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## Shifting Beliefs About the Teaching of Reading: Teacher Candidates' Responses to *The Book Whisperer*

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## Shifting Beliefs About the Teaching of Reading: Teacher Candidates' Responses to *The Book Whisperer*

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### Abstract

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In this document analysis, the authors explored if and how Miller's (2009) *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* served as a symbolic model of a reading teacher who teaches her students not just the technical aspects of reading, but also how to enjoy reading. Drawing on social learning theory, the authors investigated how the selected text connected to elementary preservice teachers' personal reading experiences with reading and learning to read, their preexisting beliefs about teaching reading, and their current observations of reading instruction in field placements. Written reflections, which served as the data source for this study, confirmed that Miller's text served as an inspiration for change and as a positive model for these future teachers of reading. However, the preservice teachers' reflections uncovered a range of emotional experiences with reading, the vast majority proving to be quite negative, suggesting that they need to rediscover their own love of reading in order to authentically share and model this passion with their students.

**Keywords:** *case study, elementary preservice teachers, reading experiences, social learning theory, symbolic models, transforming reading instruction*

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Ogden (2020) reminds us that “reading is one of the most unnatural things we teach children to do” (p. 28). Learning to teach reading can feel just as unnatural. Future educators need knowledge of both reading development and language structure, including concepts such as phonological awareness, phonetics, morphology, and semantics (Hikida et al., 2019). It is critical that teacher candidates learn to teach for decoding, fluency, and comprehension, become familiar with a wide range of children's literature and be able to evaluate the sociopolitical context in which reading instruction occurs (Hikida et al., 2019). Not only is the sheer volume of knowledge and skills needed to teach reading daunting for many teacher candidates, but it frequently challenges their personal beliefs and experiences related to learning to read, creating yet another level of complexity. At the same time, teacher candidates' field experiences provide a front row seat to the culture of accountability and assessment that has come to characterize reading instruction in far too many schools. Presented with mandated, scripted, and standardized curricula that conflict with the research-based practices learned in their

university courses, teacher candidates struggle to balance these competing paradigms and understand their role as future reading teachers.

Together, the academic demands of learning to teach reading, the strength of preexisting beliefs about reading, and the intense pressure in schools to implement instruction aligned with high-stakes reading assessments often compel teacher candidates to focus on the technical aspects of reading instruction and assessment. Helping students develop the ability to read remains front and center, while the equally important goal of helping students experience the joy of reading and to become lifelong readers is little more than an afterthought. Our experiences as teacher educators suggests that the importance of modeling a love of reading can be lost amid all the other demands teacher candidates face as they learn to teach reading and as they observe practicing classroom teachers in their field placements. A singular focus on mechanics of teaching in reading may, in part, be a result of many teacher candidates' negative experiences with reading. Vansteelandt et al. (2022), for example, found that approximately one fourth of teacher candidates have a negative attitude toward reading as they enter the teaching profession. This dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that few teacher candidates have experienced or observed reading instruction in their field placements that attends to the development of both students' ability to read and their enjoyment of reading. Without models and experiences in classrooms that disrupt notions of reading instruction as solely skill based, it is difficult for teacher candidates to imagine how inspiring a love of reading should and can be part of, if not the heart of, their practice.

In this document analysis, we explore whether symbolic models found in literature can serve in this capacity. We used Miller's (2009) *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* to provide teacher candidates enrolled in an elementary language arts methods course with a model of a reading teacher who teaches her students how to read and how to enjoy reading. In this book, Miller recounts her personal classroom experiences as a reading teacher and shares the emotional journey of learning how to teach young adolescents the joy of reading. She takes the audience, teachers, on a detailed field trip into her sixth-grade classroom and, through vulnerable anecdotes, describes her triumphs and tribulations as a classroom teacher, leaving the reader motivated and inspired to reflect on and transform their own practices of reading instruction. The specific research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How do teacher candidates respond to the portrait of a reading teacher who loves reading as modeled in Miller's text?
  - a. How does Miller's text prompt teacher candidates to reflect on their personal experiences with reading instruction?
  - b. How does Miller's text prompt teacher candidates to reflect on their preexisting beliefs about teaching reading?

This study is informed by Bandura's (1977) conceptualization of social learning theory and the importance of modeling vicarious reinforcement. Research on teacher candidates' reading habits, the role of their own school-based reading experiences in their development as readers, and how a teacher's love of reading can impact their students' reading practices frame the study.

### Conceptual Framework

Social learning theory posits that individuals learn best by watching others. More specifically, by observing others we not only learn how to enact specific behaviors, we also learn about the potential consequences of enacting the same behaviors in our own lives (Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992). Modeling behaviors and skills becomes the primary mode of instruction. The primary purpose of modeling is to convey information about specific behaviors enabling the learner to conceptualize and enact this behavior. Bandura (1977) identified three types of models: live models, which involve someone demonstrating the behavior; verbal models, or explanations and descriptions of the behavior; and symbolic models, which include a real or fictional person in a book, film, or other form of media displaying the behavior. Unlike an operant conditioning approach to observational learning, social learning theory suggests that observers do not need to immediately perform the behavior modeled in order to learn it; rather, they learn the behavior before they perform it themselves. Observational learning can be particularly effective when the desired behavior is complex, is difficult to describe, and/or requires addressing specific obstacles or challenges (Bandura, 1977; Grusec, 1992).

