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## Sharing Stories: Reflections of Professors' Literacy Identities and Beliefs

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## Sharing Stories: Reflections of Professors' Literacy Identities and Beliefs

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### Abstract

Teacher identities and beliefs influence instructional practices. In order to explore this process, this self-study was conducted by three literacy professors from different ethnic backgrounds including one African-American professor, one Chinese national professor and one White professor. The purpose of this study was to examine how professors' literacy identities are shaped and how sharing these identities, experiences and beliefs in meaningful professional dialogues influences instructional practice. We examined the role of our identities and beliefs on our instructional practices using multiple forms of qualitative data such as journal entries, digital stories, and critical group discussions. Despite the range of differences among participants, we also shared commonalities in our identities and experiences. Findings from the study reveal that our literacy stories shaped our identities, our identities and beliefs shaped our instruction, and our reflective process shaped change in our practices. Through this process we were able to adjust our instruction in order to meet the diverse needs of our students. This reflective process influenced and improved our instructional decisions.

**Keywords:** literacy, identity, beliefs, instruction

The purpose of this self-study was to examine literacy professors' experiences, identities and beliefs and how these components influenced instructional practices. In order to examine this connection, as researchers, we engaged in reflecting on and sharing our experiences, identities and beliefs in meaningful professional dialogues. In this study, we recognize and honor the fact that identities have multiple interpretations across disciplines and over time (Moje & Luke, 2009). With this in mind, we draw on the work of Gee (2006) in defining identity as a socially and culturally constructed and socially situated sense of self, and we use our experiences to better investigate this "sense of self" as we examine and seek to improve our instructional practices. Specifically, in this self-study we investigated, *how do our literacy experiences, identities, and beliefs shape our literacy instruction?*

## **Review of the Literature**

Examining the identities of teachers and teacher educators can serve to provide an understanding of ourselves as both teachers and learners. Throughout this self-study, we engaged in an interactive process of sharing and reflecting on our experiences through stories as one aspect of considering how we might improve our practice. Through this interactive process we hoped to examine our own beliefs and identities, the role they played in our practices, and how we might improve our practices. Researchers suggest identities can be examined and understood through sharing personal stories (Howard, Myers, Adams-Budde, & Joliff, 2017; Compton-Lilly, 2013; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009). In examining our own literacy experiences, beliefs, and identities, we used our stories to better investigate our “sense of self.” For the purpose of this study we define literacy identities as “co-constructed and socially situated self-understandings of how one engages in reading, writing, and texts in various contexts and over time” (Howard et. al, 2017, p. 2). We use this self-study to explore these identities as we share our experiences and stories and reflect on the impact on our instructional practices.

In Keiler’s (2018) study of teachers’ identities, results revealed that participants’ identities were closely connected to their instructional practices. In this study, participants learned to implement a new instructional model and through this process some participants transitioned easily to the new student-centered instructional model because of their identities and beliefs and some participants needed to make shifts in their identities and beliefs in order to comfortably implement this model. This study supports research that teacher identities are connected to instructional practices (Parr & Campbell, 2011; Ticknor, 2015).

Parr and Campbell (2011) discuss the importance of examining our identities and literacy experiences in order to better understand how this information informs our work as

educators. While their study focuses on teacher candidates, Parr and Campbell express the importance of all educators examining and “deconstructing” their literacy pasts. Their work with teacher candidates revealed the importance of not only sharing literacy histories and stories, but also “problematizing and deconstructing” these stories in order to “examine assumptions and misperceptions and move beyond a traditional, conventional view of literacy” (p. 344). Their study stipulates that as teacher educators, many of our stories may be shaped by traditional, middle class experiences. With this in mind, we have to consider the assumptions and misperceptions that inhabit these stories and understand that our identities may be very different from the experiences of others. This assertion is aligned with the views of McCarthy and Moje (2002) who encourage us to challenge our own identities. It is not enough to *acknowledge* this “sense of self” but we must also *challenge* this “sense of self.” Through the self-study approach, specifically through colleague interactions, discussing our stories and examining our changing perspectives provided the space for this challenge to occur.

Research shows that identity stories can take many forms such as interviews (Drake et. al, 2001) artistic representations (Adams-Budde, Howard, Jolliff, & Myers, 2014; Howard et. al, 2017; Bustle, 2004; Hayik, 2012; Ives & Juzwik, 2015) and narratives (Williams, 2003). Adams-Budde, Howard, Jolliff, & Myers, 2014 asked participants to create visual representations of their literacy identities and then to discuss these representations with researchers as a means of sharing their literacy stories. The visual representations from the presentations showcased that participants valued reading and writing a range of texts including religious texts, Internet sources, academic texts, etc. Participants used these visual representations as a springboard for sharing specific literacy experiences.

