

Preservice Teachers' Understanding of the Language Arts: Using a Lens of Critical Literacy

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Preservice teachers are placed in educational environments to learn about teaching literacy and about literacy's role in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Of particular significance is how preservice teachers perceive and understand the varied components of language arts (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing) while observing mentor teachers. The purpose of this research was to discover which language arts preservice teachers choose to observe during their field placements, and how that might impact the teaching of critical literacy. First, the authors situate the study in our understanding of the language arts and frame it within critical literacy. Next, a description of the methods used to collect and analyze the data, including the role of constructivism and observation, is provided. The authors then describe the findings regarding what language arts were privileged and what language arts were absent in preservice teachers' observations of classrooms. A final reflection focuses on the definitions of "language arts" and on how best to help preservice teachers recognize all of them, so they are better able to ultimately implement a comprehensive language arts program that includes the tenets of critical literacy in their classroom.

Critical literacies involve much more than words alone. As scholars in New Literacy Studies and Digital Literacies have shown us, being literate in the 21st century requires new ways of knowing (Hobbs, 2007; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Zoss, 2009). Unfortunately, not all practicing and preservice teachers understand literacy in the same comprehensive way. Preservice teachers are placed in educational environments to learn about teaching literacy and about literacy's role in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Consequently, they observe mentor teachers' pedagogical strategies and gain knowledge about content. One of the goals of teacher preparation programs is for preservice teachers to ultimately use these instructional practices and knowledge in their own ELA classrooms. Of particular significance is how preservice teachers perceive and understand the varied components of language arts (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing) while observing mentor teachers. Preservice teachers' understanding of what exactly literacy and language arts are may inform what they learn during those observations.

The multiple definitions of both language arts and literacy make learning about the content and pedagogical strategies for teaching this content problematic. The "New Literacy Studies" have replaced the traditional notion of literacy with a sociocultural approach, where rather than situating literacy in the abilities of an individual, literacy is situated in society where it interrelates with the workings of power (Gee, 1996). Literacy, which historically was defined simply as a set of skills one must master, is now viewed as a set of practices, beliefs, and

values—a way of being in the world, all of which have to do with language and meaning making. In fact, “literacy for this century implies that students are able to create and interpret meaning within multimodal, digital environments” (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009, p. 157). Literacy is constantly evolving and is now often linked to popular culture. Therefore, defining literacy in the new millennium continues to be complicated, and terms like multiliteracies, new literacies, information literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, and critical literacy add to the complication. We assert that these literacies share a commonality—the need to teach students all of the language arts in order to be savvy consumers. Today children are born into a world of technology, surrounded by digital media in numerous formats. They acquire literacy from multiple sources. Literacy practices such as reading online newspapers and Skyping are dynamic and malleable, linking us in time and space with others. It is evident that readers and writers of the 21st century must be able to utilize the tools of technology, collaborate with others to pose and solve problems across cultures, create information for global communities to distribute for a variety of purposes, evaluate and synthesize multiple stream of simultaneous information, interrogate multi-media texts, and confront the ethical responsibilities required by these multifaceted literacies (NCTE Executive Committee, 2008).

We are making the case that these new literacies are similar because they focus on the development of students’ engagement with texts and are concerned with the meaning-making process; they differ in their emphasis on the reader, the text, and the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which the “viewer’s” interpretation takes place (Hobbs, 2008). The differences between the new and more established literacies are important because these differences are reflected in pedagogy and how we prepare students to acquire a range of proficiencies with these literacies. Another difference also lies with what one does as a result of familiarity with those literacies. For example, Freire (1998) writes:

A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails. (pp. 30-31)

The students can engage in multiple literacies to first learn, becoming critically conscious, and then to take action by developing counter narratives, interrogating power structures, and challenging the status quo. According to Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015), people must see themselves in literacy to become literate, and this involves starting with the personal (a child’s identity as a person of color) and moving to the social (access to stories that include the child’s culture).

Our research questions were as follows: *Which language arts did our preservice teachers choose to observe during their field placements, and how might that impact teaching critical literacy?* We will show that preservice teachers do not often report experiencing all of the language arts in their observational experiences, which leads us to question how much exposure they get to all six components. We believe it is essential that they recognize all the language arts with a broad understanding of literacy in order to meet the demands of the 21st century learner. Attending to the literacy events in which K-12 students engage—both home and school literacies—is crucial

to creating a language arts classroom that, by utilizing and accessing all of the language arts, is dynamic and transformative. When any of the language arts are minimized, engaging in critical literacy can become problematic.

As teachers engaged in critical literacy, we have a responsibility to inquiry and a responsibility to our preservice teachers to support their inquiry. Tompkins (2012) states, “critical literacy focuses on the empowering role of language and emphasizes the use of language to communicate, solve problems, and persuade others to a course of action” (p. 13). A critical educator requires mindfulness of her own complicity in maintaining the status quo or systems of injustice (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). We engaged preservice teachers in the observational process to become critical observers so that they might strengthen their understanding of pedagogy, content, and the classroom environment. Over the course of three years, we also practiced that mindfulness regarding observation and learning in order to identify the observational patterns of preservice teachers and determine the language arts most commonly recognized in their observations (Bender-Slack & Young, 2010; Young & Bender-Slack, 2011). As the study evolved, we sought to identify the language arts preservice teachers chose to observe. Specifically, we analyzed their observations during their field placements in order to help preservice teachers better understand and be better prepared to implement a comprehensive language arts program. We found viewing and visual representation frequently missing in this data.

