



ACADEMIC SERVICE-LEARNING: CONNECTING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS WITH DIVERSE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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"I want to create a classroom environment where students understand that, as readers, they can hear the voices of the authors and create change in our world. This is a powerful way for scholars to feel the significance of reading. I can use culturally relevant books in my classroom in an effective way. I can help my students realize the importance of their role as critical readers in this world and the personal success they can achieve through reading."

—Reflection from a pre-service teacher (PST) after creating a research-based family literacy activity around a diverse children's book and presenting it to a local family at a Family Reading Night event, Spring 2023



Image 1
PICTURE OF FAMILY READING NIGHT

A Literacy-Based Academic Service-Learning Initiative

An academic service-learning initiative was embedded throughout an Early Childhood Education foundational course in the University of Houston's Department of Curriculum and Instruction during the Spring 2023 semester. This community literacy collaboration was funded by a University grant that seeks to increase the number of students participating in co-curricular activities as part of their undergraduate education. In addition to impacting students and transforming the broader university community, the goal of this community engagement initiative was to increase the number of high-impact co-curricular activities that provide direct real-world experience, thus preparing students for success in their post-undergraduate lives and careers. As part of this initiative, 70 Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) were invited in January 2023 to design an engaging family literacy activity around a diverse children's book for a member of their school community. We define diverse children's literature as picture books that enhance student understanding of all people and cultures. This framework makes space for all individuals to see themselves represented in text. The PSTs had the opportunity to bridge theory with practice by using family literacy packets to model their diverse children's books for families at a local public school. The family literacy packets included (a) a thoughtful letter to parent(s)/caregiver(s) explaining the family literacy activity, including a discussion

of effective techniques to encourage inquiry and collaboration; and (b) specific instructions for the activity, including necessary materials, step-by-step procedures, prompting questions, ideas for differentiation, and extensions. The letter and instruction were included with the book in a plastic bag to be enjoyed by a family whose child attends the school.

The primary focus of this Early Childhood Education foundational course is to introduce PSTs to content areas and teaching strategies, while also supporting meaningful family involvement in early childhood education. However, the course also challenges students to examine the practicalities of the teaching profession, as a way to prepare them for their future careers as educators.

Utilizing Diverse Children's Literature: Linking Theory to Practice

While books have been predominantly used for pleasure or foundational academic literacy in the primary schooling years, a transition occurs in secondary education that requires more action on the part of the reader. In this unique service-learning project, the evolution of two PSTs— from student to teacher, and from consumer to conductor of literature—is observed and documented within the confines of an undergraduate university course.

While in some spaces the contemporary library of children's literature has become more diverse and culturally aware over the past several years (Koss et al., 2018), distinct efforts to suppress this shift have been prolific. PEN America documents 2,500 challenges to children and young adult literature titles in the 2020-2021 school year in the United States (Friedman, 2022). In Texas alone, 801 books were challenged, making it the state with the most bans in America (American Library Association, 2023; Friedman, 2022; Solomon, 2022). Books are not alone in this attack though, as other curricular content is increasingly found to have such qualities that are displeasing to some parents and politicians.

Despite these efforts, educators continue to use books to teach children about the world around them. This is accomplished through discussions about the ways people interact with each other and with their environments, about the complex relationships between us, and about the ever-changing ecosystem in which we reside. Books are considered to be a developmentally appropriate way to address issues that are quite visible to children (NAEYC, 2022), despite beliefs to the contrary (Kemple et al., 2016; Hailey & Olson, 2013; Pahlke

et al., 2012). Here, we as teacher educators see an authentic opportunity to engage PSTs in service-learning projects.

