

FROM PAPER TO PLUGGED IN: Pivoting Access to Children's Literature in Light of the Pandemic



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ACROSS THE NATION, students in our classrooms come from varying backgrounds and encompass a wide variety of perspectives, histories, and values. However, it is well known that classroom texts, curricula, and materials do not represent the diversity of our students. Children's literature is a powerful tool that can be utilized in classrooms to provide young readers with diverse books that reflect the diverse world in which we live. Educators have the critical task of ensuring that our students have access to children's literature that allows children to see themselves in books and also learn about the lives of others through literature.

We are teacher educators from two disparate Southeastern institutions; one of us teaches pre- and in-service teachers at a small liberal arts private university with a student population of approximately 3,100. The other teaches pre- and in-service teachers at a public, regional comprehensive university with approximately 12,600 students. Both teach children's and young adult literature and literacy methods courses across a variety of degree programs, including English and education (BS), elementary education (BS), exceptional student education (BS), and reading (MEd) programs. As teacher educators for pre- and in-service teachers, the heart of our instruction in our literacy methods and children's and young adult literature courses revolves around the use of children's literature to teach pre- and in-service teachers how to apply theories of literacy development and implement effective practices for instructing students in K–12 classrooms.

Moreover, we emphasize the importance of getting quality literature into the hands of young children to support their reading and literacy growth.

In order to utilize children's literature as a field of learning and classroom application, students must also have access to a range of quality and diverse texts. Therefore, providing access to quality children's literature for our students is central to our work in the classroom. At one institution, the teacher educator incorporated a field trip to the local library in her course with preservice teachers. Students applied for library cards, received a tour of the library, and were made aware of all the services offered. Students had access to the university library as well, where a special room, dedicated to children's literature, had numerous options from which to access children's literature just steps from their dorm room. At the other institution, the teacher educator provided students a tour of the College of Education's Professional Studies Library, a resource center that houses children's literature texts and teaching resources and supplies for education majors. Moreover, grant work has funded the use of a rolling library, where the teacher educator brings hundreds of children's books into the classroom for student use on a weekly basis.

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools, universities, and libraries, educators and community members alike were unaware of the full impact this global crisis would have on students. In our university classrooms, opportunities to engage in field trips to libraries and provide access

to utilize children's literature texts during in-person courses halted. Educators knew the day-to-day practices they took for granted as methods of educating pre- and in-service teachers and classroom students would have to be revisited.

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Pandemic Impact on Literacy

With rampant school and library closures occurring nationwide, we wondered how this would impact students' literacy achievement. In addition to the closure of schools and libraries, limited access to technology in low-income communities, limited learning materials, and the need for adult supervision for home-based learning are all further factors that affected students during the pandemic (Bennett, Gunn, & Peterson, 2021). Based on the substantial body of research on summer reading loss showing a potential three-month reading gap for some students (Kim & Quinn, 2013; White et al., 2013), we anticipate students and schools will experience a negative impact regarding literacy growth during the extended out-of-school time when the pandemic closed schools. While the body of literature on the consequences of the pandemic for literacy achievement is evolving, one study noted results from gathering data of students' reading habits prior to and during lockdown (Clark & Picton, 2020). The report delineates reading practices of children and young adults before and amid lockdown, and notes that many children found

opportunities to discover or rediscover themselves as readers during pandemic restrictions due to additional time to read and increased access to stories online (Clark & Picton, 2020). However, barriers such as a lack of access to books (due to school and library closures), home environment, and lack of school and/or peer support negatively affected some children's ability to read as well as their motivation to read for pleasure. Given the nascent research on the impact of the pandemic on student achievement (Nazerian, 2020), it is important to also note existing research surrounding access to literature and its impact on student achievement (Alexander et al., 2007; Edwards, 2011; Green et al., 2020; Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020; White et al., 2013) as well as reading loss when students experience an extended period of a lack of interaction with reading, such as the summer reading slide (Alexander et al., 2007; Allington & McGill-Frazen, 2003; White et al., 2013).

The pivot to remote and hybrid instruction, coupled with library closures, led educators and librarians to implement creative means to provide access to books for children. Bennett, Gunn, and Peterson (2021) secured emergency funding in response to COVID-19, with which they worked to deliver quality multicultural and social justice books to K–8 students, ensuring students had access to literature during the pandemic. Public libraries also implemented creative modes to support access to literature for their patrons, including book mobile units, Internet services for families to gain access to online books, and book giveaways (Lawton, 2021). Three librarians in Virginia, worried about their students being left without access to books, borrowed government vehicles and loaded hundreds of books in bins that they delivered to predetermined stops all over the county to distribute books to children in need (Lawton, 2021).