The purpose of this paper, however, is to focus on the relationship between critical literacy and these two missing language arts, as well as the importance of making preservice teachers aware of this relationship. First, we situate the study in our understanding of the language arts and frame it within critical literacy. Next, we provide a description of the methods used to collect and analyze the data, including the role of constructivism and observation. We then describe the findings regarding what language arts were privileged and what language arts were absent in our preservice teachers’ observations of classrooms. Last, we reflect on the definitions of “language arts” and on how best to help preservice teachers recognize each of them, so that they are better able to ultimately implement a comprehensive language arts program that includes the tenets of critical literacy in their classroom.

The English Language Arts

Just what exactly defines ELA continues to evolve within the given context of the theoretical/policy era. For example, ELA at one time have been defined solely as reading and writing, and then reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In fact, “Language arts has traditionally been seen by many teachers as involving only written language—words—with perhaps a speech unit or a video unit thrown in near the end of the year” (Graham & Benson, 2010, p. 97). Currently, many educators continue to define language arts as consisting of only four language arts: reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, standards identified by the International Reading Association (now the International Literacy Association) and the National Council of Teachers of English almost twenty years ago define the English language arts as the study of the six modes of language.

Our goal is to define, as clearly and specifically as possible, the current consensus among literacy teachers and researchers about what students should learn in the English language arts - reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and visually representing (International Reading Association, 2012, p.1). The six interrelated language arts are defined as follows:

- Reading is the process where students use strategies to decode and comprehend text;
- Writing is a strategic process where students write in multiple genres;
- Speaking allows students to incorporate talk for different purposes;
- Listening is the process in which students use strategies to monitor their comprehension;
- Viewing incorporates critical analysis of multiple, everyday texts such as film, Internet, and advertisements; and
- Visually representing helps students to create meaning through multiple sign systems and to see something familiar in a new way (Tompkins, 2012, pp. 18-19).

Although educators recognize the significance of the visual literacy language arts (including viewing and visually representing), many state standards do not consider these important concepts and skills that students should be taught. “In many states, the Language Arts Literacy Standards focus on four broad areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening” (Cohen & Cowen, 2011, p. 7). The exclusion or neglect of visual literacies of viewing and visually representing is problematic because “the development of literacy is complex and multidimensional (Gipe, 2006, p. 3), and “A strong oral language base facilitates reading and writing development. Likewise, visually representing and viewing [facilitate] the production and comprehension of visual language” (Gipe, 2006, p. 4). Machado (2010) “divides the language arts into four interrelated areas—listening, speaking, writing, and reading—and also discusses visual literacy as a primary, basic human capacity closely related to the other language arts areas” (p. 165). According to Cohen and Cowen (2011), “the standards are meant to help teachers develop a broad view of literacy and to specify specific teaching strategies that are recommended practices in literacy development” (p. 7). This is particularly relevant to the language arts curriculum as conceptualized within the Common Core State Standards, which focus on preparing students to be college and career ready. As states adopt the Standards, addressing all of the language arts seems vital. Consequently, some states are re-defining their literacy standards to include visual literacy, which includes viewing and visually representing. “Those states that are moving toward the integration of visual, media, and technological literacies into their content standards are establishing a new, 21st century definition of ‘literacy’” (Cohen & Cowen, 2011, p. 8).

Theoretical Framework

The understanding of literacy and language arts is intimately related. In fact, Gallas and Smagorinsky (2002) have noted that the consumption and production of texts, response activities, and all subsequent conversations are socially situated. This study addressed preservice teachers’ socially-situated learning in K-12 language arts classrooms. This section defines critical literacy, constructivism, and observation as theories related to our research question.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is “a politics of thinking from the margins, of possessing integral perspectives on the world” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 27). Critical literacy is foundational to making sense of the world and constructing knowledge.

Critical literacy is a mindset; it is a way of viewing and interacting with the world, not a set of teaching skills and strategies. From a pedagogical perspective, critical literacy is a philosophy that recognizes the connections between power, knowledge, language, and ideology, and recognizes the inequalities and injustices surrounding us in order to move toward transformative action and social justice. (Wallowitz, 2008, p. 16)

As a mindset and a philosophy, one’s approaches to research, texts, and the world are highly individualized, yet share common elements. Those who engage in critical literacy pay attention to power and language as they move toward action. Specifically, critical literacy works towards *praxis*, a notion of Freire’s (1970) that is based on reflection and action that can lead to social transformation. Consequently, the goal of educating for critical literacy is to identify the causes of inequalities and take action to resolve those inequalities. Specifically, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) offer an instructional model for critical literacy that consists of the following components:

