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## What's the Story with Children's Literature? A Content Analysis of Children's Literature Courses for Preservice Elementary Teachers

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## **What's the Story with Children's Literature? A Content Analysis of Children's Literature Courses for Preservice Elementary Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

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Developing knowledge and understandings related to children's literature among preservice elementary teachers is a vital component of teacher preparation that should be addressed in a required course. The purpose of the present study was to identify essential learning outcomes addressed in children's literature courses that were required coursework among elementary teacher preparation programs located in Texas. The goal was to determine to what extent current teacher preparation practices aligned with professional recommendations from recognized experts in the field. The present study employed a qualitative, directed content analysis approach that used purposeful sampling methods. Content analysis techniques identified codes and established themes that resulted in the identification of 306 distinct essential learning outcomes, which were categorized into nine themes. A discussion of findings was presented, and four implications for teacher educators and teacher preparation program stakeholders were described. Limitations of the present study were also noted, along with recommendations for future studies.

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**Keywords:** children's literature, preservice elementary teachers, teacher preparation

Children's literature has been regarded as an "essential instructional resource" (Serafini, 2011, p. 30) that plays a vital role in elementary classrooms (Keach, 1974; Noyce, 1979; Powers, 1974; Radebaugh, 1981; Sipple, 1924; Stauffer, 1961). Elementary classrooms should be literate environments that use a wide range of texts (e.g., expository, narrative, poetry) in varied formats (e.g., print, digital, online) throughout the curriculum (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2010; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2004). Thus, elementary teachers must be skilled practitioners who are capable of evaluating and selecting high-quality children's literature texts to support teaching and learning among all students (Anderson, 2013; Galda, Liang, & Cullinan, 2017; Russell, 2015; Short, Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2014). Through effective instructional use of children's literature, elementary teachers satisfy national curricular guidelines by providing a focus for literacy instruction and enhancing instructional rigor as students engage with "increasingly complex texts" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, para. 1).

With these guidelines in mind, developing knowledge and understandings related to children’s literature must be an essential component of preparing elementary teachers (Children’s Literature Assembly [CLA], 2011, 2012). Teacher preparation programs must offer and require successful completion of children’s literature coursework throughout their respective teacher preparation programs (Brindley & Laframboise, 2002; Greenberg, Walsh, & McKee, 2015; NCTE, 2004; Tunks, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). Children’s literature coursework should (a) develop knowledge of literature, (b) broaden personal and global understandings, (c) cultivate multicultural perspectives, and (d) extend reading maturity among preservice elementary teachers (CLA, 2012). Such coursework should also emphasize the value of children’s literature for all content areas and model how to make connections between carefully selected texts and literacy development among all students. Furthermore, preservice elementary teachers must develop “a guiding set of theoretical principles” in order to use children’s literature as instructional resources meaningfully and purposefully (Hoewisch, 2000, para. 7). Yet despite its evident value, children’s literature coursework has become a less common requirement for elementary teacher preparation (Sharp, Coneway, Diego-Medrano, 2017; Tunks et al., 2015).

We designed the present study to explore current teacher preparation practices implemented during children’s literature coursework. Specifically, we sought to identify essential learning outcomes addressed in children’s literature courses that were required coursework among elementary teacher preparation programs located in Texas. Our aim was to determine to what extent current teacher preparation practices aligned with professional recommendations from recognized experts in the field. Findings from the present study will help teacher educators who teach children’s literature courses affirm strengths and recognize deficiencies in their courses. Findings may also be of interest to teacher preparation program stakeholders who are responsible for curricular decisions by providing insights concerning the preparation of preservice elementary teachers with children’s literature.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Children’s literature encompasses any “material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults” (Library of Congress, 2008, para. 1). Children’s literature has experienced an extensive and rich history dating back to the 17th century, when early texts were didactic in nature and designed to indoctrinate children to societal expectations (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013). Children’s literature made an important shift during the 19th century from providing life lessons for children to stories enjoyed by older children in the form of fairy tales (e.g., *Household Tales* by the Grimm brothers), novels (e.g., *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott), magazines (e.g., *St. Nicholas Magazine*), poetry (e.g., *A Book of Nonsense* by Edward Lear), and verse (e.g., *A Child’s Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson). Later during the early 20th century, educators began advocating for better books for younger readers (Clarke, 1901), which was followed by the publication of the first modern picture book in 1902—*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter.

