“This They Believe”: An examination of the texts pre-service teachers know and how they know them.

Penny Soboleski
Bowling Green State University

Introduction

“There is no one ‘perfect method’ for teaching reading to all children. Teachers, policy makers, researchers, and teacher educators need to recognize that the answer is not in the method but in the teacher” [emphasis added] (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999, p. 10)

Teacher educators of reading find themselves in a quagmire as we attempt to prepare out pre-service teachers for classrooms in the 21st century. Many of our students come from a culture rich in digital media and increasingly poor in printed texts. The average student sports a cellular phone that is capable of texting words, photos, and videos, something that was virtually impossible the decade most of them were born. They read their textbooks digitally from iPads, iPods, or their personal laptop computers (thin enough to tuck in their backpacks). Conducting on-line literature searches from the university’s on-line library while lounging in a dorm room replace trips to the library for research. No need to purchase the newspaper; it, too, can be read digitally at the readers’ convenience. They have developed effective media and digital literacy skills. Yet, many of the classrooms they enter rely solely on printed texts. Similarly, fewer students entering teacher education consider themselves as enthusiastic readers (Brooks, 2007).

Two theoretical perspectives toward reading provide a multi-dimensional look at the complex process of reading as well as an understanding of the influences of factors beyond the text and the reader. Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading hypothesized that reading is much more than the cognitive processes of
the reader with print. Rather than a process, Rosenblatt saw reading as an event, an unrepeatable, infinitely unique appointment between the reader, the text, and the moment in time the two intersect. The reader’s purpose for reading, either afferent or efferent, established the backdrop for the event, as did the environment in which the reader is reading, thereby creating a unique reading experience.

Similarly, Trabasso (1980) posited that the reader must engage in four levels of knowledge simultaneously to comprehend a text. These levels on the dimensions of knowledge the reader must engage during comprehension of the text to include the following four constructs: the knowledge of verbal concepts, text structure, social interactions, and human intentionality. The reader’s socioemotional and cultural experiences as well as the purpose for which the reader is reading influences the reader’s construction of meaning. Theoretically, the perspectives are quite similar and relevant when considering how pre-service teachers perceive reading.

Teacher educators in the 21st century face a new challenge in course development as they prepare to teach pre-service teachers how to teach reading at the intersection of digital and printed texts. Our classes are much more culturally and socially diverse than in the previous century, which means their prior knowledge of reading is most likely just as diverse. Moreover, their purposes for reading are just as diverse. The complexity of our students’ preconceived notions about reading and the texts they read requires teacher educators to become familiar with what their students believe about reading and the texts they read.

The study aimed to answer the following questions: (a) Which texts do undergraduate and graduate students perceive to be meaningful in their acquisition of reading and literacy skills? (b) How do students know or relate to these texts? and (c) Which text features do these texts share, and how might these features contribute to a personal connection with what the student believes about reading and literacy?

**Perspective/Theoretical Framework**

Understanding how learners acquire new information has resulted in a number of cognitive learning theories. The schema theory (Bartlett, 1932) suggests that learners acquire and organize new information or experiences (schemata) by attaching and supplementing new knowledge to previously learned information (pre-existing schemata). If the learner possesses some prior knowledge or understanding of the material, the activation of the pre-existing schemata permits more rapid construction of new schemata during the learning process; the greater the quantity of pre-existing schemata, the more rapid the acquisition of new information and understanding of the text. Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) developed the theory of constructivism upon the notion that the child, as an active and motivated learner, encodes or files new information by attaching it to previous knowledge or experiences (schemata). He suggested that providing
students with a variety of experiences would support them in the assimilation or accommodation of the new information. Constructivist teachers of reading acknowledge the contributions of the reader’s prior knowledge in the construction of meaning and posit “that meaning does not reside in the text, but in the reader” (Lipson, 1983, p. 449).

Teachers of reading have long understood the correlation between the reader’s knowledge of the subject matter prior to reading and the reader’s ability to comprehend the material (Alverman, Smith, & Readence, 1985; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977; Spiro, 1980; Tierney & Cunningham, 1984). Several early studies indicated the strength of the reader’s schemata was predictive of the reader’s ability to respond to inferential questions (Omanson, Warren, & Trabasso, 1978; Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979).

Research in the skill-based areas of conceptual knowledge and text structure were some of the first constructs studied (Guthrie, 1973; Smith, 1965, 2002). However, little early research focuses on the reader’s knowledge of social interactions and human intentionality until the emergence of Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading and Rumelhart’s (1985) interactive theory of reading. Rosenblatt posited that reading involved more than skills, the text, and the reader; reading was an experiential event—the fourth dimension, if you will. Likewise, Rumelhart acknowledged the multidimensional nature of reading. Comprehension of the text, in other words, involves the combined knowledge of the reader’s conceptual understanding of the text and its structure, previous and current socioemotional and social experiences, and purpose for reading (eff erent or afferent). Similarly, the more a reader reads, the deeper their understanding of the nature, process, and experience of reading. In other words, much of what we believe is rooted in our experiences.

