had a chance to see each reading skill modeled at least once and then had time to use this skill in guided practice and on their own throughout the semester.

Student impact. The majority of students reported that all of the skill lessons had a positive impact on their personal literacy practices (see figure 1). The skills rated by students as having the most impact on their personal literacy practices were monitoring comprehension, before, during, and after, and background knowledge (in that order). Annotating, inferencing, and determining importance had the least impact on students' personal literacy skills, but still had an impact on most students.

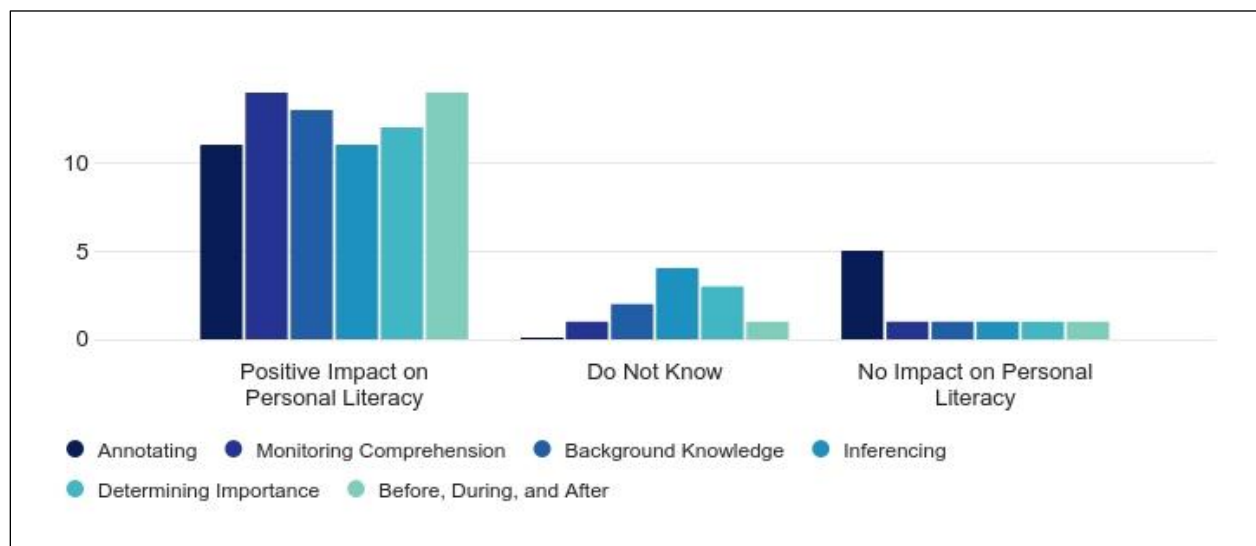


Figure 1: Literacy Skills Lessons Impact on Students' Personal Literacy Practices

One student stated that their view of literacy changed drastically after this course.

“The very first class was a major eye opener in terms of actually defining literacy, but the following classes were just as important because [they] provided actual examples and demonstrations which are extremely important if I want to understand something fully.”

An interesting data point to note is that annotating was rated as having no impact on students’ personal literacy by 5 of the 16 students. Annotation was the skill I received the most pushback on when teaching. Students were opposed to trying annotation strategies more than any other strategy, however in class, students mentioned more than once that annotating had helped them right away when reading for other college courses.

Students rating of whether they would teach these literacy skill lessons to their future students were more positive than the impact on their personal literacy. All 16 students stated that they would teach monitoring comprehension and background knowledge to their future students, and the other skills were not far behind (see figure 2). As one student pointed out, “The course opened my eyes to how much more literacy includes, and gave me some good techniques to use in my future class.”

It is interesting to note that the skills students placed the most emphasis on for their personal literacy practices were the same skills they all would teach to their future students (monitoring comprehension and background knowledge), which supports the ideas that preservice teachers personal identities have an effect on what they teach in the classroom (Sulentic-Dowell et al., 2006; Ulusoy & Dedeoglu, 2011) and that it is important for preservice teachers to experience literacy practices in order to better understand the value of these practices personally and in the classroom.

