

**THE EVOLUTION OF MY IDENTITY AS A LITERACY EDUCATOR THROUGHOUT
MY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS METHODS COURSE**

by

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A Signature Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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May 2023

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and explore the evolution of my identity as a literacy educator throughout the course of my English Language Arts (ELA) Instruction Methods course. This study was conducted as self-study research with the mentorship and guidance of a critical friend. The goal of this study was to better understand my personal beliefs and values in regard to literacy education practices and how I can and will implement them into my future classroom. To further understand my personal identity as a literacy educator and to answer this question, research was completed using data from multiple sources including coursework from the ELA Instruction Methods course, weekly journal entries, and recorded conversations with said critical friend. The results of this research represent my identity and feelings about literacy education, my experiences with literacy education, as well as new understandings I came to gain regarding literacy education and its approaches.

Keywords: Phonics, Whole Language, Literacy, Self-study

The evolution of my identity as a literacy educator throughout my English Language Arts methods course

Literacy for me, like any child, was a large portion of my educational development. I was exposed to many different teachers throughout my childhood, each with their own take on literacy education. However, in my most formative years, the most influential literacy instruction that I remember being exposed to involved a more whole language approach. My teachers approached literacy through thematic units and comprehension-based projects rather than choosing a more phonics-based approach which focuses more on the structure of the words. Even the portions of the classes that seemed to indicate a more “phonics-first” approach, were still linked with the whole language and comprehension emphasis. Spelling tests were not simply assessing spelling but required conceptual knowledge as well. For example, on a first-grade spelling test about shapes, we were not only required to spell the names of each shape correctly, but to draw each shape correctly as well. This was indicative of the teacher’s more well-rounded goal for our class rather than focusing just on the spelling. In my later elementary school classes, there was a large emphasis on independent and silent reading. In nearly every class we were required to read silently and respond with some sort of summarization or reflection of what we read. This aided my comprehension not only by making me more aware of what I was reading after I read it, but by encouraging me to be more engaged while I was actively reading as well.

In my Reading Instruction for the Primary Grades course, we focused a lot more on phonics. The course curriculum focused on how young readers emerge into their reading skills and what those transitions look like. The class went into depth discussing how phonemes meet graphemes to form words and how this is how the language forms. We learned to break down words not only into syllables and letters, but also into sounds, digraphs, and blends. This was a

new concept for me, and it took me by surprise as I was not expecting the instruction to cover the language structure in that much depth. With this focus on phonics and applying that to young readers' learning, this left little room for any reading comprehension, something I expected to be heavy throughout the course.

Because of my misunderstanding of the reading course, my experience in it was less than expected. Since my memories of my elementary reading instruction involve a much more language centered approach, that is what I expected out of a reading instruction course and stated, this was not what I was faced with. This meant that what I found to be the most intriguing parts of reading, what I was most excited to teach, were seemingly nonexistent in accordance with this course. This led to a lot of anxiety about teaching literacy because it was not what I was expecting and I began to feel scared of it rather than excited, especially when it came to emergent literacy. Breaking down literacy to that extent was seemingly impossible, and the more I learned, the more intricate and intimidating it became. Going through this course led to many feelings of inadequacy; I felt that since it was not something that I immediately enjoyed and felt prepared for, then I would never be ready for it and would never feel prepared to use it in a classroom. Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to unpack where my past experiences meet my present learning and identify how to apply that to my own teachings. Through this process, I will better understand my evolving identity as an elementary literacy educator.

Literature Review

In this section I will discuss two different approaches to literacy instruction. I will review research on the benefits and drawbacks of the two approaches and discuss their connection to student achievement. I will also discuss the benefits of an approach that balances the two theories and how this can aid in early literacy development by considering multiple perspectives to the

language. Lastly, in this section, I will discuss self-studies and their purpose in research and how they can aid build better educators.

Whole Language Approach

There are multiple educational perspectives that approach literacy development very differently. While neither one has been settled as the perfect way to teach children, researchers for decades have unsuccessfully tried to establish one as the sole approach. One of these approaches is referred to as the Whole Language approach. With this approach, readers are more active and independent in their learning as they learn information that is relevant and functional for them as young students (Goodman et al., 2003). This means that students that are learning this way are more focused on authentic experiences, ridding the classroom of artificial breakdowns and using the language out of its functional use (Goodman et al., 2003). With the whole language approach, students are encouraged to draw from their individual interpretations and experiences, contradicting the idea that there is one way to instruct readers (Murphy & Dudley-Marling, 2003). The overall principles of a whole language approach urge students to collaborate and to work together to learn and grow their understanding in a more independent way. The principles that encourage this type of learning include being learner centered, learning in context, meaning based, integrated curriculum with other written language concepts, learned through active involvement and also through multiple sources (Murphy & Dudley-Marling, 2003). This approach does not say that learning phonics is a completely dead and useless idea, it simply puts an emphasis on learning “meaning first”. Meaning-first learning focuses on the meaning of the print rather than just the phonics and structure of the word, hence its use in comprehension-based conversations (Johnson, 2016).

