

"A Virtual Community Literacy Partnership: A Place-Based Reading and Writing Initiative between College of Education Students and Urban Middle School Students"

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Cover Page Footnote

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"A Virtual Community Literacy Partnership:
A Place-Based Reading and Writing Initiative between College of Education Students
and Urban Middle School Students"

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How can I reflect on my practice as a literacy teacher? “I want to be the type of teacher who inspires great writing from my students, and makes them yearn for more knowledge.”

As a reading professor, I am inspired by the words Justin wrote in the pre-project survey at the beginning of the semester. In the midst of a pandemic, how could I create a learning experience to facilitate a literacy collaboration with local middle school students? I planned the community literacy partnership in the context of a College of Education grant written the previous year. This format anticipated a face-to-face environment and opportunities for field trips between educational spaces as a forum for writing and visual literacy conferences. In light of current circumstances, it was time to change my paradigm and adapt to the circumstances. However, my commitment to the initiative remained strong. I hoped the impact—for both university and middle school students—would persist. This experience led me to consider the following questions—“In what innovative ways can educators partner with local students and foster collaboration?” and “What lessons from online learning can inform future in-person teaching and learning?”

College of Education pre-service educators enrolled in a Fall 2020 Language and Literacy Development course completed a pre-study survey and participated in a semi-structured interview to describe their current identity as a literacy educator at the beginning of the semester. Due to the pandemic, the course (usually scheduled to meet face-to-face twice a week) was re-structured as hybrid. A group of students met partially face-to-face and partially online on a weekly basis. Future educators read select short stories contained in *Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks* by (Reynolds, 2019) throughout the course of the semester, writing journals reflections about chapters. Simultaneously, middle school students virtually read short stories contained in *Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks* in weekly facilitated discussion circles with an Associate Professor of Reading and coordinator of a literacy leadership initiative at the school. They completed reflective journal entries and participated in group discussions; a focus on characters’ funds of knowledge guided the work.

Both middle school students and pre-service educators drafted personal place-based writing short stories, inspired by the mentor text, as the project continued. Online Zoom sessions provided both sets of students with the opportunity to virtually conference on their writing pieces. The reading professor shared middle school student writing with university students during our in-person courses and noted student feedback. This feedback was subsequently shared with middle school students. In addition, the reading professor discussed university student writing excerpts with middle school students during virtual sessions, recording elements of the conversation to share with college students thereafter. In this manner, a virtual approach guided authentic conversations through a writing conference format.

In *Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks*, Jason Reynolds discusses situations occurring on the walk home from school. Characters voice the detours we face on the walk home and in life. Both sets of students viewed videos and information about Jason

Reynolds, appointed as the Library of Congress' National Ambassador for Young People's Literature (2020-2021). Students reviewed ideas presented in the videos and articles below regarding his platform as literacy ambassador. This included a story from NPR (<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/14/796160531/next-national-ambassador-for-young-peoples-literature-is-named>), a "CBS This Morning" story (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JNTbSCnnw>), and his inaugural speech at the Library of Congress (<https://guides.loc.gov/jason-reynolds>).



In addition, students viewed Mr. Reynold's "Write, Right, Rite" creative writing videos. They participated in several of these activities as a class warm-up—<https://guides.loc.gov/jason-reynolds/grab-the-mic/wrr>. As described on the website, "Throughout the series, Reynolds shares his passion for storytelling while discussing topics like creativity, connection, and imagination. At the end of each video, Reynolds shares a prompt encouraging young people to work toward a specific idea." Sample activities include the following: imagine framing an item with special meaning; create an invention and write about the invention in a story made entirely of dialogue; and describe the best and worst parts of an imaginary road trip with a person they admire.

"I am From" Poems & Pre-Project Self-Study

University students responded to the following five prompts at the beginning of the semester. They also shared "I am From" poems with colleagues. These activities provided a means to reflect upon one's identity through a literacy-based lens. Justin shared the following "I am From" poem in a Discussion Board-

"I am from aloe plants, from sweet cocoa butter and olive oil.

I am from the edge of suburbia that smells like lavender and jasmine.

I am from the earth and stone, the towering oak whose moss-covered branches shield me from the sun and wind- something that I am thankful for.

