

Create, Construct, Curate: Fostering Community Literacy Around Diverse Children's Literature

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Abstract

This paper describes an academic service learning project that enabled teacher education candidates to create research-based family literacy activities around a diverse selection of children's books. The book and family literacy activities were donated to local families at a Title I school during a reading night event. Teacher education candidates reflected on the experience of creating the family literacy project and their future plans for involving families in their students' literacy learning.

Keywords: *academic service learning, teacher education candidates, family literacy, diverse children's books, community literacy partnerships*

In order to prepare reflective practitioners, it is important for College of Education faculty to collaborate with community partners to ensure that teacher education candidates are equipped with tools to be successful in their future careers (Nganga, 2020). The academic service learning project being described in this paper was embedded throughout a foundation course in the Early Childhood Education program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. This course had a focus on student-centered practices in the classroom, family involvement in early childhood education, content area literacy strategies, and realities of the profession. Most

importantly, future educators developed a framework for sharing how “reading enriches the life of an individual personally, socially, and culturally” (Wolter, 2021, p. 9).

The project supported the following course student learning outcomes: (1) to understand the importance of family involvement and support in children's education and know how to interact and communicate effectively with families; (2) to understand human developmental processes and apply this knowledge to plan developmental and skill-appropriate early childhood instruction and ongoing assessment that motivates students and is responsive to their individual

characteristics and needs; and (3) to understand student diversity and know how to plan developmental- and skill-appropriate learning experiences and design assessments that are responsive to differences among students, address individual needs, and that promote all student learning. Reflections from teacher education candidates after completion of the service learning project demonstrated how these outcomes were achieved.

As a foundation for the activity, each student enrolled in this course was provided with a book that was considered for the International Literacy Association’s Notable Books for a Global Society. Peer feedback activities were included in the course for the family literacy letter and activity in order to facilitate cooperative learning opportunities. In this summary paper, instructions for creating the family literacy letter and activity are shared, as well as two student case studies and post-project reflections (see Figure 1 for sample projects).

Figure 1

Sample family literacy projects created by teacher education candidates



Family Literacy Letter and Family Literacy Activity Instructions

At the beginning of the semester, teacher education candidates were invited to design an engaging and creative family literacy activity around a diverse children’s book for a member of their community. Students were advised that their family literacy packets and children’s books would be donated to a local Title I public school for families to use with their children. The Associate Chair of Teacher Education suggested that this Pre-K-8th grade school with a history of cultivating strong family collaborations would be a valuable partner.

The assignment included two parts. First, teacher education candidates wrote a thoughtful letter to parent(s) and/ or caregivers explaining the activity and discussing effective techniques to encourage inquiry and collaboration. Second, they developed specific instructions for the activity. This included a list of all materials, step-by-step procedures, prompting questions, ideas for differentiation, and extensions. These would be included with the book in a Ziploc bag to be enjoyed by a family whose child attends the school.

The letter for parent(s) and/or caregivers was to include a thoughtful description introducing the family literacy activity; an introduction to the

author and illustrator; a preview of the book (read the title, review the cover illustration, and make an initial prediction about what the book might be about); a picture walk to activate the child's interest; and an opportunity to point out key vocabulary words to discuss. The letter would include the elements of encouraging text-to-self or text-to-text connections; offering active conversation-extending question ideas; and developing the child's identity as a reader. Recommendations for developing this literate identity were provided, such as, "If your child enjoyed this book, you might consider exploring other books by this author at your local library. If your child was interested in the topic, you might consider (provide another book or book(s) that might be of interest)." The letter could introduce ideas for a connected field trip, or possibilities for research through a website on the book or topic. It could also develop the child's identity as a writer with suggestions, such as inviting the family to compose a letter or journal entry to the main character.

The components of the Family Literacy Activity could include step-by-step procedures for the activity; prompting questions (4 questions); ideas for differentiation (2 ideas); and extensions (2 extensions).

