



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 57
Issue 1 March 2018

Article 2

3-2018

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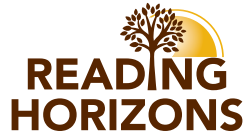
Scheffel, T., Cameron, C., Dolmage, L., Johnston, M., Lapensee, J., Solymar, K., Speedie, E., & Wills, M. (2018). A Collaborative Children's Literature Book Club for Teacher Candidates. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 57 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol57/iss1/2

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A Collaborative Children's Literature Book Club for Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

This paper highlights the two-year journey of an extra-curricular book club for teacher candidates as they explored children's literature in order to further their teaching practice. Initial themes were confirmed and refined as the journey of the book club concluded after two years. A sociocultural theoretical framework guided this work and considered Cambourne's (1988) conditions of learning, specifically immersion in texts, as well as the important role of social contexts in developing shared text meanings. A qualitative methodology, drawing on participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and taking a case study approach to sharing the "case" of this collaborative children's literature book club, was used.

KEYWORDS: children's literature, book club, teacher education

This article begins with the voice of a teacher educator (Tara-Lynn) to contextualize the two-year journey of a children's literature book club involving teacher candidates. The findings and discussion that follow assume the collective voice of seven teacher candidates (Claire, Lindsay, Madisen, Jemanica, Kirsten, Emily, and Meagan) to highlight their central role in this study as well as the insights they gained about children's literature through participation in the book club.

The Journey Unfolds

Throughout my teaching, I (Tara-Lynn) convey to learners the importance of fostering a love of reading. Echoing connections to Cambourne's conditions for learning (1988), this sense of fostering, as summarized by Bainbridge and Heydon (2013), includes

- demonstrating a love of books ourselves (Routman, 1991);
- making a large quantity of texts accessible (Allington, 2001), especially “high interest” texts (Gallagher, 2009);
- providing time to read (Allington, 2001), including reading for enjoyment (Gallagher, 2009);
- providing opportunities for sharing about and responding to texts (Daniels, 2002); and
- recommending suitable, high-quality texts for readers “that suit them and the situation” (p. 267).

To fulfill these goals, teacher candidates must become familiar with children’s literature in order to experience what children are reading and learning about in the text. This goal for familiarity is echoed by De Groot (2007):

Preservice teachers need to be encouraged to reflect on the importance of using and reading children’s literature of all kinds to be prepared to share these books with their future students. Readings, assignments, and discussions should focus on raising this awareness and ensuring that new teachers have a strong foundation on which to build. (p. 21)

Cremin, Mottram, Bearne, and Goodwin (2008) convey a similar goal for preservice teachers “to understand the significance of developing their knowledge about and pleasure in literature” (p. 459) and “to become familiar with a wide range of children’s authors” (p. 459).

One of the ways I have aimed to meet this challenge is through an in-class children’s literature wiki where I provide teacher candidates with a variety of texts across different genres to read, discuss, and write about collaboratively. However, while this assignment has increased teacher candidates’ knowledge of and exposure to children’s literature, I was cognizant of having limited time to delve into a multitude of books for ongoing conversation. This recognition prompted me to hold several Storybook Café events to provide further time for teacher candidates to read children’s literature beyond their language arts coursework.

Claire, Lindsay, Madisen, Jemanica, Kirsten, Emily, and Meagan participated in the initial series of Storybook Cafés, which included an open drop-in time on Friday mornings to browse storybooks and continue conversations that had begun in their language arts course. In their words:

The café sought to bring books to life in a way that would allow us to connect with a variety of storybooks as we continued to reflect upon the potential for teaching literacy with and through children’s literature.

While not initially intended as a research project, this intent grew from the teacher candidate’s desire to build upon the drop-in Storybook Cafés towards a book club that would involve them as co-researchers and reflective practitioners.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study values the importance of social contexts in developing shared meanings around texts and is grounded in sociocultural understandings (Vygotsky, 1978) and Cambourne’s (1988) conditions of learning (immersion, demonstration, expectation,

responsibility, use, response, approximation and engagement), specifically immersion in texts. According to Cambourne (1988), the goal of immersion is “long and deep” as opposed to “shallow and quick,” and requires a variety of visual and aural text forms that are led by both teachers and learners (p. 46). The ultimate goal is not to view immersion as a strategy, but for immersion to become part of “one’s teaching consciousness” (p. 47). Driven by Cambourne’s conditions, Miller (2009) describes immersion as an ongoing event involving opportunities for reading and “conversations about reading—what is being read and what students are getting from their books” (p. 34). With similar goals for immersion, this study sought to document the journey of our children’s literature book club as teacher candidates worked toward Bainbridge and Heydon’s goal (2013) to foster a love of reading in learners.