In Drake et. al's (2001) study examining 10 elementary teachers' identities, interviews were used as a form of storytelling to explore teachers' sense of self, beliefs and knowledge. They assert, "stories, as lived and told by teachers, serve as the lens through which they understand themselves personally and professionally and through which they view the content and context of their work..." (p. 2). In reflecting on their stories, findings of this study revealed consistency between teacher identities and teacher practices, supporting Clarke and Watts-Taffe's (2014) idea that "identity is inextricably linked to teaching" (p. 14).

As we consider how identity is linked to teaching, it is also important to consider how as educators, we can explore the identities of the students we teach. Duckworth & Brzeski's (2015) work supports the notion of the importance of examining not only our identities as educators but how as educators, we examine the identities of our students. This study describes the identities of two college-level students through a case study lens as they consider how engagement and disengagement of students in classroom practices is often related to the range of identities students have in the classroom as well as beyond classroom settings. This study revealed the importance of examining and valuing these identities in order to best meet the needs of students.

Through the self-study approach (LaBoskey, 2004) we worked to inform and improve our instruction through examining our identities through stories and interacting in collaborative reflection with the goal of defining opportunities for change in our practice to better understand and serve the needs of our students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on the theories of how language and literacy learning are socially constructed (Lave, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1993). In examining this construction with teaching and identity, this study is grounded in the sociocultural perspective, which "emphasizes

the roles of social, cultural, and historical factors in the human experience” (Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 122). The sociocultural theory posits that values and experiences held by participants are shared within the learning context and serve to shape knowledge through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). In alignment with the self-study approach (Laboskey, 2004), as participants in this study, we capitalized on these social interactions by meeting throughout the study to discuss our experiences and reflections of teaching, learning from each other during these meetings and times of reflections. Within this space we examined how historical factors related to our social and cultural experiences shaped our beliefs and action in the classroom. This sociocultural approach created the context for us to use multiple data sources that allowed for collaboration, reflection and discussion while learning and gaining knowledge with each other.

The sociocultural theory emphasizes that both learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and identity (Gee, 2006) are socially and culturally situated. In Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain’s (1998) discussion of identity, they assert, “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities” (p.3). With this in mind as participants we explored our identities first independently and then shared our reflections of these identities with each other. As identities are shaped and reshaped within our lives, self-understandings emerge and we are better able to understand how our identities shape our actions within specific contexts. Specific to this study, the experiences and discussions of participants’ classroom activities provided an opportunity to explore these self-understandings and the implications for instruction.

Using this lens to examine the literacy experiences, identities and beliefs of three university professors from different ethnic groups (African-American, Chinese, and European-

American) helped to analyze the specific social, cultural and historical factors that shaped our experiences and teaching. This perspective is valuable in analyzing how identities are shaped and more specifically how these identities impact participants' instructional decisions.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The three of us all come from different ethnic groups and differ in our educational and professional experience. Christy is an African-American female. Before teaching at the university, she was a classroom teacher, curriculum specialist, and instructional coach. She has been at the university for 3 years. Ran is a Chinese national. Before coming to the United States, she was a high school English teacher. She finished her K-12 studies as well as college education in China and came to the US in order to pursue graduate education. She has been teaching at this university for 9 years. Johna is a white female from the southern United States. She has been at the university for thirteen years and prior to that she worked in her state's department of education and was a classroom teacher and instructional coach. At the university she works as a faculty member and in an administrative capacity. All three participants are female working professionals as well as wives and mothers. In examining our identities, we consider the influence of each of our roles.

### **Self-Study**

In an effort to capture how our literacy identities influenced our instructional decisions and practice, we used self-study as the methodological approach in this research. According to Dinkelman (2003), self-study is defined as "intentional and systematic inquiry into one's own practice...conducted by individual teacher educators as well as groups working collaboratively to understand problems of practice more deeply" (p. 8). It is about "the learning from experiences that is embedded within teachers creating new experiences for themselves and those whom they

teach” (Russell, 1998, p. 6). Self-study is based on teacher educators’ desire to better understand themselves and to learn more about teaching. Hence, it is considered as a powerful way to promote reflective teaching and foster changes of the teaching pedagogy (Hu & Smith, 2011).