I am from cookouts, hard work, and from Jamie and Kim.

I am from Netflix and fishing trips, and from dog parks and long walks.

I am from “you can do anything you can dream of,” and “treat others with respect” while ‘Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay.’

I am from exploring nature and watching blue birds on the fence line in spring.

I am from the land of 10,000 lakes, and Norge bloodlines where we eat lutefisk and lefse.

From my cousin riding a horse stung by a bee and caught by a branch as it ran, and pictures of my grandfather and me down by the creek in my family photo album.”

Prompt	Response
How do I view myself as a reader?	As a reader, I seek knowledge to gain a better understanding of the world. By reading, we can glean information to better define our views.
How do I view myself as a writer?	As a writer, I use writing as a format to convey my world views. I am a future history teacher, so putting my thoughts down on paper helps me to elaborate more fully on my views.
How will I reflect on my practice as a literacy teacher?	Reading and writing play a large part in being a history teacher. I want to be the type who inspires great writing from my students, and makes them yearn for more knowledge.
What literacy strategies or activities can I use to get to know my students and their background?	I am a firm believer in personal interaction and the benefits it has on education. I like to use a monitoring and clarifying style of teaching to gauge student understanding. This also helps me understand if my pace in class is appropriate, and whether or not I need to spend more time on a subject. This helps me understand if students are solidifying the subject in their brain through the myelination process.
What is my vision of literacy instruction for my classroom?	I had a teacher in high school that truly inspired me to want to read. Before his class, English and reading seemed very boring to me. He included engaging reflections after we read passages in books. This gained our buy-in; it made us feel like our input and thoughts were important. Afterwards, I was inspired to read more challenging books on my own. This is the type of classroom environment

	I want to foster. These are the types of interactions I yearn for with my students.
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Journal Writing

Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks is composed of interconnected stories. Each story centers on different students at Latimer Middle School, set in one of the blocks surrounding the school. Throughout these ten stories, Jason Reynolds offers glimpses into the struggles, strengths, and secrets of middle school students in their daily lives. The stories remind us to look at the world and the people around us more closely, noticing threads connecting us to one another and our communities. University students submitted journal reflections from several of the chapters they chose to read.

In response to the “Marston Street” chapter prompt: “Jasmine says if she has to be something else, she would choose to be a water bear. *Water bear* is the common name for an organism called a *tardigrade*. Research these organisms online. What makes them unique? Why do you think Jasmine would want to be one? Would you want to be a water bear too? Explain your answer.” Justin wrote the following:

“Water bears or tardigrades are unique little worm-like organisms. They are not very pretty and show a level of resilience which is unmatched in the animal world. They can be exposed to extreme hot and cold temperatures that would kill other living beings. They could be the toughest organism on planet Earth in that respect. Jasmine has been through a rough year. Her parents split up and she had a bout with sickle cell anemia. Both trials tested her resilience greatly. However, like a water bear, she survived, becoming stronger than she was before.

The ability to overcome any challenge made the water bear an appealing symbol which reflected upon the challenges she had just faced. We all face challenges in some form or another. Some are greater than others, but that does not lessen the impact they have upon us. Jasmine, the water bear, has shown us what it takes to be resilient despite not fully understanding the life events we are going through. Aspiring to be like a water bear is something we should all strive for. The challenges we face make us who we are.

The symbolism of the main character in this story and her resemblance to a tiny, insignificant creature who cannot be broken shows that despite her forgettable nature, she is stronger than anyone would think by looking at her. This concept gives one pause to think about how many people like Jasmine who have passed us by and gone unnoticed. Maybe if we had stopped to talk to some of these people, perhaps our lives would be enriched by strength and beauty we didn’t know existed.”

In response to “The Low Cuts/Placer Street” prompt, “Why do you think the Low Cuts only steal loose change? Explain how they use the money they collect in chapter two. What do their actions reveal about their values? Did your perception of them change once you knew how they were using the money? Reynolds describes the Low

Cuts as a “braid of brilliance and bravado.” What does this description suggest about the group?” Justin wrote the following:

“The Low Cuts were stealing loose change because it is something nobody would miss. Yes, it was technically stealing. However, what they were stealing nobody really cared about. They used the money to buy candy, which they later sold for a small profit. Though their method is slightly flawed, their intentions are pretty noble. Stealing is obviously wrong, but they were using the money to help Bit’s mother, who just had chemotherapy. His intention was to help his mother, which was pretty important in the grand scheme of things.