- Situated in specific contexts: Culture and norms of the school can support or hinder moves to develop critical practice
- Personal and cultural resources: What students and teachers draw on to create the content of the curriculum as well as how people must see themselves in literacy to become literate
- Critical social practice: Disrupting the common place, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice
- Critical stance: Attitudes and dispositions we take on that enable us to become critically literate beings with four dimensions (consciously engaging, entertaining alternate ways of being, taking responsibility to inquire, and being reflexive)
- Moving between the personal and the social: Complicates the ways we envision the curriculum; there are always social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions to any event or issue we first describe as personal

This model consists of concentric circles beginning with a critical stance progressing towards critical social practices and drawing on personal and cultural resources, all situated within specific contexts. This instructional model of critical literacy offers an opportunity for how preservice teachers might conceptualize ways to include all six of the language arts in their literacy practices and move toward action and change. Viewing and visually representing would be essential to the personal and cultural resources on which students draw, and is necessary for engaging in critical social practices with regard to the texts with which they interact daily and for moving between the personal and the social.

According to Willis, et al. (2008), “In the current [educational] crisis, institutional structures and disciplinary practices sustain race/ethnic, class, gender, and linguistic oppression” (p. 65). Critical literacy examines texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs and their

underlying assumptions and ideologies, as well as power structures that intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. “It is important to raise or confront sociopolitical issues in texts, particularly race, gender, class, and sexuality, and not ignore controversial topics out of fear or discomfort,” Wallowitz (2008, p. 226) argues. Furthermore, critical literacy examines the way in which texts use language to position readers, transmit information, and perpetuate the status quo. Critical literacy aims to delve deeply into the sociopolitical and sociocultural issues embedded in texts in order to identify the root causes of social inequities (Wallowitz, 2008, p. 16).

Engaging in a critical literacy approach ourselves, we took what Lewison, et al. (2008) call a *critical stance*, or attitudes and dispositions that enabled us to become critically literate beings. Taking a critical stance is accomplished using their four dimensions—consciously engaging, entertaining alternate ways of being, taking responsibility to inquire, and being reflexive. For example, we knew that we must look beyond what wasn’t working to determine why that was the case. Consequently, we designed the study in a way that held us accountable to our professional understanding, envisioned alternate ways of learning, and continually questioned our goals and rationale for engaging in the research.

Constructivism

Both constructivism and observation can help contribute to the development of critical literacy. Fosnot (1996) writes, “Constructivism is the theory about knowledge and learning; it describes both ‘knowing’ and how one ‘comes to know’” (p. ix). Learning occurs when individuals integrate new knowledge into existing knowledge while the learner is actively engaged in learning. At the same time, constructivists describe learning as a natural state of mind that is always in progress. In the classroom, constructivists are concerned with creating a community of learners who are engaged and interacting through activities, discussions, and reflection.

Due to humans’ capacity to interpret and construct reality, the world is shaped by those constructs. According to Patton (2002), “constructivist philosophy is built on the thesis of ontological relativity, which holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world” (p. 97). The preservice teachers in our study engaged in a constructivist approach to learning as they were provided with opportunities to participate in authentic activities where they were required to observe and interact with the environment of the classroom and construct their own understanding.

Observation

Wallowitz (2008) suggests that “By employing critical literacy, one questions the construction of knowledge and searches for hidden agendas in school curricula, governmental legislation, corporation policies, and the media” (p. 16). Preservice teachers are expected to construct their knowledge of teaching by learning content and by observing effective teaching in order to produce similarly effective results. In fact, without guidance, preservice teachers find it

challenging to recognize what matters in teaching and to reflect on what they see (Berliner, 2001; Santagata & Angelici, 2010; Santagata, Zannoni, & Stigler, 2007; Star & Strickland, 2008; van Es & Sherin, 2002). Engaging in classroom observations is critical to teacher education because most human behavior is learned by observation through modeling (Bandura, 1986). Consequently, observation plays a key role in learning to teach.

Anderson, Barksdale, and Hite (2005) argue there are two methods of observing teaching by preservice teachers: *guided* and *unguided* (Anderson, et al., 2005). Unguided observation is used when preservice teachers are provided a general area of foci, such as a literacy event, language arts instruction, or the use of language in the classroom. According to Bell, Barrett, and Allison (1985), unguided observation requires observers to organize their thoughts according to individually-devised frameworks rather than a pre-determined—and possibly limiting—structure. Moreover, preservice teachers who engage in unguided observations view the classroom through multiple lenses, acquiring a greater understanding of the complexities and realities of teaching (Anderson, et al., 2005). Conversely, the guided approach is defined as observations where pre-identified types of observable teacher and student behaviors (i.e. classroom behavior), actions, or strategies are provided before the observation, so that preservice teachers have a clear and concentrated focus.

