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## Inviting Teacher Candidates into Book Talks: Supporting a Culture of Lifelong Reading

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## **Inviting Teacher Candidates into Book Talks: Supporting a Culture of Lifelong Reading**

By Janine Bixler, Sally Smith and Susan Henderson

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### **Abstract**

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This article describes our collaborative inquiry, three teacher educators/researchers of literacy from different institutions who shared a concern about how few teacher candidates in our programs neither viewed themselves as readers nor possessed a love of reading, qualities we view as key to supporting all children as lifelong readers, writers, and communicators. In this paper, we share how we took action and studied the use of book talks in our programs to support a culture of lifelong reading among our teacher candidates and to offer possibilities for candidates' future teaching experiences. The study took place over two years. In phase one, we studied groups of our candidates from our literacy/ language arts methods courses as they engaged in book talks. In phase two, we followed-up with nine of the participating candidates, three in each institution, during student teaching or their first year of teaching to explore how the book talk experience influenced their early teaching efforts. Findings show that book talks and the culture created in reading for pleasure and purpose made a positive impression on the way candidates viewed what it means to be a reader and their role as future teachers of literacy. In addition, we found many challenges that impeded candidates' efforts to act on their visions of using book talks and developing independent readers in their classrooms.

*Inviting Teacher Candidates into Book Talks: Supporting a Culture of Lifelong Reading*

"I truly didn't realize the significance of it until I was a member of this club. Books are meant to be discussed and to be

delved into and enjoyed and I need to teach my students how to do that before they will be able to do it on their own.”

(Nina, Teacher Candidate)

Nina was a participant in our study that examined how teacher candidate book talks and opportunities to engage in pleasure reading might support our teacher candidates' knowledge and experience with promoting lifelong reading with their future students. As literacy educators, we often initiate conversations with our teacher candidates to think beyond the importance of modeling and supporting literacy strategies to consider how vital it is for teachers to **be** readers and writers and demonstrate a love of reading and writing (Ruddell, 1995). We open these conversations because ironically, despite the heavy curriculum focus on reading and language arts, many of our teacher candidates do not love to write or read. At the beginning of each semester, when we survey candidates, at least fifty percent of our candidates will admit that they rarely read for pleasure, do not like to read, or have a hard time “getting into” or “sticking with a book.” Similarly, Applegate & Applegate (2004) have surveyed hundreds of their preservice teachers, also finding that, 51.5 % of their participants were “unenthusiastic readers.” These results are of concern for us as many have asserted that the most effective teachers are those who demonstrate a love for reading (Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, & Radencich, 2000). Our experience with what differentiates a teacher as effective and influential concurs with this assertion.

We (the teacher educators/researchers of this study) share a philosophy that literacy instruction needs to include a balance of explicit teaching of word study and comprehension strategies, with opportunities to engage in reading real texts for pleasure as well for information.

Many states have adopted the Common Core Standards, which cover literacy in language arts and the content areas. These new standards are noteworthy for their emphasis on close, critical reading of fiction and nonfiction. Yet we, along with other practitioners, have noted in reviewing the goals and practices, that the Standards consider meaning to reside in the text itself (CCSS, 2010; Calkins,

Ehrenworth, Lehman, 2012). The understanding of the personal and pleasurable aspects of reading, the transaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978), the importance of the reader's construction of the text's meaning (described more fully in this paper) is missing. Based on our understanding of the importance of modeling how vital it is for teachers to experience and model reading for pleasure, this paper advocates an emphasis on pleasurable, personal reading, alongside a close reading of a text's content. While we agree with and already model most aspects of the literacy standards in the Common Core Standards, we continue to incorporate the type of literature discussions discussed in this paper.

Readers need to engage in conversations (McIntyre, 2007; Peterson & Eeds, 2007) and share their own unique responses to literature (Rosenblatt 1978). The current emphasis on guided reading groups often places too great of a focus on strategic reading, with no or limited opportunity to engage readers in sustained and meaningful discussions about literature (Short, 1999), nor the opportunity to develop a reading life (Cooper, 2009). Other studies indicate that most fifth graders rarely read for pleasure outside of school, placing the formation of life-long reading habits on teachers in classrooms (McKool, 2007). In addition, the report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (NEA, 2007) raises concerns that pleasurable reading is on the decline as children enter their teenage years and throughout adulthood. As a result, trends have shown a drop in comprehension scores as well as a decline in civic and social engagement in adults (Gambrell, 2008). Recently, psychologists and neuroscientists have given greater attention to how fiction enriches our lives, concluding that narratives expand readers' experiences and influence beliefs and behaviors, such as reducing prejudice and stereotypes (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Consequently, if we neglect to address our own preservice teachers' limited reading habits, our candidates may not engage young learners and give them a purpose for reading, both for pleasure and information (Applegate & Applegate, 2004).

