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Book-Tasting Presentations within an Early Childhood Educator Preparation Program

Johannah D. Baugher
Northwest Missouri State University, jbaugher@nwmissouri.edu

Narges Sareh
Northwest Missouri State University, nsareh@nwmissouri.edu

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Abstract

This manuscript discusses a teacher education experience utilized within an early childhood literacy methods course named, book-tasting presentation. Existing literature suggests that book-tastings, in a variety of forms, are evident at the PK-12 level, yet not prevalent in higher education and specifically, teacher education. The aim of the book-tasting presentations is to expose early childhood teacher candidates to diverse, high-quality picturebooks and their application in early childhood settings to cook up a love of literacy among our youngest readers. This is achieved through the Experiential Learning Cycle as teacher candidates are tasked to experience, reflect, think, and act throughout this exercise. Facilitated in a conducive, academic environment with access to rich, instructional materials and intentional, learning experiences, teacher candidates have authentic opportunities to reflect on their professional practice regarding the use of picturebooks in early childhood settings.

Keywords

early literacy, teacher education, picturebooks, early childhood education, higher education

Book-Tasting Presentations within an Early Childhood Educator Preparation Program

Dr. Johannah D. Baughner, Trenton R-IX School District

Dr. Johannah D. Baughner, Ed.D. is the Director of Academics in the Trenton R-IX School District in Trenton, Missouri and an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Education at Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri.

Dr. Narges Sareh, East Tennessee State University

Dr. Narges Sareh is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee.

Introduction

The intent of this manuscript is to describe a literacy exercise that, while common in PK-12 classrooms is not well-known in teacher education within the higher education sector. This exercise, hereafter referred to as book-tasting, exposes early childhood teacher candidates to high-quality children's literature and pedagogical knowledge that they can, in time, take and apply in their future classrooms to cultivate a love of literacy among their students.

Within the context of our book-tasting presentations, early childhood teacher candidates have authentic opportunities to explore a range of diverse literature through quality picturebooks. Early childhood teacher candidates reflect on the use of picturebooks, their application to various content areas, and the literacy strategies that best align. Candidates are also challenged to critically examine the texts and consider how they contribute to the various domains of children's development. These tasks, among others, further support the elements of rigor and engagement that we hope for our candidates to transfer to practice in their early childhood settings.

In the sections that follow, the theoretical framework in which this exercise is grounded will be discussed, in addition to a brief review of existing literature. A detailed description of the implementation process for the book-tasting presentations within a literacy methods course will also be presented.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework supporting this work is rooted in the *Experiential Learning Cycle* that is comprised of four phases named: (a) experiencing; (b) reflecting; (c) thinking; and (d) acting (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Early childhood teacher candidates have the opportunity to *experience* an authentic, literacy learning opportunity through the book-tasting presentations (Brandt, Sharp, & Gardner, 2021). Not only are they exposed to rich exemplars of high-quality children's literature,

but this interaction is relevant to their profession as a future, early childhood educator. *Reflection* is the second phase of the cycle and intentionally occurs following each book-tasting presentation as teacher candidates conceptualize how they might utilize this specific text in their primary classroom to support literacy learning and interdisciplinary instruction (Brown, 2020; Strachan & Block, 2020).

Kolb and Kolb (2018) further explain that the Experiential Learning Theory affords learners with educational opportunities that are concrete by design, thus implying an experience of tangible value. Undoubtedly, these experiences will stimulate much *thinking* on the part of the learner. Integration of the book-tasting presentations across our early childhood educator preparation program has enabled us to further challenge our teacher candidates to critically examine children’s literature and evaluate how it can intentionally be used in the classroom to support instruction and specifically, what literacy skills and strategies specific texts may target. Moreover, candidates are encouraged to think critically and creatively to consider the interdisciplinary connections that one text may have to multiple content areas, including the arts (Brown, 2020; Havran, 2019/2020; Strachan & Block, 2020).