However, blending these two observational approaches by using unguided field notes and a guided theory-to-practice tool (Bender-Slack & Young, 2010) affords preservice teachers the opportunity to understand the complexities of the classroom as they relate to specific aspects of teaching and learning, thereby benefitting from the strengths of each approach. Observation experiences can, in fact, enrich and refine the thinking and conceptual understanding of preservice teachers with regard to teaching and learning (Cherubini, 2009; Chiang, 2008; Loyens & Gijbels, 2008; Parkison, 2009). Development of such understanding in literacy, however, can become problematic due to the confusion around defining the language arts in a way that is useful to learning about them.

Methodology

As part of a three-year study, we analyzed the language arts identified in preservice students' observations during required field experiences that occurred in two semester-long language arts methods courses, taught by the authors, at a Midwestern university. The courses were taken one or two semesters prior to student teaching. Data were collected for six weeks from 29 preservice teachers during their language arts methods courses (one early childhood and one middle childhood). Students were placed in a variety of settings. Sixteen early childhood preservice teachers were placed in the same public, suburban school and observed in kindergarten and first grade language arts classrooms. Thirteen middle childhood preservice teachers were placed in fourth through eighth grade language arts classrooms; one student observed in a parochial elementary school, four students in suburban schools, and eight in urban, public schools.

Throughout the first six weeks of field experiences, preservice teachers wrote observational field notes during one hour of unguided observation each week in classroom language arts instruction.

Using their notes as a starting point, preservice teachers then chose one significant event to explore further with a theory-to-practice tool (Appendix). The theory-to-practice format was designed to help preservice teachers construct knowledge about their observations and relate these experiences to curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning. We labeled it a “theory-to-practice tool” because it was scaffolding that supported preservice teachers through completing unguided field notes to a more sophisticated analysis in which they identified specific behaviors, strategies, and actions. When completing the tool, preservice teachers chose their own experiences that reflected interacting and teaching, observations of students interacting with each other, or teaching episodes facilitated by the classroom teacher. Moreover, preservice teachers provided a narrative description, identified their role, made a connection to course texts, reflected, made recommendations, denoted how the observation would impact their teaching, and stated why they selected this particular description. In this way, preservice teachers were disrupting the “common place,” a typical classroom, in order to interrogate it further.

Prior to their field experiences, preservice teachers were provided with scaffolding regarding the six language arts. During the methods courses, viewing was frequently modeled as preservice teachers prepared and watched videos of practicing teachers provide language arts instruction. The preservice teachers also were presented with various examples of visual representation in their text and other pictures, as part of their final project for the course. These language arts were defined and explicitly discussed as essential components of a comprehensive language arts program.

Preservice teachers were also scaffolded in the skills and process of observation. First, the language arts were identified and discussed in class as students watched videotapes of teaching and practiced taking observational notes with the theory-to-practice tool. Preservice teachers were encouraged to discuss their findings and identify similarities and differences in their notes. They recognized and discussed the difficulty in determining the differences between observation and interpretation. Second, preservice teachers received a handout that defined the components of the language arts and provided examples of each (Tompkins, 2012). Last, written and verbal feedback were supplied to students. Each week the theory-to-practice tools were reviewed by the researchers, and comments were provided to the preservice teachers to help clarify their understanding of the language arts as defined in their text, IRA/NCTE standards, handouts, and lecture notes. For example, preservice teachers were reminded to mark only the language arts they chose to focus on in the observation tool, because a small number of preservice teachers would mark all of the language arts but fail to describe them in the narrative description or in the interpretation and recommendation sections on the tool.

Data Analysis

Constructivists study the multiple realities created by people and the implications of those interpretations for their lives and interactions with others. Originally, we were interested in how preservice teachers made meaning about the language arts during their observations. Therefore, the data underwent content analysis, which can be defined as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core

consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Our goal was to identify which patterns characterized their observations, and, with regard to the language arts, what patterns of inclusion and exclusion occurred. The cultural artifacts analyzed in this study were the preservice teachers’ artifacts, specifically their field notes and theory-to-practice tools. This data were triangulated with the course syllabi and researcher journals. For example, when analyzing the student artifacts, we looked to see what connections they made to the course content, themes, and topics listed on the syllabus. We discussed and reflected on these connections, and this helped us to practice reflexivity in order to inform future methods courses.

Initially, data from the observation notes and theory-to-practice tools were deductively analyzed, a process in which initial coding categories were identified from an established framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Data from the theory-to-practice tool were coded based on the categories of language arts, specifically reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing. This became problematic when narrative descriptions were too broad, multiple language arts overlapped, or preservice teachers lost focus on the theory-to-practice tool. Therefore, we needed to establish a process for coding that was consistent.

For instance, some of the descriptive events as described included more than one of the language arts, and were coded thus. However, when multiple language arts were identified, but a single language art was the focus throughout the tool, it was coded as that language art because our goal was to determine what was drawing a student’s attention. For example, a preservice teacher may have written a narrative that included discussion in the lesson prior to the writing assignment, but if the preservice teacher focused on the writing assignment itself or students’ writing practices, then the language art was coded simply as writing rather than speaking and writing.

