

# Exploring the Impact of a Literacy-Based Service-Learning Project on Pre-Service Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we describe a teacher educator's first experience implementing a service-learning project in a children's literature course in which pre-service teachers helped provide read-alouds for the local public library's summer reading program. We sought to examine the impact the project had on the seven participants. Data was collected through reflective journals and an end-of-course debrief. Four themes were identified in the data: Initial Feelings, Preparation and Planning, Lessons Learned, and Barriers and Challenges.

*Keywords:* children's literature; experiential education; community engagement; teacher preparation

## INTRODUCTION

Service learning is a type of experiential learning that has emerged as an innovative pedagogy in higher education (Salam et al., 2019). In a systematic review of the literature, Salam et al. (2019) identified 59 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2018 that reported the integration of service learning in different academic disciplines in a higher education setting. Of those 59, five were focused on teacher education, as opposed to 18 studies in health sciences and nursing, 10 studies in business and economics, eight studies in computer and information sciences, and six studies in sociology and criminal justice. This suggests that while service learning is being implemented in teacher education courses, it is still a developing pedagogy.

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service learning as:

...a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on

the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (p. 112).

In addition to considering what service learning is, it is also necessary to differentiate service learning from other common and more traditional classroom-based experiences such as field experiences, internships, practicums, and clinical teaching. These experiences typically lack reciprocity: in other words, they are more focused on meeting the needs of the university than on being mutually beneficial to both the university and the community partner (Atlamaz, 2022; Hildebrand & Schultz, 2015). Furthermore, these experiences do not always require meaningful reflection on the part of PSTs that service-learning activities do (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Tinkler et al., 2022). It is also important to note that service learning goes beyond typical volunteering or community service in that it is an intentional pedagogy grounded in reciprocity, reflection, and social change, and one that is designed to deepen the learning accompanying the service

(Guidry et al., 2008; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015).

This article describes a teacher educator's first experience with implementing service learning in a children's literature course as a result of her university's focus on the use of high-impact practices. It describes the project through the lens of the service-learning cycle phases and examines the impact that it had on the pre-service teachers (PSTs) who participated.

### How Service Learning Benefits Pre-Service Teachers

Research has shown that high-impact practices such as service learning increase retention and student engagement (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013) and result in improved student attitudes toward coursework and the course subject matter (Stoecker, 2014). Another benefit includes the opportunity for students to apply what they are learning in real-world settings (Guzman et al., 2019; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013) and in doing so, develop self-efficacy (Tinkler et al., 2022; Wasserman, 2009). Self-efficacy has been defined as a teacher's belief in his or her own ability to affect student success including both engagement and achievement, and it can have significant effects on teaching and learning (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). In the current educational climate, where there is a national teacher shortage compounded by issues of both recruitment and retention, utilizing pedagogies such as service learning that have a positive impact on self-efficacy, could ultimately impact teacher retention (Harrington & Walsh, 2022).

Aside from the pedagogical knowledge and confidence gained through working with community partners (Atlamaz, 2022), students also hone skills necessary for citizenship, the workplace, and life (Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015; Salam et al., 2019). Additionally, PSTs receive course credit as they participate in organized service activities such as assisting in Title I schools and working with after-school programs.

### The Service-Learning Cycle

There are four stages in the service-learning cycle: preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration (Guidry et al., 2005; Wasserman, 2009). The latter two stages are integral and are what set service learning apart from community service (Guidry et al., 2005). It is through both reflection and demonstration that deep learning occurs.

In the first stage, *preparation*, a community need is identified and investigated. It is more beneficial for students if they are involved in this part of the process. Identification of community stakeholders also occurs in this stage. The second stage, *action*, is when a plan is created to address how to meet the identified need. Teachers and students build knowledge and develop resources during this stage. Stage 2 may take place in a day, a week, a semester, or a year depending on the project.

