



PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' JOURNEY TO BECOMING READERS

by Christy Lao, Ph.D.

Abstract

This study explored through interviews how prospective teachers became readers while growing up as children and adolescents. It was found that all those who were reluctant readers when young grew up in print poor environments. Some became enthusiastic readers through a "home run" book experience or through the influence of friends. All who were enthusiastic early readers grew up in print rich environments. Even those who were enthusiastic readers when young were turned off to reading when they were not allowed to choose their own reading materials. Enthusiasm was rekindled, however, when choice was provided later in life. A significance of this study lies in its attempt to explore prospective teachers' experience and insight of becoming reader and its implications for educators in motivating children to read.

Introduction

One of the important issues in literacy education is how to promote reading among children. Over the years, various methods have been attempted to address this issue. However, their effectiveness is still controversial. It is therefore important to hear the voices of those who have gone through the process of becoming readers and to have a better understanding of what it takes to become a reader. In this study, how

graduate students of education became readers will be explored. It is hoped that these prospective teachers' experiences and reflections on becoming a reader can inform educators on how to motivate children to read and create a class of readers.

There is overwhelming evidence that children who read more have large vocabulary, and become better readers and writers (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Anderson and Nagy, 1992). Anderson and Nagy (1992) estimated that children learn an average of 4,000 to 12,000 new words each year as a result of reading. It is also well established that children read more when they have access to books that interested them (Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998; Trelease, 2001). In fact, even one trip to the library (Romans and Krashen, 1998) and one positive reading experience (Von Sprecken et al., 1999) got students interested in reading. In *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985), Anderson et al. stated, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p.23). Read aloud activities often provide children with a reading role model and positive interaction with their parents (Baker et al., 1997). Neuman (1986) found that fifth grade students' reading habits were related to their parents' encouragement on reading. Other research suggested that for

adolescents, peer influence and peer book recommendations might be the most important motivator for voluntary reading. Through interviews with two middle school reluctant readers, Worthy (1998) concluded that book conversation among peers made an impact on adolescents' attitudes towards reading.

These previous studies have described and identified what contribute to becoming a good reader. It remains unclear, however, how people, especially prospective teachers view and analyze their own reading experience and the implications it holds for educators who are interested in promoting reading among their students. The current study attempts to address this gap in the literature by exploring prospective teachers' experiences and insights of becoming readers and what it means for classroom teachers.

Participants

The participants of this study were twenty-two graduate students taking an intensive summer course on Teaching English as a second language at a liberal arts college in New York State. These participants, ranging in age from twenty-five to sixty-one, came from low to middle income families, and the majority of them were native speakers of English.

Methodology

Participants were interviewed and asked the following question: "Were you an avid reader or non-reader when you were growing up? Why?" Interview was conducted on campus by the researcher and lasted about 30-45 minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded. An interview transcription was given to each participant for clarification and elaboration. The sample size and data collection method contribute to the limi-

tation of this study. All participants of this study came from one university; findings thus cannot be generalized to any other population beyond this group.

Findings

The participants interviewed fell into two broad categories: enthusiastic early readers and reluctant early readers. Enthusiastic early readers were defined as someone who often did recreational reading and reluctant early readers as someone who seldom or rarely read for pleasure in childhood and adolescence. Twelve participants reported that they were reluctant early readers and ten were enthusiastic early readers while growing up. In the following sections, several selected personal stories of enthusiastic early readers and reluctant early readers will be presented and major factors contributing to enthusiastic early readers and reluctant early readers will then be discussed.

Stories of reluctant early readers

Twelve participants identified themselves as reluctant early readers. Four were selected below because their responses illustrated the range of their reading experiences.

Eileen

grew up in a relatively low print environment. Both of her parents spoke Spanish in the home. Her mother believed that school would help her daughter with everything. Eileen reported, "Books were scarce in home and were practically non-existent." As Eileen grew older and became more independent, she would go to the library on her own or with her friends. "Novels interested me," Eileen exclaimed. In the fourth grade, she was exposed to Judy



Blume. Eileen described, "The simple way Bloom wrote attracted me and my reading took off from there."

