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Early-Childhood Teacher Candidates' Service Learning with Family Book Celebrations

By M. Susan McWilliams

An associate professor and a public school district administrator formed a family-school-community partnership to introduce family book celebrations to an early-learning center located in a high-poverty area in a midwestern city with more than 80% of children ($n=75$) who attended the center qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Primary goals for the celebrations were (a) to offer a venue for book-related experiences with families of children attending the early-learning center; (b) to engage early-childhood teacher candidates in service with families in an authentic and meaningful way; and (c) to analyze efficacy of the service-learning experience on teacher candidates. Overall, teacher candidates reported benefits in working with families, fostering interaction, and using props and concrete materials to promote successful book celebrations. Although this service-learning experience was relatively small, limited, and exploratory, it served as an initial study to inform further inquiries into early-childhood undergraduate service-learning experiences with families.

In early-childhood teacher education, one overarching goal is to develop undergraduate teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions in developmentally appropriate practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Core to the multiple components that formulate developmentally appropriate practice is *an education based on relationships*.

Service learning in teacher education is a venue for developing and nurturing relationships (Swick, 1999). First, *relationships with children* enable a pedagogy of care when teacher-education students both engage in service-based community work and also develop their knowledge of children's strengths, group stamina levels, interests, and developmental steps (Noddings, 2005). Next, professional *relationships with colleagues* expand inservice learning experiences when teacher-education students plan, implement, and reflect on experiences with each other, as well as with classroom teachers and community members. Cultivating professional relationships is important to the teaching profession because child outcomes are strengthened when professional, collaborative-learning communities develop and grow, drawing upon strengths of individual members within educational settings (McWilliams, Maldonado, Szczepaniak, & Jones, 2011). Finally, service learning offers a venue for growing *relationships with parents and families*, typically difficult to offer as part of a college course due to timing and access to families. In early-childhood education in particular, teachers and families work together to support the development of common educational goals such as transitions to and from school.

Service learning offers an especially beneficial pedagogical approach for teacher educators (Alvarez, 2009; Root & Furco, 2001; Swick, 1999). When quality-driven service-

learning experiences are part of teacher education, teacher candidates are offered venues for action research, reasons for authentic inquiry, and contexts for building and applying knowledge of children and families (Swick, 1999), as well as potential to develop awareness of how relationships serve effective teaching in early-childhood education. Among some of the many other benefits of service learning in teacher education is the potential for developing awareness and sensitivity to diverse ethnicities (Anderson, Daikos, Granados-Greenberg, & Rutherford, 2009).

Quality service-learning experiences in teacher preparation programs have potential to produce positive outcomes (Anderson, Daikos, Granados-Greenberg, & Rutherford, 2009). Faculty and students in colleges of education across the country engage in service-learning activities as a means for facilitating the development of responsible citizens. In addition, service learning is practiced and accepted within school districts across pre-K-through-Grade-12 settings (Fair, Davis, & Fischer, 2011). Anderson and his colleagues (2009) indicated, however, that collaborative service-learning partnerships between teacher educators on the university level and pre-K-through-Grade-12 school administrators and teachers are more difficult to implement. They suggested a myriad of reasons why partnerships with pre-K-through-Grade-12 school districts could be challenging, and their rationale ranged from lack of time to develop trusting relationships required for true collaboration to differing cultural norms between higher education and public school education to the current culture of assessment-driven curriculum that discourages service learning at all.

Alvarez (2009) identified a general overview of the benefits and intentions of service learning in teacher education.

Service-learning is a teaching method that encourages students to employ the values, skills, and knowledge learned in the classroom in real-life experiences through engagement within their schools and communities. In public school settings, service-learning provides both the pedagogical framework and the educational practice necessary for novice practitioners, while assisting schools to achieve designated goals. The intent of service-learning, ultimately, is that the activity is useful to both the recipient and the provider; hence, everyone benefits. (p. x)

Alvarez's summation was synchronous with my goals and intentions as an associate professor at an urban-based midwestern college of education who teaches a course with a service component. Feedback from student-teaching evaluations led faculty members in the early-childhood program at University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) to create intentional experiences with families of young children for teacher candidates prior to their entering into the student-teaching experience. Fortunately, a project director in a local school district was seeking support in developing family-literacy sessions for an early-learning center run by the district.