The Study Expanded

Our methodology was qualitative, drawing on notions of participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and taking a case study approach (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) to sharing this collaborative children’s literature book club. Initially, the main research question reflected my lens as a teacher educator asking, “What role does a children’s literature book club serve for teacher candidates?” However, as the project evolved and teacher candidates assumed co-researcher roles, the research question grew to include their collective voice: “In what ways did our participation in a children’s literature book club increase our understandings of teaching with and through children’s literature?”

Although I had a prior teacher–student relationship with my co-researchers, all coursework was completed before the onset of the book club and subsequent desire of the teacher candidates to pursue research as part of the club. This timing supported an important shift in roles from teacher–student toward mentor–co-researcher. While I guided decisions and documented the book club journey, my co-researchers took responsibility for data collection via reflective journals, followed by collective analysis and shared writing of the themes presented in this paper. Sharing their voices as teacher candidates was central and intended to empower them as learners.

Participants and Timeline. Participants in the book club included seven teacher candidates and one teacher educator across the final two years of a 5-year concurrent education program (a simultaneous bachelor of arts and bachelor of education degree program). Language arts coursework had taken place during years 2 and 3, with teacher candidates also completing multiple short-term placements prior to and during the study. Each year of the book club followed a similar format, beginning with a mail-based summer project, followed by monthly gatherings for the purpose of elaborating observations, strengthening pedagogy, and building a repertoire of children’s literature for future use as educators.

Mail-Based Summer Project. Akin to the *Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* by Ann Brashares, the mail-based project involved sharing seven children’s storybooks during the summer term. Upon receiving each storybook, book club members set aside time to read; some found quiet spaces in nature, and others read the books aloud to family members. A journal travelled with each storybook, providing a space to reflect on the text, illustrations, and potential for use within a classroom, as well as personal connections and questions that arose. When finished, the storybook and journal were mailed to the next person on the list. In total, the teacher candidates shared 14 storybooks over two summers.

In year 1, I selected the seven texts noted in Table 1. I looked for a diversity of formats and styles, a central theme of difference, potential discussion points, and mailing

costs (specifically, books that fit into a 9 x 12 inch envelope were most economical to mail). In year 2, teacher candidates selected the texts, also noted in Table 1. Because of a significant increase in mailing costs between year 1 and year 2, I made a financial decision (based on available funding) to incorporate digital versions of some of the texts through a shared online slideshow (specifically, books chosen by teacher candidates that did not fit into a 9 x 12 inch envelope). Rather than arriving by mail, these books arrived via email. This decision, while helping to allow for the selection of desired book picks, contributed to a disconnect with the book format for some of the teacher candidates. Using a combination of digitally viewed books and hard copies of books also meant that journaling had to move online for those books not mailed. As a result, teacher candidates could not see the previous entries, unlike the physical journals that arrived with each mailed book. Of the books selected for year 2 by the teacher candidates, three groupings emerged when explaining how they made their selections: a book they desired to read, a book they remembered from childhood, or a book they had used for teaching.

Data Sources and Analysis. Data sources for analysis included hand-written and typed journals, transcripts of book club discussions, anecdotal notes, email communications, and personal artifacts (e.g., photographs associated with journal reflections). The selected children’s storybooks (Table 1) and research articles (Table 2) inspired and provoked ongoing reflection.