This paper will describe our study on how teacher educators might engage teacher candidates in book talks and independent

reading to provide contexts that 1) explore their identities as readers and how they define what it means to be a reader, 2) invite them to have meaningful discussion about books, and 3) offer possibilities for promoting lifelong reading and book talk in their future classrooms.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The importance of readers' engagement in personal response, the literary transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978) that prepares them to understand and analyze their own experiences and experiences and histories of others, is an underlying theme of the study's framework. According to Rosenblatt, the content of the mental images the text sets off will be colored and influenced by the personal experiences of the reader. The facilitated literature discussion group greatly enhances support for extending this transaction.

The ways in which talk helps to confirm, extend, or modify individual interpretations, creating a better understanding of the text, is explored and documented in the studies and theories of Douglas Barnes (1993). Barnes described exploratory talk in small or large groups as talk that includes hesitations and changes of direction, tentativeness, assertions and questions, and maintained that, "in the course of the talk (readers) are in part exploring their responses to what they have read, but in an important sense they are also constructing them. And the construction is being done collaboratively" (1993, p. 27). Other researchers looking at the response of small, facilitated groups of students have documented increased participation, sophistication in reading strategies, and deeper comprehension (Almasi, 1995, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003, Eeds & Wells, 1989). Although these studies and others (e.g. Maloch, 2004; Pierce, 2006) feature teachers as experienced readers and facilitators in scaffolding meaningful conversations about texts, our study aimed to exam ways to promote meaningful literature discussions with teacher candidates who may have limited experience with reading and discussing books. We believe, based on our own experiences with teachers, that although there are many rich examples in the research on book discussion in elementary and middle school classrooms, these opportunities are not frequent. Research indicates that even practicing teachers underestimate children's ability to comprehend and discuss complex issues in literature (Baker, Leftwich, & McDermott, 2001). From our past classroom discussions about books with candidates, we knew that our preservice teachers were

somewhat naïve in their expectations about how children think and the possibilities for engaging children in conversations about books.

## Methods

### Participants and Context

To explore the possibilities for engaging our childhood/elementary teacher candidates in children's literature book talks, each of us created a book discussion experience that fit our programs, candidates, and current teaching contexts. The sites included a liberal arts college in a small, diverse city in the northeast (NEC), a large university located outside a northeast metropolitan area (NEU), and a liberal arts college in a small, diverse city in the southeast (SEC). After we agreed to study the influence of engaging teacher candidates in book talks as part of their preparation in literacy and language arts, each of us identified an opportunity for inviting representative groups of candidates to participate in our book talk study. Six book groups were formed, two at each site, which included a total of 30 candidates during the first phase of the study. The participating candidates were typical of teacher preparation programs, mostly white and middle class, with the exception of an African American male and female in the southeast college, one Latina female in the northeast college, and one in the northeast university. Also, one participant in the northeast university was an older, returning student who was a parent. Additionally, these candidates represented the range of readers, identifying themselves as unenthusiastic to avid readers. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

The instructor/researcher at the northeast college conducted book talks with childhood education candidates outside of class time as an informal book club/extra activity. These candidates were invited to participate in book talk at the beginning of the semester, as a result of a discussion of the Applegate & Applegate (2004) article about the Peter effect with reading habits, which posed the question, how do you foster a love of reading with learners, if you do not practice a love of reading yourself? The southern college instructor/researcher also conducted a book group with her early childhood/elementary candidates outside of class time. She invited her candidates to participate, with a similar conversation, based on their readings of Trelease's (2006) *Read Aloud Handbook*, specifically, "If Adults Are Supposed to Be Role Models, How Much Should Teachers Read?" In particular, they focused on his words, "book talks work only when the person talking has actually read the

book. And the harsh reality here is most teachers don't read much" (p. 100). The instructor/researcher of the northeast university involved her candidates in literature discussions during her language arts class, as a non-graded experience. She and her candidates read Peterson & Eeds (2007) *Grand Conversations* and were introduced to the theories of Louise Rosenblatt (1978) regarding literature response.