Bandura (1977) identified four processes as fundamental to observational learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and reinforcement. A learner must attend to the essential components of the observed behavior, and this level of attention is enhanced by the functional value of the behavior being observed. In other words, if the learner perceives the observed behavior as something they can successfully employ to meet their own goals, their attention will be focused and consistent. Retaining what has been learned requires learners to code modeled activities into both visual and verbal representations. Reproducing the modeled behavior is informed by whether the learner anticipates that doing so will produce positive consequences.

According to Bandura (1977), witnessing the rewards or punishments others receive alters the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the observer. This vicarious reinforcement conveys information about whether a particular action or behavior will meet with approval or disapproval, which helps the learner determine if their environment provides the right context to enact the behavior as it has been modeled and to experience feelings similar to the emotional reactions exhibited by the model being observed.

Though there is extensive literature promoting the use of live models in teacher preparation programs, few, if any, studies have examined the potential for symbolic models to contribute to teacher candidates' pedagogical skill development (e.g., Hogg & Yates, 2013; Jay, 2002). For example, research on the use of symbolic models in an educational context has explored topics such as how the use of children's literature can promote the development of social skills among young children or how watching videos demonstrating children self-regulating their emotions can reduce bullying (Jamal & Astuti, 2020; Judge & Morgan, 2020).

Drawing on the principles of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we investigate if symbolic models like those found in literature can help teacher candidates reimagine reading instruction to reflect the joy of reading, as opposed to mere skill or strategy acquisition. We utilize Miller's (2009) *The Book Whisperer* as the symbolic model. In this text, Miller clearly illustrates how she made a path through state and

district mandates as well as student resistance and hesitation. Throughout the text she describes how she created a classroom with student interest, choice, and voice at the center by using specific examples and anecdotes. Miller not only models effective, research-based strategies that support the development of her students' skills as readers, she also models how to support and ignite students' enjoyment of reading.

### **Review of Research on Teachers, Teacher Candidates, and Reading**

In this section, we provide an overview of past and current research on the importance of teachers modeling a love of reading for their students, teacher candidates' habits and perspectives toward reading, and teacher candidates' school-based experiences with reading.

### **Modeling a Love of Reading**

Teachers who model specific reading strategies and who read alongside their students can have a significant impact on the development of students' reading abilities (Allington, 2002; Calkins, 1994; Kaufman, 2002; Morrison et al., 1999; Whyte et al., 2007; Wray et al., 2000). However, as Gambrell (1996) suggests, learning how to read does not necessarily guarantee that students will read or that they will experience reading as an enjoyable, worthwhile pursuit.

Just over four decades ago, Irving (1980) argued that “the role of teachers in stimulating voluntary reading among children and young people is *potentially the most powerful of all adult influences*” (p. 7, emphasis added). Modeling enjoyment of reading has been shown to positively impact children's perceptions of the pleasures of reading. More specifically, teachers who share their love of reading with their students can facilitate increased engagement and enjoyment of reading (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Cremin et al., 2009; Harvan, 2020; Morrison et al., 1999). For example, Harvan (2020) recounted how she purposefully shared her reading life with her first-grade students and, in doing so, encouraged them to do the same. She created a “Reading Display” in her classroom where she shared books she had recently finished reading, books she was currently reading, and books that were next on her list. Following their teacher's lead, Harvan's students began to set goals for themselves as readers and engaged in discussions with peers about the books they were reading.

Cremin et al.'s (2009) research exemplifies how a teacher's love of reading can inspire even the most resistant students. Teachers who shared their reading lives with students had a “marked impact on their reluctant readers” (p. 17). These formerly reluctant readers “became drawn in and wanted to read, alone and with their friends, and to talk about books” (p. 15). Students developed “positive reading mindsets,” and reading for pleasure was “recognized as a valuable activity in its own right” (p. 18).

If the ultimate goal of reading instruction is not simply to help students acquire the ability to read but also to develop a lifelong engagement with reading, it is unclear if a teacher who does not love to read can help their students discover the joy of reading (Powell-Brown, 2004). Referring to this disconnect as the “Peter Effect,” Applegate and Applegate (2004) argue that it will be difficult—if not impossible—for a teacher who is unenthusiastic about reading to convey enthusiasm or to foster enthusiasm for reading among their students. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that this dynamic is more prevalent than we may think.