The third stage occurs when the action plan is implemented and students begin a process of ongoing *reflection*. Through ongoing reflection, PSTs consider how the experience impacted them academically, personally, and in terms of civic engagement and responsibility (Guidry et al., 2005). The practice of reflection is pivotal for effective teaching and is also a key, non-negotiable component of service learning as it is a crucial component of the learning that occurs. Reflections help students make the connection between the service they provide and their coursework (King et al., 2019).

Reflection is key for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers alike, but deep reflection does not happen by chance. A "carefully and intentionally designed" reflection assignment can support PSTs as they learn to reflect on practice in the context of service learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 28). The DEAL Model, developed by Ash and Clayton (2009), is a structure of best practices for creating critical reflection assignments and includes three steps: describe, examine, and articulate learning.

In the first step, *describe* prompts are created that ask PSTs to describe their experience by answering questions such as who, what, when, where, why, and how. Next, they respond to prompts that ask them to *examine* their experience and in doing so, to make meaning out of the activity. They reflect upon three aspects: personal growth, civic engagement, and academic enhancement. In the final stage, PSTs *articulate the learning* that resulted from their participation in the service-learning activity.

A number of possibilities exist when it comes to capturing student reflections and perspectives. Some options include surveys, questionnaires, journals, reflection papers, portfolios, plus/delta analysis, interviews, debriefs, class discussions, videos, multimedia presentations, and focus groups.

In the final *demonstration* stage of the service-learning cycle, PSTs are provided the opportunity to showcase their learning. They can choose from a variety of options such as making videos, presenting at conferences, class presentations, and open-house-type events to illustrate their learning.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

This study aimed to examine how implementing a new service-learning project in a children's literature course impacted the PSTs involved. By examining verbal and written reflections recorded before, during, and after the service-learning experience (Ash & Clayton, 2009), we sought to understand how PSTs were impacted academically, personally, and in terms of civic responsibility and engagement.

The service-learning project required PSTs to plan and implement a read-aloud as part of the local public library's summer reading program. Throughout the experience, the PSTs recorded reflections based on prompts provided by the instructor in a journal (see Appendix). On the final day of class, a debriefing discussion facilitated by the instructor occurred.

The primary research question that guided this study was: What are the impacts of service learning on PSTs enrolled in a children's literature course?

## METHOD

### Site Selection and Project Conception

The participants in this study were enrolled in a junior-level literacy education course at a university in West Texas, and they enacted their service at the local public library. This site was selected because the instructor, a former school librarian, met the children's librarian while visiting the library and the two discussed how they might collaborate.

Before the start of the summer semester, the instructor had already been considering implementing service learning as a response to the university's recent focus on incorporating high-impact practices into coursework. After meeting the children's librarian, she thought about how she might integrate a project into her upcoming summer course, *Literature in the Classroom*. What better way to learn about children's literature than to spend time in the children's section of the public library while interacting with children? Furthermore, most of the field experiences in the education program were currently in school settings, so the instructor thought it would be beneficial to introduce PSTs to a new setting in which to interact with children (Tinkler et al., 2022).

Over the next few months, plans were made for the PSTs to assist with the library's 2021 Tales and Tails Summer Reading program. Due to the ongoing COVID pandemic, many things were still undecided such as whether the program would be presented virtually or in person. The instructor and children's librarian were determined that the collaboration would take place, regardless.

However, plans halted when the children's librarian resigned to return to her job with the local public school. Nevertheless, the librarian reached out to the instructor and asked if her students were still interested. The library's need for help increased due to the fact

that it no longer had a children's librarian. From this point on, the instructor began planning for the service-learning experience with the library's interim director. Together, they decided that the PSTs would assist with the weekly read-aloud that was a key part of the summer program.

### **Participants**

Participants were undergraduate PSTs enrolled in a junior-level literacy course titled *Literature in the Classroom* in the summer of 2021. All students enrolled in this course participated in the service-learning activities as part of their required coursework. Approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board for the research protocols used in this study. Students signed an informed consent form prior to data collection. To guarantee free and informed consent, a colleague performed the consent procedure during the first week of class and made it clear to students that the instructor, also the first author, would not know who consented or did not consent until after grades were released. Because all service-learning activities were required coursework and the consent forms were not delivered to the first author until after grades were submitted, free and informed consent was achieved.