The book groups met for 4-5 sessions during the semester, for a total of 25 recorded/transcribed sessions across all groups. The participants in all sites ranged in their ratings of themselves as unenthusiastic to avid readers. In addition, most of the candidates had limited experiences in reading children's literature. See Table 1 for participant numbers by site.

The instructors/researchers collaborated on books to be read and discussed, which included a mixture of award-winning picture books and young adult novels, diverse by culture and theme. Although some common texts were chosen across sites, there were variations in the complete selection to adapt to the interests of the book talk participants. See table 1 for a list of books read by each book group.

Table 1

*Books Read and Discussed*

Site	Participants	Books
Northeast College	5	<i>La Mariposa, Ruby Bridges, Shiloh</i>
	6	<i>The Friendship, Silent Music, Alia's Mission, La Mariposa, Ruby Bridges</i>
Northeast University	5	<i>Pictures of Hollis Woods</i> (discussed over 4 sessions)
	6	<i>Shiloh</i> (discussed over 4 sessions)
Southeast College	5	<i>Elijah of Buxton, La Mariposa, The Friendship, Ruby Bridges</i>
	3	<i>The Witch of Blackbird Pond, Frindle, Shiloh, Pictures of Hollis Woods</i>

In the second phase of our study, we each followed up with three of our candidates through student teaching observations and/or semi-structured interviews after graduation to explore what we might learn from our candidates about their growth as readers and teachers of readers to inform teacher preparation programs and instruction in literacy and language arts. We aimed to examine their words and actions after the book talk experiences as student teachers/new teachers and compared these results to what we learned about them during their book talk experiences with us. A total of nine candidates, three from each site, participated in the follow-up phase of the study. The participants ranged in their ratings of themselves as unenthusiastic to avid readers, and were candidates we had the most contact with after the book talk experiences to either observe in schools and/or correspond with about their practice as student teachers and first year teachers.

## **Data Sources**

A teacher candidate reading survey, adapted from Applegate & Applegate (2004), was created and administered to the participants to learn about our candidates as readers. During the book talks, multiple data sources were used to triangulate findings. All participating teacher candidates in the book talk kept a journal on both their readings and their post-reflections on the discussions. Book discussion sessions were audio taped and transcribed. In addition, the researchers/facilitators kept field notes on the discussions. Post-book talk interviews were used to determine what candidates thought about the book talk experience and to serve as member checks for confirming findings. Some of the sites also used a blog, email correspondences, and videotaping as other data sources. A year later, each instructor/researcher chose three candidates to interview who were either completing student teaching or their first year of teaching, with structured questions designed by us, in response to the findings of the first part of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were coded throughout the study to identify emerging patterns on the nature of the discussions, the participants' written responses to books and discussions, and their responses to our follow-up interviews after book talks and during their first teaching experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative guidelines were employed to ensure study rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, we created tables to organize our data and look for patterns across data sources, then referred back to our raw data to confirm the appropriate context of the incidents we identified as representing a pattern. In addition, we consulted a peer debriefer who had expertise in literature discussions but was not a part of the context of our study. Analysis of candidate responses were shared across sites for ongoing analysis, and for auditing of themes/patterns, often involving our participants in the research process.

## **Findings**

Our impetus for doing this study was to confront the dilemma, faced by literacy teacher educators, that approximately half of the enrolled candidates, future teachers of our youth, are unenthusiastic readers, and rarely engage in the act of life-long reading that we teach in our classes. This factor potentially limited their ability to model pleasurable, consistent reading. By studying our endeavor to engage our teacher candidates into book talks, we learned that book talks became a context



for candidates to explore their identities as readers and how they defined what it means to be a reader. In addition, the opportunity became an authentic space for challenging their ideas about the significance of pleasurable reading beyond strategy instruction for comprehension, and for embracing literature discussions as a context for promoting a culture lifelong reading and learning. Candidates were invited into a world of literature that made them think about their world and considered what engaged young minds. Unfortunately, challenges occurred when candidates attempted to apply their visions of promoting reading and talk during their initial teaching experiences. In this section, we will share our findings for the following research questions:

- 1) How did our teacher candidates define what it means to be a reader?
- 2) How do their definitions compare to their actions as readers engaged in book talk?
- 3) Did our candidates' visions of what it means to be a reader, their actions as readers, and their role as teachers to support lifelong readers evolve over time/experience?