In order to garner professional recommendations for essential learning outcomes in children’s literature courses, we consulted relevant literature from individuals who were recognized as experts within the field. We began our consultation by searching the subscription databases accessible through our university’s library. Our initial search efforts produced a myriad of research- and practitioner-oriented articles that described specific ways teacher educators used children’s literature with preservice elementary teachers.

However, the amount of relevant literature was greatly reduced when we narrowed the focus of our search to include only those articles that occurred in the context of children's literature coursework. We reviewed the modest extent of relevant literature and ascertained the following professional recommendations for essential learning outcomes in children's literature courses: wide reading of children's literature, critical and historical analysis of children's literature, and pedagogy with children's literature. We offer a discussion of these three professional recommendations below as they relate to essential learning outcomes in children's literature courses.

### **Wide Reading of Children's Literature**

Children's literature plays a powerful role in developing readers (Allington, 2015). Thus, preservice elementary teachers must develop their knowledge of children's literature through participating in wide reading themselves (Anderson, 2013; Gill, 1961; Guidry, Lake, Jones, & Rice, 2005; Hoewisch, 2000; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). As preservice elementary teachers select and read from a broad range of historical and modern children's literature texts, they become familiar with genres, authors, and illustrators. Teacher educators should also support the wide reading of children's literature with learning activities that train preservice elementary teachers in understanding how to (a) select appropriate texts as instructional resources, (b) evaluate the quality of texts using specific criteria, and (c) share texts purposefully and meaningfully with students (Hoewisch, 2000). Wide reading of children's literature also encourages preservice elementary teachers to become "enthusiastic, engaged, motivated" reading role models for their future students (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2015, p. 4).

### **Critical and Historical Analysis of Children's Literature**

Societal influences have had a significant impact on the themes, characters, and perspectives represented in children's literature over time (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013). Therefore, preservice elementary teachers must be familiar with the history of children's literature and trained in how to analyze the impact that specific cultural, educational, historical, and political influences have had on shaping texts (Hoewisch, 2000). Teacher educators should carefully select multiple works of children's literature and facilitate close readings with preservice elementary teachers to scrutinize and interpret themes within a text and between texts, as well as how specific texts connect to historically situated societal themes (McNair, 2003; Rogers & Christian, 2007). In doing so, children's literature becomes a powerful vehicle for preservice elementary teachers to develop "a social critical consciousness" (McNair, 2003, p. 46). Furthermore, critical analyses of societal themes over time among single and multiple children's literature texts provide preservice elementary teachers with "conceptual tools that will guide them to make diverse and equitable choices in the literature they have on the bookshelves in their classrooms and the texts they use in their teaching" (Tschida et al., 2014, p. 36).

### **Pedagogy with Children's Literature**

Preservice elementary teachers must also learn how to use carefully selected children's literature texts with students effectively (Hoewisch, 2000). Once preservice elementary teachers have read widely and analyzed texts critically, teacher educators must then equip them with a wide variety of "pedagogically sound strategies for effectively integrating literature with their future classrooms" (Ward, 2005, p. 141). Hoewisch (2000) emphasized that preservice elementary teachers should develop pedagogical understandings with children's literature through structured learning experiences that take place in authentic settings, such as elementary classrooms, and reflect on these experiences.

Preservice elementary teachers who have opportunities to practice and ponder instructional approaches with children's literature in genuine settings experience first hand the benefits and rewards associated with teaching students in diverse classroom settings (Wright, Calabrese, & Henry, 2009); develop sophisticated understandings regarding effective use of texts during instruction (Gill, 1961; Rogers, Cooper, Nesmith, & Purdum-Cassidy, 2015); and acquire "a taste for teaching" (Day, 2009, p. 433).

### **The Present Study**

We are teacher educators who are passionate about children's literature and have experience teaching children's literature courses for preservice elementary teachers. Recently, we became aware of the trend of teacher preparation programs dropping children's literature coursework requirements and conducted a preliminary inquiry in our state to explore this phenomenon (Sharp et al., 2017). Findings from our preliminary inquiry indicated that 53 of 69 university-based, traditional certification teacher preparation programs required preservice elementary teachers to complete a children's literature course successfully. Among these 53 programs, we analyzed course attributes specified in their respective university catalogs for each children's literature course offered. Our findings further revealed variation among children's literature course attributes, such as with course levels (i.e., sophomore, junior, senior), prefixes (e.g., EDUC, EDEC, ENGL, READ), prerequisites (e.g., admission to the teacher preparation program), and content (e.g., teaching techniques and methods, genre studies, author studies, selection of children's literature).