Overall, the literacy skills lessons had a positive impact on students’ personal literacy practices and on their predictions for their future classroom literacy practices.

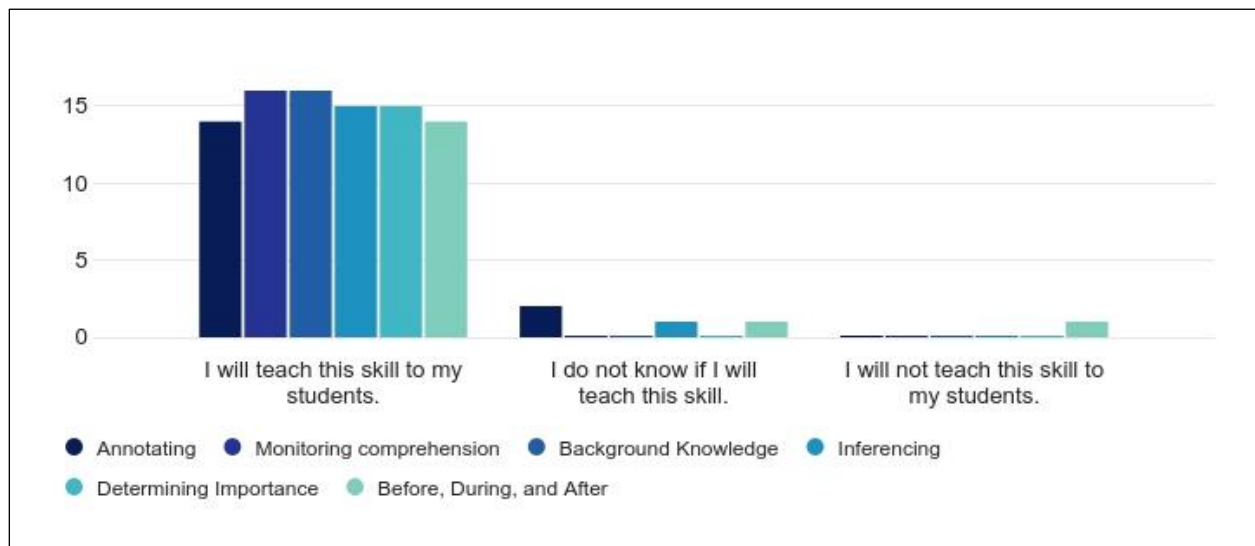


Figure 2: Impact of Literacy Skill Lessons on Students’ Future Teaching

Literacy Assignments

All of the literacy assignments and literacy practices during this course were planned with two things in mind (1) students’ personal literacy practices and (2) the transferability of these practices into any secondary content area classroom. Each practice fostered a different

component of literacy and many allowed students time to continue practicing the literacy skills taught in class.

Article of the week. To provide experiences with different texts and to apply the reading skills we were learning to use in class, students were assigned an Article of the Week (Gallagher & Allington, 2009) or Graph of the Week (Turner, 2006) each week. Students read, thought about, and annotated this text closely, and then responded to the ideas of the text in writing. This assignment served many purposes, it provided practice reading, annotating, thinking, and writing, while also increasing students' knowledge of the world. When this happens, students' have a wider repertoire of background knowledge (something needed to be able to comprehend a text) and will become not only more successful readers (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017), writers, and thinkers, but they will also know more about the world around them and how to respond to and interact with worldly and academic ideas. This is also an assignment that would be valuable in any secondary content area classroom for the same reasons.

Student impact. The majority of students, 12 out of 16, rated that the article of the week assignment increased their personal literacy practices during and after the duration of the course. The remaining students rated that this assignment did not and will not have an impact on their personal literacy practices during and after the duration of the course (see figure 3). For the students that this assignment impacted positively, one student stated that it "broadened my view on certain issues and had me forming my own questions. I found myself wanting to know more and research more on the topic." Another student stated that the articles of the week "presented not only some topics that I wouldn't usually read but then having to write about them made me question them in ways I haven't done in a long time." One student also reacted to the nature of the articles, they stated that "each article had a sensitive subject so I felt passionate about everything I wrote and was actually well educated on recent events taking place."