Although this caused much questioning, negotiating, and reflecting for us, we successfully collaborated and coded the narrative description notes, which were taken verbatim from students’ observational field notes. The purpose was to be consistent in identifying the particular language art discussed by the preservice teachers throughout the theory-to-practice tool. The preservice teachers’ confusion in identifying multiple language arts but only addressing one language art throughout the tool informed our decision to code the data in this way.

Findings

In this study, we analyzed the theory-to-practice tools in order to determine the language arts observed and focused on by the preservice teachers during their field placements. We learned that two were frequently missing. Preservice teachers did observe and reflect on a variety of literacy events; they identified reading and writing instructional practices as well as specific vocabulary and word study pedagogy. They had to focus on the language arts during their analysis and reflection, rather than simply mention a language art in describing a lesson they had observed.

Table 1
Preservice Teachers' Identified Specific Language Arts (Study 2)

Preservice Teachers	Language Arts	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Early Childhood Preservice Teachers	Reading	8	8	12	8	10	6
	Writing	3	4	1	4	0	3
	Listening	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Speaking	1	1	0	1	1	3
	Viewing	0	0	1	0	0	0
	Visually Representing	2	0	0	0	0	1
Middle Childhood Preservice Teachers	Reading	4	5	3	3	4	2
	Writing	3	6	2	2	2	3
	Listening	0	0	1	2	0	0
	Speaking	0	1	1	0	3	2
	Viewing	1	0	0	1	0	0
	Visually Representing	0	1	0	2	0	0

The data show that in the first few weeks, students most frequently selected from their observational field notes and chose narrative descriptions about reading and writing events. For example, Maria, an early childhood preservice teacher, described a literacy event during reading workshop. She detailed her interactions with a boy reading a nonfiction book about snow leopards.

The boy thinks aloud to the observer: ‘I wonder how the photographer got that close.’ The observer asked the boy what he thought, and he responds that they are babies so they do not know how to use their teeth yet; so, it was safe for the photographer to get close to take a picture.

Maria focused on the think aloud process that occurs while young students read nonfiction books during independent reading time, and this was coded as the reading language art because she only focused on reading throughout the theory-to-practice tool. She noted how surprised she was by the higher level thinking of first graders. In addition, this observation helped her connect to instruction she has read about in textbooks or observed in educational videos presented during

lectures. As Shannon (2011) notes, “Reading a text is a site of negotiation among composers, readers, and social forces within mundane and profound contexts” (p.46). This concept of thinking aloud during reading can be a means of negotiation and can be fostered in the classroom.

Similarly, in week six, Maria again wrote in the narrative description on the theory-to-practice tool about her cooperating teacher conducting a read aloud of *Where the Giant Sleeps* by Mem Fox (2007). The teacher was modeling for children how to infer the setting of the story. “One student raises his hand about halfway through the book and says, ‘I think on the left side [of the two-page spread] it is showing where each one [character] lives. And I think the right side is a close up from the page on the left.’” Other students added to these comments about the setting as if the view was from a telescope, illustrating Shannon’s (2011) point that, “The composers of texts represent the world to and for readers, but readers have choices among the ways that they will read... and therefore represent themselves as readers and agents to their community and the world” (p.46). As a group, the students made meaning of the text. Maria again was struck by how capable young children are of higher level thinking skills. She also liked the modeling the cooperating teacher provided and how the children collaborated and shared their thinking.

During her first observation, Susan, a middle childhood preservice teacher, focused strictly on reading, specifically on poetry reading strategies.

The students focused on a number of reading strategies in Billy Collin’s poem, “Introduction to Poetry.” Mrs. B. tried to narrow students’ focus to pull out meaning from the text. Students elicited images from the poem, humor, and other literary devices. In addition to stating literary devices and the poem’s meaning, students were asked to connect the poem’s meaning to their life.

As a reading lesson on reading strategies, this lesson was easily coded as the reading language art. The language arts types were provided for the preservice teachers on the top of the theory-to-practice tool as a reminder of a holistic approach to the language arts. Susan took note of that reminder. During her fourth week in the field, Susan described an event where students were instructed to listen to a historical poem entitled “Paul Revere’s Midnight Ride,” specifically for major poetic devices such as rhyme, meter, and the qualities of narrative poems. Susan explained:

I selected the listening language arts, to change up my observation focus and because listening was an essential part of today’s lesson. I feel that the listening language art is not given as much importance as others when observation *sic* (writing and reading given a lot of emphasis because they are so blatant). Therefore, my observation of students both reading and listening to a poem has given me more insight into how lesson differentiation can occur and how students can still pick up on major poetic devices such as meter, etc. through sound recordings.

Susan, who had engaged in multiple classroom observations already, recognized the privileging

of certain language arts over others. To that end, she purposely chose to focus on listening, which she felt had not been well represented. She was consciously engaging with the language arts by being intentional about her focus for the observation.

These examples demonstrate the connection between observations and the theory-to-practice tool and are representative of the group of preservice teachers’ theory-to-practice tools as submitted. Preservice teachers not only took ethnographic field notes, but then reflected on those observations by completing the theory-to-practice tool. In their reflections on the observational process, they noted how this process helped them to purposefully think about learning about teaching as well as the language arts content they were studying. The blended approach provided the framework for preservice teachers to gain critical insights about their observations during their field experience and connect these insights to the language arts.

