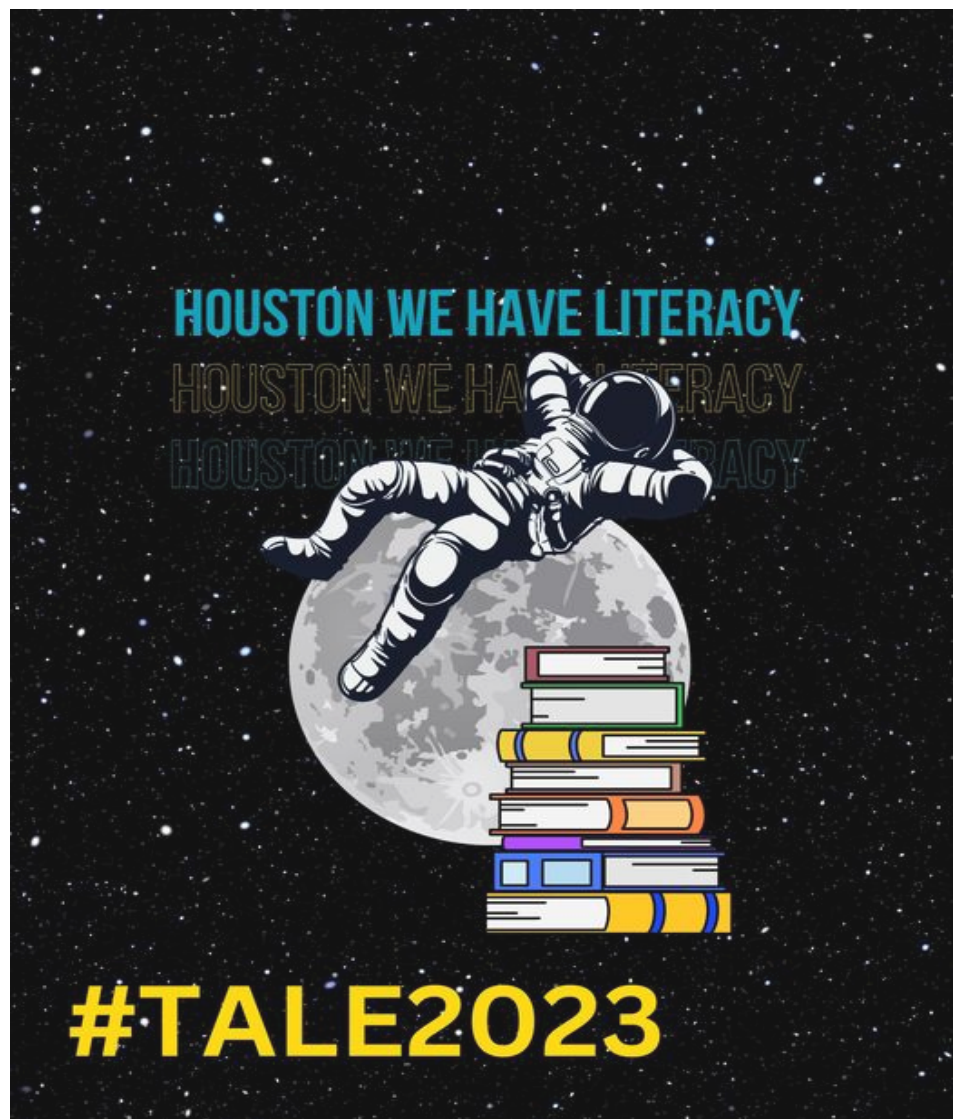




Texas Association for Literacy Education  
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# *Houston We Have Literacy!*

## *Yearbook Volume 10: August 2023*



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# TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR LITERACY EDUCATION YEARBOOK

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## Volume 10: *Houston We Have Literacy!*

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## *Foreword*

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Since the first conference, a small summit of like-minded literacy leaders in February of 2012, the Texas Association of Literacy Education has continued to grow and thrive. We pay homage to Jack Cassidy for having the vision to organize a small group of educators after the Texas State Reading Association disbanded. TALE recently reached a milestone of ten years. During the pandemic, we pivoted by adding more virtual options for professional development, and we have continued to find ways to grow and engage our membership by hosting activities like virtual book studies with author professional development sessions.

Our membership is made up of educators in the K -12 space as well as higher education. We are proud to say that our membership also includes educators who work in library sciences. As we grow, TALE continues to be the giver and receiver of awards. In the past year, we have awarded two Jack Cassidy Memorial Scholarships as well as two TAIR Emerging Literacy Leaders Grants. The TAIR Grants allow winners to attend the TALE Annual Conference and to be mentored by a member of the TALE Board of Directors. Our Advocacy Committee has won the ILA Advocacy Award again!

I see great things in the future of TALE! We have conference dates for 2024 hosted by Baylor University and in 2025 hosted by Region 18 in Midland/Odessa. We look forward to seeing new and engaging activities from our committees and members. As the chair, I was happy to serve for the love of literacy. It was an awesome experience!

*Dr. Pearl Dean Garden*

TALE Chair 2022-2023

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## *Meeting the Texas A&M University System Quality Standards for Teacher Preparation Through an Intensive Field-Based Experience*

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### **Abstract**

*The Texas A&M University System recently developed six quality standards for educator preparation programs, the Texas A&M Quality Standards for Educator Preparation, that are to be implemented and met by all system schools. These standards are: quality of selection of teacher candidates; quality of content knowledge and teaching methods; quality of clinical/field placement, feedback, and candidate performance; quality of program performance management; quality of partnership performance management; and expanding the community of practice. In this article, the authors describe how the Islanders Helping the Early Acceleration of Readers Together (IHEART) program exceeds all of these standards by working with a partner school to provide early reading intervention to first grade students and field experience opportunities to preservice teachers.*

**Keywords:** *field experiences, school partnerships, quality standards, teacher preparation*

In 2018, the first author met with a local primary school principal to discuss how our school/university partnership might be enhanced, and, more importantly, how the university could help the school faculty raise reading achievement for its students, who reside in a high-needs area. The principal's immediate response was, "We need more assistance with providing reading intervention." At this request, the author set out to develop and locate funding for an in-school reading tutorial program, which she called IHEART, Islanders Helping the Early Acceleration of Readers Together. The Islander

is the University mascot; for the idea was that the preservice teachers (PSTs) at the university would serve as volunteer tutors. The tutors would help first-grade children who were experiencing difficulties with print and would in turn gain the valuable experience of putting into action what they were learning in their educator preparation coursework.

The Texas A&M University System recently developed six standards, the Texas A&M Quality Standards for Educator Preparation, that are to be implemented and met by all system

schools. These standards are: quality of selection of teacher candidates; quality of content knowledge and teaching methods; quality of clinical/field placement, feedback, and candidate performance; quality of program performance management; quality of partnership performance management; and expanding the community of practice. The IHEART program exceeds all of these standards, and the program coordinators recently received group admission into the Texas A&M Academy of Teacher Educators for its excellence in promoting the standards.

### **Careful Selection of Preservice Teacher Tutors**

What sets IHEART apart from other tutoring opportunities is that the tutors offer children literacy lessons that mirror the instruction an in-service reading interventionist might provide. These tutoring experiences build upon what the undergraduate students are learning in their courses about working with emergent readers who have difficulty with print and can be adjusted to fit future classroom settings (Duffy & Atkinson, 2001). Because we, the IHEART coordinators, would like the tutors to have had some instruction in early literacy, we recruit undergraduate students who are currently enrolled in or have taken the course Principles and Practices of Early Reading Instruction and are recommended by their course instructors. We also seek out students who are interested in exploring what it is like to teach in the primary grades.

During the initial training session for tutors, we make clear the understanding that they will be working with children who need intervention, which is an essential experience for PSTs (Barrio et al., 2015). We strive to retain strong tutors from semester to semester by showing our gratitude through emails, videos, and on-site visits. By inviting the same tutors back in subsequent semesters, we are ensuring that our selection process is robust and that we are building continuity and mentoring opportunities in the program. We are friendly to the tutors, greeting them with smiles and providing positive comments about their work in the program.

Also, the schools' faculty are extremely warm and welcoming, which has been instrumental in retaining tutors.

### **Applying the Content of Reading Courses into Practice**

Prior to tutorial sessions with children, the tutors are required to attend an initial professional development session where we present information regarding assessment and instructional methods. In order to build upon the information that they have studied in their reading courses, we present them with instructional strategies they are expected to utilize with emergent and early readers who display difficulties with print. Even though the tutors engage the children in some isolated work with letters, sounds, and words, the largest portion of the lesson is spent on continuous text reading. The children are provided with texts that are matched to their instructional reading levels, thereby giving them multiple opportunities to be successful (Allington, 2006; Clay, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), while having some problems to solve in order to expand their repertoire of strategies to use with text.

The IHEART program is fully aligned with the student learning objectives in all six of the reading courses our EC-6 Reading Generalist students take. These include the foundational course, Principles and Practices of Early Reading Instruction, and our service learning course, Reading Assessment and Intervention, in which PSTs work with a child for eight weeks by administering literacy assessments, analyzing the results, using the results to design a dynamic instructional literacy plan, and implementing this plan.

### **Consistent Feedback and Coaching**

To ensure that our teacher candidates are using the knowledge they acquired during their coursework and IHEART professional learning opportunities, we visit each tutor at least twice during the semester to observe, model, and co-teach lessons and to provide coaching before

or after lessons. We offer feedback to the tutors in the areas of guided reading book introductions, prompting during reading, teaching after reading, letter identification, and word study. Because our tutors are undergraduate PSTs, we make it clear that these visits are primarily for professional learning purposes. Our goal is not to evaluate them, but to help them along their journey of becoming teachers of readers. Coaching sessions revolve around, first, what we notice they are doing well, and second, areas in need of attention. During this model, the tutors gradually apply what they have learned in their prior university reading coursework (Welsh & Schaffer, 2017; Zeichner, 2010) with the coach's support (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2017).

