

Elevating Learning with Collaborative Invitational Education

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Abstract

Invitational Education and literature circles elevated learning in this longitudinal qualitative study as undergraduate teacher candidates collaborated on digital projects. Multimodal instruction promoted innovative collaboration to lift learning and success to new levels in a university methods course. Through an intentionally inviting environment, teacher candidates collaborated in literature circles, prepared multimodal digital projects, and conducted personalized learning experiences with students from third to fifth grade in a field experience. A variety of evidence-based literacy strategies and activities, including the LIFT strategy, extended their opportunities to prepare multimodal digital projects, conduct peer mentoring, and metacognitively reflect upon their learning. Results confirmed the study's efficacy and alignment with the overarching goals, elements, and domains of Invitational Education theory and practice.

Keywords: Invitational Education, Invitational Theory and Practice, Personalized Learning, Digital Projects, Multimodal Instruction.

Introduction

Teachers touch lives forever, and the teachable moments when students suddenly grasp concepts are priceless. Teachers around the world love to see students experience new levels of learning. The hearts of teachers overflow with joy when students learn enthusiastically.

Teachers and parents around the world now express concern because the joys of this learning cycle were interrupted by the global pandemic. We face the prospect of multiple educational challenges, and experts predict that billions of dollars will be needed to cope with

learning loss around the world (Timmons et al., 2021). Researchers note the drop in NAEP scores from 2019 to 2022 across the nation. Reflective researchers say these students will earn 6% less during their careers, resulting in a collective income loss of \$600 billion (Lieberman, 2024).

Multimodal learning activities can restore the joys of enthusiastic learning and the competencies that promote success. During this research study undergraduate teacher candidates experienced Invitational Education in their classrooms and intentionally invited elementary students to experience compelling and innovative multimodal learning activities. As these teacher candidates became more aware of the significance of those learning experiences through reflective metacognition, they invited elementary students to reflect on their learning and take their *own* learning to the next level. This study focused on university literacy methods course in which teacher candidates used culturally responsive novels as catalysts for creating book trailers and digital projects in literature circles while they conducted personalized instruction with students in third to fifth grade. The course instructor set the stage for these learning adventures with multimodal learning experiences, collaboration, and mentoring opportunities on many levels. Multimodal projects empowered teacher candidates to capture ideas through cinematography and invited students to experience innovative learning activities.

In this university, administrators and faculty members have worked for years to provide programs and policies to invite students to enjoy higher levels of learning and innovative academic success. The programs and policies of this major southeastern university are intentionally designed to align with the overarching goals, elements, and domains of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Novak, 1996; Purkey, Novak, & Fretz, 2020; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013).

Review of the Literature

Invitational schools encourage students to experience innovation and develop leadership skills in student-centered educational environments. Reflective metacognition and multimodal projects give students the opportunities to make choices and experience higher levels of learning through engagement and active participation in the learning process. Invitational Education (IE) focuses on the positive aspects of learning and the affective side of the people, places, policies, programs, and processes in education (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Purkey, Novak, & Fretz, 2020; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). This study's approach aligns well with

multimodal projects that combine the power of a story, one of the most meaningful educational tools for generations, and technology, one of our main tools for collaborative communication.

Multimodal Projects

Multimodal literacy combines two or more modes of meaning. Due to advances in technology, multimodal texts have become part of our lives (*Mills & Unsworth, 2017*). A review of the literature demonstrates the remarkable success and the benefits of multimodal projects. Since language is fundamentally multimodal, we communicate through many modalities each day (Frohlich et al., 2019). Multimodal instruction equips students to capture the essence and the dynamic qualities of learning experiences across disciplines (Hill, 2014). The meaning-making process inherent in multimodal projects emerged from the sociocultural constructivism of Vygotsky (1978) and social semiotics theory (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010). The multiple literacies or modes of these projects add the spark of ingenuity to convey messages uniquely and effectively. Researchers use scaffolding (Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976) with multimodal opportunities to promote discovery learning and sequential conceptual development (Cappello, 2019; Magana et al., 2019).

The research literature provides many examples of the impact of multimodal projects in a wide range of contexts. At the university level, researchers (Brenner et al., 2004; Wang, 2009) have explored the use of multimodal projects for articulation of identity. Marsh (2021) described the ways high school students were more excited than usual as they explored multiple pathways for learning and used technology to express their identities and talents. Ntelioglou et al. (2014) noted the ways an urban multimodal inquiry project increased multilingual students' literacy investment, literacy engagement, and learning. Smith (2019) considered ways to leverage students' multimodal collaborative composing for their academic benefit in the classroom. Additionally, Hafner (2013) described the ways undergraduate students in a university English class in Hong Kong were able to access positions of expertise as they wrote for authentic purposes and used multimodal projects as digital ensembles to appeal to an audience. Invitational Education promotes this type of expertise in the classroom.