Table 1. List of Children’s Literature by Year

Mailing Project Year 1	Mailing Project Year 2
<i>Albert</i> , by Donna Jo Napoli	<i>Harvey Potter’s Balloon Farm</i> , by Jerdine Nolen
<i>The Big Orange Splot</i> , by Daniel Manus Pinkwater	<i>Ish</i> , by Peter Reynolds
<i>Frederick</i> , by Leo Lionni	<i>Journey</i> , by Aaron Becker
<i>The Little Yellow Leaf</i> , by Carin Berger	<i>Make Way for Ducklings</i> , by Robert McCloskey
<i>Giraffes Can’t Dance</i> , by Giles Andreae	<i>No One But You</i> , by Douglas Wood
<i>The Mitten Tree</i> , by Candace Christiansen	<i>Skippyjon Jones in Mummy Trouble</i> , by Judy Schachner
<i>The Name Jar</i> , by Yangsook Choi	<i>The Stamp Collector</i> , by Jennifer Lanthier

Table 2. List of Research Articles

Research Articles Selected by Teacher Candidates
“Using Literature to Teach Inference Across the Curriculum,” by Bintz, Moran, Berndt, Ritz, Skilton, and Bircher (2012)
“Creating a Classroom Where Readers Flourish,” by Miller (2012)
“Taking Full Advantage of Children’s Literature,” by Serafini (2012)
“Opening Spaces for Critical Literacy: Introducing Books to Young Readers,” by Labadie, Wetzel, and Rogers (2012)
“Learning From Picturebooks: Reading and Writing Multimodally in First Grade,” by Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, and Aghalaroo (2012)
“The Power of Picturebooks: Resources that Support Language and Learning in the Middle Grade Classrooms,” by Roser, Martinez, and Fowler-Amato (2011)
<i>Note: Full citations included in References section.</i>

Analysis was ongoing and began with the re-reading of all journal entries by all book club members. Key insights and potential themes were brought to the group for discussion. Working in groups of two, teacher candidates then revisited the journal entries to look for supportive or contradictory quotes. Quotes were mapped by the

larger group, with my mentorship, for ongoing discussion and refinement of themes. A similar process was undertaken in year 2, but with a focus on depth and refinement. In addition, at my suggestion, teacher candidates explored research-based articles to inform their understandings of children's literature during the book club discussions (Table 2). These articles are integrated into the themes presented by the teacher candidates to share understandings and insights developed over the course of the book club. I turn next to the voices of my co-researchers to share the themes that arose and the insights gained.

Our Book Club Journey

As a core group attending the cafés, we began a mail-based summer project, involving sharing seven children's storybooks selected by Tara-Lynn to continue our discussions while home for the summer term. As we received each book, we used the journal provided to share our thoughts about it, both as a reader and a teacher. In year 1, six themes arose within our journal responses to the storybooks rotated through the mail. Year 2 of our mailing project revealed similar themes but in ways that revised and refined the depth of each theme and its potential for thinking about children's literature from our viewpoint as teacher candidates. Each theme is outlined below with example narratives.

Sharing Our Insights

Moments of Connection. Roser, Martinez, and Fowler-Amato (2011) discussed the use of picture books to encourage full participation by students "whatever their current strengths" (p. 30). This understanding was reinforced for us in year 1 as we noticed moments of connection to our funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005), the strengths and experiences that contributed to our personal reflective lenses. Our connections were both personal and intergenerational as we stepped into the lives of the characters and reflected upon similar life moments. Reading about Gerald in *Giraffes Can't Dance*, Lindsay wrote:

I feel like students try to all be the same and that they don't want to be different. I know I was that way at one point and it is so important to learn to be yourself.

Madisen felt a similar connection to Gerald:

...I can totally relate to Gerald...This reminded me of how much I hated playing the clarinet in grade 7, by myself, for marks. I always froze up and gave up...In grade 8, I switched to play the flute and had no problem. I just needed the right instrument.

Intergenerational connections arose in response to *The Name Jar*. In this story, Unhei is given a Korean name stamp by her grandmother. Rather than choose an easier to pronounce name from the jar of names offered by her new classmates, Unhei's name stamp helps her to realize she likes her name best. Reading about Unhei's name stamp, Kirsten recalled:

When I was younger my grandfather travelled a lot...One time, as a present, I got my own name stamp. I couldn't find that stamp but I did find my grandmother's..."

From her placement of a worn out stamp impression in the journal, we saw Kirsten's personal connection with the story.

Many of us also connected to the homemade gift of mittens made by Sarah, an elderly neighbour, in *The Mitten Tree*. Madisen was reminded of her grandmother and how

“she always knit me sweaters and even taught me how to knit.” Claire was reminded of her aunts and “how they always make us handmade mittens and socks for Christmas.” She added: “For me, handmade things always seem so much nicer than store bought because it feels like they are more personal and thoughtful gifts.” Meagan shared a similar family memory in her journal:

This really connected with me and reminded me of my grandparents. All my life, they have helped me and never thought twice about it. They are constantly being generous, and growing up, some of my best memories came from them.