Acting is the final phase in the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2018), and as the action would suggest, does not assume a passive role. A primary goal in exposing early childhood teacher candidates with book-tastings is to cultivate an authentic love for literacy within them, that they can then act upon and share with their future students (Brandt, Sharp, & Gardner, 2021; Havran, 2019/2020). “Learning is like breathing; a lifelong process of taking in and putting out. For educators, it is about impression and expression – impressing learners with the knowledge necessary to live and work in today’s world and coaching them to express what they have learned in a highly skilled way” (Kolb & Kolb, 2018, p. 8). From pedagogy to practice, the Experiential Learning Cycle continues to support our early childhood teacher candidates’ professional growth and pedagogical action (Havran, 2019/2020; Slade et al., 2019; WestEd, 2022).

Conceptual Underpinnings

Steven Layne (2009) authored a poem entitled, *Aliteracy Poem* that captures the message that assessment data, benchmark performance indicators, and other data points are empty if learners have lost their love of literacy. Enjoy!

Aliteracy Poem

(Reprinted from *Life’s Literacy Lessons: Poems for Teachers* by Steven L. Layne)

Mrs. Thompson’s second graders are amazing!

The principal says they can comprehend anything –

Even a medical textbook.

Mrs. Thompson’s second graders are incredible!

The superintendent says their oral reading is completely seamless –

Like the gentle flow of an eternal spring.

Mrs. Thompson’s second graders are fantastic!

*The P.T.A. president says they finished the reading workbook
and the phonics workbook before the end of the Third Quarter.*

Mrs. Thompson’s second graders worry me.

You see, I’m the aide who works in Mrs. Thompson’s classroom,

And I know something that the others don’t.

Mrs. Thompson’s second graders don’t like to read.

In order to cook up a love of literacy, thoughtful consideration must be given to the following: academic environment, instructional materials, learning experiences, and professional reflection.

Academic Environment

Preparing a conducive, academic learning environment is like an artist preparing a fresh canvas for the first medium to be applied. Guided by intentional decisions at every turn, environmental design is the first conceptual underpinning that supports the Experiential Learning Cycle, aiding in candidates’ professional growth and commitment to pedagogical action (Havran, 2019/2020; Slade et al., 2019; WestEd, 2022).

According to Lynch (2016), preparation of a productive learning environment requires: (a) vigilance of the available, physical space; (b) cooperative learning design; (c) creation of a genuine learning community; and (d) the establishment of both a positive and supportive classroom climate. Further research would purport that authentic learning experiences (Brandt, Sharp, & Gardner, 2021), similar to that which can be cultivated through the Experiential Learning Cycle, show “...significant relationships between strategies for creating a productive learning environment and teaching effectiveness” (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, p. 7). Thus, justifying the value in the sequential process to experience, reflect, think, and act, as opposed to just transmit knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Instructional Materials

Building a love of literacy is further supported through teacher candidates’ exposure to high-quality instructional materials, including picturebooks, allowing them to transfer theory to practice. Hoffman, Teale, and Yokota (2015) encourage the use of complex texts to support early literacy skills in the primary grades. Further research would support that high-quality picturebooks can support early readers’ skill development in the areas of oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, concepts of print, and phonics and phonemic awareness (EBSCO, 2022; Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015; Moreillon, 2017; Otkarina, Hari, & Ambarwati, 2020).

For our book-tasting presentations, early childhood teacher candidates are tasked to intentionally select a high-quality picturebook reflective of the following characteristics: (a) evidence of a

thematically-rich issue; (b) presentation of round characters; (c) offering of engaging illustrations; (d) inclusion of rich, colorful language; and (e) the evolvment of a compounding plot (Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015).

Layne (2009), in the *Reader Continuum*, outlines the progression from a disengaged reader, whose avoidance with text is consistent to the engaged reader, whose interaction with text occurs routinely to the insatiable reader, whose level of text interaction is consistent. He further claims that in order to engage the disengaged and again cook up the love of reading, we, as educators, must change the way we are acting and learning experiences we are providing. “To reach these kids, we’re going to have to impact the way they *think* about books and the way they *feel* about books” (Layne, 2009, p. 53).