Although our preliminary inquiry produced interesting findings in an under-researched area, we recommended that future studies investigate preparation efforts with children's literature among preservice elementary teachers more deeply using course learning outcomes (Sharp et al., 2017). We recommended using course learning outcomes because they "clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire" (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment [NILOA], 2012, para. 1). Based on our recommendation, the following question guided the present study: With respect to the course learning outcomes stated in course syllabi, what must preservice elementary teachers know about children's literature? In addition to identifying essential learning outcomes, we also sought to determine the extent to which current teacher preparation practices in children's literature coursework aligned with professional recommendations from recognized experts in the field.

### **Methods**

#### **Research Design**

We employed a qualitative research design in the present study. We used a directed content analysis approach to uncover essential learning outcomes listed in children's literature course syllabi that were required among elementary teacher preparation programs located in Texas (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach allowed us to systematically explore text data recorded in course syllabi for required children's literature coursework. By using a qualitative, directed content analysis approach, we were able to better understand current preparation practices implemented in required children's literature coursework and how they aligned with professional recommendations.

## **Sampling**

We utilized purposeful sampling methods in the present study. In our previous inquiry, we identified 69 state-approved, university-based educator preparation programs (EPPs) located in a southern United States state that offered a traditional certification program for teaching in the elementary grade levels (Sharp et al., 2017). After confirming the accuracy of this information for the present study, we re-examined related degree program information for each EPP. This analysis confirmed that 53 EPPs required successful completion of a children's literature course, of which 23 were affiliated with public universities and 30 were affiliated with private universities.

At the time of the present study, Texas legislation mandated that all public postsecondary institutions in the state provide on their university's website public access to course syllabi for all credit-bearing undergraduate courses (H. B. 2504, 2009). Moreover, this legislation specified that all course syllabi must include essential learning outcomes. We visited universities' websites and accessed portals that housed course syllabi for the 23 EPPs affiliated with public universities. From these portals, we gathered the most recent course syllabi for required children's literature courses that were offered to preservice elementary teachers. After removing duplicate syllabi, these sampling methods yielded 26 course syllabi.

Next, we visited the websites for the 30 EPPs affiliated with private universities to determine whether course syllabi were made publicly available. This search did not produce any results, so we conducted subsequent Internet searches using keywords such as "course syllabus," the name of the university, and the name of the required children's literature course. This search produced five course syllabi from five of the EPPs affiliated with private universities. Altogether, our sampling methods resulted in 31 course syllabi that delineated a total of 239 essential learning outcomes.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed qualitatively using a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, we developed an initial list of coding categories that consisted of the three professional recommendations for children's literature courses that derived from our review of relevant literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Next, we determined that an inductive coding scheme was most appropriate to allow for the emergence of new categories. In order to validate our coding scheme, we each coded a sample of data independently. Then, we met as a group to establish coding consistency (Weber, 1990). During this meeting, we discussed and resolved assigned codes, coding categories, and the formation of themes. Once intercoder reliability was reached, we created a coding manual to establish validity and guide our independent analyses of the remainder of the data set (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). After each of us coded the entire data set separately, we met as a group once again to discuss and confirm accuracy with codes and themes. After intercoder reliability was established, we created summary sheets to describe the number of occurrences in which qualitative codes appeared within each established theme. This was an effective way to communicate the presence, as well as absence, of assigned codes.

## **Findings**

Using 31 of the most recent, publicly-available course syllabi from state-approved, university-based EPPs, we included 239 essential learning outcomes in our analyses. Through our analyses of data, we unpacked these essential learning outcomes

and identified 306 distinct essential learning outcomes, which we categorized into nine themes (see Table 1). Although the essential learning outcomes we identified vary by teacher preparation program, these findings represent the current preparation practices with children's literature that preservice elementary teachers encounter in a required children's literature course.