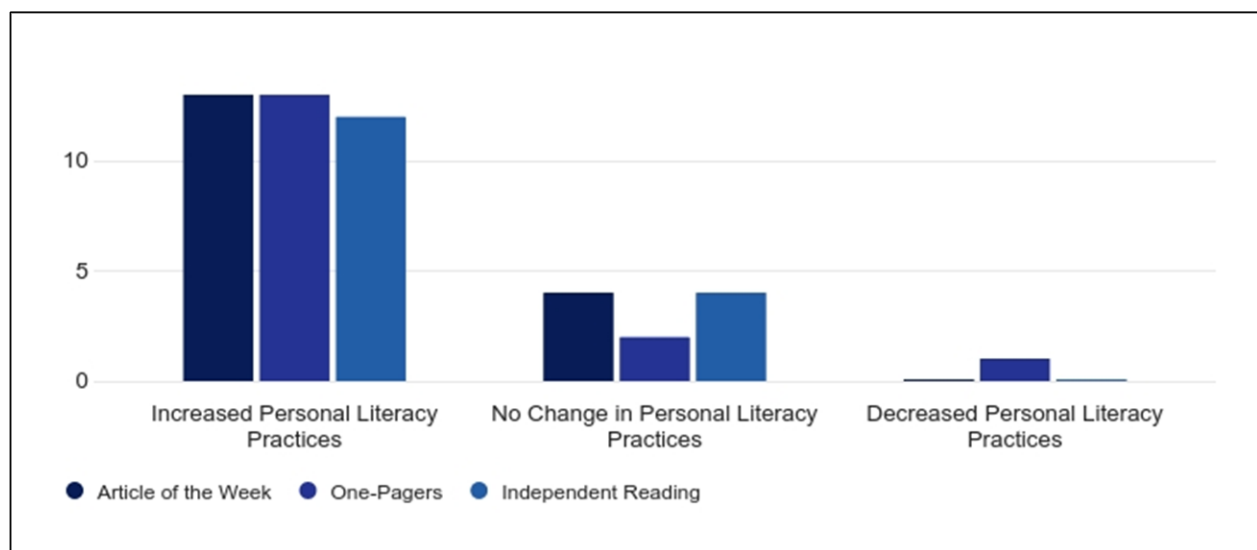


Figure 3: Literacy Assignment Impact on Students' Personal Literacy Practices

Interestingly, a higher number of students rated a positive impact for the article of the week on their personal literacy practices than rated that they would use it in their classroom (see figures 3 and 4). This might show that this assignment might have more of an impact personally than professionally. The majority of students still rated that they would use the article of the

week for their future students, but it would be expected that if a person sees something as valuable in their own lives they would want to transfer this value to their future students.

One-Pagers. In order to incorporate choice reading into the course, students were asked to read three middle grade or young adult literature trade books over the course of the semester. All three books were chosen by students based on their reading interests. They could choose any genre and format including fiction, graphic novels, novels in verse, nonfiction, etc. The only requirement was that one of the three books had to connect to their content area.

To create a space that supported students' reading and choices, I book talked books, I read excerpts from books, and I shared what I was reading during each class. For each text that students read they were required to complete a one-pager (Gallagher & Allington, 2009). A one-pager is a one-page book reflection designed to allow freedom in reading choices, but to also hold students accountable without getting in the way of their reading for pleasure (Gallagher & Allington, 2009). After completing their one-pagers, during the next class each student shared the book they read with peers in small groups. This reading assignment served multiple purposes. First, students were reading books they chose, which increases reading motivation and interest (Gambrell, Palmer, Coding & Mazzoni, 1996; Miller & Sharp, 2018; Worthy & McKool, 1996; Wigfield, Mason-Singh, Ho, & Guthrie, 2014). It also allowed students to read books of interest to their future students, which is important to be able to support student readers (Miller & Sharp, 2018).