Coaching and feedback serve dual purposes: 1) the tutors engage in authentic and guided application of previous learning, and 2) the children they are teaching benefit from the enhanced teaching of their tutors. During the portion of the guided reading lesson where students are reading the text under the guidance of the tutor, we often notice areas that the tutors need to address in order to unleash the full power of the lesson. We reinforce the importance of matching the appropriate level of text to students, reading the book out loud in its entirety while the teacher listens, and prompting students as needed. To ensure best practices in book introductions, we train tutors to scaffold the children's reading of the text. They are encouraged to think about and plan an introduction that supports children's use of sources of information. We provide them with examples over the course of the semester in the form of videos, live demonstration lessons, and co-teaching during their lessons.

Coaching and co-teaching sessions are used to help develop the skills of the tutors for the "after reading" segment of the tutoring sequence. After the children have read the text, two important events must occur: 1) an engaging conversation related to the text that further extends children's thinking and enhances comprehension, and 2) a teaching point that is meant to teach the children

a new strategy they are ready to use on text, reinforce a strategy they are just beginning to use, or celebrate a strategy they are using independently. We help the tutors understand the need to bring relevance to this segment of the tutorial session and execute a teaching point that aligns with what the children need as readers in the moment (Thompson, 2020).

### **Monitoring Program Performance**

A survey is sent to tutors at the end of each semester not only to solicit their feedback about the program, but also to let them know that their opinions and ideas for enhancing IHEART are valued. Participation in the survey allows the tutors to reflect on their teaching, and how their teaching has been enhanced by the relationships they have built with the children. Some of the responses from the most recent tutor and school staff survey (Spring 2022) will be presented here.

The tutors responded favorably to the item "I enjoyed being a tutor this semester" and indicated that they would serve as an IHEART tutor again. They also shared that they enjoyed getting to know the children as readers and that this process of listening helped them plan intervention lessons that would help the children become proficient readers and engage them (Assaf & López, 2012; Falk-Ross et al., 2017). The tutors stated that their initial apprehension and nervousness faded as soon as they began working with the children. The tutors were excited about having opportunities to develop lesson plans and use the strategies they had learned in their coursework. The chance to collaborate with other tutors also appeared on their surveys as they spoke of arriving early or staying late and listening in to others' lessons or chatting with other tutors about their lessons.

The responses collected from the surveys each semester also inform the subsequent semesters of IHEART. For example, after the first semester of implementation, we sought ways to improve communication between the coordinators, tutors, and teachers. We implemented the use of an app

where all parties could post information and helpful tutoring ideas. In another example, after a research study in 2021 where we compared the IHEART children's literacy assessment scores to a control group of children's scores, we found that, even though all the children made gains in their letter and word knowledge and instructional reading level, there was no statistical significance between the scores of both groups. This prompted changes for the current year of IHEART, such as increasing the amount of time the children work on phonological awareness and phonics skills.

The IHEART program has also had an effect on two of our reading courses, Principles and Practices of Early Reading Instruction and Reading Assessment and Intervention. Each semester, when we observe the tutors, we search for patterns across our written observations. As the PSTs implement their literacy instruction, we notice where they are excelling and where there are misunderstandings and missing content and pedagogical knowledge (Massey & Lewis, 2011). For example, the tutors are proficient at providing letter work and word work lessons at children's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978); however, there is room for growth in the area of teaching, prompting, and reinforcing while children are reading continuous text during guided reading instruction. Thus, the instructors of both of these courses are spending more time during class sessions discussing, role-playing, and practicing prompting.

In recent years, the TAMUCC reading program has engaged in curriculum mapping that has strengthened the preparation of EC-6 certification majors in their reading coursework. IHEART has filled a need that was identified in the program for more intensive training in tutoring small groups and earlier field-work in schools. Gaps were shown in the area of working with early literacy intervention, including tasks and expectations for the newly implemented Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam. In working with first-grade children who demonstrate difficulty with early

literacy skills, word recognition, and comprehension, IHEART added a layer of rigorous and robust preparation available to the University reading program and its EC-6 certification graduates.

EC-6 reading program preparation is evident in the scores of EC-6 certification majors on state exams required to obtain a teaching license in the state of Texas. For all test-takers and IHEART participants, there was a 100% pass rate on the STR certification exam in 2020-2021. Overall, for reading test-takers in 2020-21, there was a 92% pass rate on the Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR) exam, with the IHEART participants scoring higher than the overall rate. IHEART participants also performed above average on the English Language Arts portion of the core content exam, including a higher pass rate on the first attempt.

### **Working with Partner Schools**

Building and sustaining healthy working relationships with schools is a top priority for faculty in our educator preparation program. This particular partnership (IHEART) is mutually collaborative, in that the University provides tutors to supplement classroom instruction for children who need it (Nelson-Royes, 2013), and the school provides the physical space and opportunities for research. There are measures that we take to ensure that our partnership is nurtured. We collaborate with the school faculty to plan for the program and discuss items such as student selection, instructional materials, and scheduling. We visit the school frequently to support the tutors and talk with the faculty about IHEART. We also invite all classroom teachers at the school to an informative meeting each semester that outlines the program's mission and how we might support the work they do in their classrooms and the ways in which they might support the tutors.

### **Conclusion**

The IHEART program supports the educator preparation program at our university by placing preservice teachers in the field early to work with young readers in the communities in which many will teach upon receiving their certification. By selecting our tutors carefully, teaching them to implement best practices into their lessons that they have learned in their coursework, providing coaching and feedback, and collecting and analyzing program data for both children and tutors, we are meeting the standards for quality educator preparation that the Texas A&M system has prioritized. What makes IHEART even stronger is that our preservice teacher tutors are having a positive impact on student reading achievement. These qualities make IHEART a productive and fruitful school and university partnership.

Link to IHEART website:

<https://www.tamucc.edu/education/departments/cils/iheart.php>

## AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

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**Tracy Harper** is an Assistant Professor of Reading at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi. Tracy researches effective literacy professional learning and supports for early career teachers.

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## *Adolescent Digital Writing: Considerations for the Classroom and Beyond*

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### **Abstract**

*The pandemic led many schools to invest in technology that remains in classrooms today. The abrupt changes did not leave much time for professional development or planning time on how to use these digital tools to support literacy development effectively. Educators continue to grapple with how to use this technology to support language arts, specifically writing. Literacy teachers who strive to integrate this technology into their instruction must consider digital inequalities, the digital literacy skills students already bring with them, and how to differentiate digital literacy instruction for those with varying levels of competence. This literature review explores the research into digital student writing, online composition, digital inequalities, problematic characterizations of adolescent digital writers and writing, and the power of teacher perceptions. Implications for practice and future research are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** *digital writing, digital literacy, digital inequalities, adolescent writing*

Cell phones and tablets are ubiquitous in today's society. Following the instructional changes due to the pandemic, technology was incorporated more and more into the classroom, with 96% of all public schools providing devices to students (NCES, 2021). Teachers had to pivot quickly in 2020 and may still be looking for the best ways to use digital technologies. Specifically, language arts teachers may wonder how they can use technology to enhance student writing. Many students do not know a world without digital communication and are successful "at participating in several networked places simultaneously" (Alvermann & Sanders, 2019, p. 1). Their classrooms do not always reflect this lived experience. Yet, "the responsibility for educating students on relevant and real-life issues falls upon teachers" (Sanders, 2016, p. 77). This includes instruction in the new

literacies and digital writing. Many teachers may lament student academic writing, but students regularly write as part of their digital lives using their phones, tablets, and laptops, as evidenced by a survey of teens that reports 85% of respondents using YouTube, 72% Instagram, and 69% Snapchat (Dienlin & Johannes, 2020, p. 135).

While these students are considered digital natives, born after the advent of new technologies and therefore assumed proficient, the term can also be problematic, and may mask digital inequalities amongst students, obscuring the need for teachers to differentiate and scaffold digital assignments. To incorporate more digital composition, educators must also take into account digital inequities that continue to plague society.

The following literature review addresses the following questions: How can language arts teachers leverage adolescent digital writing? What should educators consider when implementing digital composition and creation?

### **Conceptual Lens**

Research about students' digital writing lives is a relatively new inquiry. Accordingly, it is important to explore the topic with new and multiple perspectives. As Coiro et al. (2008) assert:

New literacies of the Internet are sufficiently distinctive that they require their own theoretical framework – one that is grounded in the social practices of the new literacies of the Internet and other ICT [information and computer technologies] and the contexts and conditions under which these social practices occur, develop, and evolve in order to adequately understand them (p. 12).

This review employs discourse and sociocultural theories since both theories complement each other in their approach to writing instruction and digital literacy.

### **Discourse Theory**

Horner (2014) described discourse theory as a “problem-driven approach to research” (p. 2) that allows researchers to recognize social practices as “both the product of and capable of challenging political discourses” (p. 4). Texts then are created within those social practices. The lifeworlds of adolescent creators are part of this larger social practice. Turner et al. (2014) identify how digitalk, students' text, and online writing, situated the teen participants as a Discourse community. Gee (2015) defines Discourses as “ways of recognising and getting recognised” as certain sorts of *who's* doing certain sorts of *whats* (p. 173). It is more than just what people say. It's what they do and how they act and how they fit in. When teens use

digitalk, they are part of a community of practice and are participating in a Discourse community.

### **Socio-cultural Theory**

The nature of discourse theory binds literacies with social, institutional, and cultural relationships. This approach has strong roots in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and his focus on social context. He writes that “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow” (p. 88). Gee (2015) asserts that it is “impossible to separate out from the text-mediated social practices the ‘bits’ concerned with reading and writing” (p. 13). This is also in line with Street's (1984) ideological definitions of literacy. Meaning is dependent on social institutions, not separate from politics and ideology. As a social structure, literacy practices cannot be isolated. Based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), this is especially true with the use of tools, in this case mobile phones, tablets, or laptops.

This conceptual framework offers a complex lens for a complex issue. It allows a holistic view of digitalk that takes into account the Discourse communities of students and the sociocultural nature of literacy and Discourse communities.

### **Terms**

#### **Digital Writing**

The digital writing of adolescents has not gone unnoticed. Studies that explore this writing – digital writing, or “digitalk,” labeled by Turner et al. (2014) – reveal that students compose with audience in mind, make deliberate writing decisions, have identifiable writing patterns, and learn from each other in a community of practice. Additionally, adolescent digital writers are responsive to audience and skilled at what researchers term digital curation (using previously published media to create something). Students are writing, but very often this writing is seen as a distraction from the academic tasks in which they should be engaged



(Turner et al., 2014; Vaughan, 2019; Warner, 2016).