When the pandemic shifted the way teaching and learning occurred in classrooms worldwide, we recognized the significance of modifying our own instruction to support our pre- and in-service teachers' understanding of how to be responsive K–12 educators. Because children's literature and young adult texts are central to our work as teacher educators, we began to brainstorm creative ways to get texts into the hands of our pre- and in-service teachers in an online environment. Using children's award lists and online literature resources, one teacher educator paired award-winning texts with corresponding videos for use by their preservice and in-service teachers. Both teacher educators provided resources

for students to access a variety of children's texts online. Moreover, the implementation of new practices in our classrooms benefitted student learning while supporting community members in a time of need. The following section details the shifts in our instructional practices.

Shifting Access to Children's Literature in Our Courses

Given the need to support pre- and in-service teachers' access to children's literature for use in both our university courses and K–12 classrooms, we researched and shared resources to get high-quality children's literature texts into the hands of students via online sources. Drawing from Bennett, Gunn, and Peterson's (2021) book-selection criteria for providing access to multicultural children's literature during COVID-19, we aimed to find sources that included four criteria: (a) high-quality, diverse/multicultural literature (Bennet, Gunn, van Beynen, & Morton, 2021; Bishop, 1992; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001; O'Donnell, 2019; Thomas, 2016); (b) varying complexities, content, and genres (Pearson & Hiebert, 2014); (c) engaging content, language, and visual appeal; and (d) a balance of main character's gender.

One teacher educator began with children's literature award lists and compiled resources that included these four criteria. This was coupled with the introduction of an award list during each class period with corresponding video previews or book trailers of various texts from recent award winners. Over the duration of the course, students ultimately became familiar with the following award lists: the Coretta Scott King Book Award, the Pura Belpré Award, the Caldecott Medal, the Association for Library Service to Children's Notable Children's Books, the Children's Literature Assembly Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts, the Notable Books for a Global Society, and the Orbis Pictus Award.

The other teacher educator encouraged all her students to apply for a local library card. This allowed them the use of Libby, an online library resource that provides access to ebooks. She also provided weekly demonstrations using Libby for her class read-alouds. This enabled the preservice and in-service teachers to gain an awareness of the books that were available and foster a sense of potential challenges when reading books online (i.e., skipping several pages at once). The teacher educator reviewed the sites discussed in this piece (see Table 1) with her students to

ensure that they were familiar with what they had to offer and their potential use with K–12 students.

As we explored resources to find examples of read-alouds, trailers, and previews of books from award-winning lists, we realized that educators, book lovers, authors, and illustrators from around the world were also invested in providing access to books for children. We used websites like Storyline Online, whose list of titles and recordings is ever-evolving, and Unite for Literacy, which provided both fiction and nonfiction texts with predictable patterns, with a narration option. We discovered KidLit TV, whose website features high-quality videos with authors and illustrators. The International Children's Digital Library provided many diverse options, allowing readers to select books by language, genre, and character, to name a few. Additionally, Netflix Bookmarks was brought to our attention as another site created during the pandemic to provide diverse book accessibility along with recorded read-alongs. We also secured educator accounts to book resources like Epic, Vooks, and Open eBooks, which allowed us to share additional access to texts from these apps with our students.

Shifting Instruction to Provide Community Support

Research shows the connection between community relationships and fostering opportunities to enhance the literacy lives of those in the community (Neuman & Knapczyk, 2020). Instead of assuming what is needed, determining through shared conversation the necessary impact can, in fact, create a shift. For example, to explore the benefits of book accessibility, Neuman and Knapczyk (2020) studied the discrepancy in available books for low-income communities versus wealthier communities. Through their research, they considered not only the physical, but the psychological proximity students had to books through a book vending machine program. They noted that working with community leaders and families better ensured that the vending machines would be used based on their placement.

During the pandemic, a common theme from colleagues and friends was that the children in their lives were falling behind in their reading. In light of the drastic learning shifts occurring, we used instruction as a leverage to support parents, teachers, and community members in their learning endeavors during the pandemic. Based on the premise that service

Table 1
SUGGESTED SITES FOR PRE- AND IN-SERVICE TEACHER USE

LITERATURE ACCESS SOURCE	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Libby https://www.overdrive.com/apps/libby/	An app that can be linked to a local library card, through which users can borrow ebooks, audiobooks, and more from their local public library.
Storyline Online https://storylineonline.net/library/	Streaming website for videos, featuring celebrated actors reading children's books alongside animated illustrations.
Unite for Literacy https://www.uniteforliteracy.com/	Family-friendly website to encourage home literacy, offering a variety of levels of texts, allowing readers to read the books themselves or have them narrated.
KitLit TV https://www.kidlit.tv/	Produced by parents, educators, librarians, kid lit creators, and filmmakers, this website showcases a talk show with best-selling authors and illustrators, story time, drawing and illustration inspiration, and more.
International Children's Digital Library http://en.childrenslibrary.org/	A showcase of a collection of books from the University of Maryland representing outstanding historical and contemporary books from throughout the world. There are books from 76 different languages on the site.
Netflix Bookmarks https://www.netflixbookmarks.com/	Developed to celebrate Black voices, this website includes suggested books from birth to age 12, along with featured books and books read by Black actors.
Epic https://www.getepic.com/	A digital reading platform with a collection of 40,000+ books from 250 worldwide publishers.
Vooks https://www.vooks.com/	An app that streams animated storybooks brought to life.
Open eBooks https://openebooks.net/	An online library with thousands of titles that are free for children from in-need communities.