Virginia

was a non-recreational reader. Her parents did not entice her nor push her to read, nor did they care if she read. Her parents were high school graduates and blue-collar workers. "There was little or no children's literature in the home and it was a rare occurrence for my parents to take me to the library", Virginia recalled. She grew up with other recreational activities such as games, friends, music and TV. "Books were a chore", Virginia exclaimed. "My teachers were very structured and promoted memorization and phonic skills. I learned to read using phonics and memorization." "Because I was never taken to the library and because of the lack of books in my home, I was not exposed to the world of books and reading", she commented. Virginia pointed out that "the major reasons I did not like to read early in my life were the way I was introduced to reading at school and my family environment."

Jane

Although phonics was the way reading was taught 40 years ago, it did not work for Jane. There were not many books in the house. Her mother did read to her but not very often. Jane recalled, "Teachers were very structured and Basal Readers were used as required reading. I did not like the Basal Reader at all and had a hard time with reading until my mother brought me a magazine called *True Confession*. This magazine had stories about girls who were in trouble with boyfriends, mothers or life in general. I loved this magazine and from then on, I began reading."

Scott

was never really a reader when growing up because he was not interested in the books that he was 'supposed' to read. It was hard to motivate him because as Scott describes "I felt the books I had to read were being imposed on me." He read more in high school because some of the novels that he read were interesting, covered topics he was interested in, or were books people suggested he should read. "Many of my friends read. It was hard not to want to find out more about a book after hearing somebody always talking about it."

Stories of enthusiastic early readers

In this study, ten participants described themselves as enthusiastic early readers while growing up. The followings are three selected informants' success stories.

Linda

was read to early on by both parents and developed a curiosity for words. Besides reading to her, her mother encouraged her to read by herself. She seemed to catch on quickly and was able to "teach herself" unknown words. Her parents were avid readers of books, newspapers and magazines, and that was her "introduction to reading". Seeing her parents as readers encouraged her to become more curious about the words around her: "It was a natural feeling to me - reading was not forced on me." She reported she had an interest in reading around age three and would look through any printed matter that was around the house. Linda said "I did not remember having an abundance of print around but my mother took out books from the library and would buy books when they were affordable. My school library was like a second home. I was always there and loved to read."

Ali

was brought up in a home of educators. Her parents read to her all the time. She wasn't allowed to watch a lot of TV. Ali said, "I always looked forward to story time, no matter what time of day or night it was." From age 5-10, Ali went to the public library with her father on the weekends. Ali recalled, "I was unable to understand words by looking at them in the books, but little by little I was able to pick up words like THE, AND, WHEN, and WHERE." Ali also mentioned reading a lot of books in the third grade. She would write book reports and hand them in even though teacher did not ask for them. "After the fourth grade, I began to become turned off from reading because reading assignments from school did not keep me as interested and the teacher did not provide a comfortable atmosphere," Ali said. This lasted until high school. Taking a short story class in the tenth grade sparked her interest in reading again because she could choose the books she wanted to read and the assignment did not test detailed knowledge of texts.

Maria

was an avid reader growing up. Maria's parents spoke little English. Her brother constantly read to her, when she was four. Maria described, "My brother would repeatedly read me picture books such as the Madeline series by Ludwig Bemelmans. He read them

so much that I memorized them and was always "reading" to myself. At that time, two third grade teachers who lived on my block were amazed that a child my age was reading. I was so proud of myself and wanted to be around more books." Noting her motivation and enthusiasm, her mother would bring her to the library where she would spend an incredible amount of time pouring over and choosing her picture books. Throughout elementary school, she continued to enjoy reading. During the summer, she would "devour" books she said. However, "When I got older, I resented reading as I found the summer reading assignments boring and I had to write book reports", Maria stated. By the time she got to high school and college, she was swamped with text reading. "I was totally turned off to pleasure reading," she said.