Using this approach, we, as literacy professors from three different cultural backgrounds, shared our literacy stories and experiences, and hoped to better understand our own literacy identities and how our experiences influenced our instructional decisions. Specifically, we organized this study around LaBoskey’s (2004) five characteristics of self-study which include 1) self-initiated and self-focused, 2) aimed at improvement 3) interactive 4) including multiple qualitative methods and 5) validity as trustworthiness. The self-initiation and process of self-focusing on our personal practices evolved as we began to discuss our beliefs about literacy instruction and how our beliefs shaped our practices. In our early discussions we realized that at times our current practices presented narrow opportunities for diverse learning and did not always serve to amplify diverse experiences of our students. Through this study we hoped to explore the gap in who we were and in who we wanted to be in our practice (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Therefore, this study was aimed at not only examining our beliefs and practices, but specifically working to improve our practices in order to best meet the diverse needs of our students.

Validity as trustworthiness was established throughout the study. As we each shared our artifacts (digital representations, journal entries) we analyzed data from each of these artifacts across researchers. From there we audio recorded sessions where we not only shared our personal artifacts, but shared our personal responses and critical discussions surrounding our peers’ artifacts as well. These discussions were captured and shared via notes and audio recordings.



## **Data Collection & Analysis**

LaBoskey's five characteristics for self-study (2004) posit that there should be many sources, including multiple qualitative methods in the process of data collection. With this in mind, data for this study comes from three different sources: 1) the literacy profile Smore project, 2) transcriptions of our meetings, and 3) journal reflections.

During this study each of us created one online literacy profile Smore project in which we shared our stories of becoming literate, using words, pictures and multimedia. A Smore (<https://www.smores.com/app>) is a digital flyer used to share information. Here is an example of a participant's Smore <https://www.smores.com/e4w1n-framing-literacy-experiences>.

In sharing these digital pieces, we also asked questions of each other related to our experiences and instructional decisions. We reflected on our identities, literacy experiences, the roles we play in life, how we define and practice literacy, and how those experiences influence our literacy instruction. This became an online space for us to create our literacy profile and share it with others in our research group.

This study was interactive in that we shared our Smore projects virtually and held meetings to discuss the projects and our teaching journals and reflections in depth. Throughout the course of the study we met virtually nine times. During these meetings we analyzed how the projects were representative of our experiences and had the opportunity to engage in dialogue about these experiences. In addition, during these meetings we shared and analyzed our two journals and discussed our reflections of teaching during the semester. The recorded and transcribed meetings were used as a data source. At the conclusion of the study, we each wrote a final reflective journal, a culmination writing of what we learned from our discussions, changes we planned to make and ideas about future teaching.

Table 1  
Frequency and description of data sources

Data Source	Frequency	Description
Smore	(1) Smore was created per participant	Participants used the Smore for sharing literacy experiences and stories. Specific topics included literacy snapshots, cultural perspectives, exploration of roles, etc.
Journals	(2) Journals were created per participant. One at the beginning of the study, and one at the conclusion of the study.	Journals were an opportunity for participants to reflect on their beliefs, goals, ideas, challenges and resources related to teaching. This was also a space to reflect on literacy identities and implications for changing teaching practices.
Meetings	(9) Meetings occurred throughout the study	Meetings were a space for participants to discuss their Smores, journals and their reflections on teaching. During this time participants also asked questions of each other related to their experiences. Data was discussed in terms of common themes found throughout experiences as well as differences.

We analyzed the data concurrently during the data collection period, guided by the research question. We used the thematic analysis approach (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997), searching for themes that emerged from open coding of our individual data as well as that of the other two participants. In analyzing data sources when common themes arose we created charts with excerpts from data sources that were representative of each theme. Each participant

contributed to the charts independently and added themes from our analysis if they were not already listed. At this phase we had 13 themes focusing on a range of social literacy experiences, positive literacy experiences, cultural experiences, etc. We then met to compare and contrast each other's coding to look for consensus and grouped the emerging themes into categories to report the findings of our study. These final four themes are further described in the results section.

## **Results**

Analysis of the data revealed that despite the different cultural backgrounds of each participant, we share commonalities in our beliefs, identities and experiences. These experiences came to shape our identities as well as our beliefs about teaching and therefore influenced our instructional decisions. In our early literacy experiences, we were provided with literacy-rich environments, with exposure and access to books of all kinds at a young age. In school, we were avid readers even though we differed at reading levels, the types of books we read, and the ways we learned to read. Discussion of these experiences allowed us to share our stories and to reflect and embrace future changes in our instructional practice.