Literature Circles, Peer Mentoring, and Reflective Metacognition

Researchers have increasingly conveyed positive results from literature circles (Daniels, 2002; Jocius et al., 2018), peer mentoring (Andreanoff, 2016; Collier, P. J., 2015, Smith, 2013), and reflective metacognition. This research study synthesized all three approaches for the

collaborative benefit and lifelong enhancement of teacher candidates. When groups of four to six students in literature circles analyze insights and prepare multimodal projects collaboratively, they guide each other to new levels of learning (Marsh, 2021). Class discussions and group reflections elevate the quality of the peer mentoring process. Metacognition, which can promote mindful, insightful reflection and problem solving, is a skill that is often neglected (Fogarty & Pete, 2020). Dewey (1933) described reflection as an active meaning-making process necessary for learning. An emphasis on reflection enables students to use insights from learning as power tools to connect abstract concepts with concrete terms to optimize more stimulating and applicable learning opportunities (Wormeli, 2009). Winslow and Shaw (2017) noted that metacognitive writing tasks facilitate the transfer of learning across disciplines. Metacognitive activities invite insightful, reflective self-analysis that prepares students to overcome learning loss. Thus, reflective metacognition empowers students to gain wisdom and elevate learning as they learn from the past, develop conceptual insights, and look toward future opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

This research study synthesized Invitational Theory and Practice with constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). The course instructor invited teacher candidates to create multimodal digital projects. Then they, in turn, invited elementary students to share their creativity during the field experience.

Invitational Education

Purkey and Novak (2016, p. vii) described Invitational Education (IE) as a theory of practice “designed to create and enhance human environments that cordially summon people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. vii). IE “is an imaginative act of hope that explains how human potential can be realized. It identifies and changes the forces that defeat and destroy people” (p. vii). IE recognizes five Domains: People, places, policies, programs, and processes, that comprise “everyone and everything in an organization...(that) will either build or destroy intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and moral potential for stakeholders” (p. vii).

Invitational Theory and Practice

Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) “is the overarching theory of Invitational Education (IE)” (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 30). Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) “addresses the total culture/environment of an organization to provide a more welcoming, satisfying, and enriching experience for all involved” (p. 34). Invitational Theory and Practice aligns directly with the comments of teacher candidates during interviews and focus groups in this study. Throughout their multimodal projects and reflective metacognition, the course instructor used the principles of ITP. Teacher candidates in this study translated their learning through innovative multimodal projects as they constructed learning and collaborated with elementary students.

Constructivism

Throughout the learning process, teacher candidates explored innovations for multimodal learning to bring the best of the world into the classroom and enhance conceptual learning through innovative lesson planning based on constructivist principles. Then they shared these innovations with students in grades three through five. Ongoing discourse and collaboration were central features of the field experience, following the social constructivist model of Vygotsky (1978).

Methodology

This qualitative interview study was designed to determine the impact of participating in literature circles for collaborative digital projects in a university emphasizing Invitational Education. Interviews, focus groups, reflections emphasizing metacognition, class activities featuring the LIFT strategy, and digital projects were the primary means of data collection. Typological data analysis (Hatch, 2002) was used to codify the overarching themes throughout the semester. This study explored the ways undergraduate teacher candidates elevated learning with peer mentoring in literature circles and with elementary students in a field experience. Interviews and focus groups explored the overarching question: What was the impact of multimodal digital projects in literature circles, emphasizing Invitational Education?

Participants

Undergraduate teacher candidates who participated in the project shared their experiences and insights during the interviews and focus groups for this study. The course instructor provided

ongoing support and guidance throughout the project. Multimodal projects were completed as part of the university literacy course, which is part of a degree program to prepare university students to teach elementary students from grade three to five. As teacher candidates were taking this course, they completed field experiences and participated in various university courses to promote effective teaching in various disciplines for elementary students from third to fifth grade.

For clarity throughout our subsequent discussion, the degree-seeking preservice teachers will be referred to as teacher candidates or candidates. The teacher educator, or instructor, of the literacy methods course, applied the principles of Invitational Education throughout the course and emphasized the importance of providing a positive nurturing environment for elementary students in the field experience.

