

Fostering Hope and Resilience Through Children’s Literature

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Abstract

Significant traumatic events affect communities and schools. Teachers need tools to help navigate challenging conversations with their students. Consequently, we utilized our children’s literature course on the use of picture books that would invite dialogue supporting children responding to traumatic events. Specifically, we reconceptualized an existing read-aloud assignment to focus on selecting and using literature that facilitates children’s responses to challenging life experiences. This article describes the read-aloud assignment, providing a content analysis of the books the preservice teachers selected, and examples of both preservice teachers’ responses and K-12 students’ responses to the literature.

Background

In the summer of 2019, our midsized, mid-western city experienced a series of challenging events. The Ku Klux Klan selected our city center as a site for a rally in May. Over Memorial Day weekend, several tornadoes tore through our area, leaving a path of destruction that continues to affect our community. Finally, in August, our city made headlines as the site of a mass shooting in our entertainment district, only one day after a similar tragedy occurred in El Paso, Texas. In addition, Dayton was the focus of a Frontline episode in early 2019, focused on our centrality in the opioid crisis, bringing to national attention the negative economic and societal impacts on our community. As teacher educators, we were keenly aware of how these events might affect the children and teachers in our area who would return to their classrooms at the end of the summer. Further, we knew the preservice teachers with whom we worked would need to be prepared to respond to the needs of the children they would meet in their field placements. The preservice teachers at our university are predominantly not from the area—they spent the summer in their home cities, potentially unaware of the context to which they were returning in August. Thus, we aimed to create space in our courses to help our preservice teachers consider the impact of these events on the students they would meet in their field placements and student teaching, and to provide potential tools with which to have these difficult conversations in sensitive, informed ways.

The focus of this article is on how we opened up space in our children’s literature course to invite dialogue around how to support children in responding to traumatic events using picture books. Specifically, we reconceptualized an existing read-aloud assignment to focus on selecting and using literature to facilitate children’s responses to challenging events. In this article, we will describe the existing literature surrounding using children’s literature to facilitate difficult conversations with children, describe the read-aloud assignment, provide a content analysis of the books the preservice teachers selected for the assignment, and present examples of both preservice teachers’ and K-12 students’ responses to the literature.

Review of the Literature

Using children's literature with students can support their understanding and processing of traumatic situations and experiences (Wiseman, 2013). Teachers can use literature to support students as they look for answers and wrestle with contexts that are challenging and complicated. As educators, it is critical that we do not avoid the difficult conversations that students need to have, but instead prepare for these conversations through literature. Iaquinta and Hipsky (2006) write, "teachers can use children's literature to help students solve problems and generate alternative responses to their issues" (p. 210). Literature can be instrumental in helping students develop respect, tolerance, and empathy while also navigating and guiding complicated emotions (Harper, 2016; Kemple, 2004).

In order to successfully use literature to have those conversations, teachers must build relationships with their students and within their classrooms. "The real core of education is the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the extent to which that relationship nurtures the longing of the child to matter in the world, and the longing of the teacher to nurture and fulfill that desire" (Shriver & Buffett, 2015, xv). As Garcia (2019) writes,

teachers should be well versed in meeting the needs of the students in our classrooms. This is fundamentally part of what teaching is about: students who hurt, are sad, or feel scared are a central priority in our classes. Forget standards and high-stakes assessments; comforting our students and helping them feel better within the world is a key part of our charge. (p. 72)

However, rarely are teachers prepared for how to build those meaningful relationships (Garcia, 2019).

Highly skilled teachers develop a social and emotional classroom foundation through nurturing, supportive relationships and through lessons that scaffold students' strengths and abilities. They also develop a classroom culture that encourages intrinsic motivation, facilitates classroom cooperation, and builds students' prosocial behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Harper (2016) discusses using comprehension strategies such as a Venn diagram, emotional puzzles, and open-minded portraits to support difficult conversations in the classroom. Bibliotherapy is another technique to help readers navigate challenging experiences and emotions (Sullivan & Strange, 2002). As Simmons (2020) writes, "We can best support our students who may be at risk for trauma by getting to know them; discovering their gifts; paying attention to and meeting their unique needs; being consistent, nurturing adults in their lives" (p. 89). Yet, little research currently exists discussing the complexities of selecting literature to use with children who have experienced traumatic events, and even less research exists discussing how to prepare for those complex shared experiences (Garcia, 2019).