### **Our Stories Shape Our Identities**

We each began by sharing our experiences through our stories with digital/visual representations of our Smores. In our Smores we told stories through words and visuals about our early literacy experiences, how we engage in literacy in our various roles, and our literacy learning through cultural perspectives. In our Smores we specifically reflected on how our literacy stories shaped our identities. Christy shared how literacy was valued in her home with consistent access to literacy through books, religious texts, newspapers, computers, letter writing etc.

I believe these literacy experiences shaped my desire to read. Literacy was always around me and I saw people I respected and loved reading around me. I remember watching my father engaged in a religious text or motivational book and I wanted to crawl right into his lap, into the pages of the book and discover what intrigued him so. To me, he was one of the smartest people I knew and I believed he gained this knowledge from reading.

Additionally, in her Smore, Christy discussed how her access to books as a child led her to focus on access to books for her own child and students. These experiences shaped her identity as an avid reader, and in reflecting on and deconstructing these experiences, she reflected on wanting to provide similar experiences to her child and her students with the hopes of shaping their identities as avid readers.

Ran shared her story as a young girl in schools in China. In this context, she was not given choice and autonomy in reading. Reading was limited to textbooks only. She never identified herself as a book lover or a good reader until college when she was given the opportunity to read books of her choice. She said in her Smore,

Once I was done with K-12 education, I finally considered myself as a real reader, and a good one - I read what I wanted to read, not what I was required to read. I could spend hours sitting in a corner reading a novel and visualizing the picture described by the author and I loved that. I knew at that time, I loved to read.

Ran acknowledged that it was this personal experience that made her identify herself as a person who loves books and identify as a lifelong reader. As she deconstructed her personal experiences she recognized how her early literacy experiences were not helpful in developing her love of reading. In addition she discussed how she wanted to ensure that her students had the opportunities that evoked a passion for reading in her life, opposed to those that made her feel stifled as a reader. Because of this, Ran firmly believes that choice in reading is the key to foster students' positive attitude toward reading. These experiences not only shaped her identity as a reader, but they also allowed her to realize the importance of offering her students choices in

reading. Therefore, she always made it a priority to give her students options to select readings when teaching in the high school in China and at the university in the United States.

In addition to identifying herself as a reader, Ran also sees herself as a bridge that connects the Western culture with the Eastern culture, and helps her children and students realize the best value in both cultures. Ran said,

I wish my American students to, at least understand or know, even if they probably don't appreciate or agree, what is valued in the Chinese culture. So if they have students coming from China, they will understand their (the students) behaviors and know how to talk to and support their parents with literacy.

As a bridge across cultures, with her students, Ran presented literacy instruction in ways that showcased her identity and what she valued as a literacy instructor from her experiences in both Eastern and Western cultures.

Johna's literacy stories reflected her literacy identity and helped her to understand the shifts in her identity due to new technologies. In her Smore, Johna discussed how in a time before the "digital age" her family read the newspaper and made weekly trips to the public library.

I am beginning to realize that in addition to my family- my age and the era in which I went to school, impacts the ways I view learning and literacy. There are times I just want to feel the weight of a book in my hand; but I must confess I love the convenience of e-books and the access the Internet provides. I think because books were important to me and my family as a child, that I wanted to make sure my children and my students had the same environment. But, the digital age has changed that some--and that has been difficult for me.

In deconstructing her experiences, Johna realized the shift in reading from physical books to electronic books and how this shift might impact 21st century learners. She discussed how this posed a challenge for her as she worked to meet the needs and preferences of all students. Johna also noted "I worry about equal access to text. Being from a small town and living out away from resources, I often think about equal access for my students." These reflections of earlier

experiences and reflections of learning to navigate access to digital texts has shaped Johna's identity as an advocate of access for all students. Realizing that not all students will have access to libraries and technology, as she has had throughout her literacy experiences makes her an advocate for the availability of texts. It is important to her that regardless of where students live or go to school that all students have access to a range of texts. She acts on this identity as advocate by providing pre-service teachers with resources for finding a range of texts and by providing them with the opportunity to engage with a range of texts throughout her courses. As an advocate for access she hopes the knowledge and experiences she provides her students related to accessing a variety of texts will transfer this into their own classrooms and communities, providing the same opportunities for their future students.