Procedures

As the course instructor set the stage for learning, candidates conducted literacy assessments with elementary students in a field experience and participated in evidence-based literacy strategies and activities, including the LIFT strategy, to discover the essence of quality lesson planning. Initial literacy assessments focused on elementary students' interests, decoding, fluency, reading comprehension, and writing. Candidates conducted these assessments with an emphasis on funds of knowledge, focusing on elementary students' personal, cultural, and community assets. The *Decoding Assessment* began with words to read and continued with the invitation to divide words into syllables. (See Table 1.) This assessment aligns with many assessments for decoding, including the *CORE Phonics Assessment* (CORE, 2008). The *Reading Comprehension Assessment* (See Table 2.) began with a rubric for fiction retelling, featuring story elements, and continued with questions about the text. This assessment aligns with the *RWT Graphic Map Rubric* (2005) and many other rubrics for story maps and story retelling. Many research studies have confirmed the value of questioning strategies and story maps, emphasizing specific story elements (Beck et al., 1981; Reutzel, 1985; Staal, 2000; Van Blerket al., 2023). These assessments and research-based strategies prepared teacher candidates to develop a positive rapport, prepare engaging lessons matching needs and interests, invite the student to delve more fully into the learning process, and elevate learning to the next level (Beck et al., 2001).

Lesson planning was based on the results of these assessments. For instance, if a student struggled with retelling or the assessment questions, the teacher candidate might follow up with a

story map, (Staal, 2000) quality literature, and questioning strategies (Phalen, 2023) to enhance connections with literature. Maps are welcoming, and they invite exploration. Teacher candidates also used heart maps to explore students' interests more fully. To prepare a heart map, a student drew a heart and filled that heart with interests, favorites, and personal treasures. This illustrated the priorities closest to their hearts.

Class sessions alternated between experiences designed to bring the best of the world into the university classroom, insights for maximum learning and effective teaching during the field experience, and literature circles with four to six teacher candidates. The instructor modeled multimodal procedures for effective lesson planning, shared examples of multimodal digital projects, and guided students as they designed their own multimodal digital projects, featuring culturally responsive literature. As they collaborated on multimodal projects, candidates created storyboards for digital projects, prepared lesson plans, and captured the results of their collaboration with reflective metacognition.

In class sessions, candidates used insights from culturally responsive literature to analyze the components of effective stories in literature circles. They synthesized the ideas with graphic organizers, such as story maps and storyboards, to create digital projects, such as book trailers, to introduce strategic lesson plans. They used the insights from this collaboration to personalize lesson plans for students in grades three to five.

The teacher educator designed the multimodal digital project so the candidates could make their own choices, enjoy the process, and experience success. She discussed rubrics for major expectations and left aspects of the project open-ended. This gave the teacher candidates a sense of freedom and autonomy as they created their own digital projects and lesson plans. Then they relaxed and enjoyed the process rather than feeling like they had to just complete a checklist of requirements. Although they were well prepared for the experience, the innovative technology for the digital projects was new to them, and they gained new confidence as they experienced success with the process.

Candidates designed their multimodal projects in the classroom and online sessions. Throughout this process, they used the LIFT strategy and various team building activities to take each other to the next level of learning. (See Table 3.) As they collaborated, they extended their vision of what was possible and experimented as makers of technology rather than just consumers

of technology. As candidates created multimodal digital projects, they shared tips with each other and considered procedures for their own future classrooms through reflective metacognition.

Data Collection

Interview questions and focus group discussions served as the basis for data collection. They were designed to encourage teacher candidates to freely express their perceptions and feelings about the experience of participating in literature circles, creating multimodal projects, and using reflective metacognition. Interviews and focus groups progressed from general “grand tour questions” (Spradley, 2016), such as a description of a typical day to more specific questions about their experiences. Open-ended questions gave candidates opportunities to share their feelings in their own words. Focus group questions were designed to corroborate statements from interviews to invite opportunities to elaborate on certain issues that were emphasized during interviews.

The semi-structured format provided the opportunity to follow leads from statements made by the participating candidates (Van Manen, 1990). These follow-up questions elicited rich descriptions and provided a more complete picture of the lived experiences of the candidates.