Research shows that service-learning projects provide a great capacity for Pre-service Teachers (PSTs) to grow in their understanding of the diverse environments they will enter into as novice teachers (Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009; Nganga, 2020). These projects provide a controlled environment in which PSTs can make mistakes, examine their hidden biases, and determine effective ways to pursue social justice with students. Service-learning requires action from students to participate in civic responsibility (Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009) and to learn about and engage with the communities they serve. Service-learning projects also require PSTs to critically engage with resources they anticipate using in the classroom (Pomerantz, 2018). The skills needed to evaluate teaching tools, especially children's literature, can contribute to an ongoing ability to justify the use of otherwise controversial materials, as books have increasingly become.

Literature continues to be a unique and effective tool for service-learning implementation. Books are engaging, developmentally appropriate, and accessible (NAEYC, 2022). Books act as portals for children to view themselves and others in both the real and imagined world (Bishop, 1990). Books create spaces to frolic in play, and to grapple with conflict. Furthermore, they act as tools for not only instructional use, but also for personal reflection and introspection (Nganga, 2020).

This article presents case studies of two PSTs, who were invited to create personalized letters and family literacy projects around *We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020) and *Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré* (Denise, 2019). In *We Are Water Protectors*, Carol Lindstrom (author) and Michaela Goade (illustrator) present an alternate side of American industry from the viewpoint of the Indigenous people who are affected and harmed by the "black snake" (representing an oil pipeline) that runs through their land. In *Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré*, Anika Aldamuy Denise (author) and Paola Escobar (illustrator) present an inspiring biography that affirms the importance of seeing one's own culture in books. Readers are introduced to Pura Belpré, who held a popular bilingual story program at a public library and wrote children's books in Spanish, after discovering that none were available. For each case study presented, post-project and professional identity reflections are shared, specifically as they relate to preparing PSTs to effect change through teaching with diverse literature in their future classrooms.

Case Studies: Two Pre-Service Teachers

Case Study 1: Fatima's Academic Service-Learning and Professional Identity Reflections

Fatima's project centered around *We Are Water Protectors*, Carol Lindstrom (author) and Michaela Goade (illustrator), with a particular focus on children's success in the global community. She noted the following:

“Reading diverse children's books is a powerful way to show cultural inclusivity to students. In this course, I learned that culturally relevant texts are a meaningful tool to teach my future students about important subjects. In this manner, I am making sure children can connect to the books and embrace different backgrounds while also learning new material and enjoying stories. Parents and families can also join in these activities, and participate in their child's education.

For the family literacy activity connected to *We Are Water Protectors*, Fatima invited the student to draw a vision board of different ways that water can be used in society. She also added a pledge that the student can sign to promise to protect the water and land on Earth. She expresses satisfaction with these efforts in her post-project reflection:

“We were able to discuss how water is important to the student and his family. During the Family Reading Night event, my student was able to relate to the book and truly understand the importance of saving water. This was exactly my purpose for creating the project, as I wanted the student and family to collaborate while learning about an element of life important to all people and animals.”

Furthermore, Fatima noted that participating in this family literacy event impacted her professional identity as a future teacher and sharpened her skillset. She elaborates on this below:

“At the beginning of the semester, I was a bit afraid in regards to the fact that it would not only be the student that I would interact with at the school, but their family as well. However, I noticed the parent of my student was so impressed with the interactive read-aloud and my project. I was glad to be able to communicate well with the child and witness their enthusiasm for the project. It made me feel a lot

more confident as a future teacher—knowing that I can build a positive relationship with not only my students, but also the families. We can work together and collaborate for their child's success.

One way I can involve families and caregivers in my future students' literacy learning is by sending home activities they can do with their children. I can send home books with the students to encourage reading at home, and activities they can do with their families that relate to the book, both during the breaks or weekends to keep students academically enriched. I think the families appreciate the effort because it keeps their children motivated and engaged.”