Student impact. Of the 16 students, 13 stated that the one-pager assignments had a positive impact on their literacy practices during the semester and 12 reported that it would have a positive impact on their literacy practices after the semester. Most students did not take time to write about their experience with the one-pager assignment, but one student did have a negative review. "The one-pagers made me not want to finish the book I was reading because I like reading for pleasure, not for purpose. I'd rather read a book and discuss it in a group than fill out a form about the book." Subsequently, the one-pager assignment, while still rating it positively, had the least impact on students for their future classroom literacy practices. More students rated that they would not use this in their future classroom more than any other assignment (see figure 4). Based on these results, it is clear that choice reading was positive for students, but that they may not have seen as much value in the one-pager assignment. There is a chance that they needed more of a connection with the books or that more choice in the assignment would have been beneficial.

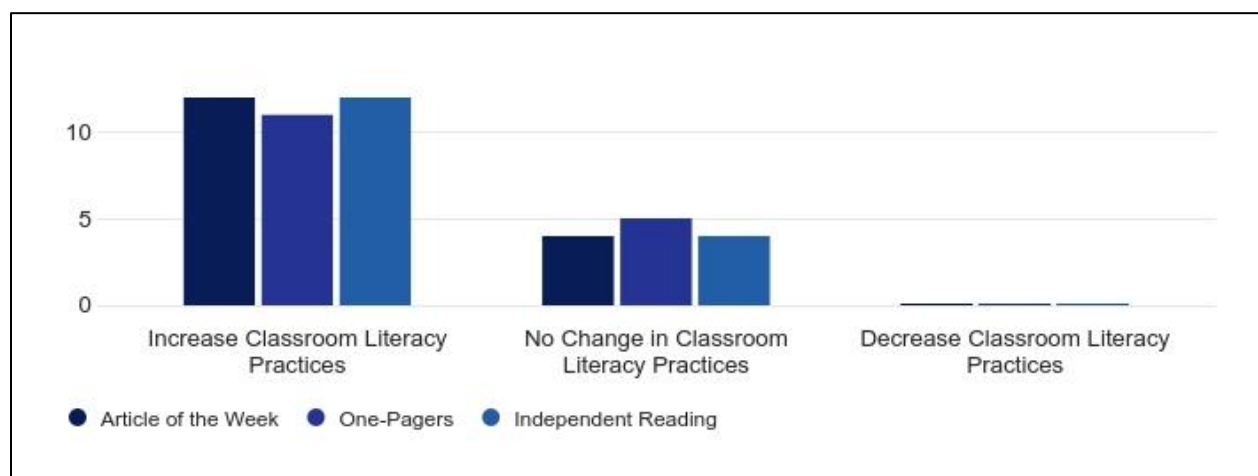


Figure 4: Literacy Assignment Impact on Students' Future Classroom Practices

Independent Reading. To make sure that students found time to read and to show students that their reading time was valued, each class included dedicated time for independent reading. Independent reading provides time for students to “consolidate their reading skills and strategies and come to own them” (Allington, 2014; Miller & Sharp, 2018, p. 102).

In the middle of each class, for 20 minutes, students brought something to class and read. This reading time was for anything the students wanted to read: books, comic books, audiobooks, ebooks, magazines, etc. The only stipulation was that they could not read a textbook or academic reading for a course, it must be something they chose to read. While students read I walked around and conferenced with each student about what they were reading and talked with them about books in general. I was able to gauge how they felt about the book they were reading and make recommendations for different or future books.

Student impact. Independent reading received positive reviews from students in regards to their personal literacy practices. All but three students said that this practice increased their personal literacy practices and that they would use this in their future classrooms. Students stated that the independent reading time had an impact on them for the following reasons—it provided time to read books of their choice, it reminded them that reading can be fun, it allowed them to recognize the importance of reading different types of books, it increased their background knowledge, it encouraged choice reading, and that having time to read was enjoyable because it is not something they generally find time for in their personal lives.

In terms of classroom use, one student wrote that “reading on a regular basis increases background knowledge... [and that] we model what we want our students to be doing; reading and being literate. Literacy equals success.” This sentiment is important for a few reasons. Not only does it highlight that students found independent reading valuable, but also because the students were making connections between what they were doing in content area reading to their future classroom and their own personal literacy lives.