A total of nine consent forms were signed, but two students dropped the course, leaving seven participants, all female, ranging in age from 21 to 67, one African American, three Hispanic, and three White. One limitation of this study is directly related to the small number of participants which affects the generalizability of the results to the larger population.

Participants for the study were selected using convenience sampling because they were enrolled in the *Literature in the Classroom* course. Convenience sampling is used when researchers select people who are available or can easily be recruited to include in the sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

### **Procedures**

#### ***Before Service***

In the first week of the hybrid 10-week course, the instructor prepared the PSTs for the service-learning project. First, she discussed service learning and how it differed from other similar experiences students may have had such as field experience, volunteering, or community service. She did this to clear up any confusion the PSTs may have had about the differences in these experiences. Next, she talked to the PSTs about the community stakeholder, the library, and how the project came to be. Then, she introduced the two graded assignments related to the service-learning project: the read-aloud and the service-learning journal. The journal assignment (see Appendix) was created keeping the DEAL model (Ash & Clayton, 2009) and the service-learning cycle (Guidry et al., 2005) in mind. Finally, the instructor delivered a brief lecture on "Planning an Effective Read-Aloud" and modeled a read-aloud while pointing out the key components covered during the lecture. Class time was provided to complete the first journal entry which asked students to share their initial thoughts about service learning and read-alouds.

In the second week of class, the instructor brought the books selected by the children's librarian along with a summer program schedule and a sign-up sheet. Students were given time to peruse the books and sign-up for their read-aloud time as well as a time to rehearse with the instructor. Since the class was hybrid, students could sign up to rehearse in person or virtually. During the rehearsals, students read aloud to the instructor, then she provided specific feedback connected to the elements of effective read-alouds such as tapping into background knowledge and asking effective questions. Aside from rehearsing with the instructor, PSTs were encouraged to practice for others such as family members, friends, and pets.

**During Service**

After the preparation phase, PSTs were ready for action. During this part of the service-learning experience, PSTs implemented their read-aloud. The read-alouds took place in the auditorium near the children’s area of the library. The auditorium was a long, narrow room with rows of chairs for seating. The PSTs read from a small stage at the front of the room. Most of the children, whose ages ranged from infants to middle school, sat on the floor in front of the PSTs. Many parents and guardians were also in the audience seated in the chairs behind the children.

The service-learning assignment required students to spend five hours at the library. In order to accumulate five hours, students conducted multiple read-alouds, assisted with other activities in the reading program, or accompanied their classmates during their read-alouds to provide moral support and assistance.

Also during the service-learning project, the instructor and students had ongoing discussions during in-person classes to share their experiences. Students shared tips such as how to engage a sometimes rambunctious audience of various ages and what to do as people were arriving and waiting for the read-aloud to start. All the while,

students were completing the “During Service-Learning” prompts in their journals.

**After Service**

In the final in-person class meeting, the instructor prepared a celebratory slide show that included pictures of all PSTs engaged in various parts of the project. She also facilitated a debrief in which everyone orally reflected upon their experience while it was “fresh on their minds”. She structured the debrief to capture things students thought should be “kept” and things that should be “changed”. Students had an opportunity to share other ideas to enrich the project. The instructor took notes during this discussion to capture students’ perceptions and ideas. PSTs also completed their final “Post Service-Learning Prompt” in their journal.

As for the final step in the service-learning cycle, demonstration, the instructor, along with another literacy professor who utilized service learning, worked with two students (one from each of their classes) to develop a proposal to present about their service-learning experience at the state literacy conference.

Table 1 provides a summary of activities utilized in this project that fall into each part of the service-learning cycle (Guidry et al., 2005).