### **What Does it Mean to be a Reader?**

When we interviewed our nine teacher candidates, a year after book talks, to follow-up with them after student teaching and during their first teaching experiences, most of our candidates defined being a reader as one who *enjoys and chooses to read*, and goes beyond understanding the author's message, to *make connections, ask questions, and discuss big ideas and themes*. Also, they stated that readers *read for pleasure and read to learn about his/her world*. For example, Nina (NEC) shared,

Not only can they read the text for what it is, they can take it a step further. They are able to make connections to their own lives, to determine themes and larger ideas from the text and connect to those things they see in themselves or in the world around them. They are able to grasp what is written between the lines of a text, and apply it to their own life or to recognize issues in the world around them.

Zora, from the NEU site who on the initial survey characterized herself as not liking reading, also emphasized making connections to both one's own life and to other books, adding, "you read for both enjoyment and knowledge...anyone can be a reader if they really want to." Michelle, another candidate, from that site said, "You enjoy it and look forward to (reading)," and similarly Latika (SEC), an avid reader, believes, "to be considered a reader, someone must go beyond reading out of

obligation. Readers choose to read even when it is not asked of them. So, basically, to be a reader, you must be a person who reads beyond requirement.”

Beyond seeing reading as something chosen and enjoyed, candidates also learned that close and engaged reading is something that teachers need to model and provide opportunities for students to do. As Nina admitted, “I truly didn’t realize the significance of it until I was a member of this club. Books are meant to be discussed and to be delved into and enjoyed and I need to teach my students how to do that before they will be able to do it on their own.” These participants indicate an understanding that engaging with challenging texts with multiple interpretations can create a joyful interaction in the reading experience (Barthes, 1975).

Two of the candidates, Kelly and John, both from the SEC site, had definitions that included a greater emphasis on comprehension strategies, which were very different from their interviews after the book talks in the first year. Kelly was now in a reading interventionist position and John was in a school that used a mandated literacy curriculum for upper grade readers who struggled with the most basic texts. Their definitions mentioned that students needed “strategies to read every word and comprehend.” Yet, when (SEC author’s first name) asked Kelly about how the teacher candidate book talks supported the way she prepared children as readers, Kelly responded, “I learned that when reading, people interpret books differently, based on their life experiences and knowledge. [The book talks] supported my learning and understanding of different points of view, to help me understand my students’ points of views and encourage them to do the same as they discuss with classmates.”

### **How Do Candidates’ Definitions Compare to their Actions as Readers in Book Talk?**

When we revisited the data on our candidates engaged in book talk and compared this to their interviews and discussions with us on how they define a reader, we learned *that the book talk experience provided them with a vision for teaching reading*. When our candidates discussed how the book talk experience influenced the way they hoped to prepare children as readers, they talked about the importance of *modeling engaged reading, listening to other readers’ points of view to explore themes and big ideas, and creating a community of learners where everyone can share ideas and disagree*. It was also clear to us that our candidates valued the book talk as a *model for student agency*. The experience of talking together in literature groups, exploring themes and social values, and contesting texts and ideas enables learners to share responsibility for learning in a collaborative social context,

fostering participants' sense of agency (Brevig, 2009; Short, 1999). Participants' comments reveal an understanding that they, and their students, should be able to make their own decisions and feel empowered in their ability to act (Cambourne, 1995; Johnston, 2004) For example, Rose from the NEC site shared her vision for teaching reading,

I would love to head my own book club. I think it is a very relaxing environment for anyone. No one is being criticized for their ideas, whereas in the classroom, the teacher may look for an exact right or wrong answer. You are always learning something new from someone else or creating new answers on your stories for yourself. Books give children a new entrance to a whole different world.