The familial bond these kids shared with their parents was obviously strengthened by the hardships they had faced together. The burden the children shared with each other also brought them close together and strengthened their resolve. When Reynolds describes the Low Cuts as a “braid of brilliance and bravado,” he suggests these are some very smart children emboldened by their strife. This was probably intimidating to their teachers because these kids would survive their situation no matter what. One might not be able to compel compliance. For a teacher, this might be pretty intimidating and concerning. It is not stated if the teachers are aware of the circumstances surrounding the children’s hardships, but I would imagine if they did, they would also be sympathetic to this fact.”

Justin also shared his overall impressions of the book at the conclusion of the journal, as follows:

“Although Jason Reynolds does not use proper syntax at some points throughout this book, he has an obvious gift for describing ‘in the moment’ feelings of the characters. The language he uses is almost poetic. This book is obviously geared toward young adults and brings to light some of the raw and real situations young adults may face. The synonyms and descriptions of the character’s thoughts and verbiage are brilliant in many respects. Though the stories in the book typically take place in urban settings, the way he describes the situations would make this book relatable to those who may not be in the same exact environment.”

Short Story Creation- University Students

University students participated in an online Discussion Board. This provided a forum to share personal writing topics and thoughts regarding the writing process.

“Please post an update on your writing progress. You might tell us about the topic of your story, an insight you discovered while writing your short story, an item that surprised you about your writing process, or how you are using what you read in *Look Both Ways* to inspire your own writing. Please respond to at least 1 colleague's post, referencing specific information shared.”

Justin shared the following update:

“For my short story, I wanted to write about something I could really describe vividly to make it interesting. I wanted to keep it simple enough for the students to clearly understand, yet provide enough detail to bring them there. I grew up in the city with my mom, and there was plenty I could write about there, but as a kid, I really just wanted to be on my grandparents' farm. I loved it there, and I could not wait to get back to it when I could. The city has many obvious sites smells and sounds, but the purity and color were nothing in comparison to the countryside. In my story, I describe something that I would be doing pretty regularly on my own. They had land as far as you could see, so I would have endless exploration options. I described something I can picture myself doing pretty regularly and ending back at my grandparents' house, safe and sound. I had probably explored the route that I described hundreds of times. Hopefully, I hit the mark with the story. Writing creatively is not something I consider to be my strong suit.”

University students were provided with the following instructions to launch their short story creation.

1. Please take a moment to reflect on your walk home from school and/or important places in your neighborhood when you were a young person/ teenager.
2. This activity might help you generate an idea in regards to a writing topic- <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-9175/>
3. Please write a short story (perhaps inspired by one of the short stories that you read in the book) about an important place in your neighborhood when you were a young person/ teenager. This might be a local park, a barbershop, a beauty shop, the local library, a neighborhood store, a community center, or your grandmother's house. This should be a meaningful location to you. Please include detail and description- “paint a picture” in the reader’s head with your words.
4. I am going to share your short stories with the literacy leadership students at a local middle school, and have them share their stories with you, over virtual means later in the semester (as I work out details with the school counselor).

Upon submitting his work, Justin noted the following in the comments section of the submission dropbox. *“I wrote this in a choppy format on purpose. I wanted it to feel like a children's book and to express ideas in a way children can understand and relate to. I hope it paints the picture well enough.”*

Justin’s short story, entitled “I Can Feel the Breeze Up Here,” is as follows:

“I can feel the breeze up here when I am on top of the world. Nobody can hear what I say, nobody can hear what I think, and nobody can tell me what to do. As I look down into the valley, I can see the smoke trail coming from Grandma and Grandpa’s house. I wonder what they are doing right now. I’ll bet Grandma is cooking supper. I wonder what it will be?