This I Believe

Understanding the power and influence of prior knowledge prompted this study of how undergraduate and graduate pre-service teachers in core reading courses perceived reading, teaching and learning how to read, and the texts used to teach reading. Therefore, the students received this assignment on the first day of class. This assignment was modeled after the text This I Believe (Allison & Gediman, 2006; Murrow, 1952). “This I Believe” began as a radio show hosted by Edward R. Murrow on National Public Radio from 1951 to 1955 featuring the personal credos of a wide sampling of individuals. Responses from the program were later published in a collection by the same title (Murrow). In Murrow’s foreword he recalls the indelible impression of the steadfastness of Britain in 1940 and the following years as the country stood alone during the early years of World War II. He was perplexed by the people’s ability to “devise a system of regulating the relationship between the individual and the state which was superior to all others” (p. vii); the character and beliefs of individuals melded together under great pressure and opportunity resulting in a resolution of united confidence. It is
safe to assume each member of Britain’s military and civilian sectors held different personal beliefs, yet collectively, they transcended their doubts and frailties in united purpose and identity.

American education is facing a situation very similar to those launched against Britain 70 years ago. Political forces are pressuring states to surrender to more restrictive federal legislation that continues to strip states and local districts of power and autonomy. Tightening measures of accountability and retribution loom over teachers struggling to teach state academic standards and test preparation. Unfortunately, our teachers are caught in the crossfire. They depend upon their professors, teachers, administrators, and parents to protect and defend them. Teacher educators realize this. We are responsible for preparing our preservice students for the political, academic, social, cultural, and interpersonal battles they will face in their classrooms, especially those who teach reading (International Reading Association, 2007).

The role of reading in society dates back several thousand years and several hundred years in American history (Smith, 2002). In the preface of her original work, Smith (1965) reminds readers that “reading was the most important subject in our early American schools, and it has continued to be the most important subject all through the years of our national growth” (p. xv). Pasacharopoulos (1981) writes that a country’s greatest societal returns are its investment in its human capital, specifically in its educational system and primary years of schooling. The preparation of America’s primary teachers is gravely important because it is during these early years children learn to read and write. Public education has long felt the responsibility of preparing educated and literate citizens; this sense of responsibility may have perpetuated the U. S. Department of Education’s (1867) decision to use of reading assessments to measure performance and “to collect information on schools and teaching that would help the States establish effective school systems” (ED.gov, 2010, ¶ 4). Most recently, The International Reading Association (IRA, 2010) has collaborated with educators, professors, and classroom teachers to design a research-based set of professional standards for reading professionals, including the teacher educator. One of the primary charges assigned to teacher educators is to “be responsible for developing programs for preparing reading professionals, including the development of course work and field site experiences, and coordinating or leading such programs” (International Reading Association, 2010, p. 23). Therefore, this assignment was one way to gather some sense of my students’ prior knowledge and perceptions of reading and the texts they associate with reading.

In addition to providing teachers with a strong foundation in research and theory, word-level instructional strategies, text-level comprehension strategies, reading and writing connections, instructional approaches and materials, and assessment (International Reading Association, 2007), many in the field acknowledge the influence of personal reading habits, preferences, and attitudes...
in providing effective reading instruction (Allington, 2002; Commeyras, Bisplinghoff, & Olson, 2003; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Expectations for providing effective reading instruction over the past decade have recognized the need to foster growth and development in related attitudes and beliefs of reading teachers. Early surveys of the reading practices of teachers revealed a wide variety of habits, preferences, and personal attitudes (Cogan, 1975; Williamson, 1991; Worden & Noland, 1984). Southgate, Arnold, and Johnson (1977) found that only three of the 127 teachers mentioned the importance of their personal enthusiasm for reading as a factor for motivating their students to read. Perhaps the teachers assumed their modeling was expected and commonplace or teachers do not believe they can pass along their reading enjoyment to their students. Williamson (1991) suggests that perhaps many teachers of reading lack an enthusiasm for reading, thereby preventing them from setting an example of passionate reading.

Research Design, Participants, and Instruments

This study used a qualitative methodology. Data was collected from a course assignment, “This I Believe About Reading and Literacy” in both the undergraduate and graduate courses Phonics: Learning to Read, Emergent Literacy: Reading to Learn and Assessment and Diagnosis of Reading Difficulties at a small private university in the Midwest. Coding of the data followed guidelines established by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). The researcher conducted purposive interviews several weeks after the submission of students’ statements, however, this study addresses only the results of the belief statements.