Rose often talked about how much she loved the book talk context as a space for readers to explore and expand their minds and often thought about stories through other points of view. For example, when some candidates engaged in book talk questioned the appropriateness of the book, *The Friendship* by Mildred Taylor (1998), for elementary students, Rose asserted,

I think the opposite—I think the place where we grew up—one black kid in the whole class, would be a good thing to open your eyes to something out of your own norm and this is what actually goes on in the world in other places like (names local cities surrounding the college). We should address this—in my town we have the projects, where all of the Black people live and we're told not to go there, because it's dangerous. My sister is 8 and if she read this it would have a great impact on her because she would want to help people like that and befriend people because she would look at it as not right—and wouldn't want to be treated like that.

Another aspect of agency that emerged was our candidates' understanding of the power of asking their own questions and working together to make meaning of their reading. Reflecting on her experience of being in a literature group, Elizabeth (NEU site) commented,

The whole idea of not having someone over you, watching you and trying to guide your discussions, it was kind of organic in a sense. I hate that word but I feel like it was natural...I believe these literature groups were so successful because of the removed role that (Name of NEU author) played throughout the weeks. Without having a body next to (you) listening in over your shoulder throughout an entire group discussion helps create a more relaxed and natural atmosphere that promotes discussion. The

members of our group were really great. I mean in general we all kind of meshed nicely. Like there was really no power (outside of our own).

In her response to the interview question, To what extent has participating in the *book club supported the way you prepare children as readers*, Elizabeth stated: “It helped me realize that...by allowing students to come up with their own questions and guide their discussions around points of their choice gives students ownership of their learning.” From the same site, Zora’s response similarly recognizes the importance of peer agency:

As a teacher I see that I should encourage my students to work together and discuss what they read and learn about because by talking with one another and bouncing ideas off of one another they can become stronger learners and readers.

Zora’s recognition that book talks provide opportunities for students to talk and bounce ideas off of one another, is the type of agency discussed by Johnston (2004), in which teachers provide a context for students to problem solve and create their own meaning. He uses Cazden’s (1992) description of “revealing,” as different from telling, since students are given a space to figure things out, rather than teachers telling students something and then having them try it. Our candidates embraced this notion that book talks provided agency in that ideas were revealed through their own dialogue, than told. We saw our candidates problem solve and create their own meaning together in every book talk. For example, SEC candidates questioned the way the illustrator portrayed people in *Ruby Bridges*:

Hillary: I’ll say something about the illustrations because those people don’t look white to me.

Brittany: No they don’t, that’s what I said.

John: They look black - they keep them looking black.

Kelly: I was like, look! (All of these voices are on top of each other, chatting furiously.)

Hillary: It’s kind of hard to distinguish

Brittany: Like is that police officer white or...

Hillary: Because all of these people are supposed to be white

Cathy: Because they all look...

Brittany: They don’t look like the teacher

Cathy: right

Hillary: different

(First name of SEC author): Do you think that’s on purpose?

Cathy: I don't know. Because I had to do a double take at her because I was like, Wow! And then I got to reading it and I was like, Wow! I felt like even the children looked kind of questionable.

John: I guess if you look at it from a child's point of view, they don't really seem like—

John & Hillary: –Black or white

Others: Yeah! That's true. I didn't think of that.

John: Because I guess racism is caused. It's not something that kids...

Kelly: Exactly

John: Because if you look at it from the child's point of view, I guess that's probably why I'm like, that they aren't black or white, you know.

Participants in the *Pictures of Hollis Woods* group (NEU) bounced ideas off one another as well, as they began to make sense of the structure of the novel:

Alexis: The book has a lot of letters, the chapters have letters.

Elizabeth: Yeah, it starts out with a W,

Nancy: So each picture is a letter in her mind? Mother, M.

Elizabeth: There's an X, it talks about that. The first picture, with her friend.

Alexis: Next one, second picture, it says Steven

Elizabeth: So each picture is a picture in her mind. Chapter 2, fishing on the Delaware. What does that mean, pictures?

Alexis: I think they're mental pictures of her past. She doesn't have any physical evidence of these things in her mind? So she has these pictures.

Elizabeth: Yeah, they're mental pictures, 'cause she doesn't have real pictures or evidence of the past.

Lara: Part of what she wants of her life? That's what the mental pictures are?

