

# Student Voices: The Literacy Histories of Developmental Reading Students in a South Texas College

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*The purpose of this study was to develop a profile of the literacy histories of developmental reading students enrolled in a South Texas college. A literacy history questionnaire was used to collect written responses regarding the students' early literacy experiences prior to entering the college setting. Analysis of the written responses indicated that the students had a positive attitude towards reading during elementary school which declined as they moved into the upper grades. The positive aspect of the results is that the students did not have an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards reading, thus leaving their instructors with the opportunity of helping them develop a more positive attitude towards reading in general. Suggestions for classroom practice will be discussed.*

Every semester students enter our developmental reading program with expectations of improving their reading and study skills so they can achieve academic success in the reading intensive courses that await them. Yet we find in our classroom many students who are unmotivated and often reluctant to engage in their reading assignments, much less ready to apply the reading and study strategies covered in class. The question we ask ourselves each semester is “why?” Why are these students who tell us they want to improve their reading and study skills so unmotivated to achieve their expressed goals? The answer might lie in understanding the type of literacy experiences the students may have had prior to entering our developmental reading classrooms.

Often a set of scores from a standardized exam is the only information developmental reading instructors have about their students' reading backgrounds. The information gleaned from these scores tells us whether or not our students mastered a particular reading skill but provides no information regarding possible explanations for their reading deficiencies such as language barriers, learning disabilities, or overall attitude towards reading. Most of the research conducted on developmental reading students over the last twenty years has focused mainly on various strategies for improving reading comprehension and higher order thinking skills (Boylan, 2000; Taraban, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2000). However, research on the prior literacy experiences of developmental reading students and how these experiences affect their reading abilities or overall attitude towards reading in general is limited. Research studies conducted on lower grade level students have shown that the literacy experiences students have at home and at school play a major role in their future reading success (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Kuo, Franke, Regalado, & Halfon, 2004). If these experiences are positive, students will continue to engage in reading activities thus improving their reading skills, but if the experiences are negative, the more likely result will be disengagement with reading which could eventually lead to deficiencies in reading skills and the development of negative reading attitudes (Mathewson, 1994). Research indicates that developmental reading students lack motivation to read because of negative experiences with literacy prior to attending a college setting (Allgood, Risko, Alvarez, & Fairbanks, 2000). Therefore, if developmental reading students are entering our programs with negative literacy experiences, then listening to the students' own voices about those experiences can help developmental reading instructors design instructional approaches that can turn the students' negative experiences into positive ones and provide them with a better opportunity for achieving academic success.

#### **SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS**

A study on developmental reading students' literacy histories was

conducted at a South Texas university in the fall of 2005. A sample of 100 randomly selected developmental reading students was selected from the institution's developmental reading program to participate in the study. Information gathered from a demographic survey indicated that 97 students identified themselves as Hispanic, one identified himself as non-Hispanic, and two identified themselves as African-American or Black. With regard to language primarily spoken, 46 indicated speaking mostly Spanish, while 54 indicated speaking mostly English. Fifty-six of the participants were female and 44 were male.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A literacy history questionnaire created by Vogt and Shearer (2003) was used to collect written responses to thirteen prompts regarding their early literacy experiences at home and at school (see Appendix). The one-hundred participants completed the literacy history questionnaire during the eighth week of classes in the fall semester of 2005. Participants who were absent or who declined to participate in the study were randomly replaced using a random table of numbers until the desired sample number was achieved (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). Because the developmental reading program at the institution consists of computer-directed instruction (CDI) courses and instructor-based courses, all developmental reading instructors and CDI Reading Lab staff were provided with instructions for administering the questionnaire. The students were given one week to complete the questionnaire and return it to their instructor. The researcher collected completed questionnaires for data analysis.

Each of the participants' handwritten responses to the thirteen literacy history prompts were analyzed and then categorized according to similar key words and phrases as suggested by Bogdan and Bilken (1992). Only questions 2, 9, 10, and 13 will be discussed because they provide information directly related to whether or not the students had positive or negative literacy experiences at home and at school and how these experiences made them feel about

themselves as readers and writers. Some of the students' comments including grammatical and mechanical errors were quoted verbatim from their handwritten responses.