Independent reading is a practice that many times loses out due to time constraints in classrooms. It was important that preservice teachers experience and understand the importance and benefits of independent reading. Hopefully they will provide the same opportunities for their future students.

Literacy Practices and Literacy Assignments

Overall, all of the literacy assignments and literacy practices had a positive impact on students personally and for their future classrooms. As one student remarked about the practices and assignments:

I was able to learn so much from them. Having these assignments made me actually read and mark what I was reading. Marking my readings was a great help when it came to summarizing/writing about the stories/articles. [These] assignments help[ed] me discover that I am not that bad at reading and understand like I used to think. It's all about dedicating the time. It was the first time I did not complain or dislike reading.

To be able to impact a student's belief in a personal practice is the start of transforming their practice as a teacher (Alsup, 2006; Richardson & Anders, 1994, Spitler, 2011). To provide a positive literacy experience that opposes a student's negative literacy experience is powerful and stands a better chance of making its way into their future teaching practices.

Course Impact on Personal Literacy Practices

Students were also asked how they viewed their personal literacy practices before taking this course and after taking this course. Out of the 16 students that took the survey, five students said that before this course they used literacy very little or that they never used literacy in their personal lives, four students said that they used literacy at an average rate before the course. They used statements such as, “before this course I would read for pleasure, but not extensively”, “read textbooks and had occasional discussions with people about my readings”, and that they “read primarily for pleasure.” Four students stated that they had an above average level of literacy practices before taking this course. For example, reading every night, using literacy on a daily basis, frequently reading to their children, and reading as often as they could in their free time. Three of the students did not answer the question. There was really a mixed level of students’ use of literacy in their personal lives (from their viewpoint).

After the course, nine students out of the 16 said that their literacy practices had changed. Many of them stated how their literacy practices had changed (see figure 5).

- I have definitely taken more of an interest in reading books that are not required for my classes. I am reading more for fun and discussing my readings with my friends. I have also started using different modes other than text to study for my classes.
- I would say it has gotten better. I find that in my spare time I read more than I do anything else I also read more articles and try to stay current on events that are happening in this world.
- I enjoy reading physical books more now that I'm reading basically for my future students. I enjoy collecting books for my future classroom library!
- I would say that it has changed in the aspect that I feel like literacy is needed across all content areas and not just in a class like English.
- Yes, my literacy practices have changed. I now recognize the importance of literacy to a higher degree. My love of reading has increased and I plan to spend more time reading books of all genres.
- I LOVE reading now. I have a new book every week.
- I feel like my daily life/routines involve so much literacy. I think it has change so much since I constantly stop and think, "In what way am I practicing literacy?" I try to converse more often with my children. I like have incorporated reading books to my children at bedtime. I try to write out my daily plans.
- My practices have definitely changed, I now understand the importance of reading and writing. I am now excited to get a new book.
- I would like to say I have more interest in reading now. Also when I read I find myself questioning what I'm reading and actually trying to understand it using some of the techniques we learned in class.

Figure 5: Ways that Students’ Personal Literacy Practice Changed

While four of the 16 students stated that their literacy practices stayed the same after the course, some of them offered their new view of literacy. One student stated that they were still an avid reader, but

I definitely see how literacy affects every part of our lives. I have also seen how important it is to make literacy enjoyable and interesting helps form a want to read. The strategies I was taught in this class have opened up my view on all the different ways we can introduce literacy to students.

Many of the students also noted that views of literacy had changed and they now had a broader view of what literacy is, what it means, and the forms in which it is presented, such as discussion, audio books, etc.

Conclusion

While the scope of this survey might not lend itself to fully knowing whether or not the students' literacy identities were influenced by this content area literacy course, it is important to note that many students left this course with positive ideas about their personal literacy and literacy for their future classrooms. This is an important start to studying a focus on preservice teachers' identities and the impact on their future classrooms, specifically in terms of literacy learning.

Many of the students in this course started with either none or negative feelings about literacy, these feelings stemmed from their personal experiences with literacy while in K-12 schools. By providing a positive literacy environment and experiences during this course, students were able to open themselves up to the possibilities of literacy. And by focusing on their personal literacy identities, there is a chance that they walked away with more than strategies. Many students left this course beginning to understand and value what literacy can do for them and for their future students.