**Table 1**

*Before, During, and After Service Activities*

Before Service (Preparation)	During Service (Action)	After Service (Reflection and Demonstration)
Introduce the course assignment & community stakeholder	During Service Reflection Journal Entries	Whole Class Debrief and Celebrate
Book Selection & Sign Up	Read-Aloud for Children’s Summer Reading Program	After Service Reflection Journal Entry

Instruction: Read-Aloud Techniques	Troubleshoot During Class	Conference Presentation Proposal
Before Service Reflection Journal Entry		
Practice Read-Aloud with Feedback		

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data analyzed in this study were the PSTs' service-learning journals and the instructor's notes from the oral end-of-course debrief. The journals were collected via Canvas, the university's learning management system. The assignments were downloaded, de-identified, and stored by the instructor securely in a password-protected document. The debrief notes were captured in a recording on the instructor's phone and then transcribed.

The researcher began the analysis process by reading through the journals and notes to get a general sense of the topics discussed and to look for similarities or patterns. After reading all seven journals and the debriefing notes, she used descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016) to identify the basic topics and then classified those into the following themes or categories: initial feelings, preparation and planning, lessons learned, and barriers or challenges.

## Findings

### *Initial Feelings*

These codes referenced PSTs' initial feelings about the service-learning project in general and the practice of reading aloud and were derived from the journal entry written before PSTs actually engaged in service learning. Several of the PSTs wrote about what they were looking forward to including meeting children and making connections, gaining experience, and practicing what they were learning. One PST was excited about reading aloud. Another said she was shy with children and hoped that the experience would help her "break out of her shell".

PSTs also expressed worries, doubts, and reservations. These included a lack of confidence in reading aloud, especially with adults ("complete strangers") in the audience. One PST said she was very worried about her oral reading ability including her pronunciation, ability to read at an appropriate speed, and to differentiate her voice as needed. Another PST, who was also enrolled in another course that included a service-learning project, was worried about managing both projects in a 10-week summer session.

A couple of PSTs also expressed mixed feelings such as being "nervous but excited". Another said she was confident about reading aloud ("I feel like I have it in the bag"), but worried that her confidence would decrease and she would get nervous as her read-aloud neared.

### *Preparation and Planning*

Codes in this category referenced PSTs' approaches to planning their read-aloud as well as their recognition of the importance of planning. As for how students went about planning their read-alouds, PSTs mentioned practicing with classmates, nieces and nephews, siblings, children of friends, and even their pets. One student had this to say about practicing with the instructor:

I am going to meet with Dr. Smith (pseudonym) in 20 minutes and I am nervous to work with her as well....after my conference with Dr. Smith, I feel much better. She helped me to get some questions jotted down about the bugs so I can engage with the kids more. I am still very nervous but I am very excited now to read to the kids.

Several PSTs mentioned what they learned about the importance of planning and the amount of preparation that an effective read-aloud requires. One said, “You wouldn’t think there would be very much that goes into it. At first, I thought, well, I will read it once and call it good. I am a confident reader.” She went on to discuss the challenges she faced, including reading punctuation effectively, knowing when to pause, and even learning to hold the book correctly. Another said:

I realized that reading fluently with enthusiasm in front of an audience is not something that can be picked up at any moment. It takes practice and skill to read to children of any age and to know the correct times to pause, ask a question, or invite audience participation.

One PST, who was asked to do an impromptu read-aloud at the library, said it was more challenging to read aloud without practicing, but it taught her that “as future educators, we have to take it upon ourselves to go with the flow when needed, make adjustments, and ultimately do what needs to be done.” Another PST also mentioned how she realized that “practice makes better not perfect.”

A few PSTs mentioned how they recognized that there was still room for improvement. “From this experience, I learned I need to work on my public voice and organization skills,” said one PST. Another said she would focus on “making sure I make it a point to show everyone the pictures and point out more specific details to help build connections in the story”.

### ***Lessons Learned***

This category included codes that reflected what PSTs learned about reading aloud as well as the importance of a “real-world” experience in their learning. All of the PSTs mentioned the lessons learned from the hands-on experience they gained through the service-learning project. One PST said, “I’ve sometimes felt out of place because I’ve never felt like I had the experience to work with

children and this has really helped me”. Several others echoed the benefit of being able to “connect with” and “interact” with children.