What many educators want to know before deciding to implement a certain type of literacy instruction is: how does it look in a classroom? In a classroom, the whole language approach gives more power to both the students and the teachers by empowering them both to take ownership in their work and learning (Goodman et al., 2003) For teachers, this means that they are encouraged to lead with their own experience and knowledge in the classroom. They are to understand and know their students' needs and to plan according to that (Goodman et al., 2003). For students, this is a chance for learners to be independent and active as they learn. The content for them is more relevant and functional and they are pushed to move on to new topics that build off prior understanding (Goodman et al., 2003). In a whole language approach, there is supposed to be an immediate application for what the students are learning. Ideally, the classroom is built around real, authentic, applicable experiences without the use of artificially breaking down the language out of its functional use (Goodman et al., 2003). Some of the first steps in a whole language approach is getting children to understand the function of print and what each component means. This is a concept that may be overlooked in a more phonics-based classroom (Murphy, S., & Dudley-Marling, C., 2003,).

Before implementing a means of instruction, educators will want to know how the approach connects to student achievement. The whole language approach to literacy has no shortage of proof that it works and that students are successful when this approach is applied. For example, research shows that students in a whole language-based classroom typically have greater success with sounding out words (Maddox & Feng, 2013). Whole language classrooms are also connected to students' independence by allowing teachers to encourage them to solve problems outside of regurgitating other people's teachings and to pursue knowledge on their own. Because of the immediate application and relevance of what their learning to the world around them and

the emphasis placed on context in this style of teaching, learning is considered “easier” when put this way (Goodman et al., 2003). However, with any approach that is researched and discussed as in depth as this one, there are bound to be limitations. The most prevalent issue that disputes the whole language approach to literacy education is the argument that because written language is not an innate knowledge that children are born understanding, the alphabetic language being as intricate as it is, needs to be explicitly taught (Treiman, 2018). This, in a whole language classroom, is not as common as many things are taught in relation to each other and in the context of the text.

Phonics Approach

Another widely debated approach to literacy instruction, primarily in the early grades, is a phonics-first approach. With this approach, teachers are focused more on teaching children to decode words according to their structure (Fang, 2005). Words are built with multiple structural parts, and students are tasked with breaking them down to decode them according to their graphemes and phonemes in order to read the text. In a phonics-first classroom, students are more focused on phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle, as well as learning how the writing system works (Treiman, 2018). Phonemic awareness is simply the awareness that sounds, when put together, form words (Maddox & Feng, 2013) whereas the alphabetic principle states that in writing, the symbols represent sounds (Castles et al., 2018). This approach is widely used because it helps students with word identification and decoding principles (Fang, 2005) by teaching that sounds correspond to letters and that these symbols work together to create words, and this creates our writing system (Treiman, 2018).

Once again, educators need to be able to apply the approaches to the classroom in order for them to be an effective option for instruction. With this, in a phonics-first classroom,

meaning that the teacher primary starts with phonics instruction before connecting it to the language as whole, students are encouraged to read skillfully and not skip over unknown words, but decode them (Fang, 2005). With this, it is said that phonemic awareness needs to be learned in conjunction with learning word identification (Fang, 2005). This means that phonemic awareness needs to be taught while learning how to decode the words through structural knowledge of phonetic understanding. Research also shows that for language acquisition, students need to be able to segment phonemes in spoken words, identify the initial phonemes, and recognize the corresponding graphemes to those phonemes (Castles et al., 2018). In this context, acquisition of the alphabetic principle is when students understand that letters represent sounds (Castles et al., 2018). Students must know this and understand it in a phonics-first classroom in order to successfully be able to decode words according to their phonetic structure.

This approach, like the whole language approach, has many connections to students in the classroom both beneficial and limiting. For example, a phonics-first approach has been shown to lead to better improvements in students spelling and reading (Maddox & Feng, 2013). With that, however, phonics instruction is still limiting in terms of teaching students how to connect sounds (phonemes) to written language (Treiman, 2018), something vital to learning to become good language learners.

Balanced Approach to Literacy Instruction

Many literary experts believe the true key to success seems to be somewhere in the middle between a fully phonics classroom, and one that fully focuses on whole language. A balanced classroom can be difficult to achieve, however, there are overall principles that are associated with including phonics instruction in whole language. These principles include being learner centered, teaching in context, presenting phonics after the foundational concept are

learned, teaching things with a meaning base, integrating phonics with other written language concepts, teaching through demonstration, teaching through active involvement of the students, and teaching through multiple faucets of information (Murphy & Dudley-Marling, 2003). In a balanced classroom, it is also important to align the decoding instruction with the structure of the English language (Fang, 2005). For example, this could be done by using real words rather than nonsense words when teaching students to decode words. Teaching students these skills that involve other parts of the language in order to decode what they're reading can also be a beneficial practice in a balanced classroom such as teaching them to bridge the gap between the unknown and known words with their oral vocabulary (Castles et al., 2018). Overall, using strategies from both approaches, but integrating them together cohesively in order to reap the benefits of both areas is an approach to instructions that enables early readers and writers to get a glimpse of the English language in a more well-rounded way.

