

Bridging Literacy Theory with Practice: Differentiated Academic Service Learning Projects with Children's Literature

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Classroom teachers need to create meaningful spaces for their students and families to explore diverse children's literature together. In order to prepare reflective practitioners, it is important for teacher educators to ensure that pre-service teachers (PSTs) are equipped with tools to be successful in their future careers. As Schu (2022) notes, there are "practical activities as well as conditions we can establish and maintain to help readers get lost in story and inquiry" (p. 67). By providing vehicles for students to implement real-world applications of the content that we are exploring in a differentiated manner, a meaningful link between theory and practice is established.

This article describes an academic service-learning initiative that is positioned as a component of an early childhood education foundational pre-teaching course. This teaching method combines meaningful service to the community with curriculum-based learning for PSTs. In this community literacy partnership, PSTs are invited to design an engaging family literacy activity around a children's book (with a focus on enhancing understanding of people and cultures throughout the world) for a child (and their family) at a local public school. The projects are donated by the PST to a student in the classroom during field experience week (as recommended by the mentor teacher). This experience "widens readers' perspectives by exposing them to multiple situations and viewpoints" (López-Robertson, 2023, p. 116). Diverse children's literature includes picture books that enhance student understanding of all people and cultures. This framework makes space for all individuals to see themselves represented in text. López-Robertson (2023) asserts that "all readers deserve to see their worlds, languages, and cultures reflected in books" (p. 116).

The family literacy packets include (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 are included with the book in a plastic bag to be enjoyed by a family whose child attends the school. The PST consulted with the mentor teacher in their field experience classroom in order to match a text that would likely be engaging for the student—in conjunction with a project that would meet family needs and be appropriate based on family resources. In the context of this authentic opportunity to engage pre-service teachers in service-learning projects, PSTs are provided with a forum to utilize children's literature as tools not only for instructional use but also for personal reflection and introspection (Nganga, 2020). Following participation in the project, the PSTs considered how the experience impacted their skillset, professional identity as a teacher, and developed a plan for involving parents/caregivers in their future students' literacy learning.

As a teacher educator, it is important that I model how to effectively utilize differentiation for my PSTs. Hall et al. (2003) describe the value of differentiated instruction, in that it facilitates the ability of all scholars to access the curriculum by providing learning tasks specific to students' needs. As PSTs select from a menu of literacy strategies that fit their individual letter and project design, the concept of differentiation is being actively implemented. This is in keeping with the importance of designing family literacy experiences that meet the needs of the individual student and their families who will receive the project. Through the personalized letter and project, the student and their family are receiving a

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differentiated approach to literacy instruction that incorporates a variety of strategies.

Choice Boards as a Tool for Differentiation

I used choice boards as a tool to help pre-service educators design a three-paragraph letter introducing their projects to students and families. A choice board is a collection of tasks or activities presented in a visual format that invites students to take ownership of their learning. This tool is ideal for differentiation in that it allows students to provide “responsive instruction designed to meet unique individual student needs” (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012, p. 304). I provided my PSTs with choices in terms of literacy strategies selected to compose their personalized family literacy letter around the diverse children’s book that would be donated to a student and local family (at the public school where they would be conducting their field experience). In order to ensure that PSTs had a foundation for each paragraph of the letter, certain items were designated as “required.” Other items were labeled as “optional” on the choice board, providing students with a sense of flexibility to adapt the letter in a manner that best served their project. A focus on ensuring that the tone of the letter is personable, yet professional, was emphasized throughout the process.

Figure 1 focuses on supporting the pre-service educator as they created an introduction to the family literacy project that the elementary school student and their family would be participating in together. Required items included two elements—a thoughtful description introducing the family literacy activity and a discussion of effective techniques to encourage inquiry and collaboration. Optional items include a choice of writing and art-based projects that the pre-service educator designed around their diverse children’s book. The PSTs could invite the student and their family to participate in these literacy activities to prepare for the read-aloud and project around the picture book.

To implement some of these strategies, teachers can invite families to:

- Create a writing activity (with instructions and supporting materials) to go along with part of the book (such as letter to character or journal entry to character).
- Create an open-mind portrait with instructions for a character in the book. An open-mind portrait provides students with the opportunity to draw a portrait of a character on the left side of a sheet of paper. On the right side, the student can illustrate aspects of a book’s character at important times during the story.

- Create an art project (with instructions and materials) to accompany part of the book.
- Create a game (with instructions and materials) to go along with book.
- Create an interactive vocabulary activity (with instructions and materials) to go along with book.
- Create instructions and a framework to guide families to write a poem inspired by a character in the book.