We seek to build upon the conversation discussing how classroom teachers (and preservice teachers) might prepare and deliver a shared reading experience with young children that helps them navigate potentially traumatic contexts. As Wiseman (2013) states, "Reading picture books about topics relevant to children's lives can provide an opportunity for children to engage with ideas and experiences that are significant to them" (p. 2). Current research indicates that when schools support social emotional learning experiences, students benefit both academically and emotionally (Durlak et al., 2011; Duto & Bien, 2014, Fisher et al., 2019; Haertling & Schmidt, 2017; Jones, 2019). This growing body of research

indicates that supporting students' navigation of difficult emotions is beneficial in multiple contexts (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2019; Zins et al., 2004). Harper and Trostle-Brand (as cited in Harper, 2016) state that, "sharing high-quality picture books with children may heighten their awareness of emotions, enhance their sensitivity to other's feelings, promote empathetic behaviors toward others, and foster moral development" (p. 81).

Description of the Context

In our courses, we utilize children's literature consistently as a way to facilitate many different types of conversations. As we prepared for the semester following an extremely challenging summer, we looked to our bookshelves to help us find the words we needed to communicate the emotions we were feeling. School districts in our area were scheduled to start at least one month late due to renovation efforts following the May tornadoes. Just across the street from our building on campus, elementary school students who lived just steps from the location of a mass shooting were returning to classrooms. These children were waking up in fear when they heard fireworks going off as part of the local minor league baseball game, the sounds too similar to the horrific night they experienced just a few weeks prior. All of these stories and experiences weighed heavy on our hearts, and we sought to address them by bringing them to the forefront as part of our children's literature course.

Twenty-six sophomore and junior students were enrolled in the children's literature course as part of their four-year Teacher Education program. Students represented diverse licensure areas including early childhood, middle childhood, and intervention specialist (special education). The course serves as an introductory course to the reading/language arts (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, visual representation) and the role literature plays in these processes. Topics examined include the foundations of literacy, research, theories, and related models of reading, various children's and young adult literature, the integration of technology in literacy, an overview of the importance of on-going assessment in teaching reading/language arts, and an awareness of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity in individual learners. A focus of the course is on learning how to identify quality examples of children's literature, using resources such as the Horn Book database, a rubric to identify diversity in children's literature (Arnold & Sableski, 2017), and elements of quality writing. Preservice teachers align theory with practice throughout the course by connecting key theories of literacy instruction with the use of children's literature in the classroom.

When reviewing the course for natural opportunities to bring these difficult conversations into focus, the read-aloud assignment stood out to us as an ideal place. The read-aloud assignment asks the preservice teachers to apply the classroom content to practice by engaging in a read-aloud experience with students at a local elementary school. The elementary school where we traditionally brought the students for the assignment is located at the center of each of the tragedies our community experienced. Students at this school lived in locations that could have been affected by the opioid crisis, the tornadoes, the Ku Klux Klan rally, and the shooting—and their teachers were also looking for ways to answer their questions and have these conversations about difficult experiences in the classroom. So, we set to work at revising the

assignment to ask our preservice teachers to focus their book selection on literature that would serve these needs in the school community.

In preparation for the read-aloud, several class sessions focused on examining the critical elements of a read-aloud. Each class session included modeling of at least one read-aloud by the instructor, including a debriefing conversation in which the students identified the elements of the book that marked it as a quality selection, as well as the elements of effective read-alouds they observed in action. To guide the book selections, the instructor (Mary-Kate) engaged in a discussion with the preservice teachers regarding the multiple traumatic and stressful events that had taken place in our community over the summer. The goal of the in-class conversation was to help the preservice teachers identify that many of the students in their field placements have been affected by one (if not more) of these tragedies or events, and that the literature selected should provide support or exploration of ways to help children respond to these events in their community.