Discussions

From the personal stories of all the informants, it was found that there were four major factors that contribute to the differences in early reading. They were: 1) quality of print environment, 2) level of choice in reading, 3) whether they were read to, and 4) whether they had parents as reading models as illustrated in Table 1:

Reluctant early readers' experiences

The stories of Eileen, Virginia, Jane, and Scott revealed one common phe-

Table 1: Major factors contributing to early reading

Contributing Factors	Reluctant Early Readers (N=12)	Enthusiastic Early Readers (N=10)
Print rich environment	0	10
Choice in reading	0	10
Parents/siblings read to	1	10
Parents as reading models	2	8

nomenon: all reluctant early readers grew up in print poor environments in this study. In Eileen's home, "books were practically non-existent." As for Virginia, she was "never taken to the library so she was not exposed to the world of books and reading." What they had were schoolbooks, which they found boring. As a result, they were not interested in reading. Because of a lack of interesting books, both in home and at school, they did not find reading enjoyable. The phonics/memorization approach did not seem conducive to producing avid readers since generally, Basal Readers were not considered interesting by the participants in this study.

Some of those who grew up in print-poor environments became enthusiastic readers through what is now termed a "home run" book experience (Trelease, 2001). In a study by Von Sprecken et al. (1999), it was found that a surprising number of children became interested in reading because of one interesting book or one positive book experience. In this study, reluctant early readers such as Eileen and Jane were turned into readers later on because of one interesting book or magazine they read—Eileen found her Judy Blume books and Jane's mother gave her the *True Confession* magazine. This one positive reading experience made them realize that reading could be fun when reading something interesting. Since encountering their first enjoyable book, these reluctant readers started to enjoy books. It was not that they didn't want to read, it was just that they didn't have interesting things to read.

There were also those who became enthusiastic readers because of the influence of friends. In this study, it was found that children read more when their friends read. When reluctant readers such as Scott and Eileen befriended

those who read, they began to be interested in what their friends were reading. As Scott illustrated "It was hard not to want to find out more about a book after hearing somebody always talking about it." Scott probably would not become a reader if he had not been surrounded with friends who read. Children who read have a more positive attitude towards reading and read more (Marrow and Weinstein, 1982) and this attitude, in turn, influences others (Worthy, 1998).

Nevertheless, there were those who never really became readers because they had no "home run" experience and all they were exposed to in school was phonics and memorization. Books were thus a chore for them. Virginia never became a recreational reader because reading was boring. In addition, almost all reluctant early readers were not read to by their parents and their parents didn't read for pleasure themselves. In this environment, these children were not exposed to the world of reading and no attempt was made to nurture them as readers. The lack of support, encouragement and reading role model discouraged these reluctant early readers from enjoying reading in their early childhood.

Enthusiastic early readers' experiences

One common characteristic found in the ten enthusiastic early readers were that they all had print rich environment while growing up. Some of them had an abundance of books at home and for those who did not have many books at home, their parents took them to the public library often. As Linda reported "My mother took out books for me from the library and would buy books when affordable." Having access to books they were interested in, these informants became enthusiastic readers in their early childhood. This con-

firms the argument that access to print encourages reading and predicts literacy development (Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998).

However, not all early readers remained enthusiastic toward reading later in their life. Nearly half of the early readers got turned off later because they were unable to choose their own reading; an experience referred by Kim (2001) as a "strikeout experience, the opposite of a "home run". Ali and Maria reported resenting reading when it was imposed on them and when they had to worry about reading to retain information for a test or to write a book report. When given choices, they became interested in reading once again.

As Krashen (1993) has indicated a print rich environment is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Children need to be encouraged to read. Reading aloud improves children's language skills and, most important, improves their attitude towards reading (Trelease, 2001). Besides providing a print rich environment, parents of these early readers often read to them. As Ali recalled "my parents used to read to me all the time. During the day, at night, whenever, I always looked forward to story time." All ten enthusiastic readers were read to at home and they all enjoyed reading on their own. This is consistent with research showing that children who are read to at home read more on their own (Baker et al., 1997; Neuman, 1986).

Conclusions

This study shows that having access to interesting reading materials is a paramount factor in becoming reader. It was found that a print rich environment correlated directly with early interest in reading. However, enthusiastic early readers could get turned off to reading when there is lack of choice.

But, given some choices, readers can recover from such "strikeout" experiences. All enthusiastic early readers in this study reported that they had the opportunity to choose books they were interested in while reluctant early readers had no choice. For them, reading was forced via required reading and assignments at school. Nevertheless, even reluctant readers who grew up in print poor environments can still become readers through a "home run" book or through the influence of peers.

Findings of this study suggest that we may need to rethink how reading should be presented in school if we want to motivate children to read and that providing children with interesting reading should be the prerequisite to children's reading development.

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