Our year 2 journals reinforced the theme of personal and intergenerational connections. While reading *Harvey Potter's Magic Balloon Farm*, Meagan was curious about the young girl in the tree at the end of the book. Did Harvey see her? Did he want someone to carry on the balloon farm when he was no longer able? This led Meagan to once again think about her own family:

I connected easily with it...my grandma has a farm I grew up on...someday I may have the opportunity to carry on her farm using my own strengths.

Madisen made a similar connection to *No One But You* as she found herself resonating with the nature-filled pages: “I could easily relate because I am a nature girl and run an outdoor survival camp.”

During year 2, we also noticed the addition of powerful aesthetic responses within our moments of connection. Aesthetic responses, according to Rosenblatt (1978) occur when “readers enter into and live through stories rather than taking information away from them” (Bainbridge & Heydon, 2013, p. 219). For instance, when reading *The Stamp Collector*, Kirsten described the feeling of being absorbed into the story and how her heart melted when a main character dies. She recognized the emotion of her aesthetic response to this story:

During reading, I got really emotional. My heart hurt for the characters and I couldn't imagine living in their shoes.

Claire felt a similar but more personal response to the story *Ish* as she resonated with the message that art is personal and does not have to look like real life:

I wish that this book had been around when I was younger because I feel like the message of the book would have resonated with me and maybe I wouldn't have been so hard on myself when creating pieces of art...

Throughout our journals, we noted powerful connections with storybooks that crossed generations and tugged on our heartstrings. We realized that, as teachers, it is important to choose literature that our students are able to connect with, in order to encourage their full participation.

Moments of Disconnection. At the same time that moments of connection stood out, we also learned that personal beliefs may conflict with what is presented in the text, causing moments of disconnection between the reader and the story. We first considered this theme in year 1 as Emily experienced the following disconnect when reading *Frederick*, a story about a mouse that writes a poem rather than helping with food collection:

I didn't know how to part with the feeling that it was not fair that he didn't help with the food. Art and poetry are important, and contributes to happiness, but you can't eat poems. Maybe I was craving a different scenario where art wasn't put against subsistence. I don't think it should be one or the other...

Though a single quote, this experience helped us to recognize an important counter theme to that of connection. At the time, Emily was taking a course on the history of food and, looking back, she recognized the influence of this course upon her reaction to this storybook.

Interestingly, in year 2, the element of disconnect remained, but was related to the digital book format and perceived teaching opportunities. The book *Journey* offers one such example. While Emily selected this book for the way in which it spoke to her artistic lens, others found it more difficult, recognizing that the art told the story in this wordless book, but finding they were unable to connect without being able to “put their face” into the pages. Meagan shared:

...I found that it was a good storyline, but I did have a hard time connecting to the story. I loved the pictures, but it took me a long time to figure it all out.

Madisen similarly reflected: “I want to look at this book during our next get together as looking of the computer I feel like I missed a lot of the key details.” One exception to this disconnect between digitally viewed and hard copy was a book that was mailed as a DVD. This digital format allowed for an animated version of the book as opposed to a scanned version of the actual book. This format was more appealing to us as readers because we could interact with it differently than a scanned book that is read on screen.

Another form of disconnect related to our perceptions of teaching opportunities with a selected text, especially when it came to *Skippyjon Jones in Mummy Trouble*. Lindsay shared:

There is something that I didn't like about the book...I usually love books that rhyme, but this one was not one of my favourites.

Initially, some of us questioned why this book was chosen. We did not all perceive its potential. However, after hearing Meagan's explanation as to why she picked the book, we could see why she was drawn to its humor, viewing it as an “outside the box” text:

I chose this book initially because I had just been on placement and we had a huge discussion that it was difficult to find books with textual features in that school. I had brought this one to use. I thought this book was quite funny and would have many implications in the classroom. (Journal Summary)

We came to understand that a possible reason for disconnections is that “each time a reader approaches a text, he or she brings a unique set of perspectives and purposes to the text” (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012, p. 118). Our reactions to each book varied depending on influences at the time of reading, a powerful understanding that we had not considered before this experience.