### **Our Identities Shape Our Instruction**

This study revealed that our identities shape our instructional decisions. As we examined our past and current roles as educators and parents, Christy reflected on her identity as an African-American woman and the importance of seeing characters like herself in books and wanting to provide this same opportunity for all of her students across race, gender, disability, religion, etc. Therefore, in her teaching, she provided opportunities for students to engage with diverse texts and share texts with their peers through various forums such as discussion groups, book chats, projects, etc. In discussing this topic she shared,

I believe diverse texts help to foster rich, thoughtful conversations in these contexts and I want books in my classroom that represent everyone. This is something I really feel like I was missing as a young reader. As I deconstruct my personal experiences, I know I want to be better at providing this for my students. I want them to value who they are and to see that in books. Research tells us this is important. This is so important. I just can't stress that enough.

Ran mentioned that as someone who has experienced both teaching and learning in China and the United States, these experiences played a major role in her literacy identity and how she

wanted to bring literacy into her classroom with the merits from both Eastern and Western culture to her students. She reflected,

Influenced by the Chinese culture, I value attitude and effort more than ability. Having the right attitude and paying effort to learn and to teach are more important than receiving a good grade in the course. Influenced by the western culture, I also value critical thinking, questioning, teacher-student interaction, and individualized instruction. All these values are present in my literacy teaching.

To embrace these concepts across cultures, Ran discusses the importance of effort in her classroom while also providing space for critical thinking, teacher-student interactions, and individualized instruction. These take the form of discussion forums, requiring students to post higher-order thinking questions to promote critical thinking and providing timely feedback to students' discussion entries. She also makes herself available to students through many platforms, Skype, Google Hangout, Facetime, cell phone and holds regular individual conferences with students to ensure she builds meaningful relationships and support systems with her students.

Johna shared her experiences and struggles with reading across the disciplines in discussing her literacy identity in her Smore project. She wrote,

I avoid technical reading. I hate the directions that come with "build it yourself" items and when faced with that type of text, I immediately gravitate to the pictures. I also have difficulty with some math texts--something I experienced all through school. Imagine being a straight A student and struggling to "read" math.

Johna discussed how she constantly reminded herself to think of her personal struggles as she worked with content area teachers and worked to find resources across the disciplines. This part of her identity made her more sensitive to the needs of content area reading instruction. "All areas are important, not just the core," she asserted when discussing how her experiences influenced her instructional decisions. She recognized her personal struggles with content area reading and wanted to find resources to support others who may struggle as well. What is more,

Johna also shared how understanding our identities as readers helped her realize the differences among the literacy identities of her students. She said in her journal, “In our collective self study with my colleagues, I realized that even though we are diverse, we have similar literacy histories... However, many of my students do not have the same background.”

These collective reflections helped us realize how our identities not only influence how we teach, but also helped in recognizing the varied identities of our students. Therefore in teaching, we must embrace and value these various identities even if they are contrary to our personal experiences. This discussion helped us acknowledge that we must continue to examine the culture, experiences and beliefs of our students and value their experiences as resources to guide our teaching.

## **Our Beliefs Shape Our Instruction**

### ***Literacy as a Social Process***

Data from this study revealed that our beliefs were also enacted in our teaching practices. We believe that literacy learning is a social process. Hence, based on this belief, we tried to help students build learning communities in our courses and provide social learning experiences for our students through book clubs and discussion forums.

Christy discussed how she not only enjoyed reading individually, but within her literacy identity she also saw herself as a social reader. She enjoyed discussing texts with others in order to discover multiple perspectives. Therefore, in her teaching, she provided opportunities for students to engage in learning collaboratively through online novel groups, group apps, whole group discussions, etc. She shared,

As a teacher and as a reader, I am a social learner. This is important to me, both in my identity as a reader and in the opportunities I provide for my students. My experiences have influenced my identity as a social learner as well as my beliefs around this topic. Based on these experiences that have promoted this positive aspect of my literacy



identity, I want to pass this on to my students. It is my belief that shared reading and writing experiences promote engagement and foster learning across diverse groups of students.

When discussing the challenges of teaching, Ran mentioned that building an effective online community was one of her challenges during instruction. She reflected on her efforts in her initial journal,

Helping my students build an effective online community (a community of learners) is the biggest challenge for me now. In the courses I taught, I always tried to have group assignments in addition to discussion forums. I like to have group work/group assignments as I really want my students to get to know their peers and have the opportunity to work collaboratively. I hope my students can find a group that has common interest and they would be free to share their concerns, thoughts about assignments or course readings.