Learning Experience

In our aim to promote engaging, authentic, and relevant learning experiences for our early childhood teacher candidates, the ultimate goal remains two-fold: to “...inspire [them] to value reading, [while also] fostering the love of reading in teaching” (Brant, Sharp, & Gardner, 2021, p. 723). This is, in part, achieved through the marriage of the learning environment, instructional materials, and the learning experience. Opportunities for real conversation and discussion in response to texts provide an avenue for authentic connections, close analysis, and reflections to be offered, while also honoring the aesthetics of reading – the joy that comes from it, simply reading (Brandt, Sharp, & Gardner, 2021; Havran, 2019/2020)!

The Experiential Learning Cycle would suggest that in order for learning to occur, an experience fostering some degree of interaction is required (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Authentic learning experiences that intentionally afford teacher candidates with opportunities to apply their learning is a primary goal of the book-tasting presentation task. Just as Brandt, Sharp, and Gardner (2021) advocate, the value of regular, professional interactions and meaningful discussions strengthen the bonds held between members of a learning community through shared experiences. Vartuli, Snider, and Holley (2016) add that “determining the how and why practices or strategies work within specific contexts requires candidates to think” (p. 504), and that too, remains a goal of these interactions following the book-tasting experiences.

Professional Reflection

Following each teacher candidate’s book-tasting presentation, or “practice-based experience” (Vartuli, Snider, & Holley, 2016, p. 504), candidates collectively have an opportunity to “...deconstruct [each] experience [to] create meaning” (p. 503), and this is achieved, in part, through professional reflection. In an authentic context, teacher candidates have every opportunity to reflect and use reflective practice to spur action (Slade et al., 2019). Slade et al. (2019) encourages reflective practice among developing teacher candidates as a tool of empowerment. “The purpose of reflective practice in preservice education is to empower teacher candidates to make the necessary applications of coursework to the classroom in a way that impacts their diverse students’ success” (p. 1).

Following each book-tasting presentation, teacher candidates have an opportunity to consider how the picturebook aligns with literacy strategies and skills, as well as interdisciplinary content. As oral reflection occurs, it too translates to a written recording on their *Book-Tasting Presentation Log* (see Appendix A). Intentional reflection enables “a move toward a plan of action to promote improvement for teaching and learning...to [continue] to bridge the gap between theory and practice” (Slade et al., 2019, pp. 1-2; WestEd, 2022).

With every effort to prepare learning opportunities with the *Experiential Learning Cycle* in mind, our early childhood teacher candidates can authentically experience, reflect, think, and act. These phases occur in an academic environment conducive for learning to occur and with access to high-quality instructional materials and resources. In addition, teacher candidates are afforded engaging learning experiences that offer candidates real contexts to link theory with practice, and alongside professional reflection, teacher candidates have every opportunity to construct their own thoughts to promote growth and guide action. Existing literature on picturebooks and their application in higher education will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Literature Review

Importance of Using Picturebooks. Picturebooks are used in early childhood classrooms as a tool to support children’s development in various areas. Picturebooks are mostly used in early childhood settings to help young children develop language and literacy skills (Thaker, 2014; Arizpe, 2013). Several studies investigated the impact of reading picturebooks on young children’s language and literacy development (Chaparro-Moreno et al., 2017; McKenzie, 2021; Montag et al., 2015; Oktarina et al., 2020; van der Wilt et al., 2019). Dickinson et al. (2012) suggested that reading books to young children can support all six principles that describe environmental factors impacting children’s language and literacy development. The six principles include: (a) children need to hear many words often; (b) children learn words when they are interested; (c) children learn best when adults are responsive to them; (d) words are learned when meanings are made clear; (e) vocabulary and grammar are learned together; (f) keep it positive (Dickinson et al., 2012).

Picturebooks support various aspects of language and literacy development. Shared reading is one of the common activities in early childhood settings that involve picturebooks. Hearing speech is how young children develop language. The child-directed conversation is one of the essential factors in children’s language development and reading picturebooks to children provide a wider range of vocabulary than everyday speech (Montag et al., 2015; Weisleder & Fernald, 2014). Children are exposed to more unique words through shared reading. Thus, “variability in the frequency with which caregivers read to young children may be an important source of individual differences in language ability” (Montag et al., 2015, p. 1494). In addition, reading picturebooks can help children understand what written language sounds like, and that reading is enjoyable (McKenzie, 2021).