## Reading Habits of Teacher Candidates

Given the positive impact a teacher's love of reading can have on whether students will develop a similar passion, the reading habits of teachers and teacher candidates have been scrutinized for decades. Since the 1970s educational researchers have documented teachers' and teacher candidates' reading habits and their attitudes toward reading using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014; Beane, 1997; Benevides & Peterson, 2011; Brooks, 2007; Burgess et al., 2011; Commeyras et al., 2003; Huang, 2017; McKool & Gespass, 2009; Mour, 1977; Mueller, 1973; Muñoz & Valenzuela, 2020; Nathanson et al., 2008; Rimensberger, 2014). Though the reading habits and practices of teachers and teacher candidates are wide ranging, there is a consistent and troubling pattern of disengagement among a substantial percentage of teachers and teacher candidates evident in the data collected over the last five decades. We highlight some of the more recent studies that focus specifically on teacher candidates to provide greater detail and context.

Applegate and Applegate's (2004) study titled "The Peter Effect" analyzed the reading habits of 379 elementary teacher candidates at two universities. Using data collected from a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions, the researchers developed profiles for enthusiastic and unenthusiastic readers. Enthusiastic readers expressed positive attitudes toward reading, voluntarily read a number of books over the summer, and explicitly noted that they enjoyed reading. Unenthusiastic readers expressed negative attitudes toward reading and completed little or no summer reading. Fifty-one percent of the teacher candidates in Applegate and Applegate's study were characterized as unenthusiastic readers. A decade after publishing "The Peter Effect," Applegate et al. (2014) completed a follow-up study on college students' reading habits that included 398 teacher candidates. Though a slightly lower percentage (49%) of teacher candidates were characterized as unenthusiastic readers, it appears that little had changed since their original study in 2004.

Similar results have been replicated by other scholars. Rimensberger (2014), for example, utilized two separate surveys to collect data about the reading habits of teacher candidates in South Africa. A Likert-scale survey was used to collect data on how much time teacher candidates read during a typical week and their beliefs about reading. Another survey with open-ended questions was used to gather information about the types of texts teacher candidates read as well as how they described the role of reading in their lives. While a majority of teacher candidates in Rimensberger's study indicated that reading is important, their reading habits told a different story. Only 16% of participants characterized themselves as enthusiastic readers. Participants in Rimensberger's study described reading as "useful" and something to do because it "improves your vocabulary, your style of writing and also advances your grammatical style of writing" (p. 5). This utilitarian mindset is far removed from the passionate engagement with books typical of enthusiastic readers.

Huang's (2017) analysis of teacher candidates' engagement with academic and recreational reading documents the limited time teacher candidates devote to reading in a week. Huang surveyed 395 teacher candidates and interviewed a subgroup of 45 teacher candidates who were enrolled in reading courses. Of the 395 participants surveyed, just over 25% had not completed any academic reading and 47% had not done recreational reading during the week. Approximately 39% of the survey respon-

dents indicated they devoted 1 to 4 hours of their time to academic reading, and only 20% indicated they spent a similar amount of time engaged in recreational reading. Of particular interest in Huang's findings is the strategies teacher candidates used to avoid reading. The 45 participants who completed interviews were concurrently enrolled in a reading course and were assigned a reading project designed to help them expand and deepen their knowledge of children's literature. Over the course of the semester, teacher candidates were to read 65 children's books and to keep a record of the books read. Interview data revealed that many teacher candidates simply listed books they had read in the past or remembered from their own childhood. In some instances, they reread a text that they were already familiar with, and few used this as an opportunity to develop their knowledge of current children's literature.

Regrettably, as this research makes clear, far too many teacher candidates do not enjoy reading. Applegate et al. (2014) noted that this negative attitude gives rise to an "alarming scenario" of a "recurring cycle of teaching producing large numbers of uninspired students, many of whom go on to become teachers who struggle to ignite in their students a love of reading that they have never experienced" (p. 190). The explanatory power of this troubling dynamic becomes clear when researchers turn their attention to teacher candidates' school-based experiences with reading.

### **Teacher Candidates' School-Based Experiences With Reading**

Connections between teacher candidates' personal experiences with reading and their current beliefs and attitudes toward reading are well documented. Using autobiographical storytelling, surveys, and focus groups, literacy scholars have identified specific school-based experiences with reading that both positively and negatively impact teacher candidates' beliefs about reading and their current reading habits (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014; Asselin, 2000; Granado & Puig, 2015; MacPhee & Sanden, 2016; Nathanson et al., 2008). Teacher candidates identified as enthusiastic readers by Applegate et al. (2014), for example, recalled their teachers reading aloud and allowing students to choose what they would read. Nathanson et al. (2008), MacPhee and Sanden (2016), and Granado and Puig (2015) described similar findings highlighting the importance of student autonomy to create positive experiences with reading in school. MacPhee and Sanden also noted that teacher candidates identified as enthusiastic readers recall teachers purposefully and explicitly recognizing their strengths and creating a low-risk environment. However, it was a teacher's enthusiasm and love of reading that participants identified over and over again as instrumental in their own development as readers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014; Asselin, 2000; Granado & Puig, 2015; MacPhee & Sanden, 2016; Nathanson et al., 2008). As Applegate et al. suggested, a "teacher's love of reading puts a great many young readers at a significant advantage" (p. 195).