In specific, preservice teachers were asked to consider the following elements as they selected a book to read-aloud to the students. First, they were to consider the literary quality of the book, using the Horn Book ratings or critical reviews from other sources, such as *School Library Journal*. Second, they were to identify three examples of effective writing in the book to highlight for the students during the read-aloud. Further, they were to address response to trauma using indirect or direct techniques in the book they selected. The instructor provided the preservice teachers with a list of books about *Tough Topics* (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/book-lists/toughtopics2019>) for them to reference and use as a starting (or ending) point in selecting books. The preservice teachers were not required to select books from this list, but they were invited to do so. Finally, preservice teachers were asked to consider the grade levels in which they would be reading aloud. For the read-aloud experience, preservice teachers were placed in classrooms aligned most closely with their licensure areas. Early Childhood candidates were placed in K-3rd grade classrooms, Middle Childhood candidates were placed in 4th-8th grade classrooms, and Intervention Specialist candidates, whose licensure area would be K-12, were placed across the grade levels. Given these placements, preservice teachers searched for books that would appeal and align to their assigned grade level.

Preservice teachers brought their books to class for the instructor to review and provide any potential feedback regarding their selection. As the instructor reviewed the titles with the preservice teachers, some books were identified as potentially problematic given the limitations presented by this particular assignment. Preservice teachers were serving as “drop-in” readers, only meeting students for the first time when they arrived at the school to engage in the read-aloud. Thus, the relationships and community that would be beneficial in having difficult conversations with students were absent from this experience. Additionally, the school identified for this assignment was a private, religious school, located very close to the campus. The location and willingness of the faculty to participate in this experience made it an ideal selection, but the context of the school, coupled with the absence of relationships and community between preservice teachers and students, were limiting factors for the book selections. These factors were important in carefully navigating text choice for both the preservice teachers and the K-8 students. For example, one preservice teacher at first selected *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 2016). This

is an award-winning text that sensitively depicts a family with two mothers. This book does not address a challenging event or topic, but rather broaches a potentially controversial topic in this particular school context. Class conversations helped the preservice teachers identify their background experiences that might shape their perception of traumatic and difficult situations. The instructor used these initial book selections as opportunities to talk with the preservice teachers about the nuanced process of book selection, in which the specific elements of the goals of the read-aloud, the community of the classroom, and the broader context of the school and community, inform teachers' book selections.

After books were selected, the preservice teachers practiced giving the read-aloud with each other in class. Preservice teachers were encouraged to practice as much as possible to build fluency in all components before engaging in the read-aloud experience with children. During these practice sessions, preservice teachers also engaged in a formal peer review process. The preservice teachers would also engage in this peer review when they completed the read-alouds at the school, so the practice sessions helped them prepare both for their own read-aloud, as well as the peer review, which they would complete while their classmates read aloud. Each classroom was assigned two to three readers, so peer review was a way to ensure each preservice teacher received feedback and learned from their classmates' experiences.

Upon arriving at the school, the preservice teachers were guided to their preassigned classrooms. The preservice teachers introduced themselves and engaged students in the read-aloud experience of their selected text. During each read-aloud, the other preservice teachers in the room completed the peer review form. The classroom teacher monitored the class and provided any redirection needed to help the students stay engaged in the read-alouds. After the read-alouds were complete, the preservice teachers gathered in a conference room and responded in writing to the following questions: *Why did you select this book (cite the quality, diversity, and response to trauma)?* and *How might it help students respond to traumatic events?* Additionally, the preservice teachers reflected on the read-aloud in general, describing what went well and what they would change if they could complete it again. In the following section, we will share the experiences, reflections, and lessons learned about having difficult conversations with children's literature.