### ***Digital Inequality and Digital Literacy***

Students' digital skills are not the only consideration. Educators must consider digital inequality, which "emphasizes a spectrum of inequality across segments of the population...along several dimensions of technology access and use" (Hargittai, 2003, p. 822). For this literature review, I use the term digital inequality to frame the topic rather than the buzzword "digital divide."

The term literacy can also be a point of contention. Literacy defined as just reading and writing is simplistic and does not take into account the new literacies that spread daily on the Internet which "permits immediate, global, and continuous change to literacy technologies themselves" (Coiro et al., 2008, pp. 4-5). Seeing literacy as only pencil/paper reading and writing can have a negative effect on the students who need the most support. For example, if all state assessments are pencil/paper, this may lead to greater focus on a traditional definition of literacy and not the more encompassing definition.

How educators define literacy is not neutral, may have negative effects on students already at risk, and continues to replicate current inequalities. As sociolinguistics researcher Gee (2015) claims, "Language and literacies, including digital literacy, are still too often today used to sustain inequalities and to create acquiescence to an unjust status quo" (p. 6), thus replicating the "social hierarchy" (p. 38). Decisions made at the district, campus, and classroom level can perpetuate inequalities or aid in their decline.

### ***The Problematic Concept of the Digital Native***

Prensky (2001) is usually given credit for the concept of the digital native that is now a pervasive idea. He may have also coined the term digital wisdom instead, but the idea

remains and has problematic implications (boyd, 2014). The concept of the digital native assumes that anyone born after 1980 has the knowledge and skills needed to fully engage with ICTs, resulting in different learning preferences due to this knowledge and skill (Bennett et al., 2008; boyd, 2014). But as Bennett et al. (2008) posit, there is no evidence of this. Further, as technology and social media scholar boyd (2014) asserts, the concept of the digital native is dangerous because it lets educators and society at-large off the hook for supporting students' use of digital literacies.

### ***Digital Writing and Inequality Research***

The digital lives of teens are growing, not going away. In a Pew survey, researchers found that 92% of teens went online daily (Joshi et al., 2019). The demand for academic writing proficiency is not going away either, as evidenced by expanded writing assessments in states like Texas (TEA, 2020). Starting in 2023, Texas began assessing writing each year it also assesses reading. The need to be able to communicate on a multitude of platforms in a multitude of ways is becoming even more critical. When the New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) wrote about multiliteracies, they broadened the definition of literacy to "include a multiplicity of discourses" (p. 61). Teachers will need to find ways to meet students where they are and harness the audience and voice awareness that students are already developing.

### ***The Nature of Digitalk***

In the past decade, researchers have examined the personal writing students do on a daily basis. Turner (2011) defines "digitalk" as the "complex and fascinating combination of written and conversational languages that adolescents use in digital settings" (p. 264). This includes texting, instant messages, and social media. This type of composition often breaks the rules of standard written English (SWE) but allows adolescents to be part of a community of practice where they negotiate and adapt conventions to the audience. The deviations from SWE are often purposeful

and used to create voice or are done in order to communicate more efficiently. The findings of Warner (2016) support the idea that youth digital composers create their own practices and conventions, as well as relying heavily on digital curation, which involves “selecting, compiling, and displaying existing digital content rather than creating from the ‘ground up’” (p. 184).

For example, Turner et al. (2014) find that students compose with their specific audience in mind. Feedback from the audience plays an important role (Warner, 2016). In fact, the attention paid to audience is one of the defining characteristics of “digitalk” and adolescent online writing. Turner et al. (2014) suggest that rather than viewing the writing done in out-of-school Discourse communities as deficient, teachers and parents should see it as a form of code-switching, or alternating between two languages or two language versions, something to be built upon in the writing classroom.

### **Online Composition**

Literacies include several online tools for composing both text and multimodal creations. Online tools are being used in school for writing, specifically collaborative composition. Research focused on the use of online tools (e.g., Google Docs) has been mixed. Kessler et al. (2012), Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014), and Krishnan et al. (2018) find beneficial results from allowing students to collaborate on writing using Google Docs, both in meaning making and student perception, while Woodrich and Fan (2017) found face-to-face interaction still garners more writing growth.

Additional research focuses on the development of multimodal texts. Findings support the need to expand the “available sources of meaning making” while also looking at the importance of the actual process of creation (Ehret et al., 2016; Miller, 2013, p. 452). Multimodal texts allow a wider method of expression and creation.

### **Instructional Bridges**

Lammer and Van Alstyne (2018) discuss potential next steps for taking at least some digital student writing into the classroom. They found that incorporating networked publics (online writing spaces) created privacy issues, necessitated time and effort to build an audience, and allowed student examination of their online writing. Attempting to create an authentic online writing space in the classroom does come with challenges but is important to give “youths opportunities to practice writing skills in areas they want to develop” (Vaughan, 2019, p. 533). These practices allow students who may struggle in class to develop a creative voice.

### **Inequities in Digital Literacy**

Not all students have the same exposure, access, or experience to digital writing. For example, a 2018 report shows that while 72% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders use technology for research, only 30% use it for presentations, and only 13% use it for making video or audio productions (NCES, 2019). Broadly speaking, socioeconomic status is the key factor in access and use of digital technology. Since her earlier work, sociology researcher Hargittai (2003) outlined that despite increases in digital access and use overall, gaps still remain. The socioeconomically disadvantaged continue to fall behind the more advantaged, showing that digital equality continues to be a moving target and that current inequalities continue to be replicated. She noted that access includes quality of equipment, freedom to use it when one wants to, support from other people, and experience. These conclusions are supported by her investigation of the internet skills of first-year college students (Hargittai, 2010). Despite controlling for access, socioeconomic status is still correlated with how students use the internet. This research also counters the myth of the digital native.

### **Inequalities for Children and Youth**

More current research shows that these inequalities remain, even for those labeled as digital natives. Collin et al. (2016) conclude that socioeconomic level is correlated to students’

digital use. The researchers surveyed elementary and high school students in Quebec, Canada. They found that the more economically disadvantaged students used the technology less than their more advantaged peers. Not all students have the same access, usage, or experience when it comes to digital technology.

In their exploration of home computer use by primary school children, Talaee and Noroozi (2019) also argue that socioeconomic status affects what they see as the final layer of the digital divide discussion: home computer opportunities. For people to reach the highest level in their framework, they must have physical access to a home computer, opportunity, time and space to use it, the necessary skills, and a positive attitude toward its use. These elements are affected by socioeconomic status.

Along a similar line, Eynon and Geniets (2016) interviewed 20 young people labeled as digitally excluded. Their interviews illustrate that lack of physical access, social constraints, and institutional blocks (where the students could find public access) all lead to poor quality of access. Lack of networks of support compounds the lack of access, with some teachers making assumptions about existing skills, leading to a lack of instructional support. These factors may also compound students' low motivation to use digital technology, leading the researchers to conclude that young people need additional support.

Improving access is not enough to build digital equality. Wilkin et al. (2017) studied 30 disadvantaged youth who were given a laptop and stable internet. They found that access is not enough to build the skills the students needed. Though the students had access, they still used the technology in limited ways and even put themselves in vulnerable positions online. They also lacked school support.

This echoes the call of Jenkins et al. (2006) for educators to work together to create pedagogical interventions to close what they call the participation gap, the transparency problem, and

the ethics challenge. The participation gap is the unequal access to opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge. The transparency problems are challenges adolescents face when interacting with media and how it shapes their perceptions. The ethics challenge deals with how school and the community might prepare students for their roles as media makers and community participants.

The need for these types of instructional shifts is evident in the research of Martin and Lambert (2015). In their summer digital writing camp with middle school students, they identified three levels of digital learners: digital drivers, digital navigators, and digital passengers. The drivers use technology independently and have both high digital text consumption and creation. Navigators also use technology independently but have only moderate consumption and limited creation. Passengers have dependent technology use, limited consumption, and minimal creation. The researchers contend that this calls for differentiated instruction in digital writing and technology.

### **Teacher Perceptions**

Teachers' perceptions of digital literacy also play a role in how digital literacy is approached in K-12 educational settings and could exacerbate digital inequalities. For example, Rafalow (2021) investigated how teachers at three different schools approached digital technologies. He notes that teachers at each school talked about the use of technology in a different way. At the school that served mostly wealthy White students, the teachers saw the work as "essential," but at the mostly middle-class school that served mostly Asian American students, they saw the same thing as a "threat," and at the school that served mostly working-class Latinx students, the teachers saw digital technology education as "irrelevant" (p. 28). These teacher perceptions have ramifications for the students whom they teach and what level of instruction they receive in digital technologies and literacies. These

attitudes may start when teachers are still in their pre-service training.

Jung et al. (2020) found that pre-service teachers paid little attention to sociocultural aspects when constructing technology instruction, suggesting they had little awareness of digital inequality issues. Jung et al. (2020) also hypothesized that “field experience in classrooms with ineffective technology use can be the greatest barrier to future technology integration” (p. 1006). Additionally, Christ et al. (2019) found that the use of technology challenged pre-service teachers’ planning and instructional implementation in terms of time management and teaching methods. The pre-service teachers also had trouble identifying appropriate texts for these lessons. On the other hand, when pre-service teachers were flexible, modeled the use of the technology, and provided models of digital artifacts, they found success. Thus, there is an opportunity to affect teacher perceptions and use of technology while pre-service teachers are in training and field experiences.

### **Implications**

#### **Practice**

This research has implications for both classroom instruction and teacher education. Teachers can harness students’ awareness of the facets of writing they gain from their experience as digital writers by incorporating digital writing in their classrooms. For example, they can use platforms such as Padlet for students to share writing for different audiences. Educators can also use online platforms for students to write authentic work, such as Yelp reviews that have an authentic purpose and audience. They can even create their own podcasts about content they are learning in class and connect with their actual audience to receive feedback.

Professionals who provide continuing education for teachers also need to support teachers in their work to connect to the digital writing of adolescents. For example, Hobbs and Coiro (2019) recommend digital literacy professional

development prioritize teacher reflection, inquiry and collaborative learning, and the “exploration of how educators and learners (not machines) personalize learning” (p. 408). The last element speaks to the current reliance on computer programs to design the learning rather than the teacher. Teacher learning could focus on how teachers utilize technology as a tool to support differentiation.