In discussing goals for her course, Johna listed “creating a sense of community in the course” at the top of the list. In addition, she discussed the importance of connecting with each of her students in an effort to build this sense of community. In her journal she shared how “establishing trust and a community of learners is crucial.” Social learning is not only important to Johna in her work with her students, but in her final journal she also discussed the importance of the social process in her life as a professional. “Discussion/Talk-it is so vital to my growth,” she shared. “Listening and discussing throughout this study made me really think about ways I could shift my instruction.” Learning as a social process was a valued aspect of Johna’s personal learning and she transferred this value to her students as well.

### ***Access to a Variety of Texts***

We believe it is important for students to have access to a variety of texts, both traditional and nontraditional. Therefore, in our instructional practices we used a variety of mediums, including online resources, videos, textbooks, articles, etc. In enacting this belief, we asked our

students to create text sets for their classrooms that represented a range of texts to teach a particular topic. In Christy's Smore, she wrote,

Students are provided with a range of texts to read including textbooks, novels, articles, videos, etc. In addition, they are required to create a text set representing a range of genres based on a specific topic. This text set can be used in their future classrooms and as a guide to encourage reading across a range of texts in future planning.

While Christy's beliefs about including a variety of texts was showcased in her instructional practices, she also noted that her Smore made her evaluate how she shared her definition of literacy with her students, and perhaps her focus on genre was too narrow.

In thinking about this, in deconstructing this assignment and how my beliefs and identity influence it, I started to think about how I could expand my view and my students' views about what counts as literacy and broaden their views on genre. I do ask them to create a text set with picture books, informational texts, etc., but I haven't asked them to consider these decisions beyond a "genre" lens. In other words, I have asked them to choose a wide range of genres, but I haven't asked them to consider gender, culture, etc. I haven't asked them about the role of music or television or video games. I would like to do this more... I would like to share more about how I view literacy in non-traditional ways as well as ask my students to consider this question. I believe this will help my students to value different forms of literacy and share these values with their students, which in turn may validate the experiences K-12 students bring with them to the classroom.

Johna worked to broaden the definition of literacy and text and hoped her students would understand that reading is more than just reading a fictional novel. She said,

My son Evan (pseudonym) was saying he doesn't like to read... But, what they think is reading, what they consider reading, is what was assigned in school, or in the case of my family it is fiction, like a novel. They read all of the time, like Evan reads sports stuff on his phone, but it is not the traditional definition of reading.

She further discussed how her son reads social media as well, but this is not necessarily valued at school and at home. Hence, as a literacy instructor, Johna wondered if teachers provided students with opportunities to read a wide variety of mediums including electronic texts and if teachers valued students' non-traditional reading experiences during instruction so this became a focus of her teaching as she worked to integrate this approach in her classes.

**Student choice.** Providing students with choice was another major theme found in our reflections and discussions. This belief is enacted in that we provided students with choices in class readings and options for completing assignments in different formats, in ways that might feel most comfortable, but also in ways that may challenge them.

In her Smore, Christy discussed the importance of having a variety of texts for student choice. “Having a range of texts available for students can help them find texts that are engaging to them and can foster a love of literacy learning particularly when they can choose texts that are of interest to them... Each semester I work to make sure there is a diverse list of books to choose from. I want students to embrace readings with characters and experiences that may be similar but also very different from their lived experiences.”

Ran mentioned multiple times in her Smore and journals that giving students choices is a key to successful teaching. She reflected, “Give choices and options. Just like different readers love to read different books, I believe a literacy educator should always give students choices in readings and options to complete assignments in different formats.” For assigned reading pieces, Ran and Johna also always provided options for students; for course assignments, students were allowed to complete them in different formats for example when asking students to present their work in Web 2.0 tools, students were given the freedom to select among VoiceThread, Glogster, Prezi, or Smore.

### **Our Reflection Shapes Our Change**

Through our opportunities to reflect in our journals and reading profiles we engaged in authentic discussions that helped us to reflect on ways to change our future instruction to better meet the needs of our students. Even though as we reflected we realized that some of our beliefs

were not always enacted, we ensured that we were aware of them and considered how we could integrate them into our future instruction.