Data Analysis

Hatch’s typological model (2002) provided the framework for data analysis from multiple perspectives (Glesne, 2015; Patton, 2014). Initial categorization of the data into typologies was followed by repeated readings, line-by-line analysis, and color-coding of the data using *Microsoft Word*. This analysis was ongoing and utilized the nine steps for data analysis designed by Hatch (2002). According to Hatch, typological analysis should only be used if the categories for analysis are evident. At the beginning of data analysis, it became evident that the data aligned with the assumptions, five elements, and five domains of Invitational Education theory and practice (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

Regularities and common characteristics in the responses of teacher candidates quickly emerged in a review of the data pattern analysis. As these semantic relationships emerged, they revealed patterns that were suggested in the research literature. These semantic relationships served as links in the data set and provided elaborations on these ideas from the literature. During

this codifying process, charts listing relevant data helped identify the integrating concepts that ran through this data.

Color-coded *Post-it flags* were used to label the patterns within the typologies as they were recorded in relation to the specific codes for the participants. While recording integrating concepts that ran through all of the data, stars were used to highlight powerful quotes to facilitate the selection of specific data to support generalizations from these patterns. Throughout these steps the typological model designed by Hatch (2002) continued to provide the framework that illuminated and ensured efficacy during the data analysis process.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this qualitative study illustrate the ways that the teacher educator invited candidates to experience success, prepared the process, and guided the teacher candidates by providing scaffolding to elevate expertise. These candidates conducted their project in a university that emphasized the principles of Invitational Education. The teacher educator and colleagues nurtured and cared for them, and this was reflected in their multimodal projects and reflective metacognition.

Invitational Education (IE) emphasizes the ways “everyone has the ability and responsibility to function in a personally and professionally inviting manner” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 23). The intentionally inviting level of functioning created a dependable stance that helped teacher candidates feel secure; thereby increasing the likelihood that they would consistently accept and act upon the cordial invitation to pursue an inviting educational experience (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

For decades, Drs. Purkey, Novak, and Siegel consistently promoted Invitational Theory and Practice as a way of life (Purkey & Siegel, 2003, 2013). As a result, they made a difference in so many lives. They emphasized the IE Domains, or powerful “5 Ps,” to promote a warm and inviting atmosphere (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010). In Invitational Education theory, the starfish metaphorically illustrates these domains. The starfish metaphor illustrates how the domains of IE theory: People, places, policies, programs, and processes (The 5 Ps), work together to overcome systemic challenges and make a difference in any organization and, by extension, potentially the world. This starfish metaphor clarifies the meaning and impact of the

concepts of Invitational Education. The starfish metaphor, depicting components of Invitational Education, models the potential for reflective metacognition to guide higher-order thinking.

The IE starfish metaphor for overcoming challenges to promote a positive environment aligns well with “The Starfish Story,” originally written by Loren Eiseley (1978). The original story and its many versions have touched the hearts of people all over the world. To paraphrase: A man sees a little boy throwing starfish back into the water. Then he asks the boy what he is doing. The boy tells the man he is saving starfish, so they will not dry out in the sun. Then the man laughs and tells him there is no way he can save so many starfish. After listening, the boy tosses another back into the sea and politely says, “It made a difference to that one.” This story is often shared to demonstrate the difference one caring person can make. The teacher candidates in this study followed the principles, which are metaphorically illustrated by the starfish story, by intentionally designing personalized lesson plans for elementary students during field experiences.

Invitational Education theory and practice emphasizes the importance of each person. Within any group, whenever everyone values each individual, the power and impact of one person is multiplied in amazing ways. (Purkey & Siegel, 2013). As Margaret Mead stated, “a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world” (Lutkehaus, 2008, p. 261).

The starfish metaphor exemplifies how Invitational Education theory and practice encourages development of a healthy climate that optimizes human potential. IE-driven leaders provide a safe, secure environment whereby people can flourish. Thereafter, intentional invitations provide the opportunities for sustaining success. In each scenario, the leader provides a meaningful environment where the learning process is appealing, and students have opportunities to choose paths to optimal learning. As Fretz (2015) noted, “Invitational Education provides educators with a systematic way of communicating positive messages that develop potential as well as identifying and changing those forces that defeat and destroy potential” (p. 28). “This understanding of the depth and breadth of messages is used to develop environments and ways of life that are anchored in attitudes of respect, care, and civility and that encourage the realization of democratic goals” (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 4). When individuals are deeply appreciated, inclusiveness and collaboration are promoted, the entire system is influenced, and learning is maximized.