#### **Future Research**

There remain many unanswered questions about what digital best practice looks like. Future research could investigate teacher perceptions and knowledge-base as well as continue investigating how students’ out-of-school writing evolves and grows. Teachers would likely appreciate research into instructional strategies for digital writing and what works best in classrooms. This could include research into how artificial intelligence affects digital writing and digital writing instruction. Action research may be the timeliest way to research these strategies, but larger research could also continue to address these questions.

#### **Conclusion**

We live in a world where technology is evolving every day. Educators cannot ignore this, nor can they ignore the skills that students will need for the future. Students come with a wealth of knowledge, and for many of them, that means a wealth of digital literacy knowledge, but educators cannot expect all students to come with the same knowledge and expertise. Digital writing must be approached with the same appreciation for differentiation as any other part of the content, with strengths leveraged and needs addressed.

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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# *A Look into a Texas Fourth-Grade Classroom Enacting an Inquiry-Based Researcher's Workshop to Integrate Literacy and Social Studies*

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## **Abstract**

*This article is guided by a commitment to equitable, affirming, child-centered literacy education, and the belief that student-led inquiry can be embraced within schools since this is an authentic way for children to learn about their world. This article describes how elementary educators can use an inquiry-based researcher's workshop to integrate literacy with social studies. It begins with an overview of the literature showing why educators and children might benefit from this approach. The article then provides a detailed look into inquiry-based researcher's workshop with examples from a fourth-grade, Texas classroom. This structure provides asset-based support for diverse learners, pushes students to engage in critical literacy with meaningful topics, and assists students in acquiring deep comprehension skills through contextualized purposeful practice.*

**Keywords:** *inquiry, researcher's workshop, literacy integration, project-based, content areas*

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Children are naturally curious (Jirout & Klahr, 2012; Piaget, 1969). From an early age, children use their senses to explore, play, discover, and learn. Many early childhood environments tap into this innate sense of wonder through discovery learning with the understanding that children's curiosities and interests often drive inquiry outside of school (Bruner, 1961; Saylor & Ganea, 2018). Yet, traditional instruction for

school-aged children does not always lend itself to following children's innate curiosities (Engel, 2011). Moreover, the current sociopolitical climate of public schools (i.e., high-stakes testing, scripted curricula) confines educators by not allowing for discovery or cross-curricular learning. This climate affects educators who long to teach the whole child rather than teach to a test.



In Texas, for example, elementary educators are hurriedly adjusting to professional development demands through the state that require completion of HB 3 Reading Academies (Texas Education Agency, 2023). These academies specifically focus on early skills in reading (e.g., phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and fluency), what is most recently being called the science of teaching reading. At the same time, these same educators are pressured to “teach to the test” so that elementary students’ high-stakes test outcomes reflect a certain type of reading and writing development (Davis & Vehabovic, 2018; Hoffman et al., 2001). Unsurprisingly, these top-down policy demands, though not inherently bad, tend to overlook more immediate needs, including asset-based approaches that value children’s identities as well as authentic connections to other content areas, such as social studies. Thus, educators need a structure that emphasizes holistic literacy development while also tapping into children’s authentic curiosities.

As a team of literacy educators committed to equitable, affirming, child-centered literacy education, we are united and striving for educational change by promoting a holistic approach to literacy and cross-curricular learning. Therefore, our article is guided by the belief that child inquiry can be embraced within schools since this is an authentic way for children to learn about their world. We describe how elementary educators can use an inquiry-based researcher’s workshop to integrate literacy with social studies. We begin with an overview of the literature showing why educators and children might benefit from this approach. We then offer a detailed look into an inquiry-based researcher’s workshop with examples from a fourth-grade, Texas classroom.

### **Inquiry-based Researcher’s Workshop**

Goudvis and colleagues’ (2019) inquiry-based researcher’s workshop builds upon literacy education as authentically integrated with other content areas, rather than a siloed discipline. Like Atwell’s (1998) other workshop structures,

the researcher’s workshop seeks to uphold a deep understanding of the complexities and interconnectedness of all learning content areas (McNeil, 2021). Each researcher’s workshop unit contains four successive phases: immerse, investigate, coalesce, and take public. Each lesson in the four phases follows a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) workshop structure: engage, model, guide, practice, share.

In our approach to the inquiry-based researcher’s workshop, we realized a need to emphasize specific pedagogical commitments that would support our efforts alongside teachers in today’s literacy education climate. These commitments reflect equity (Gorski, 2016; Muhammad, 2020), critical literacy (Comber, 2015; Freebody & Luke, 1990), and sustained comprehension through literacy integration (Duke et al., 2006), each of which we think is interrelated and encompasses the inquiry-based researcher’s workshop model.

More specifically, our approach to literacy values multiple dimensions of meaning-making and communication (Compton-Lilly et al., 2022; Gutiérrez et al., 2009) which happens through reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Driven by student inquiry and their content-driven wonderings, the workshop model integrates literacy learning across the curriculum, stretching beyond the traditional “literacy block.” Integrating literacy and other disciplines has the potential for robust and practical instruction that fosters deep comprehension (Cervetti, 2021; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Hwang et al., 2022; Ness, 2016).

### **Using Inquiry-based Research’s Workshop for Literacy Integration in your Classroom**

In this section, we offer examples of how Nicole (alongside Camille and Kelly) designed lessons to guide her fourth-grade students’ inquiry-based learning while emphasizing literacy instruction. This unit aimed to foster students’ analysis of different perspectives on World War II to inform students’ understanding of historical issues and their impact. In what follows, we describe Goudvis et al.’s (2019) phases of inquiry

accompanied by examples. Through the intentional integration of literacy with social studies, this unit encompassed almost all the instruction for its three-week duration.

## Immerse

The purpose of the immerse phase is to support students' exploration of stories, ideas, and concepts through multimodal texts. Educators can tap into children's innate sense of curiosity and wonder through an immersive experience where children generate wonderings about the overarching unit theme. To guide our unit, Injustice and Opportunity in World War II, we developed an enduring understanding and essential questions. These components represent the big-picture ideas of the unit and are investigated throughout all lessons in the unit (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

### *Enduring Understanding and Essential Questions*

**Enduring Understanding:**  
Analyzing different people groups' perspectives on the issues in World War 2 can inform our understanding of history and its impact on today.

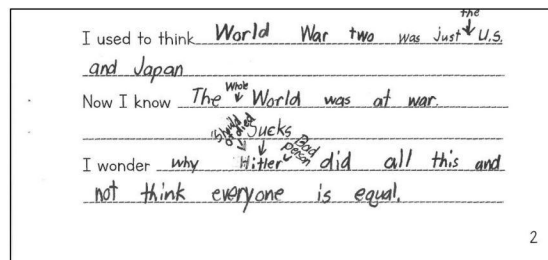
**Essential Questions:**

- What major events led to World War II?
- How does comparing and contrasting key people groups and their actions help us get a deeper understanding of World War II?
- How have past injustices from the time period of World War II impacted opportunities and progress in today's time period?

For the first two lessons, students were immersed in the events and conflicts of World War II. The first lesson had five stations—World War II in the United States, timelines, Nazi Germany, individual stories, and maps—with relevant books, websites, photos, timelines, and maps at each table. Students had time at each station to write their noticings and ask questions about what they discovered from the materials (see Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2**

*During the first immersive lesson, students were given language frames to confront misunderstandings and develop wonderings.*



**Figure 3**

*Students collaboratively and individually developed wonderings during the first WWII immersive lesson.*



The second immerse lesson introduced the setting of a novel study, *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), that students were doing concurrently with the World War II unit. *Number the Stars* tells about a Danish girl during the Nazi occupation who works with her family to get their Jewish friends out of Denmark. In this lesson, students looked at maps from the time that displayed how the Nazis had spread across Europe, talked about the Nazis' perspective toward the Jews and the destruction the Nazis wreaked, and learned about the major alliances and countries in the war. The extensive background knowledge students accumulated

from these lessons truly immersed them in the topic and engaged them in pursuing answers to their wondering questions.

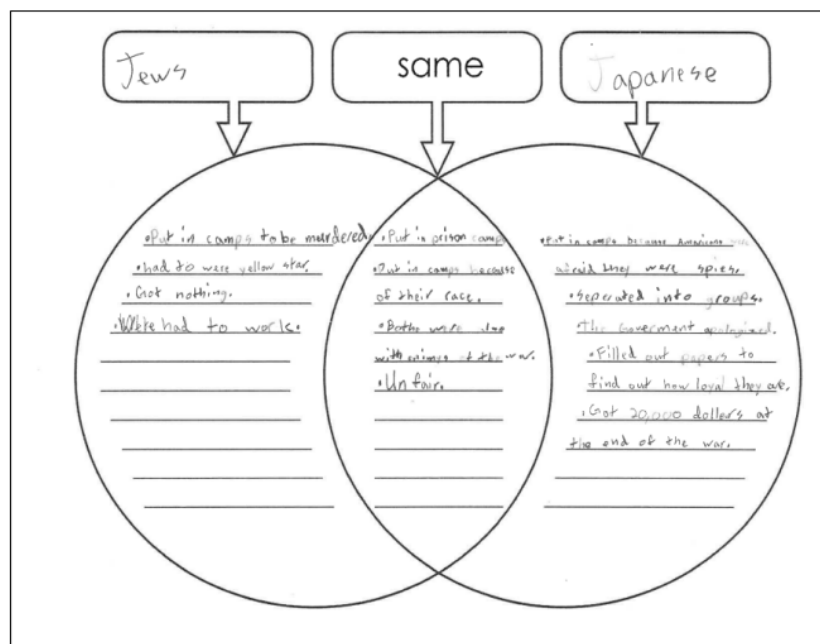
### Investigate

After students were immersed in resources and developed their own questions, the investigate phase included lessons with literacy-specific instruction to support comprehension while

engaging with varied texts. In the third lesson of the unit, we used a compare-and-contrast graphic organizer to compare *Number the Stars* to the children's book *The Yellow Star* (Agra Deedy, 2020). Following the workshop model, Nicole read aloud *The Yellow Star*, pausing to think aloud and model for her students how to use the graphic organizer to compare elements of both texts (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Students used a graphic organizer to compare and contrast different individuals and groups of people's experiences during WWII.*



After modeling, Nicole invited students to begin helping her with the graphic organizer. Students were easily able to make connections between the two texts. In fact, students were so quick to make connections that she stopped modeling quickly, and observed aloud, “I see lots of you have ideas. Are we okay if I have you finish the rest with partners?” to which audible “yeses” were heard. Students had built so much background knowledge and interest in the topic that they were able to extend their thinking

easily through the compare-and-contrast graphic organizer.