Figure 2 centers on facilitating the pre-service educator’s skill in explaining concepts about print to the elementary student and their family. Required items focused on literacy strategies that I felt were essential for families to have in their repertoire—the ability to identify the author and illustrator; read the title and generate a prediction; conduct a picture walk; preview key vocabulary words; encourage connections; and promote the use of questions to generate conversation around text. The pre-service educator was encouraged to explain what a picture walk “looks and sounds like” in their description to “paint a picture” for the family literacy participants. Optional items positioned the PST as facilitator—sharing examples of vocabulary words or connections, as well as inviting the family to participate in “noticings” around the diverse children’s book.

To implement some of these strategies, teachers can invite families to:

- Model an example of how to explain a key vocabulary word to the child.
- Include a personal example of a text-to-self or text-to-text connection that you made while reading the book (For example, ____).
- Encourage parent/caregiver to ask “what do you notice?” at a certain point in the book (explain).

Figure 3 focuses on developing the pre-service educator’s expertise in expanding the read-aloud and project’s impact through building the child’s identity as reader, writer, and learner. Required items included inviting the child to explore additional books by the author or another book on the subject; suggesting a possible field trip that connects to the book; sharing the author/illustrator website or an online interview about the book; or recommending writing a letter or journal entry to the main character. Optional items positioned the PST as facilitator, sharing a personal connection to the rationale for the suggested field trip or website, or an individual connection to the importance of developing the child’s identity as a reader and writer.

To implement some of these strategies, teachers can invite families to:

- Include a personal connection to the field trip or research/website. Explain why you chose to include

Figure 1
Family Literacy Project Choice Board, Paragraph 1

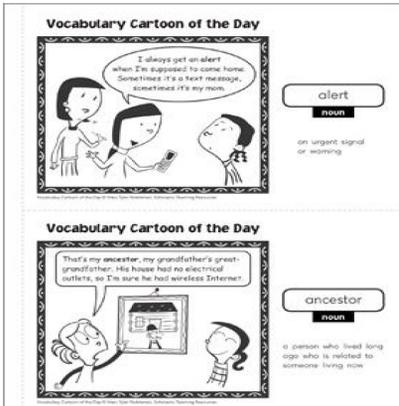
<p>Thoughtful description introducing the family literacy activity.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>	<p>You will include a discussion of effective techniques to encourage inquiry and collaboration.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>	<p>Letter is personable. Spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, professionalism.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>
<p>Create a writing activity (with instructions and supporting materials) to go along with part of the book (such as letter to character, journal entry to character).</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>	<p>Create an Open-Mind Portrait with instructions for a character in the book.</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>	<p>Create an art project (with instructions and materials) to go along with part of the book.</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>
<p>Create a game (with instructions and materials) to go along with book.</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>	<p>Create an interactive vocabulary activity (such as a vocabulary cartoon) to go along with book.</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p> 	<p>Create instructions and a framework to guide families to write a poem inspired by a character in the book.</p> <p>https://www.readwritethink.org/collections/poetry</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>

Figure 2
Family Literacy Project Choice Board, Paragraph 2

<p>Point out author and illustrator.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>	<p>Read the title and make a prediction about what the book might be about.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>	<p>Do a picture walk to activate child’s interest. Explain what a picture walk is in your description.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>
<p>Point out key vocabulary words to discuss.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>	<p>Making text-to-self or text-to-text connections</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>	<p>Encouraging active conversation- extending questions.</p> <p>REQUIRED</p>
<p>Model an example of how to explain a key vocabulary word to the child.</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>	<p>Include a personal example of a text-to-self or text-to-text connection that you made while reading the book (For example, _____).</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>	<p>Encourage parent/caregiver to ask “what do you notice?” at a certain point in the book (explain).</p> <p>OPTIONAL</p>

it, and how you think it extends the book with details.

- Explain why it is important to develop the child’s identity as a reader and/or writer. Give a specific personal example, if you would like.

Sample Student Letter Excerpts

As described by Claravall and Walthall (2024), I created an environment where my PSTs could prepare “young learners to be aware of conventions of print as well as critical concepts about how texts and books are tools

to develop their cultural identity, pride in one’s heritage, healthy self-esteem, and understanding that diversity is a strength” (p. 5). Excerpts of student letters illustrate how the PSTs used differentiated choice boards to craft their family literacy letters around diverse children’s books. Differentiation empowered the PSTs to provide choices, support, and let the families set the pace for their literacy learning experience around the text.