What is most significant, however, is that the language arts identified and discussed by the preservice teachers in the first and second year of the study were relatively similar. The analysis from the previous year’s study is found in Table 2.

Table 2
Preservice Teachers’ Identified Specific Language Arts (Study 1)

Preservice Teachers	Language Arts	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Early Childhood Preservice Teachers	Reading	9	8	9	11	16	15
	Writing	3	2	4	5	2	1
	Listening	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Speaking	4	6	7	4	6	2
	Viewing	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Visually Representing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Middle Childhood Preservice Teachers	Reading	2	3	2	0	4	3
	Writing	1	2	2	3	2	2
	Listening	1	0	1	0	1	1
	Speaking	3	3	3	2	1	1
	Viewing	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Visually Representing	0	0	0	0	0	0

The difference between each data set is that in the second year, viewing and visually representing were identified four times by the early childhood preservice teachers and five times by the middle childhood preservice teachers over six weeks of observations, where previously they had not been identified at all. Although we attempted to emphasize all of the language arts in our courses through explicitly teaching model lessons of each language art, on the observation tool through a checklist, and during verbal and written feedback, the second year's findings were similar (with only a slight increase) to the data collected and analyzed in the previous year. We do not know if preservice teachers did not observe viewing and visually representing in the classrooms, if they did not recognize them being taught, or if they did not choose to write about them. We did not specifically ask or require preservice teachers to include all of the language arts because we did not want to influence their choices.

Discussion

We are not claiming that the language arts are discrete curricular areas when practiced. Clearly, the language arts are integrated and overlapping. The preservice teachers, however, did not focus on them as integrated and overlapping when engaging in the blended observation process. Because the theory-to-practice tool directs students to check as many of the language arts as necessary, we do not believe that the tool created distinctions that undermine an appreciation of rich literate practices. Perhaps the inclination to compartmentalize the language arts when learning and reflecting suggests a need to first understand them as individual arts and then learn how they can synthesize during teaching and learning. In other words, it may be easier for preservice teachers to construct an understanding of the language arts separately before being able to incorporate them in an integrated way pedagogically. In analyzing the process of preservice teachers' observations and how they make sense of them, we purport a connection between critical literacy and the missing language arts of viewing and visually representing. After all, observation itself is a visual literacy.

Asking preservice teachers to learn through observation is asking them to engage in all of the language arts, including viewing and visually representing. Following, we will discuss the findings using the tenets of critical literacy. In order to make our case regarding the fact that viewing and visually representing add a depth and richness to critical literacy, we will illustrate the importance of preservice teachers' abilities to identify, analyze, and reflect on the missing language arts through the lens of critical literacy, building on Lewison, et al.'s (2015) instructional model.

Critical Stance

Students had no control over the classroom in which instruction was occurring, but they did have control over what they chose to focus on during the writing of their field notes and the theory-to-practice tool. Whether preservice teachers were not seeing viewing and visually representing during the field experience, or did not recognize them when being taught in the classroom (e.g., neither consciously engaging nor entertaining alternate ways of being), the lack of recognition of the visual literacies would be problematic. If preservice teachers do not see the link between their

observation and teaching viewing and visually representing, then the visual literacies may not be of value in their own ELA classrooms. Consequently, because observation *is* visual learning, we assert that teacher educators must categorize observation skills as a type of visual literacy, and teach preservice teachers how to observe K-12 classrooms comprehensively.

Critical Social Practice

There is a need, through critical social practice, to effectively utilize observational tools as a foundation for understanding and implementing a comprehensive language arts program. Consequently, we offered four suggestions for field experiences and teacher education programs engaged in preservice teacher preparation (Young & Bender-Slack, 2011). The first recommendation of the authors was *Teach the importance of all of the language arts in order to provide preservice teachers with a broader, more comprehensive and inclusive toolkit of literate practices for their future classrooms.* As previously mentioned, through teaching, modeling, and feedback, we believed that we demonstrated and incorporated the above recommendation in a way that was purposeful and explicit as we gathered data in this second study. What, then, can explain the disconnect between the course and preservice teachers' observation tools? In other words, why did some language arts continue to be privileged over others even when we were purposefully explicit with the teaching of them, and prevented preservice teachers from embracing these multiple viewpoints?

Personal and Cultural Resources

We assert that it may be the overlapping of the language arts themselves. It may also be the interrelationship between the language arts that contributes to the confusion. We understand that definitions can be messy, convoluted, and confusing. Specifically, when asked to identify the language arts, most educators define the traditional aspects of language arts instruction that includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). Our findings support this. In fact, Gutierrez et al (1997) asserted that many educators often focus on the components of language arts or the instructional approaches, rather than on language and language learning.