**QUESTION 2: WERE YOU READ TO AS A CHILD? IF YES, BY WHOM? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT BEING READ TO?**

Some students recalled being read to by various relatives such as their parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, or their teachers. Most of the experiences appeared to be enjoyable. Some students noted that their mothers read with enthusiasm and expressions, thus making the experience "interesting." One student recalled a reading experience with her mom: "I remember that she would tuck me in bed and then she would start getting into each character and she would act out the story with different voices." Some students recalled specific books that relatives read to them. For example, one student wrote about her brother reading to her at bedtime: "It was about the Beauty and the Beast. He read it to me in a way that I could imagine what he was talking about." Another student recalled his grandmother telling him stories outside on her porch: "I remember that we would both sit outside of the house in a little porch and she would start telling me about these Mexican stories. Sometimes those stories wouldn't let me sleep." Some students also recalled being read fairy tales and other stories in Spanish instead of English. Several students also recalled being read to by their teachers, which the students described as enjoyable or positive experiences. One student wrote, "I used to like the way my teachers used to read to me with expressions and all," and another noted that "it was fun."

Of the students in the sample who responded "no" to being read to as a child, a few elaborated on the circumstances as to why they were not read to. For example, one student wrote, "My parents would always work. My dad had a graveyard shift he worked 13 hours a day and when he got home he would sleep. My mom worked at a restaurant so we never had any reading done as a child." A couple of students simply indicated that no one ever read to them as children.

**QUESTION 9: *HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL? JUNIOR HIGH? HIGH SCHOOL?***

The general consensus of the students seemed to indicate that their feelings toward reading were more positive during elementary school than junior or high school. Most of the overall comments made by the students were “it was fun,” “I liked to read,” “I felt smart,” “I enjoyed it,” and “I liked it because of points.” Other comments made by the students also revealed their dislike for reading in elementary school because of reading problems or difficulty reading in English. For example, one student wrote, “In elementary reading was very hard. Kids would laugh at my accent.” Similarly, another student wrote, “I was inberset [embarrassed] because I didn’t read good.” A few of the others simply stated that they did not like to read at all, while a couple of others mentioned that they grew less and less interested in reading as they moved through the grade levels.

Most of the students’ responses about their feelings toward reading in junior high were negative. Some of their overall comments included, “It was difficult,” “It was boring,” “I wouldn’t or I didn’t read,” “I hated to read,” and “I read because I had to.” One student’s observation about reading in junior high school was, “It was not fun because you had to read out loud and the kids would make fun of you.” Some students did indicate that their feelings toward reading changed for the better upon entering junior high school. One student wrote, “I really didn’t like to read because I had problems reading but coming to junior high I start to like it a little more because I was getting the hang of it.” The students’ responses about how they felt about reading in high school were divided. Of those who did respond, a little more than half indicated that they did not like reading in high school. Some of their comments were “I didn’t like it,” “It was boring,” “I didn’t read any books,” “I didn’t feel anything,” and “It was difficult.” The other half of the students began to like reading again in high school. For example, one student wrote, “In high school I like that because reading takes you to another level,” while another student remarked that she began to like reading again because she was made to read.

**QUESTION 10: DID YOUR READING/WRITING ABILITY IMPACT YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT YOURSELF AS A PERSON? IF SO, HOW?**

Some of the students indicated that their literacy abilities did affect them positively in that they became better readers or writers. For example, one student noted, "Studying has gotten less difficult," while another remarked, "I increased my vocabulary and learned to write." A couple of students remarked that reading or writing did help them feel better about themselves. One student wrote, "Yes it did writing helped me by being able to write down the feelings I had inside of me and made me feel more relaxed and not depressed." Another student made an interesting remark about reading and her culture: "I believe that reading helps my speech and I like that. Although I am a Mexican-American I don't like having that accent many here have." Several students indicated that their literacy abilities did affect them but in a negative way. Some of the comments made by the students referred to their weaknesses in reading or writing. One student wrote, "I guess yes because made me feel inferior to those people that can express themselves so fluently on paper or that can read and understand what they read." The remaining students who responded about how their literacy abilities impacted their feelings simply wrote "no." Only one student remarked on whether her literacy abilities affected how she felt about herself as a person. She wrote, "No, because no matter your situation you should feel confident about yourself."