Additionally, the lesson concluded with a question that pushed students to make an inference based on what they had read. The question read, “In both chapters 2-3 of *Number the Stars* and the book *The Yellow Star*, why are people willing to risk their lives for others?” Before composing their short response, students discussed in small groups to make in-depth connections:

Neil- They're still humans. I just remember how White and Black happened. It's not about the color of your skin, but-

Evan- the content of your character

Neil- who you are.

Students began to make connections to other forms of discrimination in history, like the Civil Rights Movement. They also were able to communicate why it mattered to fight for those being oppressed or why people might have done it despite the danger. After writing their response, students supported their claim with text evidence from either text of the characters standing up to the Nazis, such as taking down the Nazi flag, wearing the yellow star intended for the Jews, hiding Jewish friends and family in their homes, and others. Then, students explained how these examples proved their answer, demonstrating a robust depth of thought.

Other investigate lessons followed over the next few days, each using the same compare and contrast graphic organizer to support in-depth connections between multiple texts that assisted students in researching their inquiries. As a part

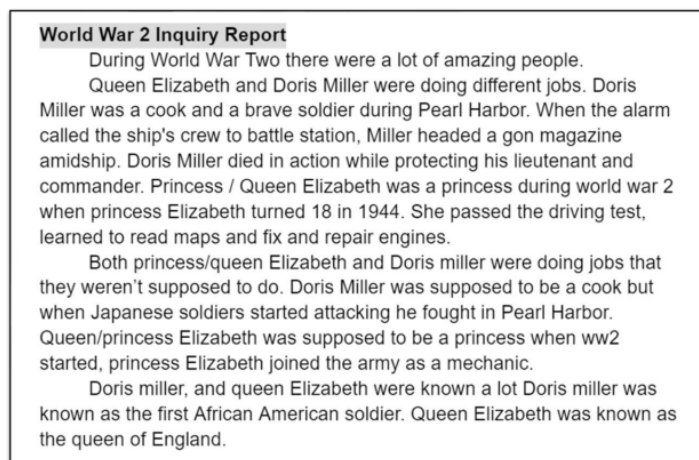
of their research questions, Nicole invited students to compare and contrast two different groups that were a part of World War II. Nicole also followed each lesson with a critical literacy question to support students in constructing short-answer responses using text evidence.

### Coalesce

Once students gathered resources and information to answer their unique questions, they synthesized the information they recorded and developed a unique learning product. Nicole's students synthesized their new knowledge about World War II to compose an essay comparing and contrasting two groups who contributed to it. The structure was set up, so students did not just report facts (see Figure 5). Rather, students were allowed to introduce their two groups with a one-sentence summary each. Then, one main body paragraph gave a specific similarity between the two groups, and the second main body paragraph gave a specific difference. Their conclusion wrapped up their thoughts and could include why the groups mattered. Our intention was to guide students into deeply considering their groups' actions and impact, not just brushing the surface with relevant facts.

**Figure 5**

*Students were able to develop unique comparisons and demonstrate deep comprehension of people and concepts during this time period.*



## Take Public

In the final phase, students shared their learning products with others, in this case, with each other. The goal of this phase is to support students in connecting their learning with the world. Many students displayed critical thinking in their writing, particularly surrounding examples of injustice. One student—Adah—focused on fairness in her notes in her lesson book. At the end of her essay, she displayed this focus by writing, “The WASPs and Tuskegee Airmen were both brave. They proved that women and Black people could fly.” Another student—Bailey—wrote about women in the workforce during the period, writing, “They worked hard like the boys but weren’t paid good,” and later, “not paid like they should.” Another student—Heather—was able to make connections to how this period of history changed perspectives that impact us today. She wrote about how women working changed perspectives on women’s rights, saying, “The women working showed the world women can be helpful everywhere, not just at home.” These students are displaying higher levels of thinking, as they consider justice and history’s impact on today. Through a deep immersion in the topic and scaffolding through organizers and modeling, students were able to reach higher levels of comprehension and build deep thinking skills.

## Concluding Thoughts and Implications

In addition to engagement and excitement, students also understood that these big ideas were meaningful. We moved beyond simple stories of the past and used multiple texts, integrated contents (ELAR and social studies), and literacy-specific structures (compare and contrast, short-answer response, and essay writing) to engage in real, weighty topics. Such authentic knowledge-building is meaningful and supports sustained comprehension, teaching students about life and how to think critically. The high engagement for this unit also seemed to be directly correlated to students’ success.

Because students understood the concepts on a deeper level than basic recollection of facts, they interacted with ideas in more complex ways. Additionally, and most importantly, students were able to write about their learning. Because they were engaged and saw the content as meaningful, students were able to interact with texts more deeply and complete complex written tasks.

The inquiry-based researcher’s workshop is a promising learning structure that has received little empirical attention. As teacher-researchers, we aim to study the benefits of fostering literacy and learning for students, teachers, and communities. We find that this structure provides asset-based support for diverse learners, pushes students to engage in critical literacy with meaningful topics, and assists students in acquiring deep comprehension skills through contextualized purposeful practice.

## AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

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research seeks to produce more equitable and just opportunities for children and youth whose cultural, linguistic, racial-ethnic, and

neurodiverse identities and practices have been marginalized through formal education.

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## *Co-teaching and Campus Collaboration in an Emergent Literacy Course*

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### **Abstract**

*To cultivate the acceptance of the co-teaching model among preservice teachers, two of the education faculty at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, have incorporated co-teaching in several field-based literacy courses. Alongside experiencing co-teaching from their professors, preservice teachers are also provided with the opportunity to practice co-teaching through a partnership with a local early childhood campus in an Emergent Literacy course. This approach promotes student proficiency in an inclusive early childhood setting and provides a model for preservice teachers to implement when they later encounter opportunities for co-teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. By learning the skills to engage in co-teaching through various field-based literacy courses, preservice teachers are equipped to enter their future classrooms as collaborative professionals capable of delivering high-quality education to both general education and special education students.*

**Keywords:** *emergent literacy, Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), co-teaching, inclusion*

The integration of special education students into general education classrooms is a longstanding practice that yields a multitude of favorable academic and social outcomes (Mansouri et al., 2022). However, in many cases, general education teachers and special education teachers tend to work independently with special education students (Kart & Kart, 2021). As each of these teaching specialties brings a unique perspective on how to teach and integrate special education students, collaborative efforts between the two professionals through co-teaching can create an enhanced and inclusive classroom environment. To cultivate the acceptance of the co-teaching model among preservice teachers, the education faculty at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor have incorporated team teaching in a field-based

literacy course. Alongside experiencing co-teaching from their professors, preservice teachers are also provided with the opportunity to practice co-teaching through a partnership with a local early childhood campus. This approach fosters collaboration between university instructors and promotes student proficiency in an inclusive early childhood setting. It is widely recognized that collaboration promotes professional growth, and through these field-based courses, university students can develop their co-teaching skills to serve early childhood learners (Jang, 2006; Ricci et al., 2017). The purpose of this article is to illustrate how two professors at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor have implemented a collaborative co-teaching approach in a field-based Emergent Literacy course.



## **Traditional Inclusion**

### **Benefits for Students in Traditional Inclusion**

Traditional inclusion involves the integration of a special education student into a general education classroom under the direction of the classroom teacher. Katz and Mirenda (2002) note numerous benefits of this educational approach for the special education student, including improved social interactions, greater academic gains than in segregated classrooms, increased instructional time, increased sense of belonging, and higher self-esteem. Students without disabilities who learn in inclusive classrooms also benefit from the presence of students with disabilities. Regular classroom instruction time is not decreased, and students have the opportunity to learn empathy and cooperation (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Mansouri et al. (2022) continue to find social and academic benefits to students in inclusive classrooms.

### **Challenges for Teachers of Traditional Inclusion**

Despite the high number of students being identified as having special needs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), LeDoux et al. (2012) note that many general education teachers are not prepared to instruct special education students in an inclusion classroom. General education teachers often experience a lack of communication regarding the placement of special needs students and of the students' goals and objectives as defined by their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A lack of collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers was also noted as a major challenge of traditional inclusion (LeDoux et al., 2012).

### **Inclusion with a Co-Teaching Approach**

General education classrooms include a diverse population of students. General education and special education teachers benefit from having additional tools and strategies when collaborating in order to serve all students. According to the Open Society Foundation (2019, para. 5), "Inclusive systems provide a better-quality education for all children and are instrumental in changing discriminatory attitudes." Since we began providing the co-teaching version of the Emergent Literacy course in the spring of 2020, we have seen how the co-teaching approach better prepares university students for the reality of today's inclusive classroom environments. We value the additional knowledge and skills our preservice teachers gain from this experience. These students also develop positive attitudes towards working with elementary special education students.

### **Emergent Literacy Course at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor**

The Emergent Literacy course, geared toward junior-level students, is the first of three required field-based literacy courses and focuses on all aspects of early literacy. The course modules closely align with the Science of Teaching Reading and include: best practices, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, phonics, language development, written expression (using the Language Experience approach), book reading, and social-emotional development (utilizing the Conscious Discipline approach).

Both a literacy professor and a special education professor collaborate to co-teach the Emergent Literacy course. Our co-teaching model adds a unique benefit to the course material and allows students to experience quality co-teaching. By receiving simultaneous instruction from professors with different specialties, students are able to understand differing points of view regarding how to teach course concepts. While one professor may lead the lesson, we are both actively engaged in the conversation with the students and with each other. This approach

provides a model for preservice teachers to implement when they later encounter opportunities for co-teaching in an inclusive classroom environment.