Excerpt of Family Literacy Letter and Project: “We Are Water Protectors” by Carol Lindstrom (author) and Michaela Goade (illustrator)

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Let's take some time to focus on a collaborative Family Literacy Project activity! The purpose of this activity is to engage your child in learning about the importance of water and the different ways we use it on a daily basis. We use water in our daily life in various ways, such as for purposes of cooking, drinking water, bathing, taking care of our plants and fruit or vegetable gardens, and for outdoor activities, such as swimming. We know the importance of saving water during our daily uses and protecting our oceans from pollution. As parents, we should teach our children this mindset beginning at an early age. This will enable children to grow up with an understanding of the importance of respecting the privilege of having clean and accessible water to use.

I am sharing a book for you and your child to enjoy together called *We Are Water Protectors*, by Carole Lindstrom (Author) and Michaela Goade (Illustrator). This book shares the story of a young Ojibwe girl who fights for the protection of the water supply for her people. The story invites all readers to take a stand to protect the water of our Earth from potential dangers. I would like to invite you and your child to explore through the bold illustrations in this book. Please pause to discuss with your child how the images in this beautiful story make them feel. Once you begin reading this story with your child, you will notice the story contains rhythmic language and some words written in large **BOLD** vocabulary. This vocabulary plays an important role in contributing to the theme. You may wish to pause at times to communicate these moments

and discuss what emotions they convey to your child, and what those words mean to them.

The discussion strategies will be a meaningful tool to build on your child's understanding of the book. If they enjoyed the story of the importance of water to this young Ojibwe girl, you may visit your local library to check out other books on the topic. You also may begin working on the creative activity to accompany the book. I have included a sample of the project.

A field trip may be to take your child for a day trip to the local park, nature center, or beach and have them work on this assignment there. This might enable them to add artifacts they collect to their project! Your child can journal their thoughts on their adventure. Ask them what they learned, and encourage them to show off their writing skills!

In the book, the main character gathers her people in order to protect their water supply from an oil pipeline for the sake of animals, plants, the environment, and the Earth. This might inspire a text-to-self connection, encouraging your child to learn about and spend more time in nature. Invite your child to brainstorm ways they can help care for the Earth. Students can keep a journal of what they notice—such as the growth of plants and trees. Your child can share observations and have discussions about environmental issues in your community.

Literacy Activity Instructions to Families

Materials

Book: *We Are Water Protectors*—Carol Lindstrom (author) and Michaela Goade (illustrator)
 “Bubbling Over with Ideas” brainstorming sheet
 Construction paper, crayons, lined paper

Step-by-Step Procedures

While reading this story, please keep these scaffolding questions in mind that you can use to communicate about the book with your child:

1. In what ways do we use water in our daily lives?
2. In what ways is water being used in the book? Did you learn anything interesting about how water is important for the Ojibwe tribe? Please explain in your own words.
3. What problem are the characters in the story facing? How is this a problem?
4. Why might water be important to other people and organisms?

After discussing the book with your child, please read the directions below to help with next steps:

1. Discuss all of the ways water is seen and used in this world. Then, use the brainstorming sheet to write down ideas or thoughts.
2. Have your child pick a piece of construction paper to use for the collage.
3. Using crayons and construction paper, create a collage of pictures and words with your child. Let the brainstorming sheet guide their ideas as you work together to display the different ways water is used in the world.
4. As you and your child create this collage, be sure to communicate how water is important in our lives, and what we can do to save water for future generations.

Ideas For Differentiation

1. For this activity, I have provided a sheet of lined paper. After discussing different ways water is used in the world, you can help your child make a list of ways they can save water in their own community.
2. You can have your child demonstrate mindfulness in their daily life by encouraging them to practice the ideas they have written down.

Extensions

Check out Carole Lindstrom's website (<https://carolelindstrom.com/>). You will find a link to an “activity kit” that includes extra activities you can do with your child related to the story. It includes a beautiful pledge you can have your child read and sign, a drawing activity, and a checklist that your child can fill out about what they do to protect the Earth. Feel free to navigate the website and print out more copies for friends and family to fill out too!