Though many researchers do support the idea of a balanced approach, there are still those who think that the decisiveness and clarity of choosing one approach to emphasize is far more beneficial. For some, this whole language approach that focuses on emersion and comprehension is a much more success yielding practice because of the argument that children need to apply exactly what they are learning in their reading and that they need to be immediately immersed in the reading that they are learning about (Donat, 2003). Others, however, still push for the idea of a phonics-first approach that encompasses a larger focus on decoding skills for literacy development. Their arguments leaning on data that supports the idea that students need to understand the "code" of the written language and how it all functions in order to read (Fang, 2005). They push the idea that there must be a level of awareness of the way that the language is presented on paper in order to read effectively. Either way, these researchers' ideas similar in

one way; their push is less for balance and more for the implication of one approach. This said, the research in this community has been an extensively researched topic for decades and continues to grow. The push for a balance approach seems to be most ideal for a lot of researchers because of the skills that balancing the two ideas together is able to intertwine in order to push for success in young readers.

Self-Study and Critical Friendship

The approach used for this research is being completed via self-study through mentoring with a critical friend. A self-study approach aims to improve oneself through multiple methods by being interactive with other literature and interpersonal research (Loughran, 2005). They are studies of oneself and the overall improvement of one's beliefs, understanding, practices, etc. However, more than that, self-studies are collaborative research projects and involve other people who can not only add perspective but make it more relatable to other educators (Loughran, 2005). In this instance, this project is being done with the mentorship of a Critical Friend to add perspective and push for further elaboration and understanding throughout the project.

When it comes to critical examination, it is important to examine ideologies; this can often be done through the process of praxis, which is dialogue, action, and reflection (Goodman et al., 2003). Self-studies are important for educators because they allow educators to continue to examine personal practices, which is integral to good instruction (Loughran, 2005). Reflective questionnaires are also an opportunity to reflect on why educators use certain practices and believe what they do (Goodman et al., 2003), and understanding the "why" can be beneficial to further implementing those beliefs and practices or improving and adding upon them. What many educators fail to realize is that often their beliefs are not reflected in their teachings, which

is why self-studies can be so beneficial (Loughran, 2005). The overall purpose of self-studies is to help teachers analyze their practices (Loughran, 2005) in order to better themselves and their instruction to help their students thrive within the school setting. Ultimately, through this process, educators unpack, reflect upon, and strengthen their teaching practice.

Methodology

Educator identity is a large part of what builds a teacher; knowing the beliefs and values that are going to motivate the key decisions within one's classroom. Through this qualitative self-study with critical friendship, I investigated my identity as a literacy educator. Over the course of one semester, I collected data during my English Language Arts Methods course and investigated how my identity changed and evolved. The purpose of this research is, through multiple facets and data sources, to better understand different approaches to literacy education, advantages and disadvantages to each approach, and how these approaches align (or do not align) with my own educated belief system about how to best equip young students with literacy in the classroom. Further, through this self-study, I learned how my perceptions and beliefs about various approaches to literacy education shifted over time. The intention of the study was to explore the follow question: How do my perceptions, beliefs, and practices within early literacy development change throughout my English Language Arts Methods course?

This study was conducted using self-study methodology with critical friendship. Self-study is typically best done on raw thoughts or inquiries and can be completed with a critical friend who can provide critique and support throughout the process (Samaras, 2011). According to Samaras, "self-study research is personally situated inquiry, critical collaborative inquiry, improved learning, a transparent and systematic research process, and knowledge generation and presentation" (2011, p. 10). Self-studies are completed by people at all levels of education and

are very beneficial in practice because they help to study personal beliefs and to allow for room to reflect on if, as an educator, those beliefs are truly being presented in one's personal teachings (Loughran, 2005). When educators are well informed, they are able to be better educators for their own students (Loughran, 2005), and therefore, creating better students and a more effective learning environment. This project's intention was to allow myself, as a preservice teacher, to establish my own identity as a literacy educator in order to better prepare for my own classroom in the future. By establishing my values now, I will be more equipped to implement these beliefs into my teaching practices in the future and will already have the experience of reflecting on my own understandings, values, and practices as an educator in order to improve them.

Context

The study was conducted in a large university setting at Regional University (RU, pseudonym) with a student population of just over 27,000 students (RU, 2022a). The university is located in a mid-Atlantic, rural, regional city.