Teacher candidates' school-based experiences with reading have also negatively impacted their beliefs about reading and their personal reading habits. Among the practices identified as negative were those that focused exclusively on mechanical reading skills, overemphasized assessment of reading ability, and restricted personal choice in terms of what students read (Asselin, 2000; Granado & Puig, 2015; Huang, 2017; MacPhee & Sanden, 2016; Sulentic-Dowell et al., 2006). For many of the teacher candidates in Granado and Puig's (2015) study, school reading was characterized by a lack of personal control or choice as well as routine practice focused solely on skill develop-

ment. Sixty-five percent of the teacher candidates in that study described their reading experiences as negative, and among those who identified as nonreaders, few could identify a teacher who demonstrated and shared a passion for reading. Nathanson et al. (2008) found similar patterns among the teacher candidates identified as unenthusiastic readers in their study. School-based reading experiences focused almost exclusively on fundamental skills, and personal choice of book selections was restricted; teacher candidates in Nathanson et al.'s study who identified as unenthusiastic readers could not name a single teacher who had shared a love of reading with them. Other teacher candidates have pointed to reading dull books, doing book reports, and "being taught by teachers who did not make reading interesting" (Applegate & Applegate, 2004, p. 560) as the early reading experiences that diminished their enjoyment of reading and their desire to read. Findings from MacPhee and Sanden (2016) echo those of previous studies while also drawing particular attention to an overemphasis on evaluation tied to programs like Accelerated Reader as a factor negatively impacting teacher candidates' school-based experiences with reading.

After extensively reviewing the literature, it is clear that many teacher candidates need to see models of teachers who share their love of reading with students in real classrooms. For the present study, the classroom, or symbolic model, selected was Donalyn Miller's (2009) language arts classroom, as viewed through *The Book Whisperer*. While the participants in the study were elementary education majors, Miller's approaches and strategies to spreading the joy of reading in her middle school classroom transfer nicely to K–5 settings.

### Methods

This qualitative study was based on a document analysis (Merriam, 1998) from an elementary language arts (ELA) methods course. The first author taught the methods course, and as part of the methods course teacher candidates read and reflected on Miller's (2009) *The Book Whisperer*. We analyzed participants' final reflection paper to investigate how they responded to a model of a reading teacher. The first author taught two sections of the course, and both sections were included in the study.

### Context

Students enrolled in this course were enrolled in a midsized, rural university located in the southeastern United States. The ELA methods course met twice a week for a total of 16 weeks. As part of the course requirements, students engaged in weekly written reflections and in-class book talks about Miller's text facilitated by the first author. Throughout the semester, students were to read assigned chapters; choose quotes, sections, or moments of the text that stood out to them; and write reflections to be discussed in class. At the end of the semester, the students wrote and submitted a final reflection about *The Book Whisperer*; these final reflections served as the data source for this study.

In *The Book Whisperer*, Miller (2009) describes a number of innovative practices she used to both model a love of reading for her students and help them develop their own passion for the written word. Practices like providing students with choices, tossing out whole-class novel studies, and making individualized book recommendations to students are thoroughly and thoughtfully described in the text. These practices became a focal point for in-class activities and discussions in the methods course, and

those in-depth conversations served as the foundation for the students' final written reflection.

## **Participants**

Students enrolled in both sections of the course were invited to participate in the study after the semester concluded. Of the 40 students invited to participate, 27 responded and gave consent. Among the 27 participants there were 18 White females, 7 Black females, 1 Hispanic female, and 1 White male. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old. These demographics are reflective of the elementary education program at our university, which comprises approximately 250 students. The students enrolled in the course were in the second semester of their junior year and had been accepted into the teacher education program at the university; the students' program of study leads them to certification in grades PreK–5 and a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Prior to enrolling in the ELA methods course, the students engaged in two field experiences; one field placement consisted of 50 hours in a K–5 classroom, and the other consisted of 30 hours in a different K–5 classroom. While enrolled in the course, participants engaged in 150 hours in a third field placement, the majority of which reflected classrooms that conduct ELA instruction and assessment.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The single data source for this study were the participants' final written reflections about *The Book Whisperer*. Throughout the semester, in-depth class discussions were held in both small-group and whole-group settings regarding Miller's innovative practices; common topics addressed were freedom of book choice, giving students book recommendations, modeling a love of reading for students, variations of reading instruction and assessments observed in field placements, and mandated district-wide reading programs. At the conclusion of the semester, students were given the following written prompt:

How did this book inspire you as a teacher of reading? Use specific points from the book and consider several ideas. What connections did you make to your classroom experiences both as an elementary student and now as a college student?

In class, the students were verbally directed to reflect on their own personal experiences with reading and learning to read as well as their previous and current field placement experiences in K–5 classrooms; it was expected that these conversations throughout the semester would inspire their thoughts for their final written reflection at the end of the semester. They were encouraged to be candid in their reflections, share their feelings about the book and their experiences, and consider how their personal experiences would inform their own future classroom practices as a teacher of reading. After students submitted their final reflection, the first author made copies of the students' reflections, and participants' names were anonymized by a graduate assistant.