As teacher candidates in literacy classes demonstrated caring attitudes that aligned with Invitational Education, they exhibited positive approaches for elevating learning. (1) When they noted the value of these experiences, they shared insights gleaned from reflective metacognition

in literature circles and developed a common language for sharing. (2) Then candidates were encouraged to invite elementary students to reflect upon what they learned from the tutorial sessions during the field experience. (3) Later, they shared the results with fellow candidates during literature circles. This ongoing cycle of analysis and sharing reinforced the value of the entire experience through an intentional professional learning community.

The legacy of Drs. Purkey, Siegel, and Novak, as expressed through IE theory, continues to benefit all educators and students. The teacher candidates in this study benefited from tenets of IE theory as emphasized, promoted, and influenced by Dr. Betty Seigel, who promoted and modeled Invitational Education theory throughout her presidency of the university. Subsequently, IE-theory and practices continue to influence the university's 5Ps, consistently touching the lives of students, faculty, and stakeholders in meaningful ways. Her ongoing legacy remains the mindset that emphasizes invitations to optimize human potential. Driving the analysis and endeavor to improve upon each of the 5Ps of IE: People, places, policies, programs, and processes, is a mindset that exhibits intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT) with the potential to "systemically transform the whole school" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). The results of this research study were validated through consistent exhibition of practices aligned with the domains and elements of Invitational Education theory and practice. The primary investigator, the teacher educator, endeavored to ensure the participating teacher candidates' comfort, appropriate challenges, and engagement with multimodal projects as they consistently and intentionally invited optimal human potential. Thereafter, the teacher candidates used reflective metacognition to analyze and elevate the impact of their instruction.

Results of the Study

This section features the ways collaborative multimodal projects, reflective metacognition practices, and adherence to the Invitational Education theory and practice optimized teacher candidates' experiences and opportunities for learning at a major southeastern university (Purkey, & Novak. 2016; Shaw & Siegel, 2010; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013). These results reflect patterns identified across the interviews and focus group sessions. The interviews and focus groups of this study consistently demonstrated the ways teacher candidates designed inviting and engaging multimodal projects that reflected their experiences in a welcoming, supportive

environment (Stodden et al., 2001). Invitational Theory and Practice “focuses on increasing the authentically personal and professional verbal and non-verbal messages that seek to bring forth the best of human potential through trust, respect, optimism, care, and intentionality” (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 34). Throughout the interviews of this study there were many links between these elements of Invitational Education and the comments made by students as they discussed their collaborative multimodal projects and participation in reflective metacognition.

Implementation of Invitational Education Theory and Practice

Invitational Education theory and practice authentically creates and sustains welcoming learning environments. IE theory advances five basic tenets: intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust [I-CORT] to optimize personally and professionally inviting behaviors (Purkey & Novak, 2016; Anderson, 2019). The goal is to promote “increased learning outcomes and personal growth” (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013, p. 33).

The teacher educator who investigated this project emphasized the alignment with Invitational Education theory and practice while consistently encouraging teacher candidates as they completed multimodal digital projects. Teacher candidates shared innovations to enhance success as they invited learning opportunities within and beyond the classroom through peer mentoring, the LIFT strategy, and various team building activities, which aligned with I-CORT. The results of this study demonstrated the impact of this alignment in literature circles that combined the power of a story with technology. The elements of Invitational Education intensify the power and significance of each domain (Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013).

The next sections highlight the results of the study and discuss the impact of alignment between the literacy strategies and I-CORT through implementation of Invitational Education theory and practice. The following quotes from teacher candidates participating in the study demonstrate the powerful potential of aligning one’s I-CORT mindset with literacy strategies.

Intentionality

“Intentionality is the keyword of Invitational Theory” (Haigh, 2011, p. 300). Invitational environments are both created and sustained through intentionality. As a process for defining school climate, Invitational Education encourages a Democratic Ethos to feature “collaborative and cooperative procedures and continuous networking stakeholders” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). Intentionality in the design of these processes emphasizes the value and boundless potential of individuals (Novak, Rocca, & DiBiase, 2006). A teacher candidate stated:

I really enjoyed the project and the literature circles. Reading a book with a group, then sharing our thoughts about what we read, and later reflecting was more enjoyable than reading without a group. My insights developed as the book taught us about the cultural norms in Afghanistan. The digital project was a creative way to encourage others to read the book through a more engaging method than word of mouth or written review.

Systemic intentionally encourages the ongoing development of cooperative procedures with reciprocal benefits. The teacher educator collaborated with intentionality to provide relevant and meaningful experiences within the teacher candidates' comfort zone, thereby promoting success without undue stress (Vygotsky, 1978; McKnight et al., 2015). She used multimodal projects, featuring book talks and digital stories in literature circles, in the context of strategic innovative lesson planning to create literacy adventures for her students. Teacher candidates reflected metacognitively, discussed heartfelt experiences, and demonstrated authenticity as they shared their insights and lesson plans with each other and with elementary students.