This study was conducted within the College of Education and within the department of elementary education over the course of one academic semester (Fall 2022). The College of Education began as a teacher training program in 1907 when the school was founded and became a Teaching College offering a four-year degree in 1922 (RU, 2022b). Since then, the school has gained university status and the school of Education was renamed the College of Education formally in 2003 (RU, 2022b).

Participants

This self-study was conducted by Molly Baile (the author), with Dr. Kristen Gregory serving as a critical friend. I am an undergraduate student in the College of Education at RU in the department of elementary education and I am pursuing a degree in elementary education with a

concentration in psychology. I am also a student in the Honors College at RU. I began studying at RU in the fall of 2020 and am set to graduate with my undergraduate degree in the spring of 2024. I began this study as a rising first semester junior in the teacher education program at RU in the fall of 2022. I chose to pursue this research after I felt a sense of insecurity about literacy education during an early elementary (K-2) reading course focused on phonics and skill-based instruction and is serving as an attempt to unpack my identity as an elementary literacy educator during my enrollment in an early elementary (K-2) English Language Arts methods course.

This research was conducted under the mentorship of Dr. Kristen Gregory, an assistant professor for elementary and middle grades education in the College of Education at East Carolina University. Dr. Gregory has a bachelor's degree in Sociology and Early Education from the University of Richmond, a master's degree in Reading Education from Virginia Commonwealth University, and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction for Literacy Education from Old Dominion University. Her extensive background in literacy education, as well as her experience in qualitative research and self-study research, led me to ask her to serve as a mentor for this project. Her role as the critical friend in this study was to serve encourage me to think deeper and more critically as I work through my own literacy identity and to advance ideas and beliefs forward to encourage a more well-rounded literacy educator.

Data Collection

The data for this study were conducted through three different sources: journal entries, critical friend conversations, and course materials and assignments. Each week I wrote a journal entry with no length or requirements but simply discussing current thoughts, beliefs, and developments throughout the study. The journals were written during each week and either answered a question regarding literacy practices, dissected current events in the literacy

education world, or reflected about the development of the participant in terms of literacy educator identity. These journals were written in paragraph form and were collected over the course of the fall academic semesters. A total of fifteen journal entries with an approximate total of 5791 words were completed.

The second data source was critical friend conversations. Every two to three weeks I met with my critical friend, Dr. Kristen Gregory, and recorded a conversation regarding literacy education, the development of my beliefs, what I was learning in my English Language Arts instructional methods course, and what I was reading in the literature I was finding. In these conversations, Dr. Gregory prompted me with questions and guided the conversation with inquiries and alternative perspectives to strengthen my own arguments and ideas. These conversations were recorded, and I transcribed each conversation during the follow week. These conversations with a critical friend served as a time to enhance my understanding as well as reflect and compose all of what I was learning. A total of five critical friend conversations were recorded for a total of 112 minutes and 19,225 words.

The final data source was coursework I completed during my English Language Arts Instruction course and its related practicum in a first-grade classroom. Throughout this course in the 2022 Fall academic semester, I collected and chose pieces of coursework that reflected my personal beliefs of literacy education and exhibited what I was learning in this course. Examples of coursework included lesson plans I wrote, notes from the course, observation guides, and other miscellaneous coursework that contributed to my literacy identity. This was important data to collect because the purpose of the study was to research how my beliefs changed over the course of these particular classes. Each piece chosen to be used as data was chosen based on its ability to display what was being taught in the class as well as how I would implement those

tools. They were collected throughout different points of time throughout the whole course of the Fall academic semester as to ensure that there was the ability to study change over time.

Data Analysis

I engaged in open coding and axial coding of journal entries and critical friend conversations to determine main themes from my data. Each data source will be analyzed through open coding first. Chronologically I worked through each source and found major points and premises of the writing or conversations recorded. These were noted and highlighted for future condensing of themes. Then, through axial coding, I once again went through each data source and found commonly seen open codes and took note of their frequency. I read through each of them individually to find the recurring thoughts and notations. Following this, I condensed these open codes into broad categories (axial codes) and listed which codes created those categories (representative open codes). Combined, this analysis of the data produced the results of this research.

I also analyzed coursework from my Language Arts Instruction course to identify pieces of coursework that overall contributed to a better understanding of literacy education through both learning and experiences. I matched the examples of coursework with the codes from the journal entries and critical friends conversation. Through triangulating the data from the three sources, I was able to confirm my axial codes and final themes of what contributed to the evolution of my identity as a literacy educator. This allowed me to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how each of the sources contributed to the overall change in my understanding of literacy education and what it entails.

Trustworthiness

I engaged in several strategies to build trustworthiness in this study. First, I triangulated data from three data sources. By collecting data from three separate sources and comparing them against each other to determine commonalities, this built reliability of the findings. Each data source was established with different levels of involvement from multiple parties. The journal entries were a reflection of self by the research participant herself. The critical friend conversations were recorded and transcribed for accuracy and included input from both the research participant and the critical friend, establishing a domain of multiple perspectives. The third data source, the coursework from the ELA instructions course, was completed in a classroom with the guidance and instruction of a professor external to this research project. The engagement with and triangulation of this data that was collected from multiple sources both internal and external to this study establishes trustworthiness and represents the findings as a result of these different contributions.