Participants

The study used a convenient sample of eighty-seven graduate and undergraduate students (52 undergraduate, 35 licensure-seeking graduate students) in three core-reading courses completed the assignment. Candidates were seeking licensure in one or more of the following areas: early childhood, middle childhood, and intervention specialist. The demographic composition of the sample includes 13 males (14.9%), 2 African-American females (2%), 1 Hispanic female (1%), 3 Asian females (3%) and two participants were second language learners (L2) in English; their primary languages (L1) were German and Spanish.

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures

Criteria for the assignment are consistent with the criteria established by Allison and Gediman (2006). Students’ responses were to be between 500-1000 words, and their belief statement concerning what they believed about reading was to be constructed using the following criteria (Allison & Gediman, 2006):
Frame your beliefs in positive terms. Refrain from dwelling on what you do not believe. Avoid restatement of doctrine. Focus on the personal, the "I" of the title, not the subtly sermonizing "We." While you may hold many beliefs, write mainly of one. Aim for truth without accusation, patriotism without political cant, and faith beyond religious dogma. (p. 3)

Instructions did not direct or guide students to include specific mention of texts in the belief statements. Each statement received two initial readings: one for familiarization of the content and a second for the purpose of grading mechanics. Copies of the original submissions were used to begin the third reading. During the third reading, coding categories were established using frequently mentioned phrases using the criteria suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Phrases/sentences/words with similar codings were sorted for overarching themes. Four primary categories included (a) mention of text(s), (b) text features, (c) readers’ perceptions related to their cultural and social environments, and (d) readers’ intentionality toward teaching, learning, or participating in reading. The second layer of coding identified repeated words or phrases in each category; related terms were combined if the terms were synonymous, e.g., “Reading is fun” and “Reading is enjoyable.”

Findings

As expected, student responses were diverse; some sprinkled favorite children’s literature throughout their essays, while others were unable to name a favorite. Some found books to be therapeutic or empowering, others found them to be torturous or frightening.

The first criterion measured was the students’ mention of text (Research Question 1). Only 61 (70.1%) of the students mentioned texts in their belief statement. Almost half (30, 49.1%) of the respondents specifically mentioned children’s literature as being very important in learning how to read. Nearly a quarter of those mentioning texts in the early acquisition of reading stressed the importance of providing a literacy-rich environment or early exposure to texts in the home. However, only one student defined a ‘literacy-rich’ environment; the definition provided was “a lot of different books for children to read”.

A wide variety of genres were mentioned in the students’ belief statements (see Table 1). The most commonly mentioned text was picture books (13.1%) with phonics/decodable readers and books-on-tape (4.9%) sharing the second and third most frequently mentioned genre. Seven specific books were mentioned in the belief statements; they were Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1988), Charlotte’s Web (White, 1952), Thumbelina (Anderson, 1835), Mother Goose’s tales, and Aesop’s Fables. Participants also mentioned enjoying the Harry Potter books (Rowling), Shakespeare’s works, and the works of Charles Dickens. Sadly, 29.8% of the students (n=26) did not mention any type of text.
The second research question addressed how students know or relate to the texts they mentioned. The primary connections between the students and texts were early childhood and family. The most common responses began with “my parents”. Many respondents wrote “I can remember my parent(s) or grandparents reading stories to me during the pre-school years”, “My parent(s) read and reread my favorite books”, “My grandparents read books I selected”. Some commented how their “parents helped them with reading homework during elementary school.” Two other prevalent comments were “Reading books [as a genre] were boring”, and “Content books were boring”. One only student commented on reading during their adolescent years, while two students specifically mentioned reading classic literature during their high school years.

Thirty-five (40.2%) of the participants explicitly addressed their purpose(s) for reading. Seven said that reading was fun and enjoyable. Twelve participants (13.7%) said they read primarily to acquire information or knowledge. Six students (6.8%) wrote that reading stimulated their creativity and allowed them to use their imagination, or “to make my mind work”. Escapism and exploration and discovery were mentioned by three and five participants respectively as their purpose for reading.

The third research question explored common text features and the possible relationships the features may have to the participants perception of text. Text features mentioned in the statements and exhibited in the texts mentioned by the preservice teachers are presented in Table 2.
Table 2. Text Features of Identified Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Rhyme</th>
<th>Illustrations/Pictures</th>
<th>Graphics</th>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Read aloud</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alphabet books</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedtime stories</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books-on-tape</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic literature</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery rhymes</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics readers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture books</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-selected</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of books</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two most common text features were illustrations or pictures and the text was orally read to the participant. Rhyme was the third most common feature. The relationship between the texts, features of the texts, and the readers will be discussed in the next section.