Becky: (Reads a section from back of book.) Cause look, on the back- "*with pictures she'll never forget.*"

These students worked together to make sense of their novel as they began their reading, helping each other clarify the author's and illustrator's imagery and meaning. In the last session of the *Shiloh* (Naylor, 2000) book discussion (NEU), book club members bounced their emerging evaluations of the main character and the novel's ending off one another:

Sonya: I really liked how Marty's character became strong- and like the fact that he didn't hold back.

Chad: Right. The meeting with Shiloh changed him as a person. I really liked that.

Yeah, he says what are you going to do, shoot me? Judd's character really changed too - he went out and got him a collar. "It's your dog now. Have fun."

Zora: I like the very last page of the book - it's like a really good ending how it says look at the dark closing in...

Sonya: Like the curtains are closing.

Zora: Yeah, like the end, like across of the screen. I just like that, cause the good part is - I saved Shiloh and opened my eyes. That's ain't bad for an 11 year-old.

Yellie, another group member, then reflects,

I think children would really enjoy this story. It would be a great way to get children engaged in responsibility. They could see how someone their own age is able to make some changes in some else's life...

The candidates at the SEC site reveal a sense of agency in their discussion and evaluation of the teacher's actions in *La Mariposa* (Jimenez, 1998) as they sense the teacher is not doing all that she can do to best teach an English Language Learner in the class. They are quite engaged and opinionated in the following discussion:

Cathy - I feel like in general that this book goes against everything that we are taught in education classes - like, the whole book.

Hillary- Like being culturally aware!

Cathy- Yes! Like he [the student] just sat there the whole time. And she [the teacher] knew he wasn't paying attention and she didn't care. There wasn't anyone who tried to help him or explain anything to him. He was just like a loner. And the teacher never took the initiative to do anything, and it was just like, oh well.

Kelly - There was such a long period of time where instruction was lost because she wouldn't take the time.

Cathy - It's because...

Kelly - She knew, she could tell him. I mean, she understood.

Cathy - She could have gradually been building him along, slowly, on a lower level. But she did nothing. I was like, this is like totally wrong!

Buffy - She let him sit there and color.

John - Y'all were talking about how no one in the school was willing to learn the boy's language or nurture him. That goes on really today in the schools.

Hillary - um hm

John- Because I was in an internship freshman year and this teacher had two Hispanic kids and she never really (helped them) and I was like, was it their fault that their parents came to America and they're in this school system, and they don't really know the language?

Kelly- I haven't really seen that yet, I mean *I don't* want to see it.

After further discussion on various scenes in the book, the candidates discuss what they would do in their future classrooms:

Kelly - I guess my thing is...as a teacher, we're supposed to accommodate the needs in our classroom and ...you call those parents and you try to see if you can communicate and you find people. You take that extra effort.

These candidates discussed *La Mariposa* and showed agency by voicing their opinions of teaching; together they revealed their belief that a teacher's role is to teach *all* students.

### Examining Candidates' Visions and Role as Teachers

We wanted to know how our candidates acted on their visions while student teaching and in their first year of teaching. We found many challenges that prevented our participants from implementing their visions of readers and the instructional spaces they would like to create for students as competent language users. What candidates cited as school practices that inhibited a love of reading and student agency included, *school mandated programs, teacher or text created questions, lack of engaging materials that connected to students' lives, and no choice*. Nina (NEC) shared, "We teach them how to pass a test, not how to develop their minds and become readers that engage and change." NEC student teacher Melissa used multiple copies of *Alia's Mission* (Stamaty, 2010), a short graphic story based on an Iraqi Librarian who helped save thousands of books from the library in Basra before being bombed, to teach a required theme of courage. During the planning of her lesson, Melissa noted that her students were unenthusiastic about the stories in the required basal. She received permission from her cooperating teacher to use the story, which Melissa selected because we discussed the book in our book talk and she thought the story would engage her sixth graders and fit the theme of courage. Unfortunately, her perceptions of the expectations of daily literacy practices of the classroom of her student teaching placement inhibited her from having an engaging conversation with students about the text after reading, beyond posing two questions that only two students responded to with short statements.

Melissa: Do you think Alia was courageous?

Sixth grade girl: Yes.

Melissa: What made her courageous?

Sixth grade boy: She saved all of those books, during the war.