Care

Invitational Education theory and practice focuses on people and the importance of each individual for a successful educational experience (Purkey & Novak, 2016). Teacher candidates in this study chose culturally responsive novels as the inspiration for their book talks and digital stories at the beginning of the project. The university education program is designed to help teacher candidates maximize their cultural awareness, connect with various cultures, and develop empathy in meaningful ways. At the end of the project, teacher candidates said they were more aware of the importance of cultural connections and books that promote cultural insights. They used reflective metacognition as they demonstrated care and empathy for others. A teacher candidate commented:

I enjoyed creating a bond with a group of my peers over the semester. I believe that by creating a productive and caring literacy group, we were all able to dig more deeply into the reading as we discussed our feelings and ideas.

Class sessions emphasized the importance of each individual, and teacher candidates prepared lessons with differentiated instruction to personalize the learning experience. A teacher candidate described what she has learned about using care and wisdom to personalize instruction through multimodal projects in literature circles and her field experience:

When creating a digital project to promote cultural awareness and literacy development in our literature circle, we asked ourselves what the book meant to us and what we

learned. In doing that, we were able to highlight the key facts and details that emphasized the culture. This allowed us to shed light on the cultural aspects of our lesson, which is important when working with children.

Optimism

Throughout this multimodal project optimism and enthusiasm were highly evident. The teacher educator and candidates consistently conveyed optimistic perspectives. When candidates discussed plans and chose roles for the multimodal project in literature circles, they focused on the assets and promoted the development of those assets with creativity and attention to details.

“It is important for educators to ensure that all of the school’s programs work for the benefit of everyone and that they encourage active engagement with significant content” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 21). Optimism makes a school inviting and encourages everyone involved. A candidate noted:

My experience in creating this digital project was very positive. I really liked how each person in our literature circle had individual contributions that we could each learn from and put together to create the final project. Our novel *Journey to Topaz* helped shed light on a true cultural event that allowed us to create a lesson surrounding its most significant aspects.

The teacher educator consistently provided scaffolding to promote confidence and optimism when the candidates began the multimodal projects. After analyzing quality literature, creating storyboards with ideas for book trailers, and discussing possibilities collaboratively in literature circles, teacher candidates gained more confidence in teaching. A teacher candidate described her collaborative experiences, and stated, “I really enjoyed reading *Esperanza Rising* with my peers. They were able to point out things that I didn’t even catch!”

Teacher candidates used reflective metacognition to describe the ways they demonstrated innovation, insight, and creativity. These comments reflected the views of many candidates:

- “This is a great way to promote cultural awareness and connect to global education.”
- “My highlight of this experience was collaborating. I found the team bonding the most enjoyable and rewarding.”

Respect

Invitational Education emphasizes the importance of documenting policies and emphasizing consistency for the benefit of everyone in the program. Purkey and Novak (2016)

described policies as “critical semantic webs that influence the deep-seated structure of any school” (p. 21). Teacher candidates in the literacy classes were collaborating in a university in which those “critical semantic webs” reflected the structure of a respectful environment in which their ideas were honored and appreciated. University policies and procedures were intentionally designed to promote respect, and meaningful collaboration was valued. Class activities and discussions highlighted the value and the importance of building a classroom community with a culture of care and deep respect for every individual. Teacher candidates were encouraged to share their voices and carefully consider the classroom environment they would establish in their own classrooms. A candidate described her collaborative literature circle experiences:

We all listened to one another, gave support when needed, and used our strengths to our advantage. When meeting in our literature circle groups, I was surprised as to how smoothly our discussions went and how our ideas connected. Even though we each had different literature roles, we were able to connect our ideas to help us form the final digital project.

Trust

Invitational Education highlights the importance of providing a pleasant, comfortable, and aesthetic learning environment which nurtures growth and promotes trust (Purkey & Novak, 2016). When leaders establish trustworthy patterns of interaction, schools augment the benefits of this pleasant environment. Reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, competence, and knowledge are keys for establishing this type of environment (Arceneaux, 1994; Purkey & Novak, 2016). From the beginning of the semester, the teacher educator established trust and a pleasant rapport with candidates. The university itself is a safe, pleasant, and caring environment in which teacher candidates feel comfortable. The education program is an extension of that atmosphere of trust, extending the basic needs for a safe and caring environment to the next level (Maslow, 1943).