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Service-Learning Objectives

The early-childhood course that includes the department's service-learning requirement is *Trends in Early Childhood Education*. Service learning provides a natural connection to multiple trends: family education and programming, multicultural education, and English Language Learners, for example. Creating service learning with families also addresses feedback received on student-teaching evaluations from cooperating teachers indicating that students needed more experiences with families prior to the student-teaching experience. My over-arching goal was to create an opportunity for children, families, and teacher candidates that focused on literature and the joy of reading.

Three key objectives drove initial planning and subsequent assessment of this project's impact on teacher candidates. First, after learning from the district administrator about the stories and ethnic histories of families they would be serving, teacher candidates would create authentic, centers-based learning experiences to promote interaction, relationship building, and literacy learning. Second, teacher candidates would reflect on the impact of the project on their own learning and also on enjoyable, family, book-related fun. Throughout, the district administrator and I strove to fulfill a third goal: to create an undergraduate service-learning project that offered a new and joyful book-related experience for all family-school-community partnership members engaged in the project: teacher candidates, preschool teachers and school staff, families, and children.

Family Book Celebrations

I chose the term *Family Book Celebrations* to differentiate our program from existing, district-sponsored *Family Literacy* programs offered elsewhere. Family-literacy programming most often includes four components: parent education, student education, parent-child-together time, and assessment of program impact. One of our objectives was to support the school personnel in building trust with preschool families, and we believed that asking families to complete an assessment held potential to defeat our purpose. Several families in this population had generational histories of mistrust of public education, particularly among urban Native American families. Others, such as refugee families, were in the process of having initial family-school experiences in a new country. Because our primary funding source was philanthropic and thus did not require assessment of impact, we planned family book celebrations without asking families to complete assessments.

Our family book celebrations were inspired by the Pearson Foundation model of *Family Book Nights* (Pearson Foundation, 2012). During these Nights, families, school personnel, and volunteers come together to share books, create books, have a snack together, and read. We adopted and modified their centers-based approach in working with families with their permission and, in turn, the Pearson Foundation offered to supply us with training via teleconference, books for families, and professional assistance and support materials for our first family book celebration (J. Malchiodi, personal communication, August 2011).

Personnel from the Pearson Foundation, the district administrator, and I planned the first session with the expectation that early-childhood teacher candidates would plan and implement the second and third events. Once the semester began, we found that, due to scheduling conflicts, only 13 out of the 17 students enrolled in the course could participate in the family book celebration service learning due to scheduling conflicts. The remaining 4 students conducted service learning at a school site with kindergarten teachers.

Family Book Celebrations were held on three Friday afternoons outside of teacher candidates' typical class time. Timing for families worked at this early-learning center because most parents were unemployed. Events took place in the school gymnasium,

allowing teacher candidates to arrive 1 hour early to set up four centers and stay up to an hour after the experience to debrief with the professor and take down materials without disturbing children. During implementation, each of four pre-K classes rotated through 20 minutes of centers' time. The Table summarizes Family Book Celebration centers and activities. Note that preschool and kindergarten teachers typically use centers-based learning approaches; therefore, children's and teachers' familiarity with our format allowed for an easy transition into the project. Teachers who wish to replicate or modify our plans for their own classrooms may find the information in the Table particularly useful.

The support from the Pearson Foundation (2012) proved invaluable because our first event was scheduled just 3 weeks after the start of the semester, potentially offering planning issues for students just getting underway in a new course. The Pearson Foundation model offered teacher candidates high expectations for planning the two remaining book celebrations. The first event, although planned by me with Pearson Foundation staff, was set up, implemented, and deconstructed by teacher candidates. The remaining two Family Book Celebrations were planned and implemented by teacher candidates with support from me and from teachers of preschool classrooms. Teachers who wish to replicate Family Book Celebrations in their classrooms may benefit from viewing the short video on the Pearson Foundation Web site (Pearson Foundation, 2012).

Undergraduate-level teacher candidates ($n=13$) included 12 females and one male, all of whom were self-reported Caucasians. The early-learning center educated 75 children of multiple ethnicities, including children of refugees and immigrants, as well as high percentages of urban Native American, Latino, and African American children. During the spring 2012 semester, more than 80% of the children attending the school lived in poverty as defined by the federal government.