**Table 1** Nine Themes with Number of Related Essential Learning Outcomes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>n</i>
Knowledge of Children's Literature Awards	7
Knowledge of Children's Literature Authors and Illustrators	16
Use of Technology with Children's Literature	16
Professional, National, and State Standards	17
Personal Efficacy	22
Appreciation and Value of Children's Literature	27
Evaluating Children's Literature	36
Knowledge of Children's Literature Genres and Texts	58
Instructional Considerations & Strategies with Children's Literature	107

### **Knowledge of Children's Literature Awards**

As shown in Table 1, seven essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Knowledge of Children's Literature Awards*. Most of the essential learning outcomes grouped into this theme ( $n = 5$ ) focused on building knowledge of award-winning children's literature texts. However, only two essential learning outcomes involved knowledge of the awards themselves, as well as the specific criteria for each award.

### **Knowledge of Children's Literature Authors and Illustrators**

As shown in Table 1, 16 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Knowledge of Children's Literature Authors and Illustrators*. Among these essential learning outcomes:

- eleven specific references were made regarding knowledge of notable authors, their lives, and/or their works;
- eight specific references were made regarding knowledge of notable illustrators, their lives, and/or their works;
- four specific references were made regarding knowledge of illustrative styles, mediums, and techniques; and
- two specific references were made regarding knowledge of an author's particular craft.

Three essential learning outcomes also made specific references regarding knowledge of notable poets.

### **Use of Technology with Children's Literature**

As shown in Table 1, 16 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Use of Technology with Children's Literature*. These essential learning outcomes sought to develop knowledge with (a) effective technology integration during literacy instruction, (b) issues related to ethical and legal use of technology, and (c) ways in which

technology may complement the instructional design of literacy learning experiences. Of these 16 essential learning outcomes, only seven made specific connections between technology and children's literature. The other nine essential learning outcomes focused on developing knowledge with technology within the broader context of literacy or reading instruction.

### **Professional, National, and State Standards**

As shown in Table 1, 17 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Professional, National, and State Standards*. Among these essential learning outcomes, one contained a broad reference to "national standards," eight contained specific references to state standards (i.e., English Language Arts and Reading, Spanish Language Arts and Reading, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, English Language Proficiency Standards), and eight contained specific references to state-level competencies and standards for teacher certification (i.e., English Language Arts and Reading Generalist EC-6 Standards, Texas Examinations of Educator Standards, Code of Ethics and Standard Practices). Among these references to state-level competencies and standards for teacher certification, two of the essential learning outcomes included direct mentions towards attaining satisfactory performance on the state-level teacher certification examination.

### **Personal Efficacy**

As shown in Table 1, 22 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Personal Efficacy*. These essential learning outcomes encompassed the development of self-efficacious beliefs, behaviors, and skills among preservice elementary teachers. Among these essential learning outcomes, only three specific references to children's literature were made:

- "Speak and write about children's literature with ease and confidence."
- "Write an effectively developed analytical essay on YA [young adult] or children's literature texts."
- "Speak and write about children's and young adult literature and other media with ease and confidence."

Within this theme, the majority of essential learning outcomes ( $n = 17$ ) focused on development of writing abilities among preservice elementary teachers, such as improvement with "college-level writing skills," "writing for a specific purpose," and "applying appropriate writing standards."

### **Appreciation and Value of Children's Literature**

As shown in Table 1, 27 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Appreciation and Value of Children's Literature*. A little more than half of the essential learning outcomes grouped into this theme ( $n = 14$ ) promoted "lifelong appreciation," "joy," "enthusiasm," "love," and "enjoyment" of children's literature among preservice elementary teachers. The remaining essential learning outcomes within this theme ( $n = 13$ ) made explicit connections to how preservice elementary teachers may use children's literature as a resource to instill "joy" among their students, as well as impact their lives "personally, socially, and academically."

### **Evaluating Children's Literature**

As shown in Table 1, 36 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Evaluating Children's Literature*. Essential learning outcomes grouped into this

theme centered on providing preservice elementary teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills necessary to evaluate children’s literature using specific criteria. Examples of evaluative measures included:

- literary quality of a children’s literature text (e.g., genre, plot development, characterization, setting, theme, style, point of view);
- artistic quality of a children’s literature text (e.g., visual elements, illustrative techniques);
- individual genres of children’s literature;
- the interrelationship between and among texts, as well as the influence of texts on individuals, cultural milieu, and society; and
- bias and stereotypes with gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, family circumstances, and socioeconomic status.

Eight of the essential learning outcomes associated the evaluation of children’s literature with purposeful selection of appropriate texts for classroom use.

**Knowledge of Children’s Literature Genres and Texts**

As shown in Table 1, 58 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Knowledge of Children’s Literature Genres and Texts*. Within this theme, six related subthemes emerged (see Table 2).