The dogs followed me up here, but they left me hours ago. Some kind of watchdogs they are. Up here though, there is nobody to mess with me. The closest farm is nearly a

mile away. Up here, looking down into the valley where my father grew up. Now I am growing up, and I feel at home. Soon it will be fall and time to pick the corn and alfalfa. I like the smell of the alfalfa after it has just been cut. The smell is sweet and not something we smell at mom's house.

Mom lives in the city and I stay with her. When I am there though, I can't wait to get back here. Where I am free again. There is the breeze again. It cools the sweat on my skin. I think I will walk down to check on the deer stand. My dad says that I can use it someday when I am old enough. The leaves are crunching under my shoes as I walk. I won't see any deer if I keep making all this racket. They can hear everything, and if the wind blows toward them, they will smell me too. The plum patch is on the way. I will see if any are ripe yet. The last time I checked they were too sour. Sometimes it's hard to get to the good ones because they have all of the thorns. I guess that is why the deer leave them alone. The patch looks dark and thick. It's overgrown, so I'm going to leave it alone for now. Maybe next time I will wear long sleeves so I don't get cut up.

I can see the deer stand up in the distance. It looks like it is a hundred feet tall on top of the ridgeline. As I walk up to it, I wonder how many people have sat up there? How many people have looked down into the valley just like I am now? The tree sways in the breeze. I can hear the creaking sound of the boards. If that thing fell, you would get busted up for sure. Nobody would be here to hear you either, except for maybe the deer. The golden grass shoots are waist-high too, so you could be out here for a long time.

I picture myself sitting up there one day. Would I be afraid, or would I be brave? From up there, you can see the ends of the earth. Someday I will feel the breeze up there. I can smell the aroma of Grandma's food cooking now. I wonder what it is. She usually yells for me to come when it is time. I haven't heard anything yet.

As the breeze sways the grass from side to side, I get a blast of homecooked goodness to warm my senses. Grandma never messes around when it comes to dinner and you had better clean your plate. I could eat her food forever. Mom is never home when I get home from school so I usually fix myself some ramen. Ramen doesn't have anything on this though. The deer stand is still intact so I will start heading back toward the farmhouse. This time I'm going to sneak back though. If anyone was around, they wouldn't even know I was there. I would slide right past them like a ghost. I am going to sneak from one tree to the next.

The only sound you will hear is the sound of the breeze. One tree, two trees, faster and faster I move. I can hear a dog barking in the distance, somebody must be driving up to the farm. They won't see me. The breeze hides my sound and it hides my movements too. Now I'm running fast. I can feel my feet getting faster and faster. I am sprinting now, getting closer to the farm. I can smell the smoke from the chimney. I can taste it. I hear a loud cry in the distance. I can't make out the words, but surely it was my dinner call. I make a running jump over the barbed wire fence before I get into the yard. I have to be careful because one time it bit me. It makes a clanging sound as I launch over it into the

fresh cut grass. I can feel the soft blades of grass staining the bottoms of my shoes. It feels like I am weightless running through the short grass.

I made it back just in time. Everyone is sitting down for dinner. Grandma beckons "make sure you wash your hands!" I make a quick pit stop to wash up. Looks like it's my favorite pork chops and lima beans! I always know that Grandma is cooking something good. She always makes deserts too. Sometimes I wish mom would do that too. I am stuffed. Grandma always asks if I want seconds, thirds, fourths, or pretty much as I want. We never go hungry here. After dinner, I watch a little television before bed. As I sit up in my room, I think about how much I love it here. Although Grandma and Grandpa's place is not my home, this is where I feel home. In the city, I always have to watch out for things and be careful. Here I can be carefree. Here I am free."

Short Story Creation- Middle School Students and Virtual Writing Conferences

I led weekly virtual literacy leadership sessions with a group of 7th grade students. This process was facilitated with support from the middle school counselor. Due to technical difficulties in sending the Zoom link to students' school addresses through my university email system, the counselor kindly facilitated the logistics. Each week, we e-mailed the students with follow-up items. Students were asked to:

"Please continue reading the short stories. Please begin writing your own short story (perhaps inspired by one of the short stories that you read in the book) about an important place in your neighborhood. This might be a local park, a barbershop, a beauty shop, the local library, a neighborhood store, a community center, or your grandmother's house. This should be a meaningful location to you. You will share your story with my undergraduate college students, who are also reading and writing short stories inspired by the book!"