Additional strategies that were used to create trustworthiness for this project include working with a faculty mentor/researcher to review all aspects of the research methodology, being engaged in research reflexivity to reduce potential bias, maintaining an audit of all work completed and data collected within the study, and keeping the data stored on a password protected drive. Each of these contributed to ensuring absolute trustworthiness to this research.

Findings

Findings emerged from the data through analyzing the data from the three data sources: journal entries, conversations with a critical friend, and the coursework from my English language arts methods course. These findings ranged from findings on identity, thoughts on personal experiences, as well as new and developing understandings grasped throughout the course.

Feelings about Literacy Education

The first major theme that emerged from the data was my feelings about literacy education. This was made clear primarily through my thoughts throughout my journal entries as well as the conversations I had with a critical friend. These feelings ranged and were both negative and positive and even involved some questioning that was happening throughout the course of the semester being analyzed.

Negative Feelings

Throughout the data, there was a common theme of negative feelings. These were primarily found throughout the beginning of the study and were often stemming from fear. One of the common emotions and feelings that was found throughout the sources was anxiety. This was a word that continued to surface as I reflected on my future as an educator and what this kind of work entailed. This was an evident thought process from the very first journal entry I wrote when I stated

Not being able to see the big picture gave me anxiety about the idea of starting from scratch with a student. This feeling was not at all what I wanted nor expected as I went through this course [referring to Reading Instruction course]. (Journal Entry 1)

This negative feeling was then further enhanced by others when coupled with a feeling of confusion about my own identity as well as what literacy education entailed. This is further explained as I expressed in a conversation with my critical friend when posed with an opportunity to provide an example of something that happened during the semester (of my Reading Instruction course) that made me start questioning my beliefs. In response, I stated:

It's hard to express meaning when all you're talking about is sounds and I felt that it got a lot more detailed and then I started to get a little bit confused because I couldn't really see the big picture of how this was going to tie in. (Critical Friend Conversation 2)

Overall, what was truly becoming evident through the data was how daunted I was feeling as I was faced with the reality of what literacy education encompassed and how detailed it can become.

Positive Feelings

In addition to the negative feelings represented in the data, positive feelings were present as well. Feelings of peace were found at times, as were points where I felt interested and confident in my role as a future literacy educator. Feelings of peace were often found with the more experience I gained in the classroom, and I was able to see that a lot of the negative feelings that I felt were due to misconceptions. I stated in Journal Entry 15 that "This was a large change from where I started in the beginning of the year and gave me a sense of peace about literacy instruction. I feel less intimidated and more prepared". There is evidence of the use of the whole language approach in the classroom in the Observation Guide from observing a first-grade classroom. In this guide, I list other activities and uses of literacy instruction time that are not solely based around phonics, even in a first-grade classroom. Throughout the journal entries and conversations with a critical friend, there is also a sense of interest that emerged from these sources. The more I was engulfed in literacy practices, seeing it firsthand, and learning about them in a more practical sense, I began to state my interests in certain approaches and in literacy education overall. Another feeling that emerged throughout the course of the project that was evident in the data sources was a feeling of confidence that began to arise the more time I spent

working with literacy and literacy instruction. This is evident with a statement I made in Journal Entry 10 which followed an experience I had where I implemented my first lesson that I wrote, Lesson Plan 1. As I reflected, I stated, “Overall though, I am really pleased with how I did and doing well on this lesson enhanced my confidence with teaching, particularly for ELA”. It is this statement that summarizes how the practicing and implementation of what I was learning in the classroom influenced my feelings regarding the topic.

Questions about literacy education

I was still questioning many things in order to gain a better grasp of what I believed regarding literacy education. This was shown throughout the journal entries and conversations with a critical friend where I was continually questioning the information and my own beliefs in order to gain deeper understanding. For example, in Journal Entry 3 when I started to reflect on what I believed about literacy education and what the best way to teach literacy was. I wrote a whole journal entry about my thoughts on this question, and it was something I continued to challenge myself with throughout the duration of my investigation. I continued to experience more questions the more experience I got in the classroom and the more I was seeing this instruction firsthand. During Conversation 4 with my critical friend, the daunting task of a classroom with a range of abilities in terms of readers became a real concern. I began to question how you even help students on extreme sides of the academic spectrum when the state standards are written for those who fall in the middle.

The more I learned about orchestrating instruction in a classroom such as this, the more questions I had. For example, in Journal Entry 12, I began questioning what a teacher’s purpose was as I was learning more about scripted lesson plans and wrote:

When the state begins to mandate scripted lessons, it makes teachers and preservice teachers such as myself wonder “what was it all for?” and “why did I just learn how to do this myself if you are just going to require us to do it ‘your’ way regardless?” (Journal Entry 12)

It became clear in this analysis that the more I learned about literacy education the more questions began to surface.