Reading picturebooks also contributes to young children’s social and emotional development. Children can learn about different emotions and how to express and cope with them through picturebooks (Garner & Parker, 2018). They could help children identify their own feelings and understand others’ emotions (Beazidou et al., 2013; Garner & Parker, 2018). While reading

books, children understand emotions through *social imagination* which is the ability to imagine other people's thoughts and emotions (Lysaker & Tonge, 2013). This usually happens when children build personal connections with the characters and imagine what they think or how they feel. "In fact, stories are thought to be powerful influences on the ability to understand or imagine the thoughts and feelings of others" (Lysaker & Tonge, 2013, p. 633).

In addition to language and social-emotional development, picturebooks contribute to children's learning in various content areas such as mathematics, science, and social studies (Strachan & Block, 2020). Picturebooks impact children's attitudes toward mathematics learning (van den Heuvel-Panhuizen, 2012) and in forming their STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) identities (Eades-Baird & Elia, 2022). Exposing young children "to appealing, culturally authentic, and scientifically accurate picturebooks alongside opportunities to embody science practices is a valuable way to promote the formation of science identities and cultural awareness and humility for all students" (Eades-Baird, 2022, p. 47). In other words, providing high-quality picturebooks can contribute to children's perception of their own ability in STEM and build a positive attitude toward learning STEM content areas.

Considering the various advantages of high-quality picturebooks in children's learning and development, teacher educators should introduce strategies and tools to teacher candidates, so they develop the ability to identify high-quality picturebooks, implement innovative strategies to maximize the appropriate use of picturebooks, and create a conducive environment for learning through picturebooks in early childhood settings.

Teacher Education Practices and Picturebooks. Considering the benefits of high-quality picturebooks in early childhood classrooms and how they can support young children's learning, early childhood educators should be familiar with best practices to incorporate picturebooks in their classrooms. To gain a deeper understanding of the optimal experiences provided to children through picturebooks, we should investigate various factors impacting children's experiences with picturebooks.

Three factors are involved in the shared reading experience with picturebooks – adult, child, and the book (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). High-quality picturebooks support children's learning in various areas (EBSCO, 2022; Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015; Moreillon, 2017; Oktarina, Hari, & Ambarwati, 2020). Thus, teacher candidates should be able to identify high-quality picturebooks. The child's characteristics and learning styles will influence how they interact with picturebooks and the type of support they need from adults (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). In addition, the adults' characteristics and approach to utilizing the books impact the children's experience with picturebooks. Therefore, there is a need for preparing early childhood teachers to learn appropriate strategies to include picturebooks in their practice.

Few studies investigated the use of picturebooks in teacher education (Daley & Blakeney-Williams, 2015; Durmaz, 2022). Most of them found that using picturebooks and preparing teacher candidates with strategies they can use to incorporate picturebooks in their practice is beneficial for teacher candidates (Daley & Blakeney-Williams, 2015; Durmaz, 2022). In a recent study, Durmaz (2022) examined the change in teacher candidates' perceptions and beliefs after a six-day training on integrating children's literature in teaching mathematics. The results indicated a positive impact of the training on teacher candidates' beliefs about integrating

picturebooks in mathematics, and mathematics literacy self-efficacy (Durmaz, 2022). This emphasizes the importance of providing teacher candidates with specific pieces of training regarding the integration of picturebooks in teaching various content areas.

In a study, Daly and Blakeney-Williams (2015) investigated teacher educators' use of picturebooks in their practice. Eight teacher educators participated in semi-structured interviews; the findings indicated a range of different practices regarding the role of picturebooks in their teaching. Picturebooks were used for multiple purposes and in different content areas. One of the main reasons for using picturebooks in teacher education identified by teachers was that "these resources allowed the teacher educator to simultaneously teach content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge" (Daley & Blakeney-Williams, 2015, p. 99). The aspect of pedagogical learning knowledge is specifically important to this paper because our book-tasting presentations aims to support teacher candidates to build the pedagogical knowledge needed to optimally use picturebooks with young children.