How Literature Generates Conversation

We explored how this read-aloud experience generated conversation in the classroom from two perspectives. First, we examined the content of the picture book selections through a content analysis of the books. Second, we used thematic coding to analyze the written reflections the preservice teachers completed following the read-aloud. These perspectives helped us understand the characteristics of books that can be used to have difficult conversations with children in the classroom, as well as the experiences, both positive and negative, of the preservice teachers in reading these books aloud in classrooms.

Book Selections

In class, the preservice teachers required multiple rounds of conversation and selection as they worked to understand what was being asked of them by the assignment. Selecting a book to support students during difficult times proved to be quite challenging for the preservice teachers. Their concerns centered around the content of the books, and not wanting to share a “depressing” story or something that would bring up topics to which the preservice teachers would not know how to respond. Further, the preservice teachers struggled with the notion that a book could be supportive of students dealing with challenging situations, without being directly about the topic. “I can’t find any books about tornados,” was a comment frequently heard in class. In response, the instructor shared books such as *Love* by Matt de la Pena (2018), to illustrate how books could address a theme that would facilitate challenging conversations, while not directly discussing a specific event. These in-class conversations shaped the preservice teachers’ book selections, and led to the following categories of books selected for the read-aloud assignment.

The selected books had a message that was either “specific” (a specific traumatic event, for example) or were more “thematic” in that they had an overall message but did not reference a particular traumatic component. Of the 26 books, 14 (54%) were coded as specific (see Table 1). Examples of specific topics discussed in these 14 books include homelessness, divorce/separation, tornados, and refugee/immigration stories. For example, *Flowers for Sarajevo* (McCutcheon, 2017) is a heartfelt story depicting life for a family in the Bosnia War. *Green City* (Drummond, 2016) is a realistic fiction story articulating a community’s experience after a tornado destroys their community and their decision and determination to rebuild a sustainable community. These books articulated specific traumatic contexts and the ways in which the characters persevered through the trauma. When preservice teachers brought these books to class for instructor approval, they were met with much envy by their classmates, as locating books about the specific events was seen as the main goal at the outset of the assignment. As later discussion will show, this sentiment changed once the preservice teachers actually engaged in the read-aloud with students, but initially, the preservice teachers sought to find books that were concrete reflections of the events the community experienced.

In comparison, 12 (46%) books were coded as thematic (see Table 2). These books focused upon overarching themes of hope, peace, kindness, and love in the face of adversity. For example, *When Sadness Is at Your Door* (Eland, 2019) is a touching story to support young people who are experiencing sadness and depression. *What Do You Do With a Problem?* (Yamada, 2016) discusses ways in which individuals can face and deal with the problems that just will not go away. *The Rabbit Listened* (Doerrfeld, 2018) is a touching story reminding the reader that sometimes people who are struggling just need someone to listen and hear them, not try to solve their problems. Preservice teachers selected these books after encouragement and prodding from the instructor, and with assurance that they would be appropriate ways to have these difficult conversations, without directly addressing the traumatic events. The uncertainty of sharing these books, and having these conversations, which the preservice teachers brought to the assignment, led them to lean on books that provided a concrete representation of an event they could be prepared to discuss. Preservice teachers had to be nudged to select books that left the conversations a bit more open, and invited responses they might not be able to predict, from the students.



Table 1
Books Coded as Specific Examples of Traumatic Experiences

Book Cover	Annotation
	<p><i>Flowers for Sarajevo</i> (McCutcheon, 2017)</p> <p>In this lyrical and moving book, John McCutcheon shares the power of beauty in the face of violence and tragedy. This book takes place during the Bosnian War, but the themes of perseverance and community are relevant to modern-day contexts.</p>
	<p><i>Green City</i> (Drummond, 2016)</p> <p>A testament to community and tenacity, this book tells the story of one town’s response following devastation from a tornado. The book centers on the collaboration and grassroots efforts of community members to thoughtfully redesign their city, and make something positive out of tragedy.</p>
	<p><i>The Quiet Place</i> (Stewart, 2012)</p> <p>A young girl who recently immigrated to the United States from Mexico struggles to feel “at home” in her new surroundings. With the help of family members, she creates a special place of her own where she can safely process the complex emotions she faces as she adjusts to her new life in America.</p>
	<p><i>Fly Away Home</i> (Bunting, 1993)</p> <p>In sensitive and moving text, Eve Bunting addresses the realities of homelessness. As a book to help children see either themselves or others reflected, this story is an important exploration of a complex topic.</p>