The course meets weekly for four hours, with students spending the first two hours on an early childhood campus and the remaining two hours in the university classroom. During the first week of a course module, both the literacy professor and the special education professor help the students learn how to apply the material in various classroom settings, including a general education classroom, an early childhood classroom, and an inclusive classroom. In between class days, the students prepare a small group lesson based on the topic that aligns with the campus year-at-a-glance.

On the following class day, the preservice teachers teach their prepared lesson to a group of students while recording the lesson. After their time on the ISD campus, students return to the university classroom to reflect with the professors on their teaching performance. We identify strengths, areas of needed growth, and areas that have shown improvement from previous sessions. The students gain knowledge and expertise by co-teaching the literacy content and implementing strategies needed in an inclusive classroom (Cook et al., 2021).

### **Challenges**

While the collaborative co-teaching model has many advantages, it also presents some challenges. One of the most prominent challenges identified by both general education and special education teachers is a lack of time to plan lessons, address challenging behaviors, and collaborate with co-teachers (Larios & Zetlin, 2023). Communication between teachers can also be a challenging experience. Being able to find agreement on the instructional activities is mentioned as a potential obstacle to successful co-teaching (Ricci et al., 2017).

From the perspective of the professors involved, we encountered few challenges in implementing a co-teaching model due to the mutual respect and appreciation we hold for each other's experiences. To ensure the success of this collaborative approach, we meticulously selected which lessons would benefit the most from a co-teaching model and determined which professor, the special education or the literacy specialist, would serve as the lead instructor for each particular lesson.

### **Student Perspectives**

One student commented, "As an Interdisciplinary EC-6 major, having a class that offered both general education and special education strategies was exactly what I was looking for when I chose my major. The strategies that were taught in this class by my teachers helped me to see both sides of general and special education. I love that this class was taught by co-teachers, it gave me the opportunity to explore and practice general education and special education tactics all in one class."

Another student commented from her emergent literacy field experience classroom, "Having a co-teaching classroom has so many benefits. The teachers are able to be more efficient when helping individual students. There are more professional hands and eyes available to the children." This student's experience echoes findings by Kirkpatrick et al. (2020), who note the benefits of additional resources and shared responsibilities that are present in a co-teaching classroom.

A student teacher shared while in her intern placement, which includes both general education and special education, "I've seen firsthand how crucial it is for general education teachers and special education teachers to work together. From their different perspectives and

experiences, they come together as a team to best serve their students. Co-teaching is something my professors demonstrated well and I am thankful for the example they showed me in my classes at University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.”

## Conclusion

General education and special education are commonly viewed as distinct classroom methodologies. However, we suggest that a blended, inclusive classroom environment presents an optimal learning setting for all students. Cooperative co-teaching is an integral aspect of ensuring the success of an inclusive classroom. By imparting the skills to engage in

co-teaching through various field-based literacy courses, we equip preservice teachers to enter their future classrooms as collaborative professionals capable of delivering high-quality education to both general education and special education students.

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## *Teaching Critical Literacy with Challenged and Controversial Books*

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the benefits and problems of teaching with challenged books in the English language arts classroom. Challenged books initiate important discussions and provide opportunities for students to explore diverse perspectives. Methods for helping teachers and schools prepare for potential challenges are also discussed. The authors present three young adult novels and offer strategies for teaching these novels through a critical lens.*

***Keywords:*** *critical literacy, banned books, book challenges, teaching young adult literature*

Given recent social trends to challenge books in school libraries, teacher educators must prepare future teachers for possible backlash over book choices that may be viewed as controversial by parents and community members. In some states, books by Black American authors have been pulled from school library shelves for suspected Critical Race Theory indoctrination (Bellamy-Walker, 2022). The American Library Association (ALA), which tracks book challenges in the US, recorded 729 book challenges targeting 1,597 titles in 2021, more than double 2020's figures (VanDenburgh, 2022). According to the American Library Association (ALA.org), only a few hundred

books were challenged each year between 2000 and 2020.

In the state of Texas, lawmaker Matt Krause created a list of books that “could make students feel uneasy” (Chappell, 2021). Most of these books are young adult novels with LGBTQ characters and related themes. In Katy, Texas, a suburb of Houston, parents requested specific books be removed from middle and high school libraries because parents believed these books promoted critical race theory and Marxism, and/or addressed issues of gender identity and sexuality (Dellinger, 2021).

Organizations such as ALA (American Library Association) and NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) recognize the issues teachers may face when choosing books and materials for multicultural classes. For example, NCTE's position statement Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials (2018) states, "These are complex challenges that require recognizing the needs of students, the responsibilities that educators hold in day-to-day contexts, and the considerations of power and positionality of adults working with historically marginalized students of diverse cultures and creeds." NCTE's guidelines recognize the ways that teachers are attacked directly or indirectly, which includes teachers' decisions to self-censor to avoid controversy. NCTE offers strategies and lesson plans intended to support teachers interested in applying critical literacy by interrogating racism and sexism through discussions of gender identity or race (Burke & Greenfield, 2016; NCTE.org).

This paper includes guidelines for middle and secondary teachers to plan and respond to challenges to young adult literature. Three recently challenged young adult books, *New Kid* (Craft, 2019), *Girl Mans Up* (Girard, 2016), and *Quinceañera* (Stavans, 2010) will be analyzed for their literary and educational value, along with reasons for previous challenges. Additionally, the authors present examples of activities and methods for teaching these books in a language arts classroom.

### **The Politics of Book Challenges: Teacher Preparation**

Books are banned or challenged in public school libraries for a variety of reasons, and teachers should be prepared to face such challenges. Many public school districts have book selection procedures, so teachers should first consult with their department chair or administrator about the procedures before choosing a young adult book if it has not been taught previously. School districts usually have procedures in place for

book challenges, so teachers should familiarize themselves with these.

Along with NCTE, ALA publishes guidelines and advice for teachers when responding to book challenges. If a book has already been approved, and it is challenged by parents, teachers should take notes on how well the administration and school board follow district procedures. Knowledge of the procedures will help guard against any discrimination or retaliation against individual teachers (ALA.org).

Texas teachers should document reasons for teaching individual novels that contain any material about sexual identity or race. Citing the Texas state English Language Arts standards concerning the requirements for analyzing the cultural contexts and authors' intentions of literature may be helpful. Although it is difficult to predict which books will produce challenges, teachers should collaborate by writing form letters or other documents that describe important themes and messages in books chosen for the classroom. In this way, teachers and administrators will already have prepared, official documents for parents (NCTE, 2018).

### **Teaching about Race in *New Kid***

*New Kid* by Jerry Craft, the first graphic novel to win the Newbery Award (2020), visually narrates the experiences of middle school student Jordan Banks as he acclimates to life in a new, prestigious school. Starting a new school is never stress-free for young adults, and Jordan's challenges are complicated by his race. Jordan is one of the few students of color attending the selective school.

### **Themes For Class Discussion**

The class discussion could focus on themes of identity, discrimination, and friendship. Insensitivities to students' economic class and race are two central themes in the novel that should also be addressed to encourage cultural sensitivity. These themes are presented through

visual and verbal humor through the lens of Jordan Banks.

### ***Class Activities and Assignments***

Setting the tone for a new school year is important, and students need to feel welcomed into the classroom. Reading *New Kid* (Craft, 2019) with students would work well to engage the class in discussing or writing about goals and concerns for the new year. The visuals and humor may also incite reluctant readers to actively participate. Students could also learn about graphic design, and then create their own graphic novels or comic strips. Guest speakers, such as the art teacher or a local graphic designer, would add to students' interest in *New Kid*.

Teachers who are comfortable discussing critical issues, such as discrimination or gender identity, could encourage students to question cultural constructions of race and culture that emerge throughout the book. After a discussion of Jordan Banks's identity exploration in *New Kid*, the students could also share personal stories through journal or narrative writing assignments.

Sections of the book would also work well for Readers Theatre, for example, the first day of school when Jordan meets some of his new classmates or the scene in which Jordan confronts a school bully in chapter 12. *New Kid* (Craft, 2019) has many possibilities for active reading and discussion. The Texas state education standards for Middle School English Language Arts include recommendations for teaching students to analyze the author's purpose and theme (TEA).

### ***Teaching Gender Identity in *Girl Mans Up****

*Girl Mans Up* by M. E. Girard (2016) is a novel about a gender-nonconforming girl named Pen, who struggles to find her identity and place in the world as she faces pressure from her traditional Portuguese parents to conform to gender norms. As Pen navigates the complexities of high school and family

expectations, she learns to embrace her true self and stand up for herself and her friends.

### ***Themes for Class Discussion***

Although the book is an honest portrayal of a nonconforming character, it is often banned or challenged because of the themes of gender dysphoria and lesbian sexuality. LGBTQ young adults, often bullied, are especially at high risk for depression and suicide (Barton, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Researchers have recommended that students who read about LGBTQ characters improve their sensitivity and understanding of classmates' gender identities (Bean, et al., 2014; Christenbury & Lindblom, 2016). Teachers can make a difference in students' lives by modeling acceptance of LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming students (Hazlett & Smith, 2020). Recommended for high school students, *Girl Mans Up* (Girard, 2016) could be used in the classroom to discuss themes of friendship, gender identity, and family relationships. Pen's struggles to maintain authentic friendships while coping with abuse from parents and classmates could lead to small group or whole class conversations about identity, friendship, and bullying.

Reading LGBTQ-themed Young Adult literature can foster positive feelings and generate empathy, curiosity, and connection among middle and high school readers. For LGBTQ+ students, seeing themselves in literature is essential for healthy identity development (Batchelor et al., 2017). Students frequently model their lives after personalities they encounter through reading and viewing. Discussions about LGBTQ+ characters can empower young adults to embrace their true selves and stand up against societal pressure, promoting empathy and inclusivity for queer and culturally diverse individuals. The themes and issues presented in the book offer chances for students to discuss meaningful issues through a critical lens.

Teachers who may feel uncomfortable tackling these issues in a language arts class could

recommend *Girl Mans Up* for book clubs or individual reading. Currently, the Texas legislature has begun to restrict rights for LGBTQ children, young adults, and parents, creating a societal climate unsupportive to LGBTQ students. As a result, LGBTQ students will continue to experience bullying in school. English language arts teachers can support students through recommendations of young adult literature with LGBTQ characters that address themes of gender identity.