Experiences with Literacy Education

The second finding that emerged was the experiences that I had with literacy education. This included my personal experiences with literacy education, what I experienced and learned through my Reading Instruction course, as well as the experiences I gained from being in the classroom as a preservice teacher.

Personal Experiences

My personal experiences with literacy education, such as what I was taught and how I was taught as a young student in the primary grades, were a common topic in my journals and critical friend conversations. For example, I spoke directly to this in Critical Friend Conversation 1 where I discussed how in my elementary school experience, I did not recall reading instruction being separated from language arts instruction, so to me, they were one in the same. I described them as being one block that was called Language Arts, and this is where all literacy instruction took place. This was what caused confusion when I began to learn them as two separate skills or subjects. My personal experiences with literature were further elaborated on with how I excelled academically as well as how much I enjoyed literature. I went on to say:

I always thought that’s what I wanted to focus on a concentrate on because I, growing up, loved ELA and loved reading and loved getting

into a new world and love books and loved literacy...but when I took the course, it was a lot more daunting than I thought and it scared me.

(Critical Friend Conversation 1)

This love for reading at a young age set me up to want to encourage this same discipline in my own future students and clearly impacted how I felt as a literacy educator throughout this research.

READ Course Experience

Throughout the data sources, there were many reflections made on my experiences in the reading instruction course prior to this study. This course was one that taught how to instruct primary grade readers to learn to read starting from scratch and growing them into transitional readers. This, being a new concept for myself both as a student and a preservice teacher, brought about some unexpected experiences. For example, upon reflecting on this course, I journaled:

With an expectation such as that, my experience with this course was unfortunately underwhelming. The more I learned about the beginning stages of reading development, the more daunted I became. It became so much less about seeing the impact of reading and began to be about every minute detail that I was not even aware was so vital. (Journal

Entry 1)

This feeling was further elaborated as I explained that in this READ course, I felt like I was never getting anywhere, and I was confused about the content being taught and was not able to see the big picture. I stated how I felt as I went into the classroom for practicum for the first time and lacked confidence in the application of what I had been taught in the classroom, and this “really had an impact on my identity as an educator because I felt that if I did not understand

this, how possibly would I help my future students and move on any further as a literacy educator” (Journal Entry 1). Overall, there was a common theme of how this course impacted my feelings about literacy education and this was something that revealed itself through the analysis of many of the data sources.

Experiences Teaching in the Classroom

With the frequent comments on my experiences in my Reading Instruction course, there were also many conversations and recorded thoughts on my experiences with teaching in the classroom. Prior to the semester studied, I had minimal experience in the classroom in the position of a preservice teacher (only the one in READ), so there was a lot to be reflected on and learn. After spending time with the students in the classroom, it was clear that I was beginning to gain a deeper understanding of these approaches. For example, in a journal entry I wrote about the first graders I was with, I wrote:

This made me thankful that the students had the word recognition skills/alphabetic principle that they did have. I began to think as I was writing this plan how difficult it would be had I walked into a classroom that had strictly taught the class in a whole language way and did not go over as much with phonics. (Journal Entry 7)

I wrote again about what I saw in the classroom in terms of approaches being used and said, “I also noticed them having a hard time relating the content to the context of the books read which tells me that they may be learning with a more phonics-based approach” (Journal Entry 9). This idea of their understanding of phonics is supported in coursework collected from the ELA instruction course. After observing the students and analyzing their work, I wrote that the students three out of three “focus students” whose work I studied were writing complete

sentences at “Above Mastery” (Performance Assessment Commentary). This shows the indication that there was likely a focus on syntax in this classroom. These three instances show that what I was learning was directly applicable to what I was seeing in the classroom.

This is seen once again as I reflect on my experiences as a preservice teacher and in implementing my own plans with the students and wrote:

As soon as I started, I felt very natural and the words of the lesson just started to flow easily...Overall thought I am really pleased with how I did and doing well on this lesson enhanced my confidence with teaching, particularly for ELA. (Journal Entry 10)

Throughout both the conversations with my critical friend and my journal entries, it is evident that what I experienced in the classroom had a great impact and was influential as it was covered elaborately throughout the sources.

New Understandings

The final theme found throughout the data were the new understandings that surfaced as I worked my way through the research. These new understandings included correcting my misconceptions about literacy education, the approaches to literacy that I became more knowledgeable about, as well as the new perspectives that I gained throughout this process.