This was contrary to the discussion she participated in during our teacher candidate book talks. For example, in that context, Melissa initiated a dialogue on the looting that occurred:

Melissa: Reading about the looting, made me think—wow I don't know if I would have included that in the story, but it's important to talk about and a really good way to talk about (how people react)—there's such great vocabulary...

(NEC author's First Name): That sometimes happens as a result of a disaster—hurricanes, black outs.... I wondered why they took everything except the books? Was it out of respect, were they too heavy to carry, or did they not realize the value of the books?

Melissa: I thought it was kind of weird how they put it—because I took it at first that the books were meaningless—no one took the books, no one cares.... Then all of a sudden she said, "We have to save them." It made it seem like oh they are just books—I wouldn't have played that up as much.

Nina: I feel like too when people are going to steal things, they're thinking—oh I could really use a couch right now, I'm going to take a couch. Whereas like - since the books preserve the culture, they are not necessary to survival. So she had the bigger picture in her mind of - we have to save this history, whereas everyone else is caught up in the moment—I need a couch, I need a lamp...they're not going to see the value aspect.

This exchange, which caused candidates to think about why the author included the looting event and why people loot, was one of many ideas raised in that session. Other topics they initiated were the ironic similarities to September 11 and how the book challenges how we define a hero. Although it was this rich discussion that made Melissa love the book and think of it to share in her 6th grade class, her student teaching placement operated under a very different culture from what we did as readers in a book club.

Other candidates faced different challenges. During her student teaching experience, Becky (NEU) noted that, "while students may have their boxes of books at their desks, but so often there isn't any time to read during the day, and the teacher doesn't ask about the reading or monitor it." Zora (NEU) reported that her student teaching classrooms portrayed negative models:

For the first graders I worked with, they had 15 minutes every day they must read, but most of the time they just stared at one page the



whole time or quickly fanned through books, but never really displayed the interest to read. The same held true when I was in fourth grade, except there was not even a portion during that day when they had to read. Some students would take the opportunity on their own during snack time, but it was no way enforced or guided by the teacher.

The increasing pressure of preparing students for standardized tests, as well as the move to assess teachers' competence based on their students' test scores, tends to push meaningful, monitored independent reading and authentic discussion of literature to the margins of our former students' classrooms.

John, a first-year teacher from the SEC site who admits that he does not "actively pursue reading (nor) spend as much time reading," finds the school-required ELA scripted lessons as a school practice that inhibits children from developing as readers. He also states that this mandated program "hinders my creativity." John states that a majority of his students come from backgrounds where reading is not valued or is even ignored, and he claims that

It would be awesome to use book clubs with my students because it would give them the opportunity to share information that they found important to them as they read the selected book.

In his interview, John asked (SEC author's first name), "How do I incorporate reading into a district mandatory program that I must teach in my class? How do you help students that are reading on 1st and 2nd grade reading levels in 6th grade to read more?" His poignant questions, and other data from our teacher candidates, lead us to consider implications for our teacher education programs.

Although current school practices and regulations appeared to inhibit our candidates from implementing their visions of teaching reading, there were a few instances that showed our candidates making small but significant action towards engaging students as lifelong readers.

In the example shared earlier, Melissa (NEC) showed agency during student teaching by attempting to expose her sixth grade students to engaging literature, with a real book, rather than a perceived school text/basal reader. She often shared with (NEC author's first name) how frustrated she was with having to teach the basal series in sixth grade. She hated how the students groaned when it was time for English Language Arts, and asked to borrow the multiple copies of *Alia's Mission*. It was a book discussed in our book talk the previous semester and she wanted to share it with her sixth graders since it fit the theme of courage, and in her mind, it was more engaging to sixth graders than the stories in the basal. After receiving permission from her cooperating teacher to use the book, Melissa obtained more

copies through interlibrary loan at the local public library to make sure that students had enough copies to share in pairs.

Latika (SEC) also demonstrated agency during her first year teaching in a predominantly low SES school, when she modeled by example. She took her class to the school book fair where she bought “a good bit of books” and the students “laughed at my excitement over the new books.” She continued,

I explained to them that books are definitely something to get excited about. Each one contains a little get away for the reader [who wouldn't want that?]. They didn't get it, but when I gave them the opportunity to choose some of the new books for the classroom, they really got into it. I even noticed they seemed more enthusiastic when it came time to choose books to read.