Post-Project Reflections Fatima described how creating this family literacy project around a children's book dealing with social justice issues inspired her to use literature to create change. She relayed the following insights that provide powerful understandings for teacher educators:

“Prior to this project, I did not realize just how much of an impact a children's book can have on its readers, especially one that deals with social justice issues. I believe that the text can really make a person empathize deeply with the charac-

ters of the book, empowering a child to generate transformation in their own life and community. With the illustrations full of emotions and the powerful words in *We Are Water Protectors*, a piece of literature can become a source of inspiration to inspire the reader to stand up against social injustice. I hope to create an environment in my classroom where students understand that when an author writes a book, it's a call to action for the readers. Books that are culturally relevant and aim to share stories on topics of cultural norms, oppression, and inequality are a form of protest. They are a protest against social injustice, and the authors' voices are heard through their readers. I feel it is important for students to understand this rationale for them to truly know the importance of books."

Case Study 2: Alexis' Academic Service-Learning and Professional Identity Reflections

Alexis' project centered around *Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré* by Anika Aldamuy Denise (author) and Paola Escobar (illustrator). Alexis has a particular focus on making sure that books in her classroom library are diverse and can help her students form meaningful connections. She noted the following:

"This course has taught me that incorporating diverse children's books can serve as a powerful tool to connect with parent(s)/caregiver(s) and families. These books might have characters or stories that resemble the families in my classroom. In addition, the students and their families may enjoy the subjects and topics introduced in the book, generating meaningful dialogue. A student may also want to learn more about the author and see if they have written any additional books. This encourages the child to become a lifelong reader."

"Prior to this project, I did not realize just how much of an impact a children's book can have on its readers, especially one that deals with social justice issues. I believe that the text can really make a person empathize deeply with the characters of the book, empowering a child to generate transformation in their own life and community."

In her rationale for creating the project, Alexis noted the importance of developing the identity of her future students as writers: "I designed this activity to accompany my children's book because the character in the book created puppets and crafted stories to tell children at the library. Therefore, I thought it would be a good idea to invite students to create their own puppet with a paper bag, and then write a story to accompany it. To be able to create a unique

character with an accompanying story will be entertaining. Hopefully, this will inspire students to become interested in writing more stories in the future. I enjoyed creating this activity because using your imagination is powerful, and children like to be creative."

Excerpt of Family Literacy Letter and Project: Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré, by Anika Aldamuy Denise (author) and Paola Escobar (illustrator)

Good evening, friends!

I am excited to be here at your school tonight to share my project that I have been working on all semester as a future educator. Tonight, you and your child will read the book *Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré*, by Anika Aldamuy Denise, with illustrations by Paola Escobar.

In this family literacy activity, you and your child will create a unique character in the form of a puppet! Your child will also write a short story that includes their character. I have provided an example for your child in case they would like to see an idea or visual!

Before reading the story, I recommend that you conduct a picture walk. This practice will invite your child to think about the purpose of the story, increasing literacy engagement. I have also provided sticky notes on some of the pages throughout the book. These prompts will have your child thinking about how Pura feels at different points throughout the text, or ask them to consider "what does a specific word mean?" I want to ensure that your child becomes a strong critical thinker! The connection between your child making their own puppet and how it relates to the book is that Pura learns how to make puppets in the text. Pura then tells sto-

ries that include her new and unique puppets. I hope you and your child bond over creating a character and writing a story of your own!

If your child enjoys this story, I recommend researching the author. If your child likes the illustrations, you can explore some of Paola Escobar's artwork. Here is a link to a read aloud from the story: [\(144\) Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpre Read-Aloud - YouTube](#) Here is a link to the author's website: [Anika Denise - Children's Book Author](#) Here is a link to the illustrator's drawings: [Paola Escobar - pickledink](#) Thank you for attending Family Reading Night!

Literacy Activity Instructions to Families

Materials

The book: *Planting Stories the Life of Librarian and Storyteller*- Anika Aldamuy Denise (author) and Paola Escobar (illustrator)

Brown paper bags, markers, crayons, scissors, construction paper, lined paper, liquid glue, #2 pencil

Step by Step Instructions

After you read the story, I hope you and your child have fun using your imaginations to create a unique character, just as Pura did in the story!