Awareness of Big Ideas. Gutierrez (2008) discusses the understanding that “we need not simply meet students where they are with the topics they already know, but instead, find ways to lead them to new ways of understanding the world” (as cited in Labadie et al., 2012, p. 119). In year 1, the storybooks we considered drew upon the big idea of difference (a theme chosen by Tara-Lynn), prompting us to consider familiar topics in deeper ways. Depending on the order we received the books, we did not all initially recognize this theme. However, we noticed that we pondered larger themes within our reflections. In *Giraffes Can't Dance*, a story about a giraffe ridiculed off the dance floor because of his long legs, Claire reflected:

Individuality is an important concept to teach children...Being told and shown that it is ok to be unique means that they are more likely to become their own person and follow their own path...

In another example, from *The Little Yellow Leaf*, Emily focused on peer pressure:

The book provided many opportunities for children to relate to the feeling of not being ready to do something when their peers are. Then it showed that there will always be someone to support you, even when you think you are alone.”

We noticed a similar awareness of big ideas during year 2. Jemanica noticed the big idea of uniqueness when reading *Harvey Potter’s Balloon Farm*: “Everyone might think you are ordinary at times (like Mr. Harvey Potter) but truly everyone is special/unique in all different ways.” Uniqueness also stood out to Lindsay when reading *No One But You*: “This was a sweet book that discusses the idea of self-identity and that you are your own unique person, different from everyone else in the world.”

In fact, the theme of uniqueness began to stand out in our year 2 selections, perhaps because we had selected books that spoke to us personally, either as children or teachers in terms of the message conveyed. Sharing her reasons for selecting *No One But You*, a book that includes phrases such as “no one but you can feel the love you have for your family,” Jemanica shared:

I read this book with my students...The students discussed things that are individual to them, which promoted the idea of how everyone is unique and special. I enjoyed this book when I read it to my class which is why when we decided to choose our own books this summer, I knew I wanted to share this book with all of you!

Other members picked up on this same message in their journal entries, highlighting the connected themes of self-image and self-confidence. Through the lives of the characters, we recognized the potential for meaningful discussions about real-world topics.

The Importance of Illustrations. Initially, we viewed illustrations as an extension of the story—a way for readers, usually children, to understand the story even if they did not understand all of the words. As she read *Albert*, Claire wrote: “The illustrations in this book are amazing! The expressions on Albert’s face really do capture and depict emotions very accurately.” Often evoking an aesthetic response, we found illustrations also held opportunities to further understandings of text beyond just reading the words. Reading *The Little Yellow Leaf*, Emily reflected:

The first thing that struck me was the beautiful illustrations and all the collages. My favourite was the page that has the circles like the sun and it said “as the afternoon sun beckoned and teased.” I would love to do an art lesson involving collage and making something like that!

However, illustrations were not always helpful, as Kirsten discovered when she read *The Name Jar*:

I also thought that the illustrations could have gone better with the text. For example, the illustration showing the students looking for the jar took me a little bit to understand. I think the author could have chosen more key points in the text to illustrate.

While we had discussed the connection between text and image in our coursework, we further understood that “art is a valid language that needs to be valued and taught” (Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, & Aghalarov, 2012, p. 291). This realization led us to discuss how “illustrations are just as important in telling the story as the written text” (p. 287). Reflecting on the illustrations within *The Mitten Tree*, Jemanica wrote:

I like the illustrations; the pastel images add character to the story and the colours (smoky look) create a familiar ambience (ex. page 9 makes me feel like I am in the room with the fire and Sarah knitting—it feels comfortable.

We also agreed with Labadie et al. (2012) that illustrations are “doorways into critical literacy” (p. 120). Meagan recognized this potential within *The Mitten Tree*:

I also noticed that the illustrator used differed ethnicities, genders, and different hair colours to appeal to all different readers. I feel having more books like this will allow diversity to be seen and accepted within the classroom...

Reflecting on *The Big Orange Splot*, Emily highlighted the way this book, and the illustrations of the houses, “shows how an outward representation of ourselves can be so thrilling!” She added:

Having one person decide to break the mold can show others that it is ok! I also loved how he stood his ground and didn't let it bother him that others were making fun of him.

Our year 1 discussions reinforced the goal of moving beyond the surface of the words to consider the potential of illustrations to enhance meaning-making opportunities. We discussed ways that illustrations could provide opportunities for rich talk as well as encouragement to try out new art mediums.