In addition to research, there are a few practice articles in which teacher educators describe their approach to using picturebooks with teacher candidates (e.g. Moody & Matthews, 2021). The lack of research that investigates the role of picturebooks in teacher education is apparent; however, the few studies that focused on the topic indicated a positive impact of using picturebooks in teacher education (Daley & Blakeney-Williams, 2015; Durmaz, 2022). Thus, we have adapted an exercise called book-tasting to introduce early childhood teacher candidates to high-quality picturebooks and strategies they can use in their practice to cultivate a love of literacy.

Book-Tasting

The term book-tasting has been used in the literature before; however, there are very few studies that discussed book-tasting in a teacher education environment (Hamilton, 2012; Wanamaker & Bestwick, 2021). Although the approaches to book-tasting look different than our approach, they both have at least one common goal which is introducing the students to a range of high-quality children's literature.

Hamilton (2012) implemented book-tasting with 10th graders. They were investigating a topic, and students were given a choice of books related to the topic being investigated and were asked to choose five books from the collection and review them for 10-15 minutes. The students were given index cards to take notes about the book and how the book is going to be helpful to their study. According to Hamilton (2012), students were very engaged in the process of book-tasting, however, there was not an official instrument to measure students' engagement in the process.

In one of the few studies that focused on book-tasting with teacher candidates, Wanamaker and Bestwick (2022) investigated the impact of a book-tasting event on teacher candidates' "content and pedagogical learning, their ability to find and use appropriate resources, and their enthusiasm for children's literature" (p. 179). In this study, students in a social studies methods course participated in the book-tasting event that was designed to model the book-tasting as a teaching strategy for the teacher candidates, increase their motivation and enthusiasm in reading, introduce them to the content knowledge in children literature (social studies), and develop library skills (Wanamaker & Bestwick, 2022). The results indicated that book-tasting had a

significant influence on teacher candidates' content acquisition and the desire to use children's literature in their practice.

Although our context and approach to book-tasting are different from Wanamaker and Bestwick (2022), we believe that our approach has resulted in successful outcomes for our early childhood teacher candidates during the five academic semesters that the book-tasting presentations has been implemented in a literacy methods course. The following section will discuss the book-tasting approach used in our literacy methods course in more detail.

Implementation

We began implementing our version of the book-tasting presentations in our literacy methods coursework five, academic semesters ago. Aside from cultivating a love of literacy, our intention with implementing the book-tasting presentations was three-fold: a) expose teacher candidates to high-quality children's literature across genres; b) enable teacher candidates with the skills necessary to identify rich children's picturebooks for integration into their classrooms; and c) provide hands-on experiences for teacher candidates to present texts within an authentic environment. In the paragraphs that follow, a detailed account of our implementation process will be shared, in addition to a brief reporting of our learning along the way.

Our Approach to the Book-tasting Presentations

At the beginning of our literacy methods course, literacy professors explicitly model the expectations for the book-tasting presentations multiple times with quality picturebooks (see Appendix B), prior to teacher candidates selecting a date to share their book-tasting. Teacher candidates utilize their knowledge of high-quality, picturebook characteristics (Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015) to guide their text selection. This knowledge is scaffolded across courses and through explicit modeling from instructors. Once teacher candidates have selected a date to share their book-tasting, it commonly averages out to one or two candidates presenting at the beginning of each class session for the duration of the course.

In addition to selecting a high-quality picturebook (Hoffman, Teale, & Yokota, 2015), teacher candidates are tasked to share the following for a complete book-tasting: (a) picturebook title; (b) author; (c) illustrator; (d) picturebook cover; (e) a brief introduction and/or connection to the picturebook; (f) picturebook summary (including Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How); (g) identification of three literacy strategies that can be taught and/or reinforced through the picturebook; and lastly, (h) pose two, open-ended questions related to the picturebook. Generally speaking, a quality, book-tasting presentation should be approximately ten minutes in length.

Following a book-tasting presentation, we challenge our teacher candidates to contribute to the conversation in the following ways. First, all picturebooks shared are expected to be logged on the comprehensive document, the *Book-Tasting Presentation Log* (see Appendix A). Teacher candidates are required to record all book-tasting presentations, including their own. This document is submitted at the end of the course, as an assignment, once all students have shared their book-tastings. A complete, book-tasting entry reflects the following: (a) date the picturebook was shared; (b) title; (c) author; (d) corresponding literacy skills and strategies; and

(e) a summary statement of the picturebook. Teacher candidates are required to log a total of five, literacy strategies and skills that the picturebook can teach and/or reinforce. Three of the five come from the book-tasting presentation, but then, each teacher candidate is additionally tasked to align two more skills or strategies independently.