Excerpt 1

Please take some time with your child to read through this thoughtfully written and beautifully illustrated book

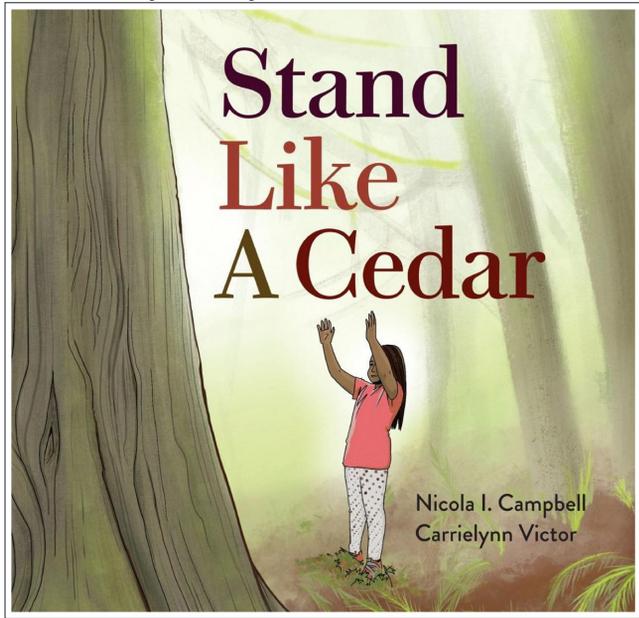
Figure 3
Family Literacy Project Choice Board, Paragraph 3

<p>Developing child’s identity as a reader.</p> <p>If your child enjoyed this book, you might consider checking out other books by this author.</p> <p>If your child was interested in topic, you might consider (another book).</p> <p style="text-align: center;">REQUIRED</p>	<p>Introduce ideas for connected field trip or research / website (such as author/ illustrator website or interview about book).</p> <p style="text-align: center;">REQUIRED</p>	<p>Developing the child’s identity as a writer.</p> <p>Suggest possible writing connections, such as writing a letter or journal entry to the main character.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">REQUIRED</p>
<p>Letter is personable. Spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, professionalism.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">REQUIRED</p>	<p>Include a personal connection to the field trip or research a website. Explain why you chose to include it, and how you think it extends the book with details.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OPTIONAL</p>	<p>Explain why it is important to develop the child’s identity as a reader and/or writer. Give a specific personal example, if you would like.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OPTIONAL</p>

by Campbell and Victor (2020) called *Stand Like a Cedar* (Image 1). Before you and your child read the book, I would like you to read the title and have your child predict what the book might be about. After that, you will do a picture walk. This can be done by viewing the book’s text and illustrations. While doing the walk, ask your child what they think the book will be about based on what they notice. This book will invite you into the culture and language of an Indigenous girl and her love for nature. In this book, you will learn about the importance of nature and the names of animals in Native languages. The pronunciation of the

words will be available in the back of the book. When reading, I suggest discussing new vocabulary words to describe nature, such as “blustery,” or family words like “descendants.” You might say, “What do you think blustery means in relation to the sun?” I also suggest prompting questions throughout the book; for example, on the page with the bear and leaves, ask your child what they notice about animals and nature when seasons change. At the end, I suggest asking your child if they identify any text-to-self-connections to the book. A possibility might be to reflect upon if they share the same love for nature as the girl in the book does.

Image 1
Stand Like a Cedar, Written by Nicola I. Campbell and Illustrated by Carrielynn Victor