The same theme echoed in year 2 as we observed our continued focus on artistic details. In particular, we noticed how illustrations affected the mood and tone of a book. *About Make Way for Ducklings*, Claire observed:

I'm not exactly sure what the medium is – charcoal or pencil maybe, but it gives the book an old-timey feel, which is appropriate seeing as how it takes place in the 1940s I think.

Meagan noted a similar observation when studying the colors of the stamps in *The Stamp Collector*: “I like how they made the stamps the brightest images in the book because they seem to represent hope, dreams, wishes, a better future.”

Serafini (2012) discusses the role of peritextual elements (e.g. book covers and dedications), picture book design elements (e.g., use of color and shape), art criticism, and visual grammar (e.g., making sense of images). We took notice of these features as we considered the use of color, medium, and the way in which these features enhanced understanding. For example, the front covers of *Journey* and *The Stamp Collector* were dark and set a more serious tone initially, while the bright colors of *The Big Orange Splot* set a lighter tone. O'Neil (2011) discusses the use of pictures as a visual grammar that involves emotions and conjures atmospheres. For example, red might be seen as hot and dangerous but also representative of love. In the book *Journey*, the use of red stood out for the way it symbolized adventure and danger. The bright, open and beautiful landscape of *Harvey Potter's Balloon Farm* changed in reflection of character's growth, illustrating O'Neil's (2011) observation that art enhances comprehension in the way it communicates thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Collaborative Meaning-Making. Initially divided into two themes in year 1 (literary observations and consideration of teaching strategies), this final theme focuses on strategies used by teachers and students to uncover layers of meaning within a text. During year 1, an article about inferencing by Bintz et al. (2012) led us to consider how we applied inferencing and other comprehension strategies while reading the storybooks. As readers,

we observed the ways in which we were “making predictions, drawing conclusions, using context clues, activating background knowledge, filling gaps, creating interpretations, visualizing meaning, and dealing with ambiguity” (Bintz, et al. 2012, p. 16).

Madisen drew on context clues in *The Big Orange Splot* as she observed:

Once I read the first page, I knew what the book was about...the houses were the same (e.g., “neat street” where lawns are cut, no garbage, houses look painted etc.)...The meaning of “neat” changed at the end. All houses were different making it a neat (cool, exciting) street!”

In another example, Jemanica was able to correct earlier predictions as she filled gaps and visualized the meaning of interaction as it related to the storybook *Albert*: “As I read further, I found out how the red bird (from the cover) and Albert came to interact and it is not through injury at all, but rather nest-building!”

At the same time, we observed a focus on teaching strategies as we considered how we would use each book in our future classrooms. For example, after reading *The Big Orange Splot*, an idea that came to mind for Kirsten was “designing a house that is specific to your own dreams.” Recognizing the aspect of making things by hand in *The Mitten Tree*, Lindsay had this idea: “Students can learn about how something homemade can mean so much more than store-bought. Students could make presents for a family member or friend using the mittens as a guideline.”

In year 2, however, we realized that both of these themes encompassed the ways in which we asked questions and sought understanding, both for ourselves and for our future students. This refined theme arose from our discussions about *Make Way for Ducklings* as we began to discuss hidden messages and the need for contextual knowledge about Boston, MA, the context where the story takes place. Lindsay reflected:

As soon as they mentioned Boston...I immediately thought about the statue in Boston...I had to look it up as soon as I was done...

In reading one another’s entries, we also observed how new understandings were prompted. Lindsay, for example, posed a question about why ducks would be afraid of turtles, which is described at the end of *Make Way for Ducklings*:

As I listened to the story, I was curious as to why the ducks would be worried about turtles. I’ve never heard of turtles as being predators.

This led Madisen, the member who initially selected the book, to research the question. She shared her newly discovered understanding that snapping turtles do eat ducks.

Our discussion of books like *Journey* also led us to consider how books that leave you with questions may be the best ones. Although the digital format of this book caused some disconnect, it was a book that demonstrated our questioning as readers. For example, Meagan asked:

What was the significance of the bird in the story? What was the significance of the blue lantern? What happens after this story ends?