1. Have your child brainstorm or jot down some ideas of what kind of character they want to create for their puppet.
2. With a pencil, have your child trace an outline of their character on construction paper, making sure it is the right size to cover the flap on the paper bag.
3. Invite your child to draw the character's facial features and color the character to their liking.
4. After coloring and decorating the character, you or your child can cut out the character from the construction paper and then glue the face onto the flap of the brown paper bag.
5. Finally, have your child write down their short story on the lined paper! Be sure to "paint a picture" in the reader's head with lots of detail and description.

Please consider asking these questions to help brainstorm ideas:

1. What is your favorite animal? What is your favorite color? Do you have any pets?
2. What is your favorite movie or cartoon? Do you have any favorite characters?

3. Do you have any stuffed animals or toys that could help you create a character?
4. Do you like to draw, color or paint? Do you like to use your imagination and create characters?

Ideas for Differentiation

1. Re-read the story. During this reading, please think about how Pura's grandmother would tell her folktales in Puerto Rico. Ask your child if they remember a story or folktale that they heard when they were younger. Spend some time discussing it.
2. Invite your child to tell the story of *Perez y Martina* from their perspective. Let your child use their imagination and tell the story in a different way!

Extensions

I recommend that you visit your local library and check out other stories in this genre!

The author has other wonderful books to explore, such as *Baking Day at Grandma's*.

Post-Project Reflections Alexis described:

"I wanted children to create a character and make them into puppets, just as Pura did in the story to bring her stories from Puerto Rico to life in America. Pura did not want her stories involving her culture to be lost or forgotten; she invited children here to keep them alive as she exposed them to Latinx culture. Also, I wanted children to generate a story including the character that they created. The character could be anything that they wanted, such as something that represented a part of their culture. This could provide a framework for the child to tell a folktale or story from their culture by expressing who they are and where they came from. Hearing stories from other parts of the world can help promote the beauty of cultural diversity."

In the excerpt below, Alexis describes her commitment to using books in her future classroom to confront perspectives about dominant cultural norms and inequality:

"My students must know that there are different cultures from all around the world. These should be celebrated—no one should be ashamed of who they are or where they came from. I want my students to

be educated at a young age about the value of diverse literature so that they are aware of what is going on right now, as well as in the past. This will empower students to stand up for what is right and wrong in their community and in society. America is a melting pot filled with different cultures, and we should all be treated equally and with respect because we are all human. Children are born to show who they are, and can be friends with any other child regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and cultural norms.”

Concluding Thoughts

This academic service-learning initiative empowered PSTs to create research-based family literacy activities around a diverse selection of children’s books. This re-affirms the significance of creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to “know how to plan developmental- and skill-appropriate learning experiences” (Katz, Galera, & Silva, 2023, p. 45). The book and family literacy activities were donated to local families at a Title I school during a Family Reading Night event. PSTs were provided with a space to reflect on the experience of creating the family literacy project and the process of authentically collaborating with students and families to cultivate a community of literacy. In addition, the PSTs were provided with a forum to consider their future plans for involving families in their students’ literacy learning.

The Pre-Service Teachers in this service-learning project were also invited to consider the realities of the profession in our current age and the value of teaching with diverse children’s literature. As Schu (2022) notes, “one of the best ways we can bring this about in our classrooms and libraries is to be an advocate for stories that validate the uniqueness of each individual already existing in your reading community” (p. 22). In order to prepare reflective practitioners, it is important for teacher educators to collaborate with community partners to ensure that PSTs are equipped with tools to be successful in their future careers. Establishing a framework for family literacy practices to be instituted through an asset-based approach that celebrates community strengths is a significant practice to model for future educators. By providing vehicles for students to implement real-world applications of the content that we are exploring, a meaningful link between theory and practice is established. •

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