### ***Class Activities and Assignments***

First, teachers could ask students to brainstorm their knowledge of gender identities. How is gender constructed in our cultures? Other countries? Students could also explore, individually or in groups, where they fit on the continuum of masculinity and femininity. Why does the main character in the book want to remain disassociated from any specific gender? Writing activities could include in-depth character analyses along with persuasive essays or debates on topics explored in the novel. Teachers could ask students to create a double journal entry, such as the example in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

### ***Example Journal Entry***

Entry Journal	
Summary	Reaction
<p>"Girl Mans Up" by M-E Girard is a young adult novel that follows the story of Pen Oliveria, a 16-year-old tomboy who struggles to find her place in her traditional Portuguese family and her high school. Pen is constantly judged by her family and peers for not conforming to gender norms and for not being "girly" enough. She also faces homophobia and bullying from her classmates.</p> <p>Throughout the novel, Pen navigates her relationships with her friends and family, discovers her own identity, and finds the courage to stand up for herself.</p>	<p>I really enjoyed reading "Girl Mans Up". Pen's character was relatable and her struggles felt authentic.</p> <p>The book deals with important issues such as gender norms, homophobia, and family expectations. The writing was engaging and the plot kept me interested throughout. I appreciated the diversity of the characters and the representation of different cultures and sexual orientations. Overall, I thought this was a great book that tackles important themes in a sensitive and realistic way.</p>
Reflection	
<p>This book made me reflect on the importance of accepting and celebrating diversity. It's easy to judge others based on their appearance or behavior, but everyone has their own struggles and identities that deserve respect and recognition. I also realized how important it is to stand up for oneself and one's beliefs, even if it means going against the expectations of others. Pen's journey towards self-acceptance and self-expression was inspiring, and I think this book is an important reminder that everyone deserves the freedom to be who they truly are.</p>	



These activities can motivate students to reflect on the themes and issues presented in the book while working on their writing skills. Finally, through these practices, teachers can aid students in gaining better comprehension and enthusiasm for the content they are studying while also enhancing their communication and analytical abilities (Alsup, 2015; Bean, 2003).

### **Teaching about Latinx Activism through *Quinceañera***

Ilan Stavans compiled a volume that highlights the significance of the quinceañera, a coming-of-age celebration, to the Latinx community. The essays in this book offer multiple perspectives on the quinceañera and its role in shaping personal and social identities within the family and the larger Latino community. The reason for the inclusion of *Quinceañera* (Stavans, 2010) on lists of books prohibited for Texas schools may be because the essays address themes of gender and race identity, gender roles within communities, social class, and religious beliefs and practices. The state of Texas has a history of targeting Latino literature and authors, with attempts to ban books that deal with topics such as immigration and sexuality (Gamboa, 2022).

### ***Themes for Class Discussion***

This volume provides an illuminating analysis of how the celebration of quinceañeras functions and takes on meaning in the context of the Latinx community. The essayist examines various aspects of the celebration, including gender, family status, class, race, and performance, and emphasizes how these themes play a central role in the festivities. In Part II of the book, Testimonios, Julia Alvarez and Judith Ortiz Cofer narrate their perspectives on quinceañeras. As published authors and cultural critics, their essays offer students opportunities to understand cultural constructions of gender within the Latinx culture.

During Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 to October 15), students could be assigned

certain essays and testimonies from *Quinceañera* to read and analyze for themes. Then teachers can ask students to share their experiences or any similarities in their own cultures within class or group discussion. The essays by Alvarez and Cofer could be read with one of their novels or short stories to guide students in understanding the characters and events in depth.

### ***Class Activities and Assignments***

*Quinceañera* can be used to teach literary analysis by examining the style and tone of the essays. Teachers can ask students to read selected essays and analyze the author's use of language, structure, and literary devices. Texas state English language arts standards require teachers to cover such literary terminology when teaching literature.

Following class or group discussions, teachers may want to assign a personal essay by asking students to write about a significant event in their life, similar to a quinceañera. Teachers can use the essays in the book as mentor texts to help students construct creative narratives, poetry, or other genres. Students can use themes and topics from the essays, such as gender, family status, and class, to inform their narrative essays.

Cultural conversations are important for teaching students to respect themselves and others. Ask students to read essays from the book and compare the quinceañera to other cultural celebrations. Students can analyze the similarities and differences between these celebrations and the quinceañera.

The Latinx organization Librotraficante attempts to combat book bans and challenges through forms of activism, critiquing book-banning efforts that not only undermine the rich cultural heritage of Latinx communities but also betray the values of free speech and intellectual freedom that should be the heart of a democratic society. After reading about this group's activities, such as their "underground library,"

students could brainstorm activism projects to benefit their school and community (Diaz, 2017). Teachers and students could also create their own “underground library.”

It is vital that teachers are empowered to celebrate the diversity of voices that enrich our world. Additionally, when teachers are allowed to present a broad range of ideas and perspectives, it helps to create a more inclusive environment for all students. This can help to counteract the adverse effects of discrimination and prejudice, promoting a more equitable society.

#### AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

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education in the Department of Education. Her publications include articles and book chapters on young adult literature and teacher education.

**Enrika Huseini** is a teacher candidate who demonstrates a profound commitment to the field of education. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Language from AAB College in Pristina, Kosovo, and she is pursuing a specialized major in Education, concentrating on English Language Arts at North American University in Houston, Texas.

**Erick Peña Garcia** is a graduate of North American University in Houston, Texas. Majoring in English education, he wishes to inspire enthusiasm for literature through teaching. He will continue his education with the goal of obtaining a master’s degree.

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

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### **Abstract**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Figure 1**

*Sample family literacy projects created by teacher education candidates*



### **Family Literacy Letter and Family Literacy Activity Instructions**

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

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

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

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

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

## Figure 2

*Excerpt of Marlene's family literacy letter*

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

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

## Marlene's Family Literacy Letter and Project Summary

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

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

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

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

**Figure 3**

*Excerpt of Marlene's Family Literacy Activity*

Prompting questions

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

Step-by-step procedures

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

Ideas for differentiation

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

Extensions

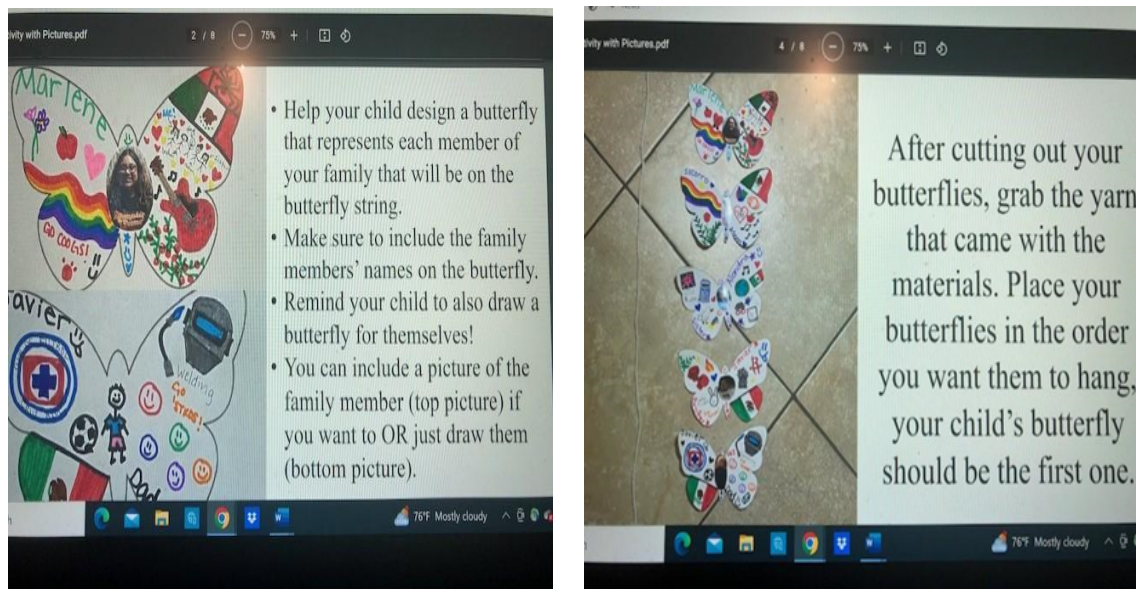
- Visit the following websites to increase your child's Spanish vocabulary.
  - o <https://www.abcvia.com/>
  - o <https://pbskids.org/noah/>
  - o <https://www.youtube.com/c/bashoandfriends/playlists>
  - o <https://plazasesamo.com/?code=US>
- Visit Karen Lynn Williams's website for more books written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



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

**Figure 4**

*Sample Activity Instructions and Project Model*



### **Marlene's Family Literacy Project Reflections**

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

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

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



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

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

### **Maritza's Family Literacy Letter and Project Summary**

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

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

### **Figure 5**

*Excerpt of Maritza's family literacy letter*

Hello authors and illustrators,

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

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

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

## Figure 6

### *Excerpt of Maritza's family literacy activity*

#### Prompting questions

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

#### Step-by-step procedures

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

#### Ideas for differentiation

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

#### Extensions

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

## Maritza's Family Literacy Project Reflections

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

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

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

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

### Project Insights

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

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

### AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

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

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

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

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

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

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## *Decoding Science of Teaching Reading (STR) Test to “Make It Impossible” to Get Questions Wrong*

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### **Abstract**

*The authors’ institution exceeded the Texas Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam’s passing rate of 86.6% for the 2021-2022 academic year. The authors think this success was largely due to conducting an analysis of test questions and helping preservice teachers better prepare for the exam. The authors helped preservice teachers supplement the literacy knowledge they needed for their classrooms with test-taking strategies. Six strategies are presented to analyze the STR exam questions. These help preservice teachers analyze the exam questions by decoding the more common scenario-based ones which we categorized as these question types: 1) A teacher wants to do something; 2) Teachers’ strategy/activity shows they understand something; 3) Students do this...what’s the next step; 4) Why this activity; 5) Tiered vocabulary; 6) What does the assessment tell? The final strategy describes a method for organizing the constructed response analysis.*

**Keywords:** Science of Teaching Reading (STR), TExES #293, test-taking strategies, preservice teachers (PST)

It might seem that an Educator Preparation Program (EPP) faculty member’s job to prepare preservice teachers for the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam would conclude once literacy courses are complete. Information about literacy learning activities, phonics, phonemic awareness, and other reading concepts has been transmitted, tested, practiced, and applied (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Now the preservice teachers (PSTs) must show they recall and understand the information by passing state teaching exams and becoming certified teachers. If we want our PSTs to succeed and move into their professional world, we want to ensure they can take this test with confidence. This requires

us to consider how to approach this unique test. This article is based on a session at the Texas Association of Literacy Educators (TALE) 2023 conference, where we presented testing strategies that have been successful at our institution. We shared what has worked for us as we adapt to the new exam and seek paths forward that help PSTs.