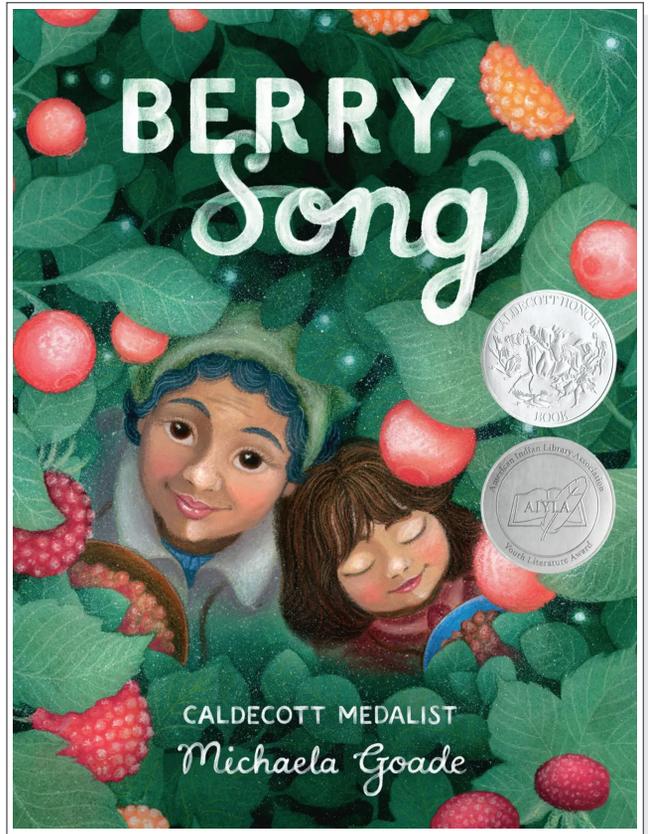


If your child enjoyed the book, consider reading some of the author's other books, such as *Shi-shi-etko*, *Shin-chi's Canoe*, and *A Day with Yahah*. If your child is interested in enjoying and appreciating nature and animals, I would consider reading *The Little Gardener* by Emily Hughes, *Wild Berries* by Julie Flett, and *Flashlight* by Lizi Boyd. I also recommend this website: The Nature Conservancy <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/youth-engagement/nature-lab/virtual-field-trips/> with virtual field trips to places such as the ocean and rainforest. I included this resource because your child might enjoy exploring other parts of nature. To connect this with writing, your child could also make a little journal or book about their adventures in nature, similar to the main character. It is so important for children to be engaged in their reading and writing. It helps broaden a child's options and spark new interest. Growing up, I always went to the library and discovered many different books. Those books sparked my interest in trying to write and draw my own stories. Hopefully, this project will spark that same interest. I enjoyed creating this project for your reader, and I hope you both like it.

Excerpt 2

Enjoy spending quality time with your child reading this beautifully illustrated book, *Berry Song* (Image 2), written and illustrated by Goade (2022). This book is about a girl who learns how to take care of the land from her

Image 2
Berry Song, Written and Illustrated by Michaela Goade



grandmother, as the land takes care of us. Before you begin reading, I would love for your child to look at the cover, read the title, look at the illustration on the front, make predictions about what the book might be about, and do a picture walk. In the picture walk, please flip through the pages of the book, examining the text and the illustrations, asking your child to consider what they noticed. As you read the book, it will open up new conversations about developing a sense of responsibility toward the Earth and the impact caring has on the Earth. Take the time to discuss and explain this information in depth with your child. While reading, please consider discussing the new vocabulary words that make up the resources the grandmother and girl collect from the Earth, such as "salmon," "herring eggs," "Crowberry," and "Huckleberry." Lastly, ask your child if they can relate any detail in the book to a personal experience of theirs. They might use the same resources the Earth provides or have similar ways of caring for the Earth as the grandmother and the girl in the book.

If your child enjoyed reading this book, you might want to have them listen to Michaela Goade's interview on the book https://www.teachingbooks.net/book_reading.cgi?id=27492

and explore the “about,” “illustrations,” and “books” tab on her website to learn more about her and her illustrations and other books- <https://www.michaelagoade.com/books>. For more excitement, have your child write a letter to the main characters of the book, the grandmother and the girl. Your child can explain what they already do to care for the Earth and brainstorm additional activities they plan to do in the future to care for the Earth. Creating this enjoyable and interactive family literacy project for you and your child has been a privilege and a delight. I hope your child will relish this amazing reading experience with you and be inspired to care for the Earth as it cares for us!

Reflections

PSTs reflected upon the impact of this initiative on their identity as a future educator. The project insights illuminate the significance of creating space for pre-service teachers to “be provided with opportunities to foster authentic, research-based literacy applications” (Katz et al., 2023, p. 51). Specifically, PSTs shared that the choice boards helped them reflect on how students may enjoy doing different types of activities to show their learning. This resonates with Gerde et al.’s (2024) framework of “how teachers can model, scaffold, and individualize children’s experiences while supporting children’s engagement in learning” (p. 2).

These insights included the following:

- “I learned how using diverse children’s books that represent characters and experiences can not only promote inclusivity and representation but also create opportunities for meaningful conversations and connections with families. Through these diverse children’s books, children and their families can consider their cultural backgrounds and identities, using books to reflect on their own experiences.”
- “Completing this assignment helped me grow professionally. It allowed my creativity to flow. The Family Literacy Project has given me the opportunity to create my own activity after reading a book. This is something essential in any classroom. Reading and learning, and then completing a kinesthetic activity afterward, allows the student to really understand the concept they’re learning. I know that if I want my students to be successful, I have to involve their family as much as I possibly can.”
- “Participating in this family literacy academic service learning activity had a significant impact on my professional identity as a future teacher. It helped me understand the importance of involving families in their children’s learning and development and how to create meaningful connections with them. Collaborating with families and providing them with

resources that they can discuss with their children helps teachers support their student’s learning and development in a more effective way. This activity also helped me develop my skills in creating and implementing family literacy projects. I learned how to use diverse children’s books to create a family literacy letter and project that meets the needs and interests of the families we work with.”

Wolter (2021) asserts that “educators, administrators, librarians, and literacy coaches fostering restorative practices should prioritize seeking and reading titles about diverse characters as well as those written by diverse authors” (p. 64). This differentiated academic service learning initiative provides readers and their families with real-world applications of that goal. Through the creation of varied, child-centered strategies for engaging with students as they grow as readers and writers, PSTs linked differentiation theory with practice, setting the stage for family literacy learning.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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