Another caveat to our book-tasting approach is that following each teacher candidate's presentation, authentic feedback is offered to them. Teacher candidates have the opportunity to critically discuss texts and candidates' presentation of them, while also contemplating channels for interdisciplinary instruction through the picturebooks presented. By the end of the course, teacher candidates have a rich collection of high-quality picturebooks recorded on their Book-Tasting Presentation Log that they will submit at the end of the course, but more importantly, have as a resource to take with them as they begin practicum experiences and later, enter their own early childhood setting.

What We Have Learned

The idea of book-tastings is not only applicable at the PK-12 level, but in higher education, too, particularly educator preparation programs. Our approach to book-tasting presentations has provided an avenue for our teacher candidates to gain regular exposure to quality picturebooks throughout the duration of the course, while pairing it with a practical resource that they can take with them and use in their future classroom. Book-tasting presentations have also catalyzed some intentional conversations that might not have occurred otherwise, particularly with regard to arts integration and interdisciplinary instruction (Brown; 2020; Strachan & Block, 2020). The Book-Tasting Presentation Log has also been found to be a useful resource for teacher candidates in other courses, too, particularly as they engage in instructional planning. This extends to instructional planning in a variety of early childhood settings, including early learning centers, parent workshops, or early intervention opportunities.

From strictly a logistical perspective, the book-tasting presentations have too proved to be a time-efficient activity. Academic time is precious and so each minute must be purposefully allocated. We have found book-tasting presentations to be an intentional strategy to expose teacher candidates to a range of high-quality picturebooks, while maintaining our commitment to holding academic learning time sacred. From our perspective, this is a win-win! Informal feedback received has been positive, so we intend to continue implementing our approach to book-tastings as a strategy for cultivating a love of literacy among our early childhood teacher candidates.

Conclusion

Grounded in the *Experiential Learning Cycle* (Kolb & Kolb, 2018), our approach to book-tasting presentations requires the active participation of our teacher candidates to experience, reflect, think, and act as they are exposed to an array of diverse, high-quality picturebooks. This experience affords our early childhood teacher candidates with an authentic model to support a love of literacy in a conducive, academic environment where rich instructional materials are

accessible, learning experiences are intentional, and professional reflection is encouraged (Brant, Sharp, & Gardner, 2021; Hoffman, Teale, and Yokota, 2015; Lynch, 2016; Slade et al., 2019).

Current research provides evidence of the value in using picturebooks with young children (Chaparro-Moreno et al., 2017; McKenzie, 2021; Montag et al., 2015; Otkarina et al., 2020; van der Wilt et al., 2019). In addition, existing literature suggest that using picturebooks are beneficial to teacher candidates' preparation in various content areas (Daley & Blakeney-Williams, 2015; Durmaz, 2022). Therefore, pairing an instructional exercise that incorporates quality picturebooks into our early childhood teacher education program, was implemented. To date, responses to this exercise have been generally positive, yet there is still a need to officially evaluate the effectiveness of this exercise among our early childhood teacher candidates and its impact in early childhood settings to genuinely cook up a love of literacy.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Book-Tasting Presentation Log



Date Shared	Title of Shared Text	Author	Corresponding Skill / Strategy	Summary Statement

Appendix B

Book-Tasting Presentation Checklist



Criteria	Points Available	+ / -
Name title of the book.	1	
Name author(s) of the book.	1	
Name illustrator(s) of the book.	1	
Share book cover with the class.	1	
Provide a brief introduction (personal connection) to the book.	1	
Offer book summary (Who, What, When, Where, and Why/How).	5	

Identify <u>three</u> , literacy skills or strategies that could be taught or reinforced through the text.	3	
Share <u>two</u> , open-ended questions that you would pose to students at the end of the reading.	2	
Comments:		
Total	15	