**Table 2 Subthemes of Knowledge of Children’s Literature Genres and Texts**

<i>Subthemes of “Knowledge of Children’s Literature Genres and Texts”</i>	<i>n</i>
Interacting with Others about Children’s Literature	4
Defining Children’s Literature	5
Wide Reading of Children’s Literature	6
Knowledge of Specific Genres of Children’s Literature	9
History of Children’s Literature	10
Knowledge of All Genres of Children’s Literature	24

**Interacting with others about children’s literature.** Within this subtheme, four essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes sought to facilitate meaningful discussions about children’s literature among preservice elementary teachers.

**Defining children’s literature.** Within this subtheme, five essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes were broad statements that intended to “define” children’s literature, “its qualities,” and associated “terminology.”

**Wide reading of children’s literature.** Within this subtheme, six essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes promoted extensive reading to develop familiarity with a “wide range” and “wide variety” of a “vast amount” of children’s literature. These essential learning outcomes contained no references to specific genres or genres in general.

**Knowledge of specific genres of children’s literature.** Within this subtheme, nine essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes named the following specific genres: poetry (*n* = 1), storytelling (*n* = 1), picturebooks (*n* = 2), and multicultural literature (*n* = 5).

**History of children's literature.** Within this subtheme, 10 essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes focused on developing knowledge about the "timeline" of children's literature by exploring "issues," "trends," and a myriad of "contexts."

**Knowledge of all genres of children's literature.** Within this subtheme, 24 essential learning outcomes emerged. All of the essential learning outcomes within this subtheme sought to develop understanding with all of the genres of children's literature. Although the majority of essential learning outcomes referred to genres of children's literature broadly, one essential learning outcome included a specific number of genres (i.e., "8"), and two essential learning outcomes listed the following specific genres:

- "narration, exposition, and argumentation;" and
- "traditional literature, modern fantasy, poetry, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, and informational books and biography."

### **Instructional Considerations & Strategies with Children's Literature**

As shown in Table 1, 107 essential learning outcomes were categorized into the theme *Instructional Considerations & Strategies with Children's Literature*. Within this theme, four related subthemes emerged (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Subthemes of Instructional Considerations & Strategies with Children's Literature**

Subthemes of "Instructional Considerations & Strategies with Children's Literature"	<i>n</i>
Selection and Use of Children's Literature for Cross-Curricular Instruction	4
Developmental Considerations	12
Specific and General Aspects of Literacy Instruction	39
Selection and Use of Children's Literature for Literacy Instruction	52

**Selection and use of children's literature for cross-curricular instruction.** Within this subtheme, four essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes focused specifically on developing knowledge related to "evaluating," "selecting," and "integrating" children's literature during cross-curricular instruction.

**Developmental considerations.** Within this subtheme, 12 essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes sought to develop understandings related to "fundamental principles, generalizations, and theories" of child development. Of these essential learning outcomes, eight specifically connected developmental considerations to the use of children's literature, three connected developmental considerations to literacy instruction in general, and one focused on developing knowledge "of individual developmental differences in learners."

**Specific and general aspects of literacy instruction.** Within this subtheme, 39 essential learning outcomes emerged. These essential learning outcomes referred to either specific (i.e., oral language, fluency, comprehension, communication skills) or general aspects of literacy instruction. None of these essential learning outcomes contained references to the use of children's literature.

**Selection and use of children's literature for literacy instruction.** Within this subtheme, 52 essential learning outcomes emerged. Each of these essential learning outcomes regarded the selection and use of children's literature as resources for literacy instruction. These essential learning outcomes sought to train preservice elementary teachers to utilize children's literature as valuable resources to:

- “share;”
- “model” aspects of literacy; and
- accompany “literature-related activities” that “engage,” “motivate,” and “stimulate” literacy development among students.

### Discussion

At the onset of the present study, we realized that there was limited relevant literature available that described specific ways teacher educators used children’s literature with preservice elementary teachers in the context of children’s literature coursework. Moreover, much of this available literature was dated. Despite this constraint, we were able to ascertain three recommended essential learning outcomes from individuals who were recognized children’s literature experts: (1) wide reading of children’s literature, (2) critical and historical analysis of children’s literature, and (3) pedagogy with children’s literature.