The method of data analysis used in this study was document analysis (Merriam, 1998). Holistic coding was used to analyze participants' final reflection papers. Saldana (2016) explained that holistic coding is useful when trying to identify basic issues "as a whole" rather than line by line coding (p. 166). We both independently read through the entire data set, identifying segments of participants' written reflections

aligned with the research questions and creating initial codes. Initial coding included sorting the data into positive and negative experiences with reading.

Positive experiences included codes such as LTR (love to read), RTH (read to at home), LT (library trips), BC (book choice), and negative experiences included codes such as HR (hate reading), AR (Accelerated Reader), FTR (forced to read), and CN (class novels). We met to share our initial codes with each other, narrow down the list of codes, and complete a second cycle of coding. Second-cycle coding was used to produce our four main themes, as listed in the following section.

### Findings

Our findings suggest that symbolic models, like the one presented in *The Book Whisperer*, can effectively convey information about specific instructional approaches and enable teacher candidates to use this information to reimagine reading instruction. Miller's (2009) text presented each teacher candidate with a model that disrupts notions of reading instruction as solely skill based. As they read the text, teacher candidates compared their personal experiences with reading in school and their recent classroom-based observations to Miller's practices. They also began to articulate how the model of a reading teacher who teaches students not only how to read but how to enjoy reading would inform their future practice. All of the participants' written reflections confirmed that Miller's text served as an inspiration and model for them as future teachers of reading; this could be because the book was indeed inspirational, or this could stem from the wording of the prompt that asked them to address "how the book inspired you." However, their reflections also uncovered a range of emotional experiences with reading, the majority (83%) proving to be quite negative and suggesting a need to rediscover their own love of reading in order to authentically share and model this passion with their students. To share our findings, we use direct quotations from the teacher candidates' reflections. The following four overarching themes were identified: (1) UGH! The way I was taught to read was torture!; (2) My teacher made me fall in love with reading: Glimmers of hope; (3) Wait! Teachers are STILL teaching students to read the way I learned?; (4) I'm inspired: I get to be the change, and I don't have to be perfect to do it!

#### **UGH! The way I was taught to read was torture!**

Teacher candidates' written reflections demonstrate that their experiences learning to read were overwhelmingly negative. Of the 27 participants, 23 offered reflections that pointed to limited, if any, opportunities to choose what they would read as a major cause of their dislike and, in some instances, their pure hatred of reading. As one participant noted, "My teachers made us read novels they chose or we'd read certain books because they were 'classics.' lame. What a waste of my time." Disdain for being "forced to read" texts they had no role in choosing was a common theme present in just over half of the teacher candidates' reflections. One teacher candidate noted, "In my own personal experiences, I have grown to dislike reading simply because I was constantly told what to read, when to read, and how to read it."

Closely tied to this lack of choice was an overemphasis on testing and activities that tied reading to evaluation and assessment instead of enjoyment. Of the 27 participants, 15 lamented the often boring and countless activities that accompanied any novel they read as a class. One suggested that the common practice of requiring students to

read only a certain portion of a novel in order to make sure the whole class was on the same page “caused so much of a distraction that I wasn’t able to actually get lost in the book.”

The Accelerated Reader (AR) program was cited by 48% of the teacher candidates as a major contributor to their dislike of reading. AR is a computer-based program that allows teachers to monitor students’ independent reading, and, using the Lexile Framework for reading, a student’s reading level is determined. After reading an AR book on their level, students complete a short quiz on the AR platform that assesses their comprehension through multiple-choice questions. Teacher candidates often connected their dislike of reading to reward and punishment systems put in place with the AR program. One teacher candidate described her experience:

I remember AR being terrible in elementary school. As a student, I never enjoyed reading because I was too worried about having enough AR points to go to the reward party. I struggled with reading so I had to sit in the classroom and read most of the time while other students got to go to the pizza parties. It was heartbreaking as a third grader and made me hate reading even more.

Across all 27 reflections, we found 81% of the participants shared negative K–12 experiences connected with tests or tasks to complete after reading books. Of this 81%, almost three-fourths, 73%, specifically made associations with the AR program, including being “forced” to take tests to earn points for rewards and celebrations, being restricted to text choices, popcorn reading whole-class novels, writing book reports, and cheating the system by reading shorter, easier books. All of these experiences contributed to the teacher candidates’ “hatred” for reading. One participant shared a college experience suggesting that the reading practices she had developed as a response to AR continued long after she matriculated from the program:

As a college student, I’ll admit that I didn’t read a single book for my English 1102 course, yet I still managed to get an A in the class. This is because throughout school, myself and my peers have been conditioned to take tests and we have learned how to ace these reading comprehension tests by doing the bare minimum.

However, as we explore below, not all of the students expressed a negative attitude towards reading. The data revealed that 15% of the teacher candidates had positive experiences with reading.