Limitations

Several limitations affect the generalizability of the study’s results. Primarily, the demographics of the sample are representative of the regional demographics, but not the demographics of most regions or school districts. 93% of the participants were Caucasian and 87% were female. Although specific socioeconomic data was not available for the participants, most likely come from middle income households.

Another hindrance to generalizability is the ambiguity of the belief statements in relationship to the study of texts. Future instructions for the assignment might directly address the place of texts in reading or solicit specific comment on the role of texts in the participants’ beliefs on reading and literacy while maintaining the integrity of the model. A reading interest survey may have provided depth to the participants’ responses and provided additional opportunities to identify patterns and relationships. Including an analysis of the interviews would have provided a nice triangulation of the findings and conclusions.

A major flaw in the design of the project was the omission of a team of readers and coders. Having several other content experts collaborate in the coding of the findings may have yielded very different findings and strengthened the validity of the study.
Implications

Texts that seem to be student favorites may provide some insight as to why they left lasting impressions or distastes for reading. Literacy research suggests that effective teachers of reading should be readers themselves (Atwell, 1998; Commenras, Bisplinghoff, & Olson, 2003; Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, & Radencich, 2000; Gambrell, 1996; Mueller, 1973; Routman, 1991, 1996; Searls, 1985). Teachers who enjoy reading become “an explicit model” of reading (Gambrell, 1996) for their students. Applegate and Applegate (2004) coined this relationship as the Peter Effect.

The Peter Effect takes its name from the biblical account of Peter and the beggar. When the beggar seated at the base of the gate called Beautiful solicited alms (monetary donations) from Peter, the Apostle was unable to give him alms because he did not have any money. Similarly, teachers who do not possess an enthusiasm or passion for reading are unable to pass along an enthusiasm for reading to their students. If preservice teachers do not enjoy reading, do not engage in an active practice of leisure and professional reading, and do not think reading is important, they are only able to pass these perceptions on to their students.

It bears to reason that teachers who are not motivated, enthusiastic readers provide an explicit model as well, that of disengagement. It is this thought that teachers are ‘explicit models’ of reading that fueled this study of what preservice teachers believe about reading, texts, and how they know or relate to the texts. If preservice teachers’ most cherished books read aloud to them as children and do not have a vibrant reading-rich life as adults, it is unlikely they will emerge from our classrooms as passionate readers. It is also unlikely they will foster an enthusiasm for reading in their own classrooms. The instructional implications of this deficiency cannot be overlooked in teacher education programs.

This study may also help reading professionals reevaluate the content of our courses as we begin to understand our students’ prior knowledge and perceptions of texts, reading, and literacy. Teacher education programs may want to reflect on their reading environment. Probing questions such as “How do our courses and instructors model healthy, vibrant personal and professional reading models? How might our existing courses be modified to nurture times of self-selected reading and reflection? How might our faculty engage in professional or leisure reading book clubs? Which book might the college adopt as a common read? On a personal level, teacher educators may want to ponder the following questions: Am I an enthusiastic reader? Why? How can I reignite my passion for reading? How can I begin providing my students with an “explicit model” of reading in my courses? How can I help them bridge the wonderful
memories of their youth to the construction of a classroom where students experience the wonders of reading?

Lastly, this paper is an extension of the This I Believe heuristic introduced during a problems court at the 2009 ARF conference. It demonstrates the value of discovering what our students believe about texts, reading, and literacy as we endeavor to equip pre-service professionals to become effective teachers of children in reading and literacy. The results have resulted in several modifications of the existing courses. Students are now given eight minutes of DEAR time (Drop Everything And Read) in the “Phonics” and “Emergent Literacy” courses. The only stipulation is the text must be self-selected, and the text may be either print or digital. The response has been very positive. In subsequent reflections numerous students have written that they “have fallen in love with reading again.” One student is responsible for selecting a favorite read aloud book to share with classmates during each session. Students have enjoyed listening to ‘old favorites’ and collecting titles to add to their libraries.

In the forward of Murrow’s publication, he writes that this book is “a compilation of experience and incident which may help you to recognize some of the signposts that have been meaningful to others” (p. xi). Like Murrow, it is my hope that in sharing some of the signposts (perceptions and misconceptions) of reading among these emerging elementary, middle childhood, and interventional specialist pre-service teachers might help us to identify the signposts of their understanding of reading and what they identify to be meaningful texts in the instruction of reading.

References


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