Outcomes and Implications for Early-Childhood Teacher Candidates

One key data source informed the project: undergraduate teacher candidates' descriptions, reflections, and analyses of their service-learning experiences. In this regard, the study was very limited, as few conclusions can be drawn from this analysis due to a lack of multiple data sources; however, value can be found in telling the story of teacher candidates' responses to this one unique service-learning experience.

As an assignment, undergraduate candidates were asked first to describe their roles and responsibilities in the service-learning project; second, to reflect on the value of their work to children and families; and third, to analyze how their experiences connected with the course objectives, readings, and class discussions. I copied, cut apart, and sorted students' work according to themes. After sorting data, I analyzed topical themes for predominant patterns to discern what most teacher candidates were saying within these themes.

Overall findings indicated that teacher candidates reported the benefit of the experience with planning and implementing a family event to their development as professionals. Within the overall *benefits of the experience* expressed by students, themes included (a) interactions are integral to working with children and families; and (b) working with props yielded more interaction between children and families and teacher candidates and families. Not surprisingly, teacher candidates did offer suggestions for the next class of early-childhood candidates—an indicator that they cared about their work and wanted it to continue. Under the *suggestions for next time* theme, teacher candidates encouraged a heavy use of props and learning materials for successful Family Book Celebrations.

Table*Family Book Celebration Themes and Centers-Based Activities*

	January 27	February 24	March 30
Theme	Books are Fun!	Nature Fun	Mother Goose
Responsibility for planning	McWilliams, district administrator, Pearson Foundation	Early-childhood teacher candidates	Early-childhood teacher candidates
Book Title (one book went home per child)	<i>Earl the Squirrel</i> by Don Freeman (2005)	<i>Over in the Meadow</i> by Ezra Jack Keats (1999)	<i>Each Peach Pear Plum</i> by Allan and Janet Ahlburg
Center #1 Read and Learn	Children pose with 8 props and have photos taken and immediately printed on labels. Photos are inserted (with help from parents, volunteers, and teacher candidates) in a pre-made book donated by Pearson Foundation. Books are read with children (1:8 ratio plus volunteers).	<i>Over in the Meadow</i> story is read and retold using teacher-candidates' prepared props (tongue-depressor puppets). After hearing the story once, children select an animal puppet to become when their page comes up in the story (large group).	<i>Mother Goose</i> rhymes: Participants <u>sing</u> the rhyme then sing and act-out the rhyme with teacher-candidate-made props (1:4 ratio).
Center #2 Read and Play	Eric Carle Book Center is available with related stuffed animals and also Fisher Price stacking alphabet blocks and Little People (large group).	Books are available (selected by teacher candidates) with related teacher-candidate-made learning materials and games (1:4 ratio).	More <i>Mother Goose</i> rhymes are used: repeat and chant new rhymes and story-act with props (1:4 ratio).
Center #3 Read and craft	<i>Earl the Squirrel</i> readers' theater (with puppets and props) is led by ECE teacher candidates, followed by dog/squirrel mini-race if time allows (large group).	Children sing <i>Over in the Meadow</i> together with a teacher candidate who will use the book as a prop for remembering the story song. Make bookmarks with animal stickers, crayons, and markers.	Reading of <i>Each Peach Pear Plum</i> ; children and families create a story-retelling prop (a tag-board pie pan and crust that opens, held together on one side with a brad; glue paper peach, pear, and plum inside the pie (large group).
Center #4 Read and Snack (large group)	Enjoy snack and stories with dialogic reading (Zevenbergen, & Whitehurst, 2003) and intentional interaction (animal crackers and juice).	Enjoy snack and stories with dialogic reading and intentional interaction (animal-shaped cookies and frosting applied by children and family members; water).	Enjoy snack and <i>Three Bears</i> puppet show (gummy bears and water).

Interactions are integral to working with children and families. Students predominantly discussed the importance of interacting through their vocabulary: the words *communicating*, *talking*, and *speaking* were most often used. Some commented on their fears of teaching children and working with families who did not know English (with no interpreters present). Below, a student comments on how she viewed interaction with families.