Even though the project did not occur in a classroom, several PSTs mentioned how it helped prepare them to deal with student behavior. “I learned how children actually behave in that setting. For instance, some children listening, some are in their own world, and some are just talking away,” said one PST. Another PST made a similar comment: “This project allows students to feel an actual classroom feeling including the chaos, distractions, and the rewards as well.” Yet another PST realized how the experience “prepared me for future classroom or school events such as parent-teacher conferences, open house, and meet-the-teacher days.”

The connection between theory and practice was also alluded to by some of the PSTs, and they seemed to enjoy the opportunity to gain authentic practice connected to what they were learning in class. One said, “I’m a hands-on learner and I really enjoyed putting to work what I was currently learning in class.” Another said, “The read-aloud helped me learn course content by allowing me to experience the reading like a true classroom teacher. I found this to be much more helpful than reading to peers.”

When reflecting upon their learning, some of the PSTs wrote extensively about what they learned about the practice of reading aloud including gaining a “better understanding of the read-aloud planning process from scratch”. Some of the practical things learned included how to pace the reading, how to pause at the right time, how to select appropriate literature, and how to get children to interact. One PST stated, “I learned a lot about the importance of read-aloud. It also made me realize that even a 15-year-old (my sister) really enjoys a read-aloud.” Another wrote: “In the end, I know that reading aloud requires a certain amount of finesse to give both the audience and the reader a sense of accomplishment and the certainty they learned something new.”

The confidence gained from the hands-on experience was mentioned by nearly all the PSTs. One commented that it “showed me ‘I can do this. I can be the teacher that helps students learn to read and love to read’”. Another said:

This project really was an eye-opener for me as a person because I was so nervous and I would never have signed up for something like that on my own. I liked how it got us out of our comfort zones and into something we normally wouldn’t do.

### **Barriers or Challenges**

These codes included PSTs’ statements about what challenges they faced throughout all phases of the service-learning project. Barriers, both internal and external, occurred. Most of the PSTs expressed that a primary barrier for them happened internally: overcoming nervousness and insecurity. They felt insecure about a variety of things including a lack of an “appealing voice”, being “the performer instead of an audience member”, and a large audience of both children and adults. One PST described the way she felt as having “stage fright” and said, “As I was driving to the library, I could feel my stomach getting butterflies.”

Another challenge expressed was in the planning of the read-aloud. One PST said that although she currently worked in a school and conducted regular read-alouds, the district used a curriculum with ready-made read-aloud cards. She said, “I definitely gained a better understanding of the planning process for times when I don’t have pre-made cards”.

Another challenge frequently mentioned was how to handle behavior in the library setting and how it differed from classroom behavior management. One PST mentioned that:

Working in a classroom setting is more controlled and familiar...in the classroom, my students know my expectations, and I can re-direct as needed, and control any distractions. Contrarily, in the library read-aloud,

the children were exuberant, and I felt as if I was competing with the parents for the children’s attention...

Another commented that a “crying toddler made it difficult to stay on track, but we managed just fine.” She went on to say that she wished had visited with the mother afterward to encourage her to “still bring her children to things like this” and to continue to encourage them to read.

Other challenges PSTs faced were busy schedules, proximity to the library (several lived in other towns), finding the library, and the fact that there was no librarian in charge of the summer reading program to provide extra guidance. They expressed that “it would have been helpful to speak to, or hear from, the library staff who usually does the read-aloud in advance.”

### **DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this study, we set out to discover how a newly created service-learning project in a children’s literature course impacted pre-service teachers. The data collected about the benefits to PSTs were consistent with previous research. PSTs enjoyed the opportunity to apply what they were learning in real-world settings (Guzman et al., 2019; Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013) and in doing so, overcame their initial fears and developed self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) regarding delivering effective read-alouds and interacting with parents and children (Wasserman, 2009).

In addition to the pedagogical knowledge and confidence gained, PSTs also developed workplace and life skills such as time management, effective communication, and planning processes (Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015; Salam et al., 2019). Service-learning partnerships should also benefit the community partner (Tinkler et al., 2019). In this case, the PSTs played a crucial role in the children’s summer program when the children’s librarian resigned by taking responsibility for the read-aloud portion of the program. In this study, perspectives of the

community partner were not collected because the library had an interim director and gaining permission was difficult; however, it is recommended that in future studies, feedback also be collected from the community partner and other stakeholders.