The theme of curiosity stood out as we pondered the storyline and asked questions of one another, both in our journals and during our meetings. Lohfink (2012) suggests that questioning is a pathway to comprehension, which we discovered to be true of our experience as readers. We did not always find the answers to the questions we asked, but our self-questioning led us to think more critically as readers and educators (Lohfink, 2012).

The Journey Concludes

This two-year journey has offered us new insights and understandings about children's literature, adding rich layers to our ongoing thinking about teaching literacy. Key discussion areas reinforced the understanding that "each time a reader approaches a text, he or she brings a unique set of perspectives and purposes..." (Labadie et al., 2012, p. 118), as well as the ways that "meanings are constructed from the constituent parts as well as the book as a whole" (Serafini, 2012, p. 458). Serafini and Moses (2012) suggest that

As teachers explore the world of children's literature, they develop deeper, more meaningful connections to these texts and learn new ways to integrate them into their reading workshops (p. 468).

We are these teachers. The themes we discussed above influenced our ongoing thinking about teaching language arts and literacy in ways we had not expected. We now understand more fully the significance of using children's literature in the classroom as more than just a tool in language arts.

To those contemplating the value and purpose of a children's literature book club such as this, we offer four points for consideration. First, as Tara-Lynn intended when designing the Storybook Cafes, we received greater exposure to, and appreciation for, children's literature beyond our coursework. We have been introduced to new and exciting books that push traditional boundaries and allow for more exploration of texts, not just in primary grades, but in older grades as well. Second, although we explored children's literature in our language arts coursework, we have taken away a deeper understanding of the potential of children's literature to enhance literacy learning. The book club provided more time to truly reflect upon and challenge our thinking. We went beyond simplistic uses of storybooks to examine the context of stories in ways we had not done before, including using books across the curriculum (e.g., art, drama). We now find ourselves looking for hidden messages and differing perspectives within books. Third, our journey has helped us gain confidence to use children's literature in the classroom to create meaningful learning opportunities for our students with and through texts. This confidence filtered into our placements as we applied our growing understandings about children's literature to planning opportunities. Our funds of knowledge as educators have increased as we take with us a deep desire and interest to continue working with children's literature. We are more confident to stand behind our book selections and explain our choices. Finally, the book club offered the opportunity to expand our initial perceptions of storybooks in collaborative ways. Providing an informal context for conversation, we took time to contemplate others' perspectives, all the while increasing our understandings of the potential uses of children's literature in ways that we might not have thought of ourselves. This experience also opened our eyes to how students may perceive books differently and that similar book club style discussions can support our students in hearing the insights of others.

In addition to these considerations, we have found ourselves altering the way we interact with books as a result of our participation in the book club. Some examples include:

- We find that when we select books for our teaching, we draw upon the themes, as well as the books we read, to guide our decision about the books' quality and potential uses. In fact, Kirsten has even begun to formulate ideas for her own children's book.

- We are more critical of the types of digital books we use and how they are read. Lindsay, who teaches in an online environment, also finds herself constantly exploring new and innovative ways to foster a love of reading while learning online.
- We are more willing to explore books with unfamiliar authors that we might only have glanced over previously. We also find ourselves purchasing children's literature as gifts for family and friends.
- We share our love of children's literature with other teachers and look for opportunities to extend the discussions started in the book club.

Final Thoughts

We recognize that joining a children's literature book club may not be of interest to all teacher candidates. For us, it was an exciting opportunity for professional development and personal growth that far outweighed the time spent. At the same time, our book club journey speaks to the purpose and potential of similar experiences to establish lifelong learning, not only for teacher candidates but also for new and established teachers. Although we have graduated, our journey has not concluded. The goal to foster a love of reading for our future students remains in the hopes they will discover "a path to enjoyment and self-learning that lasts long after schooling ends—an immeasurable gift" (Miller, 2012, p. 92).

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Lindsay Dolmage is a graduate of the concurrent bachelor of education degree at Nipissing University. She is a content developer at an online elementary and secondary school, along with teaching language online for grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. She has a passion for all books, especially children's books, and is hoping to continue working with the online school to expand the literacy program for the elementary grades.

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Kirsten Solymar is a graduate of the concurrent bachelor of education degree at Nipissing University. She teaches Kindergarten in Ottawa, Ontario, with the Ottawa Catholic School Board. She has a passion for literacy that she passes onto her students by assisting in the exploration of many different books. She aspires to write her own children's books in the future.

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