Figure 2

Excerpt of Marlene's family literacy letter

After reading *A thousand white butterflies*, the next step is for you and your child to create a butterfly string where each butterfly represents a member of their family. Each butterfly can have a picture or drawing of the family member; they can decorate and write words on the butterfly to match the family member's personality. While working together, have an open discussion with your child about your family's origins, who everyone is in their family, and what makes them unique. Having these discussions and asking questions will prepare your child for the reflection letter they will write for this activity. This packet includes an example activity I made of my family and materials for the activity.

Before reading the book to your child, read the title and have your child predict what the book might be about. Moreover, make sure to point out the authors and the illustrator before you start reading. In addition, I encourage you to do a picture walk, which is a preview of the book. In the picture walk, you would flip through all the pages and quickly look at the illustrations and text. Ask your child what they wonder and notice while doing the picture walk. Once you begin reading, I ask that you point out the key vocabulary words I have included in the instructions. This beautiful story about family and friendship will lead to new conversations with your child about their own family and background that will lead to the student connecting the book to their own life and experiences.

Marlene's Family Literacy Letter and Project Summary

An excerpt of Marlene's family literacy letter (see Figure 2) based on the book *A Thousand White Butterflies* (Betancourt-Perez & Williams, 2021) provides a sample of this community partnership work. The family was invited to answer the question "Who is your family?" and consider how we all have different family makeups. Marlene highlighted that:

No family looks the same; these differences should be celebrated! For example, my family is comprised of my mom, dad, brother, and sister. However, my mother is staying with my aunts and grandma in Mexico for the next few months. Your family may look similar to mine, or be something completely different!

After reading *A Thousand White Butterflies*, the project (see Figure 3) invites the family to create a butterfly string, where each butterfly represents a member of their family (see Figure 4).

If your child enjoyed reading this book and would like to read more books like it, I have included a list of suggested readings at the end of the letter. If your child loves learning new Spanish words, you can visit the websites I included so your child can increase their Spanish vocabulary. These websites are good resources for learning Spanish and about the different cultures in Latino America. Furthermore, I have included a list of bilingual books (English and Spanish). Feel free to add any of the books listed to your home library! Lastly, I ask that you and your child write a reflection letter about what they learned from the book and about themselves after reading and doing the activity. This will help your child further develop their writing and literacy skills and identity as a writer.

Figure 3

Excerpt of Marlene's Family Literacy Activity

Prompting questions

1. Who is your family? Who lives with you and your family?
2. Isabella's father is still waiting for permission to travel to the United States in Colombia. Have you ever been separated from a family member? Why were you separated from your family member? If you haven't been separated from a family member, how do you think it feels to be apart from a family member?
3. It is Isabella's first day of school in the United States because she immigrated from Columbia. Can you tell me what you know about immigration? Do you know anyone who immigrated from another country?
4. What languages do you hear in the book? What languages do you speak; are they spoken in the book?

Step-by-step procedures

1. Find the butterfly template. Have a conversation with your child about who is in your family.
2. Help your child design a butterfly that represents each member of your family that will be on the butterfly string. I have included a pack of crayons.
3. After designing all of your butterflies, please cut them out with scissors.
4. Grab the yarn included in the materials and tape the first butterfly, which should be your child's butterfly, at the top.
5. Tape the rest of the butterflies to the yarn. Cut off any excess yarn from the butterfly string. You now have a beautiful butterfly family string!

Ideas for differentiation

- Have your child re-tell the story or a scene from the story to you. Encourage them to be detailed and specific.
- Have the child explain the meaning of the vocabulary words to you in their own words. Encourage them to use the word in a sentence.