What is also missing is the interconnectedness between and among the language arts. Graham and Benson (2010) contend, "We do not pretend that every student embraces the idea of multimodality. Preservice teachers may face heavy resistance in their school placements, including host teachers who require them to teach only from a designated section of a basal or literature anthology" (p. 97). If many practicing educators are still ascribing to a narrow definition of the language arts and only incorporating instructional strategies that emphasize specific language arts, such as reading and writing, preservice teachers may not observe mentor teachers teaching all of the language arts, and therefore, not recognize and/or comment on the visual literacies. In addition, with an emphasis on high stakes testing, the focus for many educators is on the fundamental principles of reading and writing.

[T]he increasing prevalence of standardized testing is one reason why media literacy is not being systematically included in schools, especially because much of the current form

of standardized assessment uses pencil-and-paper tests. If media literacy skills—particularly those dealing with non-print competencies—were legitimized in education systems, stakeholders would have to reconsider what proficiencies should be valued and how they should be assessed. (Bruce, 2009, p. 300)

The narrow definition of language arts as well as the lack of instructional emphasis contributes to the oral and written language systems being emphasized and the visual language ignored.

Perhaps the issue also lies in defining literacy itself. Traditional notions of literacy are being contested and transformed by and through changing literacies. For example, according to McLaren (2000):

Literacy, for Freire, was an introduction to a particular way of life, a way of living and caring for others. Critical literacy a la Freire is a revolutionary dialectics of interest and theory in which individuals can become self-conscious of their own self-formation in particular ways of life through an engagement in critical self-reflexivity. (p. 155)

An adequate definition of literacy must involve the use of language. Language can be viewed as an identity marker because “languages have the privilege to retain, sustain, and maintain power, and to reproduce inequalities through language use” (Willis, et al., 2008, p. 64). Teachers can more effectively translate this into practice in real classrooms. The benefits to the changing literacies, including the visual, are that they can provide opportunities for collaboration and support the learning needs of diverse learners. In fact, Hobbs (2007) demonstrated significant gains in print (reading and writing) skills by students due to the inclusion of media literacy in the classroom. Including all of the language arts can further *all* literacies.

Critically conscious researchers can draw from a wide range of philosophical thought, providing a multi-perspective view. Attending to the missing language arts of viewing and visually representing with a critical consciousness can challenge a politically neutral approach while moving beyond the local to the global. Like literacy, criticality is embedded in historical and social foundations. Gee (1996) cautions that the traditional view of literacy as simply the ability to read and write tears literacy out of its sociocultural context, treating it as an asocial cognitive skill with no connection to human relationships. This is problematic because it “cloaks literacy’s connection to power, to social identity, and to ideologies often in the service of privileging certain types of literacies and certain types of people” (Gee, 1996, p. 46).

Moving Between the Personal and the Social

Clearly, all of the language arts, including viewing and visually representing, can add a depth and richness when engaging in critical literacy. Critical literacy links the pedagogical with the political. Morell (2005) defines critical literacies as “literacies involving the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations; and promoting individual freedom and expression” (p. 314). Due to young adolescents’ time spent

interacting with media, addressing these literacies as they relate to students' lived realities can inform the language arts teachers choose to teach. Transformative theories of education suggest that schools are ideal sites for promoting social change; consequently, classrooms should focus on social critique leading to change (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1992). In order to engage in a critical literacy, all of the language arts are necessary for affecting social change. The school is not a neutral site where objective knowledge is transferred from teacher to student regardless of social or cultural locations and identities. Rather, the sociocultural implications with regard to knowledge production and the transfer of knowledge are considerable; as Giroux (1992) noted, "The pedagogical in this sense is about the production of meaning and the primacy of the ethical and the political as a fundamental part of this process" (p. 133).

The neglect of viewing and visually representing caused us to wonder about such implications for language arts education, especially with regard to critical literacy. The missing visual element of the language arts can be problematic if certain texts, such as advertisements, web sites, or memes, are left out of the classroom. The visual texts with which students engage can manipulate them if they are not shown how to critically engage with them.

When visually representing and viewing are not recognized or absent, the discursive practices in which students can engage incur additional limitations. Students make meaning of the world and their place in it as they engage in various literacy acts using multiple language arts. Although we provided scaffolding for the preservice teachers' observational skills and made explicit connections to all of the language arts through class discussions and comments on their theory-to-practice tools, many continued to focus on the most prevalent, traditional definition of the language arts.

Getting preservice teachers to accord respect to all six language arts does not simply or necessarily lead to any kind of critical consciousness. In fact, it is not enough to treat critical literacy as a topic of conversation; they have to go out and do something as well (Lewison, et al., 2008). Viewing and visually representing can be used as tools to develop students' and teachers' critical consciousness to make English Language Arts relevant and purposeful. The missing language arts can help to challenge traditional ways of doing English Language Arts, interrogating passive classroom literacy events. Collins (2000) notes that "Power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies" (p. 285). Viewing and visually representation are replete with opportunities for manipulating ideas, images, and symbols not evident in the traditional language arts. Where literacy reflects multiple beliefs, values, and ideologies, so will the observations of our preservice teachers. Preservice teachers can use/address the missing language arts in order to develop that critical consciousness for themselves and their students. In an attempt to make a move toward linking a richer, more complex understanding of "language arts" and even "literacy" to a critical literacy, we assert that attending to viewing and visually representing can accomplish two things.