	<p><i>The Invisible String</i> (Karst, 2000)</p> <p>In this book centered on helping children process grief over the loss of a loved one, children are given a powerful metaphor to help them feel connected to those who have died. Widely used in counseling settings, this book offers comfort and connection to children experiencing grief.</p>
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Table 2
Books Coded as Thematic Examples of Traumatic Experiences

Book Cover	Annotation
	<p><i>Love</i> (de la Peña, 2018)</p> <p>Love comes in many different formats, and this book explores the complex ways in which love manifests in children’s lives. Through both positive and challenging contexts, children will see the incredible power of love.</p>
	<p><i>When Sadness Is at Your Door</i> (Eland, 2019)</p> <p>Sadness can be overwhelming and scary, but this picture book helps the reader give sadness a name and a face. Suggested activities for what to do when “sadness is at your door” are an integral part of this story.</p>
	<p><i>What Do You Do With a Problem?</i> (Yamada, 2016)</p> <p>This story is for everyone who has had to deal with a problem that will just not go away. The child in this story tries to avoid the problem, but it only gets bigger. When the main character decides to face the problem, it turns out to be something much different than what it appeared to be.</p>

	<p><i>The Rabbit Listened</i> (Doerrfeld, 2018)</p> <p>The Rabbit Listened is a poignant story for children to consider how to deal with loss. When something terrible happens, all of Taylor's animals want to give advice on what Taylor should do. When Rabbit arrives, and just listens, Taylor has just what is needed.</p>
	<p><i>Come With Me</i> (McGhee, 2017)</p> <p>When a young girl grows overwhelmed by the negativity filling the daily news reports, she turns to her family for advice as to how to respond. She learns that being a positive presence in one's community can be enough to make an impact.</p>

Written Reflections

The written reflections on the read-aloud indicated that the assignment fostered the capacity of the preservice teachers to use children's literature to have difficult conversations in the classroom. In their reflections, the preservice teachers explored themes of connections to the local community, children's responses to the read-alouds, and their own professional learning.

Connections to the Local Community

The preservice teachers made connections to the local community, which was a primary goal of the assignment. One of the most profound examples of this came from a preservice teacher who chose to read *The Invisible String* (Karst, 2000), which is a picture book about loss. The preservice teacher wrote,

Before reading I did not think that the children would connect this with the tornado that came through Dayton. I was surprised how this was brought up and the children all wanted to share their stories after one child did. Then the children connected the book to their personal lives. One child connected the book to how she loves her father and how although he is in prison he is still connected to her. Another child then shared a similar story about his uncle, who is also in prison.

The preservice teacher was struck by the personal connections the students made to the book. During an in-class debriefing session, this preservice teacher shared this story with the rest of the class. Many of the other preservice teachers had similar experiences with their read-aloud, as they went into the assignment initially skeptical that students would be able to make any connections to the literature they chose and found that the connections, particularly thematic connections to broad themes represented in the books, were numerous.

Other preservice teachers selected books with the specific intention of connecting to the issues facing the community. Preservice teachers selected books with either specific examples of challenging contexts, or with broader themes to help children respond to challenging contexts. One preservice teacher, who read *Come With Me* (McGhee, 2017), stated,

Around the city of Dayton, we have had shootings and tornadoes, which are two things children and everyone in the community had to battle their fears with. But, as the story goes on it teaches the students that living in fear does not help you, it shows the negative and scary things in life that they are winning. While we all might have a small part in the world, everyone's part matters so taking the walk outside and meeting people along the way and showing them to not live in fear is important.