With respect to the first professional recommendation, findings from the present study revealed that preservice elementary teachers engaged in wide reading with a variety of children’s literature while enrolled in required children’s literature courses. Our findings identified 82 essential learning outcomes that made explicit references to wide reading of texts within the themes *Knowledge of Children’s Literature Awards*, *Knowledge of Children’s Literature Authors and Illustrators*, and *Knowledge of Children’s Literature Genres and Texts*. Thus, this finding was well aligned with recommendations made by children’s literature experts (Anderson, 2013; Gill, 1961; Guidry et al., 2005; Hoewisch, 2000; Tschida et al., 2014). However, our concern is that not all teacher preparation programs require preservice elementary teachers to complete a children’s literature course successfully. With this concern in mind, we wondered if preservice elementary teachers do not complete a children’s literature course while enrolled in their respective teacher preparation program, how do they develop the requisite knowledge and understandings related to children’s literature?

With respect to the second professional recommendation, only 10 essential learning outcomes referred to critical and historical analysis of children’s literature. This finding was not aligned with recommendations made by children’s literature experts (Hoewisch, 2000; McNair, 2003; Rogers & Christian, 2007). Being that societal influences have such a significant impact on the themes, characters, and perspectives represented in children’s literature (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013), teacher educators must ensure that their preparation efforts include familiarizing preservice elementary teachers with the history of children’s literature and how to analyze the impact of specific cultural, educational, historical, and political influences on texts (Hoewisch, 2000). By doing so, preservice elementary teachers develop “a social critical consciousness” (McNair, 2003, p. 46) and become more knowledgeable about making diverse and equitable choices with children’s literature (CLA, 2012; ILA, 2010; NCTE, 2004; Tschida et al., 2014).

With respect to the third professional recommendation, our findings demonstrated a plethora of ways that preservice elementary teachers developed pedagogy with children’s literature. In fact, our analysis identified 107 related essential learning outcomes categorized into the theme *Instructional Considerations & Strategies with Children’s Literature* and only 16 related essential learning outcomes categorized into the theme *Use of Technology with Children’s Literature*. This finding presented the strongest alignment with recommendations made by children’s literature experts (Day, 2009; Gill, 1961; Hoewisch, 2000; Rogers et al., 2015; Ward, 2005; Wright et al., 2009). Although this finding revealed

the most common essential learning outcome in the present study, closer examination of these 123 essential learning outcomes showed that only a few of them were concerned with the use of technology. With the ever-expanding presence of digital resources and texts, teacher educators must develop expertise with technology and children's literature among preservice elementary teachers (CLA, 2012; ILA, 2010).

### Implications

Our analysis of data has highlighted four implications for teacher educators who teach children's literature courses, as well as teacher preparation program stakeholders who are responsible for curricular decisions. First, we were surprised by the high number of essential learning outcomes, which identified nine themes currently being addressed in children's literature courses. Although there was some alignment to the three literature-based professional recommendations (i.e., wide reading of children's literature, critical and historical analysis of children's literature, pedagogy with children's literature), our findings have suggested a more comprehensive set of essential learning outcomes. Based upon our findings and reflections upon our own preparation practices with children's literature coursework, we propose augmenting the professional recommendations to include familiarity with children's literature genres, authors, illustrators, awards, and texts; instructional use of children's literature in alignment with professional, national, and state standards; aesthetic appreciation of children's literature; evaluation tools for children's literature texts; and children's literature in the 21st century classroom.

Second, we were perplexed by the limited number of essential learning outcomes within several of the themes. For example, only 16 essential learning outcomes were grouped in the theme *Use of Technology with Children's Literature*. Preservice elementary teachers must be prepared comprehensively with technology and be competent professionals who know how to integrate technology with children's literature (Toren, Maiselman, & Inbar, 2008). Additionally, a large number of essential learning outcomes within several of the themes did not directly relate to children's literature. For example, 17 essential learning outcomes focused on development of writing abilities in the theme *Personal Efficacy*. While development of writing abilities among preservice elementary teachers has significance, we wondered about its appropriateness in a required children's literature course. In knowing that course learning outcomes should "clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire" (NILOA, 2012, para. 1), we suggest that teacher educators review essential learning outcomes in their children's literature courses and ensure they represent teacher preparation practices aligned with professional recommendations from recognized experts in the field. Essential learning outcomes that are not aligned should either be omitted from the course or revised to clearly represent the professional recommendations for knowledge and understanding in children's literature coursework.