Expectations Versus Reality of Literacy Education

Going into this project, I had a preconceived understanding of what I thought literacy education consisted of. Through the research, the READ course I took, and the experiences of the classroom, these misconceptions were corrected. When talking with my critical friend, I was asked “So, coming into that READ class, would you say that you looked at reading solely as comprehension? Had you thought about decoding prior to the course?” (Kristen Gregory, Critical

Friend Conversation 1) to which I replied “I think that I definitely saw it as more comprehension. The whole word recognition, that was so innate at that point that I hadn’t really considered it as something that was part of reading” (Critical Friend Conversation 1). This understanding that reading was only comprehension and was not the multifaceted and ever developing skill that it is was a common theme as it comes up again when I mention again in this same conversation that I never really considered that for students to get to the novels and the language skills that comes with fluency, they have to start with the basics (Critical Friend Conversation 1).

However, this idea was corrected as I began to develop a more well-rounded definition of reading and saw that there was more to it. This is evident in my final journal entry where I wrote:

I was terrified at the thought of teaching emergent literacy. I thought that all that meant was simply decoding words and teaching the students to read by decoding the words on the page. However, through the literacy review, I learned that there are more ways to educate young readers on the language than simply the mechanics of the words. (Journal Entry 15)

Again, I show this development of a new understanding of what literacy education truly entails when I analyzed the coursework from the Language Arts Instruction Course. Here, in this course, I was exposed to the idea that reading and writing are only two of the six language arts (Language Arts Notes Guide). This emphasizes that there are other ways to approach literacy education and there are other ways to put the language on a young students’ level.

Based on the evidence in the data sources, it is clear that there were expectations about literacy education that I had going into this project that were changed through the information gathered in research.

Approaches to Teaching Literacy Education

Another idea that became a new understanding were the new approaches to literacy that I was exposed to throughout this course and this project. Because of my misconception about literacy, I was not in tune with the different approaches that are used to implement good literacy instruction, nor was I aware of the controversy that surrounded them. However, they are mentioned many times in my data sources. This is seen as I speak in my conversations with my critical friend about my personal experiences, my READ experiences, and my practicum experiences about both a whole language approach to reading as well as a phonics-first approach. This realization that there are multiple ways to teach young readers this skill was clearly a new understanding for me as I even wrote about it in my journal entry. While reflecting on the question “what is the best way to teach literacy?” I wrote:

I am already noticing a difference in my opinion of literacy education.

Through my ELEM 3200 course, I have been exposed to other portions of teaching literacy to students and it is more appealing knowing that there is more to it... This was encouraging to me as it gave me a whole new perspective to the other aspects of early literacy development as a whole. (Journal Entry 3)

Further on in this same journal entry, this newly-learned language of these two approaches is seen again as I state:

Referring to the sources I was also looking into this past week, I really am starting to see why the whole language approach is so important.

While I do see the importance of phonics and do think it is very

important, I am really interested to learn more about the whole language approach... (Journal Entry 3)

However, when it came to trying to describe the type of literacy educator I wanted to be, I described it as more balanced, a new description, by stating:

I don't know for sure but I feel like based off of you know my first lesson and the kind of tendencies I saw myself driving towards I feel like probably more balanced but like more learning towards whole language which probably does have a lot to do with the way I was taught too... (Critical Friend Conversation 3)

This thought that my lessons would be more balanced is seen throughout the lessons I wrote in this course. In Lesson 1, I created an activity that addressed multiple language arts at once. My activities in this lesson allowed students to show their learning of literacy (in this case, answering and asking questions) in more than one way. They created questions with models, discussed verbally, wrote questions in sentence form, and used pictures to support/answer their questions. Allowing students to use multiple ways to indicate understanding, including a formally written sentence, shows the implication of a more balanced approach.

Overall, my new understanding that there are multiple ways to approach literacy education is evident throughout both my journal entries and the conversations with my critical friend as those terms are used more and more to describe my own practices and those of the people I observed.

New Perspectives

A final theme that was seen throughout the sources was that of the new perspectives I gained from the experience of working through this course and this project. This is seen in a conversation with my critical friend I explained:

I think that honestly the 3200 class while so far it has like broadened it is also allowing me to see the value in that decoding and that it is still really important especially for you know when you're teaching emergent readers... (Critical Friend Conversation 2)

Here, I recognize the new perspective that the language arts instruction course had allowed me to see in that there are benefits to the phonics approach that I originally disliked. Again, I discuss new understandings and perspectives I gained in a journal entry where I wrote "I learned that there is more language instruction than just reading and that students of all ages need to be exposed to each area of the language in order to learn and become fluent" (Journal Entry 15). This, once again, showed a understanding that was different than what I believed literacy to be as I began this project. Overall, throughout the conversations and journal entries, there were new understandings gained from the experiences, readings, and coursework throughout the length of this project.

Discussion

Through this self-study with critical friendship, I gained better insight into my personal beliefs as a literacy educator and how they changed and evolved over the course of my English language arts methods course. Through the analysis of the data sources, there was clear evidence that my perspectives and understanding of literacy education changed throughout the course described.