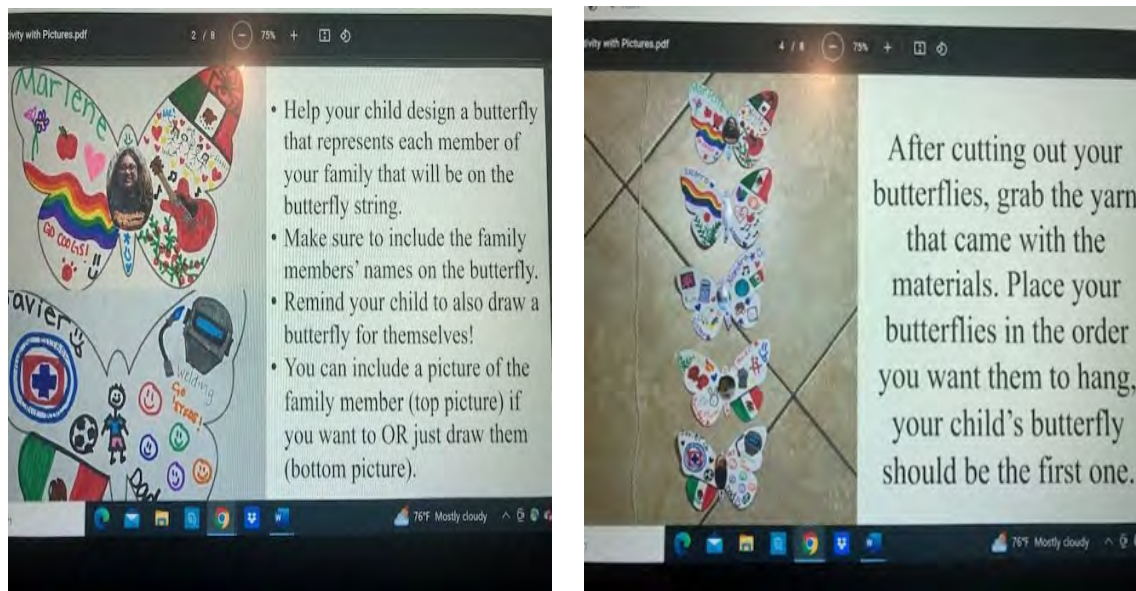
Extensions

- Visit the following websites to increase your child's Spanish vocabulary.
 - o <https://www.abeya.com/>
 - o <https://pbskids.org/noah/>
 - o <https://www.youtube.com/c/bashoandfriends/playlists>
 - o <https://plazasesamo.com/?code=US>
- Visit Karen Lynn Williams's website for more books written by her.
 - o <https://karenlynnwilliams.com/books/>
- Books with themes similar to *A Thousand White Butterflies*:
 - o *Home is in between* by Mitali Perkins

- o *Wishes* by Mượn Thị Văn
- o *Me & Mama* by Cozbi A. Cabrera
- o *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales
- o *What is a refugee?* by Elisa Gravel
- o *Carmela full of wishes* by Matt de la Peña
- o *The proudest blue: A story of hijab and family* by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S. K. Ali
- o *Fry bread: A Native American family story* by Kevin Noble Maillard
- Bilingual books to learn more Spanish vocabulary:
 - o *My papi has a motorcycle* by Isabel Quintero
 - o *From the bellybutton of the moon and other summer poems* by Francisco X. Alarcón
 - o *Nosotros means us* by Paloma Valdivia
 - o *Abuela* by Arthur Dorros
 - o *My town/Mi pueblo* by Nicholas Solis
 - o *Waiting for the biblioburro* by Monica Brown
 - o *Mango, abuela, and me* by Meg Medina
 - o *Sol a sol: Original and selected bilingual poems* by Lori M. Carlson

Figure 4

Sample Activity Instructions and Project Model



Marlene’s Family Literacy Project Reflections

After participating in this academic service learning initiative, Marlene described the following insights:

Using diverse children’s books is a powerful way to connect with families.

We can use the books to represent the different families in our classroom, which in turn will create a safe and positive learning environment. These books serve as mirrors of our students’ cultures and windows into other cultures in and out of our classroom and community.