The literacy courses were intentionally planned to build trust and help teacher candidates feel that they were in a comfort zone. Class sessions were designed to provide encouragement, and teacher candidates were able to thrive in a nurturing environment. Teacher candidates reflected on their joy and feelings of satisfaction, which resulted from seeing plans and dreams become reality. A teacher candidate commented, “The connections I made this semester have been so rewarding, and it makes me excited for the future.” Another teacher candidate stated:

My experience was great. I loved working with my peers. Not only did it speed up the process, but we worked great as a team. Everyone is supportive of each other, and we were able to bounce ideas off each other.

Many teacher candidates indicated that seeing their digital stories become reality was a highlight of the experience. They also enjoyed seeing elementary students' eyes light up when they shared digital stories with them during their lessons. Teacher candidates built trusting relationships in their literature circles as they created multimodal projects with book talks and digital stories. They consistently commented on the encouragement they experienced through these close relationships. Teacher candidates emphasized the ways they were able to depend on each other as they divided up sections of assignments and discussed their multimodal projects. Their collaboration took their learning to the next level, particularly as they saw how much could be accomplished collaboratively.

Overarching Comments

Teacher candidates consistently said they would use literature circles and multimodal projects with their own classes. They were quite pleased with their accomplishments. Candidates noted that this project made them want to be more creative in their own classrooms. As they summarized the experience, a candidate shared the ways she would emphasize culturally responsive literature in her future classroom:

This experience helped me think about how important it is to give my future students the opportunity to engage in culturally relevant lessons, so they can gain awareness on these topics. It made me realize that I still have so much more to learn regarding historical and cultural topics that will be extremely beneficial for me to introduce in my future classroom.

When candidates described the benefits of their collaborative experiences and multimodal projects, they mentioned the ways they would use these projects to inspire their own students and spark their imaginations in creative ways. Typically, their most satisfying experience was seeing the project come together and presenting it to the class. A teacher candidate commented:

I found this experience most rewarding when presenting our final digital project to the class because I could see how all of our collaboration helped us create a culturally relevant lesson that can even be used with my future students. Presenting and having a successful final product was really a highlight of this experience because it showed me that I was capable of putting forth my best work and working with my peers to create an engaging project. I also found the book trailer most enjoyable because it was really fun to think of different music, effects, and visuals that would make the story come to life.

Candidates were enthusiastic about the knowledge they gained from their class sessions and multimodal projects. These projects made teacher candidates more aware of the kaleidoscope of possibilities for creating adventures and inviting their own students to explore literacy with innovations that promote exuberance for learning. A candidate reflected:

I would describe the impact of this experience as very encouraging and helpful because I have left knowing much more than I did before engaging in this process. In most classes, a lot of our projects and classwork are individual assignments, but this experience allowed me to work with my peers in a very effective way which has definitely left a positive impact.

Many teacher candidates noted that they would recommend this experience to others. These comments were typical of the insights of many teacher candidates:

I would recommend this experience to others because it is a great way to make sure your opinion is heard as well as to gain insight into everyone else's opinions. This allows for beneficial discussion and consideration of each other's thoughts. Creating a digital project is also really engaging because it allows you to open up your creativity to make unique products of your own. I feel that I was able to learn a lot more about my own topic as well as my classmates' topics because we all worked together in planning our final projects and peer reviewing each other's work. I think that this has been a very beneficial learning experience!

Many teacher candidates said they would use literature circles in their future classrooms. These comments were typical of the comments made by many candidates:

I definitely plan to use literature circles in my future classroom because I have learned how important it is for students to collaborate with each other. Literature circles give students the opportunity to choose their own individual roles and share their insights with peers. It is also really helpful as the teacher to take a step back and act as the facilitator during literature circles so that students can prompt their own discussions and use their higher order thinking skills during this process.

When candidates concluded their literacy adventures, they discussed the joys of many levels of collaboration. A teacher candidate stated:

I would describe the impact of this experience as powerful, as it taught me so much about collaborating. It showed me the importance of making reading fun and thought-provoking for students to fully enjoy reading.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Teacher candidates were quite pleased with their multimodal digital projects, and they confidently lifted learning to higher levels. As a result, they will walk into their future classrooms knowing how to conduct effective literacy assessments and lessons to take their students to the next level of learning, empowering them to rise from any learning loss to new levels of insight and confidence.