In discussing her reflections of her Smore, Christy shared, “I began to “problematize” my literacy profile and to think about components that may be missing or experiences that I didn’t have that I may not value. Just because I didn’t have them, doesn’t mean they aren’t important. In other words, my students may have experiences that are different from mine, and I need to be more conscious of highlighting and valuing those too.” Christy also stated that the process of reflection was valuable because it helped her to remember, “there isn’t a hierarchy of literacy experiences, there isn’t a “norm,” especially not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and while I feel to a certain extent I have valued all experiences I know that I haven’t adequately taught my students (outside of the diverse literacies class I teach) how to value all experiences and examine the similarities and differences in their own.”

As critical friends we began to question ourselves and each other about the level in which we helped our students explore cultural perspectives and we recognized that while what we believed was important, we were not consistent in enacting these beliefs. We began to consider how we could make this approach more prevalent in our classes. Johna shared, “I wish I could find a way to help them (students) instantly see how their cultural identity impacts how they approach literacy instruction. However, it takes time. I do think with some assignments, it will be easy to help students begin to think about why they think the way they do--why they select certain materials over others.”

In her final journal, Ran also shared that she would, “give students more opportunities to reflect about themselves, share stories they know about literacy learning under different cultural backgrounds and update some assignments taking the cultural perspective into consideration.”

In addition, she also reflected on how the collaboration and discussion process of this self-study led her to think more intentionally about discussing her own culture and the culture of others with her students.

During this process of self and collaborative reflection, the authors became critical thinkers by being aware of the issues in their own teaching and the necessity to make changes. As dependable and trusted critical friends, they also shared feedback, offered suggestions, and discussed changes they sought to make. In one meeting, Johna talked about how she did not do much thinking about her own culture-which is not uncommon.

Being in the mainstream culture, who really bothers much to think about the cultural values one holds? This fact just made me think about the students that I am teaching. Most of them are white Americans. If they have never been a minority, how much can they know or feel about minority students' discomfort, challenges, feelings about being different, not being accepted, doubts about whether it is right or wrong to do that.. So the challenge on my part as the professor for those teachers is how can I help these teachers understand better or maybe just make them more aware of issues like that?

In Christy's final journal she similarly reflected on the importance of creating a focus on cultural identity with pre-service teachers.

I would like to teach in a way that encourages my students to examine their own identities, including their culture...I want them to think about how these identities may influence their instructional decisions... I want to provide opportunities for my students to explore the various types of literacy experiences that students have who may not look like them. How can we build communities of learning that value differences while increasing student engagement and learning?

Christy continued in her reflection of change as she considered how the current climate of America might impact discussions around identity.

I also want to begin to ask my students how the political, social and cultural contexts influence their ever-changing literacy identities and how these contexts might influence the identities of their students. For example, when we consider recent movements about race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. how can we use our literacy identities and experiences to create communities of equity, peace, acceptance and hope in our classrooms? How can we value the lived literacy identities of our students in the midst of these social cultural and political movements and show them the empowerment they can

gain from literacy? ... These conversations about my Smore helped me realize this is a missing piece. I don't acknowledge differences in my students enough. I don't ask them to examine the value of their differences enough and this is important in literacy learning.

This reflective process led to plans for changes in future teaching, with the authors discussing activities such as student self-reflections, identity maps, personal cultural research, etc. as changes that would more adequately address not only diversity in teacher education courses, but changes that could potentially help pre-service teachers' instructional practices in their K-12 classrooms with new strategies to authentically get to know their students and their experiences.

### **Discussion**

If we are to believe that “identities and reading and writing practices are linked” (Compton-Lilly, 2006), as educators, we must continue to examine our identities and the connection to our reading and writing practices, so we can improve our instructional practice to meet the needs of diverse students. In this study, we do this through our stories. With our stories we engage in examining ourselves and our identities through questions such as, how do we define literacy? What are our cultural experiences with literacy? How do our literacy experiences influence our instructional decisions? The responses to these questions shed light on our identities as we began to examine how our stories influenced our practices with pre-service teachers. Parr and Campbell (2011) assert, it is not enough to tell our stories, but we must also “problematize and deconstruct” these stories in order to “examine assumptions and misperceptions and move beyond a traditional, conventional view of literacy” (p. 344).

As participant researchers we began to do this by creating a visual and written story of our literacy experiences and identities through our Smores. However, creating this piece and sharing our story was just the beginning. As we shared our stories collectively, we critically posed questions to each other that forced us to consider the deeper meaning behind our stories.