A sample student story is below. The items in red are recommended items for the middle school student to consider adding to their initial draft. I formulated feedback in conjunction with my university students to provide them with a writing conferencing experience through virtual means.

Please add title here!

One time, my sister and I and our friends got caught in the rain, while we were going back to our grandmother's house. **Where were you walking from? Were there trees on the street? Was it hot or cold outside? Was the pavement even, or uneven and crooked? What did you see when you were walking? Were there neighbors outside? People mowing their lawn? Please describe so I can feel like I was there too!**

While we were halfway there, the rain started to pour. **Tell me what the rain looked like, what it felt like, what the air smelled like when it started to rain. Were you wearing the correct shoes and clothes for this type of weather? Or did you get drenched?**

While we were close to my grandmother's house, it started to rain harder. **What did you do then? Why were you going to your grandmother's house? To visit her? What do you usually do there? Cook, play, talk? Please tell me more. What is her house like more specifically? Please describe for the reader.**

The revised version of the story, with implemented suggestions, is below:

"Caught in the Rain"

One time, my sister and I and our friends got caught in the rain, while we were going back to our grandmother's house. We were walking from the park. It was a cold day. The pavement was uneven and crooked. When I was walking, I saw the sky getting cloudy and the trees blowing. There were no people outside though.

While we were halfway there, the rain started to pour. The rain was heavy and hard, and the air smelled like grass as the rain started coming down. I was wearing tennis shoes and my clothes got really wet.

While we were close to my grandmother's house, it started to rain harder. We started running because we were so close. Our feet splashed and there was a pitter-patter sound. We were going to our grandmother's house because we were visiting her.

When I'm usually at my grandmother's house, I watch T.V with her. Her house was a brick house with blueish grey paint on the outside. Her house smells like oatmeal and it looks really old.

A second sample middle school student story is below. The items in red are recommended items for the middle school student to consider adding to their initial draft. These items were also formulated in conjunction with university students to provide them with an authentic writing conferencing experience through virtual means.

Park Fun- you can change the title as you would like!

Well, I don't have an important place in my neighborhood, but I do have an important place to me where I like to go with my family.

My important place is the park. Parks are peaceful, and you have fun and have outside experience with your family. **Please tell us which members of your family that you usually go with. What do you wear? Do you bring a blanket with you? Or anything else?**

Describe the park here to someone who has never been. Tell me what colors you see, what sounds you hear, what you smell in the air. Tell me what the trees look like. Are there benches, or do you sit in the grass? Do you see other people or animals- maybe people walking their dogs- when you go? Please describe for us!

We go and get junk food first just in case we want some candy or juice or something. **Nice! Tell me where you get juice or candy? Is it a neighborhood store? What kind do you usually buy? Describe for me so I can imagine I am there.**

We have a BLAST!! Every time we go to the park, we have a lot of fun! It never gets old! **Wonderful! Tell me why you have so much fun.**

Is there a specific memory that you have at the park with your family that you can write more about?

The revised version of the story, with implemented suggestions, is below:

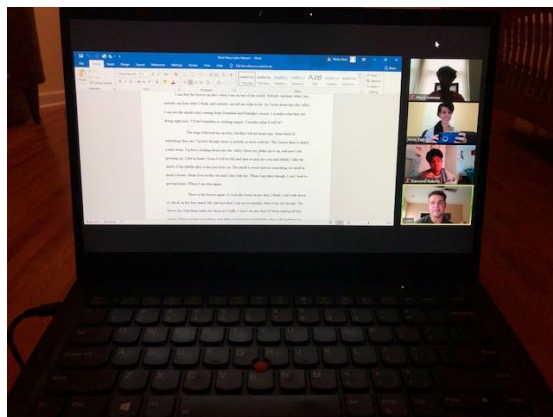
"Peaceful Park"

Well, I don't have an important place in my neighborhood, but I do have an important place where I like to go with my family. My important place is the park. Parks are peaceful, and you can have fun. You have outside experience with your family. Normally, I go with my mother and father. Sometimes, I just go with my dad considering my mom's work.