There is more research to be done in this area due to the fact that many college-bound students are leaving high school without a high level of literacy (American Institute for Research, 2006; NAEP, 2015), which affects not only how preservice teachers view and value literacy, but could also impede their ability to use it for instructional purposes. Simply providing strategies is not enough for all future teachers to strengthen their literacy identities, they need courses that provide positive, social environments to participate in and experience literacy learning in new and meaningful ways. Only then will we see a difference in teachers' literacy identities and in turn a difference in their future students' literacy identities.

References

- Allington, R. (2014). How reading volume affects both reading fluency and reading achievement. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 7(1), 13–25. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1630429467/>
- Alsup, J. (2006). *Teacher identity discourses: Negotiating personal and professional spaces*. Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- American Institute for Research. (2006). *The literacy of America's college students*. Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/resource/literacy-americas-college-students>.
- Bogard, T., Sableski, M., Arnold, J., & Bowman, C. (2017). Minding the gap: Mentor and pre-service teachers' ability perceptions of content area literacy instruction. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 17(4), 44. doi:10.14434/josotl.v17i4.21885
- Daniels, H., & Zemelman, S. (2014). *Subjects matter: Every teacher's guide to content-area reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gallagher, K., & Allington, R. (2009). *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers.

- Gambrell, L. B., Palmer, B. M., Codling, R. M., Mazzoni, S. A. (1996). Assessing motivation to read. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 518-533.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25, 99-125.
- Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A. (2017). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension for understanding, engagement, and building knowledge*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- McCarthy, S. J. & Moje, E. B. (2002). Identity matters. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(2), 228-238.
- Miller, D. & Sharp, C. (2018). *Game changer! Book access for all kids*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Moje, E. (2010). Comments on Reviewing Adolescent Literacy Reports: Key Components and Critical Questions. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 42(2), 109–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862960903340520>
- Moje, E. B., Luke, A., Davies, B., & Street, B. (2009). Literacy and identity: Examining the metaphors in history and contemporary research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(4), 415-437.
- National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015). *1992–2015 Reading Assessments*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556901.pdf>
- O'Brien, D., & Stewart, R. (1990). Preservice Teachers' Perspectives on why Every Teacher is not a Teacher of Reading: A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 22(2), 101–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862969009547699>
- Plaut, S. (Ed.). (2009). *The right to literacy in secondary schools: creating a culture of thinking*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Richardson, V. & Anders, P. L. (1994). The study of teacher change. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Teacher change and the staff development process: a case in reading instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Spitler, E., Anders, P., Short, K., & Yaden, J. (2009). Transformation of preservice and new teacher literacy identity: Three transactional dimensions (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304842933/>
- Spitler, E. (2011). From resistance to advocacy for math literacy: One teacher's literacy identity transformation. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(4), 306-315. doi:10.1002/JAAL.00037
- Sulentic-Dowell, M., Beal, G. D., & Capraro, R. M. (2006). How Do Literacy Experiences Affect the Teaching Propensities of Elementary Pre-Service Teachers?. *Reading Psychology*, 27(2/3), 235-255. doi:10.1080/02702710600642509
- Turner, K. (2006). Turner's graph of the week. Retrieved from <https://www.turnersgraphoftheweek.com/>
- Ulusoy, M., & Dedeoglu, H. (2011). Content area reading and writing: Practices and beliefs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, 36(4), 1-17. doi:10.14221/ajte.2011v36n4.1
- Wigfield, A., Mason-Singh, A., Ho, A., & Guthrie, J. (2014). Intervening to improve children's reading motivation and comprehension: Concept-oriented reading instruction. *Advances in Motivation and Achievement*. 18. 37-70.

Worthy, J., & McKool, S. (1996). Students who say they hate to read: The importance of opportunity, choice, and access. In D. J. Leu, C. K. Kinzer, & K. A. Hinchman (Eds.), *Literacies for the 21st century: Research and practice. 45th yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 245-256). Chicago: National Reading Conference.