Our Smores told of our literacy experiences and identities which at times involved learning with others, our struggles, our experiences in religious settings, our roles as educators, parents, etc. But our discussion of these stories required that we push our thinking further, that we deconstruct not only our own work, but the work of our peers through probing such as, “I didn’t really see where you talked about culture and where it influences you as a teacher educator. Have you thought about it, if so, what do you think about it?” (Christy). This type of probing forced us to consider not only the role of culture in our identities and in our instruction, but also our comfort level in discussing it, in recognizing the role it plays in our work and why it might be absent from our stories. This probing allowed us to consider the areas of beliefs that were not being enacted in our instruction. As previously noted, many of these areas related to beliefs about the importance of culture and diversity. We were able to see the importance of not only thinking about culture as important aspects of our classrooms, but to consider better ways to value culture in our classrooms and to embrace culture in our instructional practice.

Data from this study revealed that the changes we made in our teaching helped us to embrace our identities as we sought to understand and embrace the identities of our students. Christy reflected that learning about her identity helped to show her students how to explore their own identities and the identities of their students. She created a safe space in her classroom for students to explore their identities, which enabled students to share their past experiences comfortably. Many of her students talked about their learning experiences in the discussion forums and indicated that it was a wonderful opportunity for them to learn with and from each other, and to realize the differences that might exist among their future students. She also used literature to show her students different cultures and the experiences of students around various topics of equity and diversity. With the exposure to this literature, Christy asked her students to

discuss their reflections of diverse experiences and how to value these experiences and perspectives in future classrooms. These conversations allowed teachers to share their questions, concerns, and ideas for their future students.

Ran shared cultural related stories about her teaching and learning experience in both China and the United States. These stories resonated with some of the students who had experiences working with students coming from a different country. In a discussion forum on disciplinary literacy, Ran shared her experience of teaching math in the United States, using her foreign language. This special experience made her deeply understand and appreciate the efforts those immigrant students have to pay in order to learn all the subjects in schools with their foreign language. Inspired by this story, several of the students posted about their experiences tutoring or observing students who speak English as a second language in the discussion forum, and many more students posted responses. Students had very active discussions on this topic and became more culturally sensitive when considering working with their future students.

All the authors believed that sharing their literacy identities shape students' futures. Christy thought that the process of sharing stories helps students consider the role of their identities related to their instructional practices. Ran proved the point as she has showed and taught students more than just how to be a good literacy teacher. She believed that this process of sharing and learning with and from each other helped her students become more open-minded, culturally sensitive and have a deeper understanding and appreciation toward their future students. Johna further added that recognizing and sharing each other's stories help students realize that it is okay not to know everything because we can always learn from each other.

These critical discussions of our stories helped us realize who we were and who we wanted to be in our practice (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). It also helped us consider not only



how we define literacy, but how we share this definition with our students and how we help them to evaluate how they define literacy. In addition, within this self-study we were able to think about how our literacy experiences and identities may be quite different from the literacy experiences and identities of our students and while we valued literacy as a social process, access to texts, and choice we had to consider how to make these values broad enough for diverse student experiences to fit inside.

### **Conclusion**

In this self-study we realized that with similar experiences across the three of us, we shared similar values in terms of literacy instruction, beliefs and identities, but instead of focusing only on our own values, we needed to focus more on valuing the experiences of our students and helping them to consider how they might one day value the experiences of their students. As both teacher educators and pre-service teachers reflect on and analyze their own experiences with literacy, it helps them to consider the experiences they want to provide for their students.

When thinking about how this reflection process can take place with teacher educators and pre-service teachers, we recommend starting as the participants did in this study, with sharing stories. Stories can take the form of essays, journals, songs, poems, collages, etc. Stories can be presented using digital tools like Smore, Padlet, Voicethread, Prezi, and Glogster. As described in this study, conversations are important as well. These conversations can take the shape of meetings, partner interviews and questionnaires. During this reflection process it is important to consider topics such as reader identity, reader experiences, beliefs, instructional decisions, etc. As we found in this study, everyone's experiences may be different, but

understanding and valuing these experiences as part of our identities is a process that can bring these differences together in ways that enhance the learning of others.

With the enhanced understanding of literacy, identity and experience, we pondered the roles that we needed to play in different educational settings and how our students' beliefs and perceptions affected the dynamics of learning to teach and the establishment of their identities as teachers (Walkington, 2005). Teacher educators, whether they are university lecturers/tutors or mentoring teachers in the workplace, must seek to continually encourage the formation of teacher identity by facilitating pre-service teacher activity that empowers them to explicitly build upon and challenge their experiences and beliefs.

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