Conclusion

Broader notions of literacy are part of a critical need for developing a critical stance and

engaging in critical social practices in the classroom. A deeper, more comprehensive understanding of critical literacy is better informed by all six of the language arts. The conception of language arts and the inclusion of multiliteracies have been explored in this article to encourage teachers and preservice teachers to think more broadly about why literacy instruction matters. Bruce (2009) points out that “Because the research shows that media literacy is so important to adolescents, because it shows that society demands that students be knowledgeable and skillful about emergent technologies, and because research shows that multiple media provide means of expressing and extending knowledge, skill, and ideas, teachers need to know about media literacy” (p. 301). The goal is to expand literacy instruction so that teachers and students think about literacy as it relates to *all* of language arts.

The purpose of this paper was to examine the links between critical literacy and viewing and visually representing, and the importance of making preservice teachers aware of this relationship whether in their field observations or their own future classrooms. Preservice teachers need a deep understanding of the multiple literacies students negotiate, along with the ability to implement an inclusive language arts program that addresses and accesses those literacies. Teaching from a holistic approach by incorporating all of the language arts (reading, speaking, writing, listening, viewing, and visually representing) and critiquing everyday literacies is one way to foster this. Preservice teachers’ understanding of the various definitions of literacy and language arts will help guide what they learn during their observations in their field experiences. In fact, school can provide a site for interrogating cultural texts and repositioning oneself in relation to those texts. Children need to develop the language of critique to be truly literate in the 21st century (Lewison, et al., 2008).

We originally designed this study to determine which of the language arts were most privileged. We also recognized that observation, a visual literacy itself, plays a key role in learning about teaching and content and provides the framework for examining the language arts. Using this process, we know that we must first scaffold preservice teachers’ observational skills so that they can reflect on language arts content and teaching practices (Young & Bender-Slack, 2011). Even though this scaffolding occurred, we found that preservice teachers focused primarily on reading and writing when describing the language arts on the theory-to-practice tools. We believe if preservice teachers are narrowly identifying and focusing on specific language arts, they may not recognize the need for—or be able to teach—the language arts comprehensively. This is an opportunity for further research. Teacher training programs in the United States have been dominated by a behavioristic orientation where students master subject areas and methods of teaching, emphasizing technical expertise at the expense of critical thinking and analysis (Giroux, 1988; Schwarz & Brown, 2005). By consciously engaging with the issues and events that arise in our teaching, we can thoughtfully decide how to respond (Lewison, et al., 2008).

Given what we know about the importance of the new literacies (Bruce, 2009; Hobbs, 2007, 2008; hooks, 1994; McKenna, et al., 2008), attending to visual literacy in ELA classrooms is important because it impacts what students learn and how they engage in the world. If we are preparing preservice teachers to teach the students of the 21st century, their understanding of the language arts must include the broader definitions of language arts and literacy. The visual

literacies must be identified, applied to theory, interpreted, and reflected upon for instructional practices.

Understanding the value of observation to learn about teaching and content, we structured our courses to enhance our preservice teachers' field experiences, to engage them in understanding the significance of their observational patterns and to determine the language arts observed. However, in their descriptive statements and recommendations, preservice teachers recognized effective classroom practices that primarily focused on reading and writing instruction. It is problematic that other language arts were neglected because each of them helps students negotiate the world. Developing a critical consciousness is about seeing the world differently, and this necessarily changes what one pays attention to during observation. This is exactly the space where a blended model of guided and unguided observation may attain its most crucial benefits as it relates to the language arts. Opening a space for understanding language arts is a way of viewing and interacting with the world through multiple modes of language. As teacher educators, we recognize the importance of emphasizing all of the language arts, including viewing and visually representing, if we are to engage in critical literacy. Like Morrell (2004), we believe “that it is within the scope of literacy education to help future professionals consider how their actions or inactions either mitigate or contribute to a more just and equitable global order” (p. 44). We plan to continue to scaffold preservice teachers in the blended observational approach to promote growth and reflection in their field experiences in order to open up a space for them to see the world differently. By particularly explicating all of the language arts and their role in developing a critical consciousness, we hope to continue to make all of language arts significant for preservice teachers so that they will be better equipped to teach a comprehensive language arts program with a critical lens.

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Appendix: Theory-to-Practice Tool

The theory-to-practice entry will serve as a tool for you to record and reflect on your observations. Your entries may pertain to (1) your own experiences interacting and teaching or (2) observations of students interacting with each other.

Day/Date _____ Name _____ Role _____

Modes of Language: (check all that apply to your narrative description and were specifically taught during the observation)
Reading ___ Writing ___ Listening ___ Speaking ___ Viewing ___ Visually Representing ___ Other _____

Narrative Description:

Connection: (theory, standards, text, etc.)

Reflection:

Recommendation(s):

Impact on teaching:

Why did you select this observation?