Marlene explained that she created the butterfly string activity for the following reasons: First, a family tree isn't always the best way to represent a family; Second, the book mentions butterflies a lot, and butterflies serve as a symbol in the book; and finally, it is an excellent way to include all types of families, not just the conventional kind. In summary, this creative activity can lead to powerful discussions about one's family history and culture.

As a future bilingual teacher, Marlene noted that the "involvement of families/caregivers in their children's literacy learning in my future classroom is one of my highest priorities." She continued to describe the importance of establishing a line of connection with students' caregivers "since we will work together to ensure their child is the best person they can be." Marlene further shared that she planned to include resources and tools with caregivers to enhance student learning and foster a sense of community in her future classroom.

Maritza's Family Literacy Letter and Project Summary

An excerpt of Maritza's family literacy letter (see Figure 5) and an excerpt of her family literacy project (see Figure 6) based on the book *Pura's Cuentos: How Pura Belpré Reshaped Libraries with her Stories* (Pimentel, 2021) provide an additional sample of this community partnership work. Maritza invited families to "help your child express themselves by writing and illustrating their own story!" She included a personal connection by sharing how:

Growing up, my mother would share her own folktales and tell them to me as I was going to bed. Since they were verbal and from her time in Mexico, we didn't have any physical books. All I could do was imagine the stories in my head. We all have a tale to tell, but don't always know how to brainstorm ideas, write it out, or even draw it out. With this in mind, students have the choice to work on their own with parent help, or pair up with another family member or friend(s) to create their own story. Materials will also be included in this packet to ensure that each child has all the supplies needed to become authors and illustrators!

Figure 5

Excerpt of Maritza's family literacy letter

Hello authors and illustrators,

This project is meant with the intention of student expression. Children can not only share their ideas, but learn from the stories of others. To inspire your child's ideas for a story, I recommend reading *Pura's Cuentos: How Pura Belpré reshaped libraries with her stories*, written by Annette Bay Pimentel and illustrated by Magaly Morales. Start off by exploring the cover of the book and making predictions about what the story might be about. (This will give your child ideas for creating the title and cover of their own book). Afterwards, I encourage you to do a picture walk with your child by going through the pages of the book and looking at the illustrations. Ask your child what he/she notices about the page, or what they think may happen next based on the pictures. As you read, you'll also notice that this book uses Spanish vocabulary, such as "cuentos," "abuela," and "coqui." If your child does not speak Spanish, encourage them to find the meaning of these key vocabulary words using context clues in the story. Similar to Pura's life, I also experienced most of my stories being told orally, rather than from a book. Try to make a text-to-self or even a text-to-text connection from the book with your child.

If you enjoyed this fun activity and would like to continue your child's learning, I recommend reading *Planting stories: The life of librarian and storyteller Pura Belpré* by Anika A. Denise. You can also view more

books by Annette Bay Pimentel by checking out her website <http://www.annettebaypimentel.com/>. The following website also includes a read aloud for Pura's Cuentos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAAP2mdknD8> If you wish to give your child a more hands-on experience, I also recommend taking a field trip to your local library. What better place to explore reading than a place full of books! Now that your child is an official writer and illustrator, have them practice their techniques by writing a letter to their favorite author or their favorite character from a book.

Figure 6

Excerpt of Maritza's family literacy activity

Prompting questions

1. What are some key words you could include in your story? What makes them key words?
2. Have you ever been told a story without a book? What was it about?
3. Do you know what "cuentos" are? What about the word "abuela" or even what a "coqui" is?
4. What are some folktales that are told in your culture?

Step-by-step procedures

1. Start by brainstorming ideas for your story in the Bubble Map Template provided in the packet. Your ideas can be written down, or even drawn out in the bubbles.
2. Once you have an idea for your story, move on to the Beginning, Middle, & End Template provided in the packet. You will use this to organize your story into three separate parts.
3. After you have organized your story, begin to write it down on the lined paper. The story can either be long or short.
4. Cut off the excess lined paper that was not used in writing your story.
5. Use another sheet of lined paper (or even the excess portion from before) to create your illustration for your story.
6. Pick a colored sheet of construction paper and fold it in half to create a small booklet.
7. Glue both your written story and your illustration on the inside of the booklet.
8. Once the glue is dry, go ahead and decorate your outside cover.
9. Optional: Repeat steps 3-6 to create a longer story and make your book even thicker! To attach all parts together, make sure to glue the back parts together (an example will be provided in the packet).
10. Your final step is to read your new book to a family member or a friend!