This change in understanding is vital as a future educator because of the importance of understanding personal beliefs. The better my understanding of my own personal values regarding education and literacy instruction, the more inclined I will be to insert those beliefs into a classroom. A common theme within this project was my feelings about literacy education, including negative feelings I had about phonics instruction and how tedious it could be. This is explained in literature as it shows that phonics-based classrooms and lessons are much more focused on phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle (Treiman, 2018) in comparison to language-first classrooms. Similarly, another finding was my personal experiences teaching the classroom. I spoke on my experiences where I realized how vital it is for students to have an understanding of phonics so that they can use them in a lesson. This is also recognized in literature as phonics-first approaches have been shown to lead to better improvements in students spelling and reading (Maddox & Feng, 2013) which are useful skills in any language arts lesson.

Without the understanding of my personal beliefs, it is difficult to be able to apply those values into teaching. With understanding these beliefs comes the need to reflect on my ability to implement them. Reflection is imperative for educators and a research project such as this gives ample opportunity to examine whether the beliefs that I indicate that I support are being used in instruction. This is something that I found to be greatly important as it allowed me to come to my final theme of new understandings. Without the reflection that comes with self-study and this project, these new understandings would not have erupted. Research supports self-studies as a means for educators to examine personal practices as it is an integral part of improving instruction (Loughran, 2005).

With this understanding of self-studies, this research and the intricate examination of my understanding allowed for a better comprehension of the content. Because of the amount of time

and effort spent on analyzing the information and data, I have an extensive better understanding of the content, the approaches, and literacy education as a whole. This will help to strengthen my future instruction and aid in my teaching skills, overall improving my educator identity. This is evident already in the lessons I developed throughout my Language Arts Instruction course. In each of the lessons (Lesson 1, Lesson 2, and Lesson 3), my skills in integrating multiple approaches to literacy by combining my understanding of both is seen. The activities and conversations that stem from these lessons each show a deeper understanding of how to teach literacy to young students.

Implications

This self-study focused on my identity as a literacy educator will be very useful to myself as a future educator. As a beginning teacher, there are so many parts of the job that will be new and that I will need to learn in my classroom. While this project does not exempt me from any of those lessons, it does give me a head start on learning them. As I begin my teaching career, I will already know my personal understanding of literacy education and where I stand in terms of literacy approaches. Due to this research, I have an awareness and appreciation for both phonics-based approaches as well as a whole language first approach, however, ultimately see the value in a more balanced take on literacy instruction. I will have a good grasp of what this looks like in a classroom and how I can use it in my day-to-day lessons. In turn, I can be a better educator overall because my practices will better align with my beliefs. By researching which approaches I agree with and which I am more hesitant to stand by, I can emphasize my actions in what I believe in. I can therefore advance in a mission to utilize the balanced approach to literacy as opposed to my former understanding of a more singular approach view. This research allows me

to be self-aware of what I value in literacy education and self-critical on my ability to implement that.

Conducting self-studies can also be a useful tool for other pre-service teachers. First, it can act as a catalyst for other preservice educators to begin reflecting on their beliefs in literacy education. Using critical friendship, it can provoke deeper thought about approaches and even inspire some to dig deeper into further research than is presented in this research, in turn allowing teachers to better understand their own perspectives. This can therefore help other preservice teachers experience the opportunity that I did of gaining a deeper knowledge of what they are already learning in the classroom. In the same way that it impacted me, it may impact them by allowing them to gain a sense of self-awareness and preparing them to be better educators by implementing this. With self-study, researchers are forced to take a critical view of their own practices which can bring a sense of awareness to educators of what they are doing and are not doing in their classroom. This opportunity for self-reflection otherwise may not have been presented, therefore dismissing an opportunity to grow in this area of consciousness in personal and interpersonal teaching practices.

In the future, I could conduct additional self-studies with different purposes by using the content of other courses to inspire further research. Because it was a course taken at a university that provoked this research and my understanding of literacy education, it would be insightful to gain better understanding of how certain courses can impact preservice teachers. They can use this opportunity to develop their own research and self-studies to strive for better personal understandings for themselves. Overall, self-studies are important because they provide an opportunity for the researcher, their peers, and their future peers to design their own line of

questioning and research for more personal growth amongst the education community as a whole.

Conclusion

Overall, this study began as a way to establish a better understanding of my personal identity as a literacy educator. After taking a course regarding reading instruction in primary grades, I began to become more apprehensive about what literacy instruction entailed. I began this study prior to my English Language Arts methods course as a way to collect data and analyze my thoughts and understandings regarding early literacy development and education. After spending time collecting data such as journal entries, coursework, and conversations with my critical friend, I coded this data through open and axial coding. With this, I was able to establish findings that showed my overall concluded identity as a literacy educator through resolving misconceptions and establishing new understandings. This study will be beneficial to me as a future educator as it allowed me to be self-critical as well as gain a better understanding of the educational approaches to early literacy.

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