### **My teacher made me fall in love with reading: Glimmers of hope**

While almost 85% of the participants expressed their dislike of reading, four teacher candidates noted how much they loved to read. When these positive experiences were described, they were often connected with a certain person or place. For example, one teacher candidate connected her love of reading to her high school Advanced Placement language arts class. Every day they were able to read freely for 15 minutes, and her teacher read along with them. She shared her appreciation of this free reading time: “Those 15 minutes quickly became my favorite part of the school day and I read more that semester than I had during the three 3 prior.” Two other teacher candidates who professed a love of reading pointed to the freedom to choose as pivotal in the development of their reading habits. One of these teacher candidates

shared, “In middle school I was given the most freedom with reading. I explored different types of literature and fell in love with Jane Austen and Steinbeck.”

Other positive experiences were tied to memories of being read to at a young age and trips to the library with parents and grandparents. In some cases, a teacher candidate’s discovery of a specific book sparked a love of reading. This type of experience is reflected in the story of a teacher candidate who discovered “the most beautiful book” on a routine trip to the library:

I remember when I was in first grade, I went to the library with my class and I saw what I thought at the time was the most beautiful book I had ever seen. The only thing was, it was a level U-ish book Princess Diana biography, that didn’t matter to me though, this was the book I wanted because there was a beautiful princess and pretty dresses. I took this book home and I looked at the pictures and found my sight words. I checked out the biography many times during my years in elementary school and every time I checked it out I was able to read more words, find more words, and learn more about the pictures.

Memories and experiences like these were unfortunately rare among the teacher candidates in our study. There is a stark contrast between experiences that fostered a love of reading and those that did exactly the opposite. Overwhelmingly, it was school-based experiences with activities such as popcorn reading and whole-class novels, as well as programs such as Accelerated Reader, that teacher candidates identified as having a negative impact on their engagement with reading. As they reflected on their own experiences learning to read in light of what they learned from *The Book Whisperer*, teacher candidates also made connections to what they were observing in their field placements. Miller’s model of a reading teacher who offered choice and motivation to read through high expectations raised questions and concerns about the practices they observed in local elementary classrooms in their field placements.

### **Wait! Teachers are STILL teaching students to read the way I learned?**

Almost two thirds of teacher candidates, 63%, noted that the majority of the instructional practices they observed in their current field placements mirrored their own experiences with school-based reading. These practices included an overemphasis on assessment tied to reading, an intense focus on reading levels, and a lack of student choice. In the words of one participant:

In my placement, I see reading but I do not see readers. Reading is used as a punishment for the students or as a classroom management system. Meaning, if students do not reach an AR goal, they lose their recess and have to stay inside to read their book. With classroom management, the teacher tells students if they do not get quiet, they’ll stop what they’re doing, and everyone will read AR.

Another teacher candidate explained that students were required to choose books on their Lexile level and to take AR tests on every book they checked out from the media center. Not only were students required to take a test for every book read, but they were also required to score an 80% or “they must test again and again and again until they pass.” This teacher candidate noted that the results of this approach only limited students and caused them to fall further behind.

Forty-four percent of participants indicated that iReady, an online computer-based reading program, was also a part of reading instruction in their practicum classrooms. One participant reflected on the way her students tried to avoid reading from computer screens because they “just wanted to read a real book.” Closely tied to the prevalence of computer-based reading programs in elementary classrooms, teacher candidates also identified an intense focus on reading level as commonplace in the classrooms they visited. Of the eight participants who specifically identified the use of AR or iReady as part of reading instruction in their classrooms, six noted that students “hate” the way reading levels restrict their ability to choose what they can read. One teacher candidate described this disconnect: “In placement, students would get a book and it had to be on their Lexile level.... They would hate what they were reading, and they always felt confined to that one section of books.”

Over half of the teacher candidates reported the frequent use of ineffective or “boring” reading strategies like popcorn reading and whole-class novels. One teacher candidate commented, “I saw it everyday—popcorn reading.... Students were not paying any attention because they were too worried about what part they would be reading and if they were going to mess up.” In addition to popcorn reading, six teacher candidates observed students listening to audiobooks without teacher guidance or engagement. In one instance, a teacher hit “play on the SMART Board and let the electronic voice read the story while students followed along. Meanwhile, she was at her desk either on her computer or grading papers.” Students in this particular class would repeatedly fail their reading tests on Fridays then lose recess as punishment. The teacher candidate assigned to this classroom added, “I was confused at the time as to why my teacher continued to do the same thing every week when it seemed like her students were never improving. It made me so upset.”

It is evident in the teacher candidates’ reflections that many were disheartened, and at times even angry or frustrated, with what they observed in their classroom placements. One teacher candidate described her experience:

Throughout my placement this semester, it has been sad to see how my teacher is with her children when it comes to reading. She does not allow them to read in the classroom. She only allows them to take their tests. If they get the wrong level book, they get yelled at and then forced to read it again before they can take it back to the library. Not allowing them to read just kills their spirits and it discourages them, which is heartbreaking.

The teacher candidates also reflected on their initial assumptions about teaching reading and their dismay over the instructional practices they observed and the impact of these approaches to reading on students’ engagement and attitude toward reading. One teacher candidate noted that getting her students to read is “like pulling teeth” and attributed that to her classroom teacher just “giving up” on the students.