Candidates are equipped to bring the best of the world into the classroom with culturally responsive novels in literature circles. These literature circles will give them opportunities to connect with their students' funds of knowledge, featuring personal, cultural, and community assets. As a result of their experiences, they are beginning to see themselves as skilled teachers and cinematographers who bring stories to life with multimodal digital projects. They know the value and importance of creating a culture of care and optimism. Candidates have risen to new levels of learning because of their opportunities to intentionally design and create projects to lift students' learning to new levels. This gives them encouragement to continue to explore strategies for personalized learning and encourage students in their future classrooms with creative projects each year.

Teacher candidates are prepared to collaborate and build new bonds of friendship, mirroring their collaboration based on respect and trust in literature circles. The bonds of professional friendship they have established through peer mentoring prepare them to gain new insights through metacognitive reflection. This will continue to enhance their connections with colleagues. Then they will be ready to lift each individual student from learning loss just as a young boy lifted starfish and threw them back to the safety of the ocean. Teacher candidates have already achieved more than they thought possible. Thus, the future looks bright and invites them to use multimodal digital projects to elevate learning for themselves and their associates. Digital stories will empower them to make a difference in the lives of students and promote innovative exploration. Then the power of stories will make the world a better place, and their success will highlight the glow of their lasting impact.

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Table 1

Decoding Assessment

Ask the student to read each word below (on the student copy). Then score the accuracy.

Category	Words to Read					Score
Blends and Digraphs	fast	thin	when	dodge	match	/5
R-Controlled Vowels, Vowel Teams, and Silent Letters	surf	leap	hawk	kneel	giant	/5
Multisyllable Words	admire	radishes	inhaled	bordered	railways	/5

Ask the student to read each word (on the student copy). Then ask the student to repeat the word and say (or clap) the word in syllables while you record responses on the chart. Students should achieve mastery of at least 4/5 read correctly in each category.

Category	Words for Syllabication					Score
Compound Words	hotdog	anytime	sunset	postcard	jumpstart	/5
Closed Syllables	basket	problem	napkin	Sunday	picnic	/5
Open Syllables	paper	begin	tiger	robot	music	/5
CVe Syllables	complete	debate	locate	became	remake	/5
R-controlled Syllables	solar	larger	further	bordered	barber	/5
Consonant le Syllables	candle	cradle	circle	nibble	babble	/5
Vowel Team Syllables	contain	rejoin	thousand	pointed	detour	/5
Total						/50

Based on ideas from [CORE](#), *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures*, 2nd ed., 2008, Arena Press.

[Student Copy of the Decoding Assessment](#)

(This is an enlarged word list without point values.)

Table 2

Reading Comprehension Assessment

After your student reads a passage, complete the rubric as your student retells the story.

Criteria	Not Evident 1 point	Needs Improvement 2 points	Meets Expectations 3 points	Proficiency 4 points	Criterion Score
Beginning Setting and Characters	Does not describe the beginning.	Describes the beginning with a few details.	Describes the beginning with some details.	Shares a detailed description.	___/4
Middle Problem and Events	Does not describe the middle	Describes the middle with few details.	Describes the middle with some details.	Shares a thorough description.	___/4
End Resolution or Conclusion	Does not describe the end.	Describes the end with few details.	Describes the end with some details.	Shares a specific description.	___/4
Details Important Details	Does not share important details.	Describes a few important details.	Describes some details of importance.	Discusses important details.	___/4
Total	Comments about Fiction Retelling:				___/16
Scoring Guide: 16 points – Proficiency, 12 – Meeting Expectations, 10 or less – Needs Improvement					
Prompting: Did you prompt a little or frequently for each question?					
Comprehension Questions					
What did you find most interesting about this story?					___/3
Does this story remind you of any other stories or books you have read?					___/3
Does this story remind you of any experiences in your own life?					___/3
What did you learn from this story?					___/3
What was the main idea of this story?					___/6
Total	A score of 14 or more indicates that the student is making connections with the passage.				___/18

Based on ideas from RWT (2005). [Graphic Map Rubric](#). NCTE/IRA.

Table 3

LIFT Learning

Complete each section of this chart to share elevating insights and feedback with a friend.

Like – Let your friend(s) know what you like. (What did you enjoy or find most meaningful?)
Inquire - Inquire and express interest regarding a certain part. (Do you want to learn more about a certain aspect, or would you like some clarification?)
Find - Find something to take to the next level. (Do you have beneficial suggestions?)
Tell - Tell an idea or insight gleaned. (What did you learn, or what insights would you like to share?)

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