**QUESTION 13: ARE YOU A READER/WRITER NOW? IF SO, DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A READER; IF NOT, WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE THIS IS SO? WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING? WRITING?**

Most of the students who indicated they were readers or writers now referred to their academics. Many of the responses indicated they were reading or writing in their classes in one form or another. Several students remarked about the reading and writing done in their writing classes. Most of the students had to write essays or summaries in response to their readings.

A few students wrote about their recreational experiences with reading and writing. For example, one student stated that she liked reading because it “is a good way for to learn more about the places. If I don’t go to different places of the world, I can read about it and imagine the place.”

A few students described themselves as writers but in their native language. One student wrote, “I am a writer, but I write more in Spanish, because it is my first language. If I have to read or write in English I’m death, because I don’t have many vocabulary.”

Overall, most of the students who indicated they were not readers or writers remarked that they simply did not like to read or write, weren’t good at it, or weren’t interested in it. A couple of the students reflected about why they weren’t readers or writers and what they would do differently. For example, one student wrote:

“I am not a reader or writer. I suppose this is because no one in my family is. But I think that if I had someone in my childhood that had read to me at least for a bedtime story I would of probably think different or like reading. But I am really working on it because I have to, and wouldn’t like for my child to pass through the same difficulties that I did.”

## DISCUSSION

The results of the literacy history questionnaire indicated that participants’ early home and school experiences with literacy were enjoyable and interesting, and their views about reading were positive, but as they moved into middle school and high school, those experiences became less interesting and boring, and their views toward reading became less than positive. This finding is supported by prior research which stated that as children move through the grade levels their attitudes toward reading tend to decline (Anderson, Tollefson, & Gilbert, 1985; Dwyer & Joy, 1980; Fitzgibbons, 1997; Parker & Paradis, 1986; Smith, 1990). It is possible that students’ overall attitude towards reading is the result of years of reading passages in preparation for state-mandated tests. As the students begin testing in third grade, it is likely that their teachers

move away from providing the students with rich literacy experiences and move into the more formulaic reading practice passages in preparation for state-mandated tests (Harlen & Crick, 2003; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). The positive aspect of the results is that the students did not have an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards reading, thus leaving their instructors with the opportunity of helping them develop a more positive attitude towards reading in general.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE**

By using instruments such as the literacy history questionnaire, developmental reading instructors can obtain valuable insight into the literacy experiences their students had prior to entering their classrooms. The rich details gathered from this type of questionnaire can provide instructors with information as to how the students feel about reading and writing in general and can be used as a literacy foundation upon which to develop classroom activities that can enhance the reading and writing experiences of their students. For example, in an effort to promote the importance of literacy in our classrooms, we have our developmental reading students collect and donate children's books to a community-sponsored Halloween event, in which the books are given as Halloween treats to the children instead of candy. The students also get to participate in the event and hand out the books to the children. Other strategies for enhancing students' attitudes towards reading include having the instructor act as a role model by imparting his or her enthusiasm for reading to the students. Simply telling students that reading is important is not enough. The instructor should share books that he or she has been reading and conduct read-alouds with the students. "When students listen to a teacher read, they are receiving a message that reading is important" (Ecroyd, 1991, p. 77). Read-alouds are also beneficial to second language learners who need to hear models of what good reading sounds like and can also provide an opportunity for discussing vocabulary orally in class. Other activities we have used in the classroom include conducting book talks,

book projects and using literature circles. Students should also have opportunities to share what they have been reading with their classmates through these types of activities which allow students to share their reading interests and can provide them with choices in reading, thus enhancing the value they attach to the reading act. Developmental reading instructors should also incorporate cooperative learning activities, such as using literature circles, which allow students to share and discuss their readings with their classmates in a positive, collaborative and risk free environment, which is especially beneficial for the second language learners (Tyler, 1993).

## CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the literacy experiences of the developmental reading students played a major role in the development of their reading attitudes. As prior research had found, regardless of how positive these experiences were when the students were in elementary school, as they moved across the grade levels these attitudes tended to decline. In addition to enhancing our students' cognitive skills, we must also listen to our students' voices so we can create positive literacy experiences for them to incorporate into their personal lives, as well as their academic lives. Strategies for developing positive attitudes in developmental reading students must become an explicit part of the developmental reading curriculum if the goal is to improve their academic reading and study skills and to develop lifelong readers. As we learn more about the literacy experiences of our students, the opportunity to develop effective curriculum and programs that go beyond addressing the cognitive skills of the students will become apparent.

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