While most teacher candidates’ field experiences echoed those described above, there were a few bright spots. One teacher candidate described a student who was given a choice in what he read and how that resulted in the student actually enjoying reading, even though he struggled and his reading was slow. This particular teacher candidate saw the importance of reading to comprehend but also recognized the importance of choice in fostering the development of students’ reading skills and their enjoy-

ment of reading. Another teacher candidate commented, “Teachers now are following the model of *The Book Whisperer* more and more; I see teachers highly familiar with books and directing their focus on readers and how to keep them interested in reading.”

While this example highlights a bright spot on the landscape of reading instruction in local elementary schools, the majority of teacher candidates’ experiences did not reflect the model of reading instruction presented in *The Book Whisperer*. Yet they were not deterred in their admiration of Miller and her approach to teaching reading, as all teacher candidates were inspired to emulate Miller’s practices and hoped to disrupt teaching and assessment practices that had undermined their own enjoyment of reading.

### **I’m inspired: I get to be the change, and I don’t have to be perfect to do it!**

In every reflection read and analyzed, teacher candidates described how they were inspired by *The Book Whisperer*. One teacher candidate described the book as “a phenomenal read. It made me feel like anything is possible and made me really believe in myself as a teacher.” This same teacher candidate concluded, “This book belongs on EVERY teacher’s bookshelf.” Another teacher candidate noted that her initial beliefs and vision for reading instruction were predominantly teacher centered. Describing her prior beliefs, she noted that she had thought that reading instruction was going to be “me, the teacher, drilling students with things they should be reading and having them take tests at the end of the book. Boy, was I wrong.”

Teacher candidates also shared that they were surprised by *The Book Whisperer*. As one noted, it wasn’t just “another book to read to pass a class.... It was a book I found myself completely engrossed in after the first chapter.” *The Book Whisperer* also encouraged the teacher candidates who were questioning their career path. One noted, “Many times I feel doubtful that I have not chosen the field I am meant to be in, but this book has been a catalyst for a lot of things I want to do in my classroom.” She continued by saying that she wants to be the teacher to “turn the kid that hates reading into the kid that can’t put a book down.”

The teacher candidates not only were inspired to embrace an alternative approach to reading instruction, but also had reignited their own love of reading. They wanted to become someone who loves to read and who shares that passion with students so “they can have a better story” than they did. Over half of the teacher candidates included in our study noted their personal goal was to read more and to rekindle their love for reading. Recognizing that without modeling a passion for reading it will be difficult to inspire their own students to read, the teacher candidates’ view of reading changed. This sentiment is reflected in one teacher candidate’s exclamation: “It inspired me as a ‘hater of reading’ to WANT to read.” Another teacher candidate stated:

This book has saved me, and it has made me reconnect with reading and has made me open my eyes up to all the new possibilities of teaching reading and how enjoyable it can be. I want to thank you, Dr. Crawford, for having us read this book because without it I would hate reading and would be a terrible reading teacher.

Teacher candidates were also inspired pedagogically. They frequently described their intent to interrupt how reading instruction and assessment are typically

approached in schools. Similarly, they expressed a desire to avoid programs like AR and to refrain from using this or similar programs as a means of punishment. Teacher candidates recognized the limitations of programs like AR and iReady. As one teacher candidate noted:

I've noticed when one of the struggling readers in class messes up her first attempts at reading, she is able to correct herself with a little help after an adult sits beside her. Computers can't do that. Computers can't provide the human interaction and scaffolding that students need and deserve, but when I have my own classroom, I get to do that for my own students!

The majority of teacher candidates also noted the importance of giving their future students a choice in what they read. They wanted to allow students' interests, rather than reading levels, to drive their choices so "we don't suck the fun out of reading." A couple of teacher candidates defined choice as the "heart of a reading classroom." They also understood that giving their future students choice would lead to enjoyment in reading.

Finally, four of the teacher candidates reflected more broadly and recognized that "our current system is broken." They expressed their frustrations with the system by making statements such as this:

After being a part of this class and reading *The Book Whisperer*, I am more angry than anything. I can now see how things could be so much better in schools, and I plan to make a difference in so many children.

Teacher candidates realized that they have the power to make changes in the context of their future classrooms and that these changes can have a broader impact. As one teacher candidate stated, "I have the potential to help children love to read and those children have the potential to ...pass on these characteristics to future generations."

### **Discussion and Implications for Future Research**

Modeling is a foundational pedagogical tool in teacher education (e.g., Korthagen & Vasslos, 2005; Tondeur et al., 2012). Drawing upon the principles of social learning theory, we frequently model instructional strategies, community-building, and a passion for teaching in our classes. In her Language Methods course, the first author also modeled a love of reading. However, the absence of an elementary classroom-based teacher, their assigned classroom teacher in placement, modeling similar practices prompted teacher candidates to remain hyper-focused on the technical aspects of teaching reading (phonics, comprehension strategies, vocabulary, etc.).