In their reflections, preservice teachers connected their books to the issues the students they read to were facing. This was an ongoing topic of discussion in class, as preservice teachers struggled to select books that would facilitate difficult conversations without being didactic or overly traumatic. Through conversation with the instructor and classmates, and through exploration of books in class, preservice teachers found that they could read a book about a theme, rather than a specific topic, to help facilitate difficult conversations with children. One preservice teacher selected an older book, *Egbert, the Slightly Cracked Egg* (Ross, 1997), because of the themes it presented. She stated,

In light of the recent hate crimes and tragedies of Dayton, feeling accepted and finding a place to call home is something students may struggle with. Egbert provides students with hope that they will also find a place they belong, even in the face of adversity.

By selecting books with broader themes, some of the preservice teachers were able to facilitate difficult conversations that invited students to connect to the stories in unique ways, facilitating the difficult conversations in ways that focused on the lived experiences of the students.

Other preservice teachers picked books specifically to connect to the events students experienced in the community. For example, one preservice teacher selected *Green City* (Drummond, 2016), because it,

specifically talks about the trauma of a tornado and how a city coped with that loss. It has received many awards and directly shares ways that a town can recuperate from a disaster. This can help the students because it can give them hope that things can rebuild and that their life and their city will flourish even after a tragedy.

Even when texts were specific to a particular event, sharing the books with children helped them make connections to broader themes related to trauma and challenging contexts.

Student Responses to Literature

The preservice teachers noted the responses the students made to the books they chose in their reflections, as often these responses took them by surprise. One preservice teacher who read *The Quiet Place* (Stewart, 2012), shared,

I was not sure if this would be something that all the students could relate to, however, it ended up being very relatable. There were two students in the classroom that were new to the class that year and their first language was Spanish like the girl in the book. After reading the book, students made connections to parts of the story, and we also had a discussion about how they can be welcoming to new students in a classroom that may not feel safe and how they were welcoming to their two new classmates in the beginning of the school year.

The Quiet Place is about a young girl who immigrated to the United States from Mexico, and the challenges she faces in adjusting to a new culture while missing her family. The preservice teacher stated that she, "chose this book because it brings up the topic of having students that traveled from a different country and now are learning English as their second language in the classroom." Although she chose the book with the guidelines of the assignment in mind, she did not have knowledge of the specific demographics of the students in the class. The community of the classroom enabled the students to make connections to the book, despite the fact that the preservice teacher was not a part of that community. She commented,

I think that there was already a community created in this classroom by the teacher because the students were so trusting in sharing about their connections to the story. The read-aloud not only allowed me to practice my skills, but also to realize the importance of choosing the right book for a specific group of students and the topic that needs to be discussed.

This example illustrates the power of a strong classroom community to invite connection and response when having difficult conversations in the classroom using children's literature. When children are invited to bring their lives to the discussion through literature, they can see both their specific experiences reflected in the literature, as well as make connections to broader themes of trauma and difficult conversations. As Dutro (2017) states, "children's stories are already in the room, whether acknowledged, invited, or not" (p. 329). Literature can serve as both a "window and a mirror" (Bishop, 1990) to help students grapple with their own traumatic experiences and those of the broader community.

Professional Learning

The goal of an assignment such as this one is to give preservice teachers tools for their future roles as classroom teachers. In their reflections, the preservice teachers indicated several key take-aways they were able to determine from engaging in this experience. Though many of them were unsure about the assignment at the outset, the scaffolding provided in class helped them to select a book, read it aloud to a group of students, and identify components they will hopefully apply in their future teaching, particularly when facilitating difficult conversations. As Dutro (2017) writes, this was one critical approach to prepare teacher education students whose "histories, privilege, and life experiences may be different from those in the communities where they will teach" (p. 331).