One of the barriers mentioned was that some PSTs did not live in close proximity to the public library where the service-learning project occurred. The library was only about four miles from the university where the course was taught, but the project required PSTs, many of whom commute from other towns, to make more trips outside of the scheduled class time. Additionally, finding the time to complete the hours presented a barrier for several PSTs, and for those who had longer commutes, this compounded the problem. One solution would be for the instructor to select multiple sites in other towns and allow PSTs to choose where to complete their project. This could, however, take away from the shared experience that resulted from all PSTs working at one site.

Another suggestion would be to allow the PSTs to identify a community need and plan their own project. This more student-driven approach would also ensure that the project was based on a specific need in the community. One thing that sets service learning apart from other more traditional activities is that the site is purposefully selected based on a specific need that the site has—rather than just selected out of convenience (Wasserman, 2009). In this situation, the site was not initially selected based on a stakeholder need, but when the children's librarian resigned, the need presented itself.

PSTs also described challenges such as feeling nervous, not knowing how to handle children's behavior during the read-aloud, and not knowing how to find the library. One idea shared during the final debrief could help resolve many of these concerns: an orientation visit or field trip to the site in which PSTs could visit the library before beginning the project, meet with the librarian, learn more about expectations, possibly even observe a

read-aloud, and ask questions. PSTs could meet library staff, hear more about the library and the summer program, find out what other resources are available for read-alouds (puppets, technology, etc.), and learn about other volunteer opportunities at the library. An orientation event could be added to the preparation part of the service-learning cycle (Guidry et al., 2005).

As the literature suggests, ongoing reflection is critical to the learning that occurs in a service-learning project (Guidry et al., 2005; Tinkler et al., 2022). It also helps students make the connection between course content and the service provided (King et al., 2019). The journal assignment ensured that each PST reflected upon the entire process. However, this assignment could be improved upon by allowing PSTs class time to complete journal entries to ensure that PSTs were writing entries regularly. In this initial project implementation, only the first and last journal entries were completed in class. It might also prove beneficial for the instructor to provide samples or to model reflective writing in addition to the prompts.

*Literature in the Classroom* provided an unparalleled opportunity to immerse PSTs into an authentic learning and teaching experience not usually gained in junior-level courses. Most of the PSTs said that the experience was enjoyable and they would “highly recommend it for future teachers”. Furthermore, it provided a heightened sense of community engagement and responsibility. One PST commented that “serving the community is a reward in itself” and that she planned to incorporate service learning into her own classroom someday. Another PST said she “enjoyed being a part of my community outside of the classroom” and that she planned to volunteer at the library or find other opportunities to volunteer in the community. Through this project, PSTs moved beyond their initial “stage fright” and were able to gain confidence in themselves as they took center stage at the library.

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APPENDIX

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

REFLECTION OF JOURNAL PROMPTS

**Pre Service-Learning Prompt**

- Initial thoughts about service learning and conducting read-alouds

**During Service-Learning Prompts**

- Describe your experience in planning your read-aloud/storytime. Explain any challenges you faced and how you overcame them.
- Describe your previous experience with the Ector County Public Library and/or the Children's Department. What did you learn about the Ector County Public Library and/or the summer reading program while serving there this summer?
- Describe your previous experience with service-learning if any. Describe how you might incorporate service learning into your own classroom someday.
- Describe your experience with your read-aloud/storytime at the library. Was it successful? How do you know? How could it be improved? How did the children react?
- Describe any barriers or challenges you faced in completing this project and how you overcame them.

**Post Service-Learning Prompt**

- Reflect on the service-learning project overall. What went well and what changes might improve future service-learning projects?
- How did this experience impact you academically?
- How did this experience impact you personally?
- How did this experience impact you in terms of civic engagement and responsibility?

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AUTHORS' NOTE

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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