Elizabeth (NEU), another respondent, - one who is an enthusiastic reader herself - is an assistant teacher in an elementary science class. She shared with (NEU author's first name) that she is able to take agency in her classroom by having her students participate in nonfiction book discussions, and in her interview, cited above, reinforced that she saw that when students are given the time and opportunity to generate their own discussion topics and direct their own learning deeper comprehension takes place.

As teacher education programs are scrutinized in terms of how well they prepare teachers, we wonder how we, as teacher educators, can help our candidates keep the vision and the agency they experienced as part of our study. As we reflected on our study, we consulted the work of Kosnick and Beck (2008), who studied how their teacher education program prepared their graduates for teaching literacy during their first years as teachers. Similar to our findings, they found that their candidates appreciated learning a vision for teaching literacy, but fell short in enacting many of these practices. It caused them to reflect on how much to cover and whether to expose candidates to approaches that may be “beyond their abilities” as beginning teachers (p. 127). One of our original goals for this project was to provide spaces for our teacher candidates to engage in a pleasurable reading experience: how can we balance the need for teachers to see themselves as readers with the exigencies of today's scripted and test-based literacy curricula?

## **Implications**

This study aimed to address challenges teacher educators face— preparing candidates who have limited experience in reading for pleasure and discussing books, and supporting candidates within and beyond the methods courses to develop their understanding of language arts practices to support competent

language users. Sharing effective practices for reading and discussing books may not be enough if we do not provide opportunities for candidates to explore their own reading identities, to address challenges they may face in schools, or to give our candidates opportunities to try book talks with actual students during field experiences and student teaching. In listening to our candidates, we learned many lessons that can inform teacher preparation programs. Although only one of the candidates implemented a book talk to date, many discussed having a designated independent reading time in the classroom. Often, we talk about this practice in our classes, but do not give candidates an opportunity to go beyond setting aside time for students to discuss how teachers need to engage students as readers (Miller, 2009). In addition, read alouds are prominent in the classrooms; we must have candidates do more to engage students in talk and authentic questioning during whole group discussions and discuss how this modeling can lead to peer-led discussions. We have these Grand Conversations in our college and university classes; we must help them transfer these experiences into the classroom as well.

We also thought how our candidates might have had trouble implementing book talks in the classroom because they forgot how to scaffold this—after they became more natural in engaging in their own talks. In the ELA methods courses of our teacher education programs, candidates are exposed to Harvey Daniels' Literature Circles (2002) and participate in book discussions using role sheets. Candidates learn how those role sheets are a temporary scaffold as they will have their future students use open-ended journals and possibly sticky notes. As book clubs continue outside of class, candidates are able to sustain their own meaningful discussions; perhaps when in their own classroom, they do not remember effective ways to help students learn how to discuss literature. Sometimes opportunities enable students to work outside the mandated literacy block where they can practice what they learned. For example, Elizabeth, mentioned above, who is able to discuss nonfiction literature in groups in her class.

Last, we recommend that candidates need to engage in opportunities beyond the methods classes, to engage with faculty and other students as readers beyond what they do for “school reading.” We must help candidates continue to read and explore children’s and adolescent literature, more than the literature they read for their education classes, so that they will truly know books to recommend to their future students so to help promote a love for reading. Literacy faculty at the NEU site has spearheaded a read-aloud of a notable children’s novel, inviting all elementary education candidates and in-service masters students to take turns reading along together in the school lobby. Choosing award-winning novels such

as *When You Reach Me* (Stead, 2010) to highlight creates a community of readers. At the NEC site, (NEC professor's first name) and some of the teacher candidates in the last book talk group created an official student club on campus to read and discuss children's literature. (SEC professor's first name), at the SEC site, designated a "hot read" display on her desk of a book recently read. She and several candidates heard the idea from Steven Layne (2009) at a reading conference where he discussed his book, *Igniting a Passion for Reading*. (SEC author's first name) hopes that graduates will display their own "hot reads" in their classrooms to model personal reading and to open the door for discussion with their own students. Keeping in touch with our former students through online blogs or the department's face book page with children's and young adult literature reviews and recommendations may enable us to continue to scaffold a vision of pleasurable reading for our teachers. We encourage you, the reader, to continue the conversation on how we may foster a culture of life-long reading in teacher preparation programs, our schools, and our communities.



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