learning can support the development, understanding, and evaluation of relationships to create effective work (Bringle et al., 2009), both teacher educators opted to find meaningful ways to have their students engage with their communities.

Children's Literature Service Learning Initiatives

After teaching graduate students about current research and trends in the field of children's literature, one teacher educator supported students as they worked to increase access to children's literature in the community through service learning projects such as Zoom story time, integrated arts and read-aloud video recordings, virtual read-alouds for "First Chapter Friday" to introduce children to a variety of chapter books, and the creation of digital book flyers with award-winning

books. As schools and libraries remained closed during the production of their service learning, students utilized the resources from Table 1 to select books that showcased the four criteria for book selection we emphasized in our teaching: (a) high-quality, diverse/multicultural literature; (b) varying complexities, content, and genres; (c) engaging content, language, and visual appeal; and (d) a balance of main character's gender. Students facilitated projects over the duration of an academic semester. These projects were shared with local teachers, libraries, and homeschool parents to support K–12 student learning and book access during the pandemic.

Field Partnerships

One of the requirements for the teacher education program at the liberal arts university is a field experience where preservice

teachers participate with a teacher and local school. Pandemic restrictions created the need for a shift in field experience expectations. One teacher educator tasked her students to work one-on-one with a student in Grades pre-K through 6, engaging them with texts aligned with Bennett, Gunn, and Peterson's (2021) criteria. Preservice teachers determined the interests of their students virtually through the Reading Interest Inventory and then located online books for their students. Since these were to be virtual sessions and libraries were still closed, it was necessary for the preservice teachers to have books accessible for their tutoring sessions. Many of them have just begun to gather books for their own future classroom libraries and have not accumulated the range of texts necessary to meet the needs of their particular tutee. Preservice teachers had to find either a version of a text read aloud online or a book they could download and read to their student. They were also encouraged to utilize the resources listed in Table 1. On some sites, books that met our requirements for high-quality children's literature were challenging to find. For example, on the Libby site, many of the diverse texts were often checked out. However, flexibility with the online resources allowed for a variety of options based on tutee interests and particular needs.

At the regional comprehensive university, one teacher educator partnered with the Child Development Center on campus in order to support undergraduate students in applying theory to practice, while also giving back to the community. Feedback from the director of the center regarding their greatest needs for their preschool students centered around book access for prekindergarten students, particularly online recordings. Therefore, the teacher educator designed a collaboration where preservice teachers in a literacy methods course worked in small groups to select high-quality books aligned with Bennett, Gunn, and Peterson's (2021) criteria and planned a recorded read-aloud, with several requirements, including (a) the selection of a high-quality book with rhyme, rhythm, or repetition; (b) an introduction of the book's cover, title, and author and illustrator; (c) the incorporation of oral language and phonological awareness strategies while reading; and (d) open-ended questions and prompts to support comprehension. The recordings were shared privately with the director of the center and the prekindergarten students. The response from the Child Development Center was very positive. Teachers corresponded after utilizing the record-

ings with pictures of written student responses as a way to say "thank you," revealing the benefits of the recordings to the prekindergarten students.

Educators need to think strategically about the innovations that ensued from the pandemic and feasible ways to continue to build on these in the future.

Final Thoughts

As we continue to prepare preservice and in-service teachers to enter the field, we wonder if we will return to pre-pandemic teaching. As we wait with bated breath, there are several questions on our minds. Teacher educators and K–12 teachers alike are anxious to know how their students fared during the lockdown, both academically and emotionally. Educators are also asking themselves what new technologies utilized during the pandemic might be suited for ongoing use in the future. Are there ways for preservice, in-service, classroom, and teacher support that these resources can be part of our day-to-day classroom and home curriculums? Many of the websites mentioned in this piece were free of charge or offered at low cost during the pandemic. Additionally, many school districts and Internet providers offered low-cost or free minutes and Internet access. Going forward, families that no longer have computers or free Internet at home may not be able to use these sites as reading material. Similarly, teachers may not be able to afford the cost of these online resources. Educators need to think strategically about the innovations that ensued from the pandemic and feasible ways to continue to build on these in the future. •

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