The first author selected *The Book Whisperer*, a text she had turned to as a young struggling elementary teacher, to read with teacher candidates and to determine the effectiveness of using a symbolic model as an additional pedagogical tool. This initial study demonstrates that symbolic models can be powerful teaching tools and teacher educators should consider how the use of symbolic models can contribute to teacher candidates' growth and development. Reading *The Book Whisperer* prompted teacher candidates to reflect on their personal experiences with reading instruction and to critique these experiences. Our research builds on previous studies of teacher candi-

dates' reading habits, beliefs about reading, and their school-based reading experiences (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014; Beane, 1997; Benevides & Peterson, 2011; Burgess et al., 2011; Commeyras et al., 2003; Huang, 2017; McKool & Gespass, 2009; Mour, 1977; Mueller, 1973; Muñoz & Valenzuela, 2020; Nathanson et al., 2008; Rimensberger, 2014). Teacher candidates in our study pointed to limited opportunities to choose what they would read as negatively impacting their engagement with reading. This finding is aligned with earlier studies that identified limited choice as a common feature of reading instruction negatively impacting teacher candidates' experiences with reading (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014; Asselin, 2000; Granado & Puig, 2015; MacPhee & Sanden, 2016; Nathanson et al., 2008). While existing research also notes an overemphasis on evaluation of reading skill as another common element of future educators' experiences with reading instruction, only one study identified reading programs like AR as a factor in teacher candidates' negative school-based experiences with reading (MacPhee & Sanden, 2016). Our participants repeatedly pointed to programs like AR as having a negative long-term impact on their engagement and enjoyment of reading.

At the same time, the model of a reading teacher who teaches students how to read and to enjoy reading provided by Miller disrupted participants' existing beliefs about teaching reading and offered a powerful alternative. Reading *The Book Whisperer* provided teacher candidates with an opportunity to observe another teacher's reading instruction and to vicariously experience the positive impact Miller's approach to reading had on her students. According to social learning theory, witnessing the rewards or punishments others receive alters the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the observer (Bandura, 1977). We found this to be true in our study as participants experienced frustration and even anger when comparing their school-based experiences with those recounted in *The Book Whisperer* (Miller, 2009).

At no time during class discussions or in their written reflections did teacher candidates question the viability of enacting Miller's approach to reading instruction in "the real world." They were inspired and determined to help their students develop the ability to read and to experience the joy of reading. Results from this initial study suggest that symbolic models, like those found in literature, can effectively challenge teacher candidates' personal apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975). The symbolic model (Bandura, 1977) of a reading teacher who teaches students how to read and how to enjoy reading provided by *The Book Whisperer* was effective in disrupting preexisting beliefs and presenting a viable alternative to the status quo. Teacher candidates in our study were inspired to both rekindle their own love of reading and enact practices like those modeled in *The Book Whisperer*.

While our findings suggest that symbolic models provided by texts such as Miller's (2009) can have an impact, these experiences must be reinforced in teacher education coursework and teacher candidates' field experiences. Chief among these experiences are opportunities to work alongside classroom teachers who are committed to modeling effective and passionate reading instruction. However, the dearth of such opportunities is what initially prompted the first author to consider using Miller's text and suggests that we need to continue to expand on the use of symbolic models like *The Book Whisperer*.

*The Book Whisperer* disrupted many of our participants' preexisting

beliefs as well as their vision of themselves as teachers of reading, but will this disruption last? We propose two follow-up studies as a way to build on lessons learned from this initial research. A longitudinal study designed to follow teacher candidates into their first teaching position will investigate if and how teacher candidates maintain their commitment and passion for teaching the aesthetics of reading. A secondary follow-up study will be to investigate how in-service teachers respond to a symbolic model of a reading teacher committed to fostering a love of reading.

### **Limitations**

While this study presents rich, informative results for teacher educators and classroom teachers, we recognize several limitations. First, the number of participants (27) does not represent holistic viewpoints and experiences of a wide variety of teacher candidates. Further studies may consider including teacher candidates from both elementary and secondary levels as well as ensuring participants reflect racial and ethnic diversity. Moreover, the current study relied primarily on participants' final written reflection about *The Book Whisperer*. Including multiple data collection points throughout the semester could have provided greater insight into how the model of a reading teacher depicted in Miller's text challenged teacher candidates' prior beliefs and perspectives about teaching reading. By including participant responses to and reflections about each chapter, we could have more readily identified connections between specific practices Miller describes and teacher candidates' prior beliefs and new perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

The demands of learning to teach young people how to read are many. For many teacher candidates the extensive knowledge and skills needed to teach students how to read combined with pressures to increase student performance on high-stakes reading assessments often results in a narrow vision of reading instruction as solely skill based. Helping students discover the joy of reading becomes a mere afterthought, yet without the will and desire to read, students may be able to read, but rarely choose to do so. Effectively integrating instruction on reading skills with a focus on the pleasures of reading is a challenging and complex task that is difficult to imagine without powerful models. Based on the findings of this study, we are confident that it is possible to disrupt teacher candidates' negative perceptions of and attitudes toward reading when given just the right model of hope and inspiration.

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