Ideas for differentiation

- Go to your local library and ask permission for your child to interview a librarian. Make sure they come up with a couple questions at home before heading there. Your child may also want the librarian to read their story, or to help "publish" their book on themselves.
- Have your child act out their newly written book, as if it were a play. They may need help from other family members to play various characters. You can even help them create their own props.

Extensions

- Check out the author's website to find more books that help represent different cultures and people. (<http://www.annettebaypimentel.com/>)
- You can also use the following websites to help your child write and illustrate more books! The website includes templates for writing and drawing- <https://www.sunnydayfamily.com/2017/02/make-your-own-book-for-kids.html> This website has more in depth instructions on how you can physically create your book- <https://earlylearningideas.com/blank-books/>

Maritza's Family Literacy Project Reflections

After participating in this academic service learning initiative, Maritza described her learning as follows:

Using diverse children's books as a tool to connect with parents and families helps in building stronger relationships with those in the community. For instance, although one may not look or come from the background that your students are from, it is still beneficial to represent them in their learning. Not only will this increase student motivation, but it will also ensure that there is a positive learning environment.

Maritza elaborated on her rationale for creating the activity—"I decided that it was best for the children to create their own story in order to promote reading and writing strategies. . . . I was able to write and illustrate my own story as a model."

Maritza noted that in her future classroom, she will involve families in their child's literacy learning by making sure that many of her literacy projects can incorporate family assistance. For example, "If I assign a storyboard project, then I will break down how to organize your story so that each student can give a beginning, middle, and end." In addition, Maritza described how she will provide "outside resources, such as videos, blogs, and links, that can serve as additional ideas for the student's storyboards."

Project Insights

Teacher education candidates articulated the powerful lessons gleaned from participation in the academic service learning initiative through reflection after creating their projects. This is in keeping with Schu's (2022) recommendation to pause and reflect as we "think about the energy and conversations you see around books. How are students welcomed to a safe, loving environment?" (p. 14). It is hoped that providing vehicles for future educators to implement

real-world applications of the content that we were exploring would facilitate a meaningful link between theory and practice. Service learning requires action from teacher education candidates to participate in civic responsibility (Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009) and to learn about and engage with the communities they serve. Service learning projects also require future educators to engage critically with resources they anticipate using in the classroom (Pomerantz, 2018). It is important for teacher education candidates to be provided with opportunities to foster authentic, research-based literacy applications. Through participation in this initiative, future educators engaged in a meaningful academic service learning partnership in collaboration with a local school community.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Anne Katz is a Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at the University of Houston. She recently served as a member of the Notable Books for a Global Society (NBGS) Awards Committee of the International Literacy Association, and is currently chairing a Research and Practitioner Award for innovative uses of NBGS books. Dr. Katz enjoys mentoring future educators and facilitating community literacy partnerships with local schools.

Marlene Galera is a senior B.S. student in Teaching and Learning (Early Childhood - Grade 6 Bilingual Generalist) in the College of Education at the University of Houston. She is passionate about equitable and inclusive education practices and supporting dual-language classrooms. She is looking forward to becoming a bilingual teacher and providing the best quality of education to her students.

Maritza Silva is a senior B.S. student in Teaching and Learning (Early Childhood-Grade 6 Bilingual Generalist) in the College of Education at the University of Houston. She

enjoys being in the classroom environment and having the opportunity to work with many students. Maritza is looking forward to

beginning her student teaching this upcoming school year, as well as her journey in the field of education.

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