The STR exam began in January 2021, adding to the list of required exams for new teachers to pass to begin their teaching careers. This exam is “designed to assess whether an examinee has the requisite knowledge and skills that an entry-level educator in this field in Texas public schools must possess” (Texas Education Agency,

2020). Additionally, they must pass their Early Childhood-Grade 6 or English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) Grades 4-8 and Pedagogy exams. The STR exam is required for five certification areas.

### Test Preparation? Is That Our Job?

Over the last year, we reviewed questions and patterns that are included in the exam. We wanted to find a way to reduce stress and cognitive overload (Kim et al., 2022) that comes

from reading the many scenario-based questions that make up the bulk of the STR exam. Faculty can feel confident that PSTs know their literacy research and content and are prepared to be strong literacy educators. However, where confidence might not be as high is test-taking ability. We wanted to make sure our PSTs knew the literacy content and how to take this unique standardized test. We found several patterns in the question structure and answer choices that will be discussed in greater detail.

**Table 1**

#### *Strategies for Decoding Science of Teaching Reading (STR) Exam*

Decoding Exam Questions Strategies	Summary of STR Sample Test Domain and Questions	How to Choose the Correct Answer
1 A teacher wants to do something	Domain II Q5: Which instructional strategies would support a student's phonological awareness skill development? (TEA, 2020)	Use each answer choice to ask if the strategy helps the teacher accomplish what they want to do.
2 Teachers' strategy/activity shows they understand something	Domain II Q10: Which statement shows the teachers' knowledge of engaging students with a text decoding activity? (TEA, 2020)	Ask if each answer choice is an accurate descriptor of the teacher's strategy.
3 Students do this...What's the next step	Domain II Q13: Which teaching strategy would promote students' word reading skills to the next level of word reading development? (TEA, 2020)	Use each answer choice to ask if the strategy accomplishes the teacher's activity goal.
4 Why this activity	Domain II Q29: What's the purpose of having children clap the syllables in a word? (TEA, 2020)	Ask, "Does this activity help children?" then read each answer choice.
5 Tiered vocabulary	Domain II Q15: Which group of words is categorized as specific vocabulary Tier? (TEA, 2020)	Ask which answer choice has words that are different parts of speech from the other choices or, which words are domain-specific, general academic terms, or are common use words.

6	What does the assessment tell?	Domain II Q12: Which assessment strategy would address students' reading fluency difficulties that also affect comprehension? (TEA, 2020)	Read each answer choice asking, "Does [answer A, B, C, D] help address the student's assessed need?"
7	Decoding constructed response	Constructed-Response Question: Analyze the provided information, then identify students' reading skills and describe instructional strategies that would address students' needs.	Use instruction bullet points as separate paragraphs to write. Then use the content in the bullet points as a checklist.

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## Decoding Exam Questions Strategies

### *A Teacher Wants to Do Something*

One of the most common scenario-based question types, *a teacher wants to do something*, tells an examinee a teacher from a particular grade level wants to prepare a lesson, conduct an assessment, or do an instructional activity that will help students learn a particular skill, such as identifying or isolating initial sounds. Additional information might be given, such as whether the students are English Language Learner (ELL) students or what skills they have previously mastered. The examinee's task is now to identify what lesson or activity answer choice will best meet the thing the teacher wants to do.

What happens next is important for the examinee. They need to have a consistent pattern for how they answer scenario-based questions. We have a format that simplifies how they can analyze the text of the scenario and choose correct answer choices. For each answer choice, ask: *Does answer choice A help the teacher introduce "isolating or identify initial sound[s]" for ELL students, or whatever else the scenario presents?* (TEA, 2020). The examinee should use the answer choices as sentence stems and then add the sentence that the teacher wants to do, then answer "maybe" or "no." For example: "Does selecting stimulus words for the lesson that have sounds common to both English and the ELLs' home language help 'isolate/or identify initial sound[s] in spoken words for ELL students?" (TEA, 2020). The examinee may answer maybe. Then the examinee would

continue with the other answer options. The examinee will see after all options are read that the first choice is the only "maybe" option and then select it as the correct answer as summarized in Table 1.

### *Teachers' Strategy/Activity Shows They Understand Something*

The next strategy is *a teacher wants to do something* but is organized differently in the scenario. In the scenario provided in the TEA sample test (2020), a grade-level teacher demonstrates a skill related to reading or writing. It is important to take note of what the students do well, such as using decodable words as a tool to promote letter-sound correspondence in writing activities (Ecalte et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019). The examinee will use that information to answer the questions. The final part of the question then asks how the scenario demonstrates that the teacher understands a literacy instruction concept. For example, in the question, the examinee would ask, "Does incorporating 'the content of a text' into an 'interactive writing lesson' develop the role of early print concepts when learning to write? No" (TEA, 2020). The examinee will ask and respond to the question for each answer choice.

### *Students Do This...What's the Next Step*

A less frequent question type that fits in the format of matching answer choices to the scenarios previously described is called *students do this...what's the next step*. In this scenario, a student or group of students demonstrates that they can do a particular skill. The examinees ask



themselves what activity the teacher should do to help them to the next step in the continuum of reading skills. In the example from the sample questions (TEA, 2020), the students have progressed to the full-alphabetic phase of word reading development (Tanasy & Ali, 2019). The question is about how to develop “word reading or recognition, accuracy, and automaticity” (TEA, 2020). The examinee asks if having students practice the listed skills would promote “accuracy and automaticity” (TEA, 2020); if “maybe,” then the examinee would review the remainder of the answer choices as summarized in Table 1.

### ***Why This Activity***

This type of question asks what a teacher’s purpose is for doing a certain activity. Some examinees might use their language knowledge to answer this question instead of utilizing answer options that fit keywords in the scenario. Most of the teachers’ purposes for doing certain classroom activities are to meet the learning objectives of children. In that case, examinees should find an answer including keywords matching the children’s learning objectives. The example from the practice test (TEA, 2020) asks why a teacher uses circle time activities to teach the concept of learning syllables, so the keywords are “learning syllables” instead of “learning names.” The correct answer is C, using “phonological sensitivity” to match with “learning syllables,” rather than “recognize, write, or connect with names” (see Table 1).

### ***Tiered Vocabulary***

Some examinees may feel nervous if they do not remember the Tiered Vocabulary definitions. Tier One words are commonly used terms, Tier Two words are general academic terms, and Tier Three words are discipline-specific terms. For the exam, they must use those definitions to examine their answer choices. Examinees must identify which group of words is different from the other three choices. The correct answer is C in two ways. They are verbs as well as general academic words, also called Tier Two words.

The Tier One words in choice B are commonly used words. The Tier Three words in choice D and A are discipline-specific words (see Table 1).

### ***What Does the Assessment Tell***

Another frequent question type concerns assessment. Examinees may feel overwhelmed when they read long descriptions of scenarios. To alleviate this stress, they should reduce the long descriptions to key terms or sentences. The key sentence, for example, refers to the student’s fluency and comprehension difficulties. The examinee then reads as a question: “Does [choice A, B, C, D] address the key sentence?” This student’s reading behaviors are related to “oral reading fluency” skills, and this type of skill is mentioned in the C answer choice. The other answer choices do not address directly the students’ oral reading skill needs.

### ***Decoding the Constructed Response***

The constructed response question asks examinees to analyze provided information, identify students’ reading skills, and describe instructional strategies that address students’ needs. The instructions are a lengthy page of several bullet points. This amount of text and detail can sometimes be too much for some examinees to want to read carefully. We have developed a strategy to help examinees quickly see the important directions, take steps to stay organized, and correctly identify student needs in the scenario.

First, it is important to reduce the number of ideas that may be competing for attention in response. PSTs need to read the instructions and follow them carefully. This can be difficult when they look at the entire page of instructions and other information. Examinees may be tempted to skim over the bulleted instructions. In addition, the online version of the test requires moving back and forth from the writing section and the instructions and moving about visually from instruction bullet points. This can lead to



stress and decreased performance due to overload complexity through the inclusion of too much material to keep in mind (Kim et al, 2022). Having a method to organize the response before taking the test may relieve examinees' concerns, thus freeing time to think through the problem. Second, organize the response in paragraphs. Use each bullet point as a paragraph and only write about the information in each bullet at a time. Third, use the information in each bullet point as a guide for general terms to use. Then use the general terms as a launching point to elaborate on those concepts.

The simple organization of each paragraph by the bullet is to:

- 1) Identify a foundational reading skill, and cite evidence from the exhibits to support the identified issue.
- 2) Describe a strategy or activity to help with foundational reading skills.
- 3) Identify a reading comprehension skill, and cite evidence from the exhibits to support the identified issue.
- 4) Describe a strategy or activity to help the student with reading comprehension.
- 5) Explain why the strategies or activities are effective and how they are appropriate for that child's grade level TEKS.

Preservice teachers should practice this strategy. The instructor can analyze their responses and provide feedback so they have practiced the strategy and have been given help with any problems they might have. Doing this strategy once or twice has produced great changes in how PSTs write and feel about their responses (see Table 1).

## Conclusion

These test-taking strategies allow examinees to use the knowledge they gained from their EPP. It helps PSTs understand how to take this

scenario-based exam systematically, reduce testing anxiety, and complete the exam more efficiently. These strategies also have the potential to help faculty members better understand the exam design. Decoding exam questions and creating test-taking strategies help faculty be an integral part of PSTs' success (Caravolas et al., 2019). These strategies allowed us to help our PSTs feel better prepared for their exams. We encourage everyone to develop their local testing strategies that help their students and then share them with others. Continuing to build strong literacy content knowledge in concert with testing strategies helps PSTs feel confident that they are prepared to pass their exams and more importantly, to be successful educators.

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