The most powerful experience that I experienced from the service-learning projects was interacting with families. They all seemed so thankful that we were there even if we spoke different languages. Finding ways to communicate was a learning process, and I now know the significance and importance of finding ways to help your ESL students understand within your class. (MS, personal communication, May 2012)

Interaction is based on relationships (Pianta, 1997) and has been demonstrated as a key indicator of quality education in the early-childhood years (Burchinal, Howes, Pianta, Bryant, Clifford, & Barbarin, 2008). Relating to and with people with intentional educational or social goals was at the heart of our service-learning work. Yet, none of my students used the word *relationship* in their papers. Instead, the term *interaction* was used, and for good reason. Due to awareness of the importance of interaction in effective teaching, current early-childhood literature points to dimensions of interaction as quality indicators for teachers of young children (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Left unanswered in teacher candidates' papers was whether or not they conceptualized dimensions of interaction as inclusive of relationship building. Teacher candidates' comments revealed the need to unpack *interaction* terminology in the context of service learning. Debriefing with teacher candidates regarding the role of *relationship* in successful interactions may shed light on their understanding.

The use of props yielded high interaction among participants. Teacher candidates observed the correlation between number of props used while interacting with children and the responses of the children and their families. They put their observations into play, especially during the last Family Book Celebration event.

I thought that the props we made for the nursery rhymes were the most meaningful because I found that most of the parents participated in this activity... It was nice to see the parents get involved in acting out the nursery rhymes. (JP, personal communication, May 2012)

The most frequent reference to props by teacher candidates was related to the wildly successful puppet show (*Three Bears*) provided to the children at the last Family Book Celebration. Using props, concrete materials, and learning materials or games with families is part of developmentally appropriate practice in early-childhood education (Lilly & Green, 2004). Teacher candidates appeared to have internalized the concept as their own discovery, in spite of the fact that they had learned this concept in multiple course readings and discussions. In this case, service learning offered an authentic way to experience and discover the power of developmentally appropriate practice with families.

Changes in the attitudes, dispositions, and thinking of teacher candidates were not assessed because the assignment involved a reflective self-report. In future projects, a survey would substantiate self-claims by students who report change in attitude about poverty, race, and working with families. In summary, emerging themes demonstrated a value in working with families, the importance of interaction with children and families, and the need for props and learning materials to serve as a venue for increasing interaction among children and families and among children, families, and teachers. I observed that, minimally, teacher candidates' quality of work far exceeded past assignments that required

former students to create hypothetical lesson plans and learning materials.

Parting Thoughts

According to a review of the literature of service learning by Anderson and his colleagues (2009), one indicator of quality service learning is a provision for student decision-



One early-childhood teacher candidate narrates a puppet show using the book, *The Three Bears*, as a service-learning experience with pre-K children and families.

making in the service-learning experience. In this case, the undergraduate assignment had flexibility within the boundaries of requiring children's literature selections (and subsequent use with families). Students selected the books and created designs for their own reading extensions, games, crafts, and activities; supplied materials lists to the professor; and had to suffer natural consequences if they did not get the list to her on time—all work-related skills.

As a result, service-learning students took ownership of

the Family Book Celebration events and sincerely cared about their performances, about outcomes, and about helping lay the groundwork for future service-learning groups.

My overarching goal was to facilitate a literature-based service learning project centered on the joy of reading for all participants. One of the reasons teacher candidates cared about their project was because they were focused on fun. Their successes with fun through joyful book celebrations made them proud of their work. Important to their learning was experiencing something they already knew: props and concrete materials made teaching young children more successful.

Teacher candidates' continuous reflections about the importance of interaction without mention of the word *relationship* troubled me because our early-childhood profession and service-learning work both hold relationship at the center of learning. Did teacher candidates understand that at the core of interaction is relationship (Pianta, 1997)? My concern motivated me to revisit Mem Fox's (2001) work on reading aloud to young children. A well-known author of books for young children, Fox often focuses on an adult imperative—for teachers and parents alike—for creating joyful, relationship-based, reading experiences with children:

The fire of literacy is created by the emotional sparks between a child, a book, and the person reading. It isn't achieved by the book alone, nor by the child alone, nor by the adult who's reading aloud—it's the relationship winding between all three, bringing them together in easy harmony. (p. 10)

Ultimately, although my students did not use the word while reflecting, they certainly experienced *relationship* in the Mem Fox sense of the term.

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