Third, we were disappointed that successful completion of a children's literature course was not a requirement of every program that prepares preservice elementary teachers. At the time of the present study, we identified 69 state-approved, university-based, traditional certification teacher preparation programs that prepared elementary teachers in Texas. Although 53 of these programs required successful completion of a children's literature course, we wondered how the remaining 16 programs prepared preservice elementary teachers to use children's literature meaningfully and purposefully. We feel such a phenomenon warrants further research as to why teacher preparation programs are removing requirements for children's literature coursework, as well as how these programs

are addressing essential learning outcomes for children's literature among preservice elementary teachers. Our search for relevant literature produced several scholarly articles that described preparation efforts with children's literature in contexts beyond a required course (e.g., Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejia, 2003; Leonard, Moore, & Brooks, 2014; Rule, Montgomery, & Vander Zanden, 2013). While we acknowledge these efforts have great value, their role should be to complement, not replace, children's literature coursework.

It is absolutely essential that teacher preparation programs offer and require all preservice elementary teachers to complete at least one children's literature course (Brindley & Laframboise, 2002; Greenberg, Walsh, & McKee, 2015; NCTE, 2004; Tunks, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). Preservice elementary teachers must become familiar with quality literature, skilled with how to use literature appropriately and meaningfully during instruction, and understand the value of literature in their own lives and the lives of their students (Short et al., 2014). Children's literature coursework should be designed to develop "a guiding set of theoretical principles" for the use of children's literature during instruction (Hoewisch, 2000, para. 7) by incorporating learning activities that develop knowledge of literature, broaden personal and global understandings, cultivate multicultural perspectives, extend reading maturity, emphasize the value of children's literature for all content areas, and model how to make connections between carefully selected texts and literacy development among all students (CLA, 2012). With this list of principles in mind, we recommend that teacher preparation programs offer a required children's literature course at a point when preservice elementary teachers understand circumstances in which they will use literature during instruction (Hoewisch, 2000). Thus, preservice elementary teachers should complete coursework and other program requirements that involve critical examination of the relationship between educational theory and instruction prior to enrollment in a required children's literature course. By providing previous opportunities for preservice elementary teachers to connect theory and practice, teacher educators are able to extend the focus of a children's literature course beyond the mere reading of children's books (Gill, 1961).

Fourth, our findings have pointed to the importance of both teacher educators and teacher preparation program stakeholders engaging in continuous improvement efforts that utilize both internal and external evaluations (Norman & Sherwood, 2015). Using a combination of internal and external evaluations is an effective way to "impact decisions about how to maintain, refine, and revise" a teacher preparation program (p. 6). Internal evaluations should promote supportive communities of practice among teacher educators where program colleagues engage in collaborative interactions and discussions that "could lead to deeper program change and individual development" (Snow, Martin, & Dismuke, 2015, p. 60). Through these program evaluation efforts, it is our hope that teacher educators and teacher preparation program stakeholders will examine their required children's literature courses and ensure that essential learning outcomes align with professional recommendations.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies**

As with any research inquiry, there were a few limitations with the present study. First, we limited our inquiry to explore current preparation efforts in children's literature coursework required among preservice elementary teachers. Although it is equally important to explore how preservice secondary teachers are prepared, state-level teacher certification requirements and university degree program requirements

differ greatly for certification areas. Therefore, we recommend that follow-up studies explore similar preparation efforts with preservice teachers seeking teacher certification at different grade levels and in different content areas.

Another limitation with the present study was related to our sampling methods. We obtained essential learning outcomes from publicly-available course syllabi posted on university websites and the Internet. However, we had no way to confirm the accuracy and correctness of information contained in each course syllabus. Therefore, we recommend that a continuation study be designed to address this limitation that includes the teacher educators who teach these courses.

### Conclusion

As teacher educators who are also lifelong readers, we value the role of children's literature within teacher preparation programs. We know the joy of reading a good book—each of us has countless cherished memories of children's literature texts we have encountered throughout our lives. We also value the benefits associated with use of children's literature during instruction because a text can be a powerful resource to motivate students and enhance instruction. Teacher educators must prepare preservice elementary teachers to be aficionados of children's literature who seek to use high-quality texts with students as mirrors to see themselves, windows to consider alternative views, and sliding glass doors to experience worlds beyond their own (Bishop, 1990; Tschida et al., 2014).

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