Preservice teachers' key take-aways were primarily focused on the potential of using literature to facilitate difficult conversations in the classroom. One preservice teacher commented that when using children's literature to facilitate difficult conversations, "Students are not directly targeted to tragedies they may face, but are welcomed to explore the unique ways in which they can challenge the gloom that impacts their life." This preservice teacher identified the critical role literature can play in helping students both connect to, and work through, the tragedies that may occur in their communities. Another preservice teacher builds on this through her comment, "The use of trauma-related literature at this school has the ability to generate conversations that may not have been discussed and creates a new platform for expression." The read-aloud assignment helped her to experience the potential of literature to open up spaces for dialogue and discussion that may not have existed without the presence of literature in the classroom. Another preservice teacher perhaps summed it up best when she stated, "I learned that the best way to reach your students and allow them to feel safe can easily and appropriately be done through the use of literature." This assignment, and the professional learning it inspired, helped the preservice teachers feel safe to explore a topic that may have been uncomfortable for them, and in so doing, see the potential for using literature to help their future students feel safe to engage in difficult conversations in the classroom.

Implications

Teachers must be prepared with as many experiences and tools as possible to support their students as they navigate challenging experiences. The purpose of this assignment was to engage preservice teachers in an experience that would prepare them to use literature to have difficult conversations in their future classrooms. We wanted to invite our preservice teachers to consider the power of the classroom read-aloud, in not only engaging students with literature, modeling effective reading, and so on, but also to help them see the potential of the read-aloud to "dig deep" into the issues and complexities facing the students in their future classrooms. Rather than ignoring the pressing issues they might face as they walked into their field placement classrooms, we chose to use these experiences as a way to help our preservice teachers consider their roles and responsibilities to their students.

In so doing, we hope we have helped our preservice teachers to develop into compassionate teachers. As students experience and live through traumatic events (and in the case of our community and many others, multiple traumatic events) there is the danger of becoming "desensitized" to the traumatic contexts. It is critical that a teacher understands and embraces the importance of empathy and compassion as they share and relate to stories being read and discussed (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Rather than just reading the book to the students, and focusing on the standards to meet, the comprehension strategies to teach, or the grades to assign, it is of equal, or possibly greater, importance for the teacher to show students how a book makes them feel, and ask the students to do the same (Dutro & Bien, 2014).

To foster this kind of response to literature, developing a community is of utmost importance for an authentic shared experience. As Harper (2016) writes:

Picture books are ideal for assisting families and teachers in developing children's social-emotional literacy, sensitivity, and self-regulation. When comprehension and vocabulary strategies are taught in conjunction with reading high-quality children's literature, children make meaningful connections to the global messages of emotions. A good story combined with responsive and developmentally appropriate discussion can provide the opportunity for children to explore emotion-provoking conflicts and events that might mirror those emotions they or their friends routinely experience. (p. 85)

The preservice teachers who engaged in this read-aloud assignment felt trepidation and concern over not knowing the students prior to entering the classroom, because they knew how critical and important a strong classroom community was from class discussions. Once in the classrooms, they were able to identify very quickly which classrooms had a strong community in place, and which did not, by the level to which the students were willing to engage in the difficult conversations their literature selections invited. A strong classroom community is one of multiple factors, including the background of the teacher and the content of a text, that can contribute to the impact of literature about challenging contexts (Dutro, 2019; Simmons, 2020). This was a firsthand experience of the power of a strong classroom community that will, hopefully, stay with these preservice teachers as they seek to build strong communities in their future classrooms.

Using literature to have difficult conversations with children is not, as this assignment demonstrated, a simple matter of selecting a book about a difficult topic and reading it to children. Meaningful discussions occur in the context of strong community, thoughtful and intentional book selection, and a compassionate, committed teacher. Laying the foundation for these principles in the formative years of undergraduate teacher education programs is one way to ensure that children of the future who unfortunately witness or live through traumatic events will find a safe space in their classrooms and teachers to share, to talk, and to move through these challenging contexts.

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