When I go there, I always wear jeans (sometimes shorts depending on how I feel) and a summer shirt. I bring a bouncy ball (but if deflated, I am sad). Also, I bring some snacks! My little brother (he's 6) has never been to me and my twin sister's childhood park. It was right next to the school we used to go to when we were kids.

The park we go to now is so colorful. It has blue-green, fake roads that soothe my shoes, and it has challenges like jump rope and climb to the top. It's always quiet as no one normally comes here. Trees at that park are HUGE! They're so big- I always think someone is behind them, but they are not. There are two benches. On one bench, we always just sit down after games and take breaks. On the other bench, we talk, eat, drink, and enjoy ourselves.

We never see people there, as the park we go to is old school (back in the 2000's). When we DO see people, we see them with kids. This makes me feel like a child, but hey- who cares? We go and get junk food first just in case we want some candy or juice or something. We get candy at the dollar store (not a neighborhood store). We also usually buy giant chocolate bars (recommended), Starburst (my favorite), and Hot Cheetos (too spicy)! We have a BLAST!!! Every time we go to the park, we have a lot of fun. It never gets old! I am always there with my family and get to spend as much quality time with them as much as I can! Try it sometime 😊



Research reflects how teachers benefit from “carefully planned and mentored opportunities during preparation for debriefing and reconciling prior beliefs with new knowledge and theories about pedagogy” (Risko & Reid, 2019, p. 425). Virtual writing conferences provide a forum for middle school and university students to exchange feedback regarding their short stories. It enables middle school students to meaningfully conference with university students on their writing through online means, and for university students to informally give feedback. The experience provided a space for university students to develop a rapport with local students in the community.

Post-Project Self-Study

After the project was complete, Georgia Southern College of Education pre-service educators completed a post-study survey and participated in a semi-structured interview to describe their current identity as a literacy teacher. Justin shared the following insights:

Prompt	Response
How do I view myself as a reader?	As a reader, I like to draw text-to-self and text-to-world connections. By using the skills learned in the article <i>Building background knowledge</i> (Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014), I am able to compare and contrast, and learn through similar experiences I have had. This helps me build a more thorough understanding of the text. As a teacher, I use this strategy to bring understanding to students. After we read, or after students read independently, I ask them to relate the text to their own world. As they discuss the topic, they build their own understanding of the subject. I feel a great sense of satisfaction when the student has the “ah ha” moment. They

	<p>can take control of the conversation because they are fully grasping the topic. The connections they have made in their mind allows them to think through the subject.</p>
<p>How do I view myself as a writer?</p>	<p>As a writer, I enjoy creating a thoughtful and immersive experience with my text. When we wrote our short story assignment, I used words invoking the senses of touch, hearing, and smell. This helped to create a better feel of what it was like for me at my grandparents. The students who read the story could relate it to their own experiences because of the sensory factors. Though as a history teacher, it may be difficult to be as creative in my descriptions. I can use what I know to help to “paint the picture” for my students. If I am talking to the students about war, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, or even Africa, I can draw upon my own life experiences to help “paint the picture” for them. History teachers often use works of Ernest Hemingway to describe scenes in World War II in this manner. Hemingway was never involved in World War II directly, but his works are seen as some the most accurate as far as describing what it felt like to be there in the moment. He does this through creating detailed scenes for the reader. This is the type of description I hope to provide my students when learning about historical subjects I am presenting.</p>
<p>How will I reflect on my practice as a literacy teacher?</p>	<p>I will be teaching literacy through historical readings, essays on historical happenings, and through presentations. Gauging the students’ understanding through thoughtful conversation, discussions, exams, and essays will be the best way to understand whether I am reaching them. In this class, we learned about different learning styles and types of learners we will meet in our profession. Having these different styles in mind will</p>

	<p>help me understand any shortcomings or holes in my lectures. While I was teaching last semester, I used a combination of reading, multimedia, lecture, presentations, and student-led discussions. Combining these techniques allows me to reach different learning styles. My goal is to create an inclusive learning experience while accounting for the differences of each student.</p>
<p>What literacy strategies or activities can I use to get to know my students and their background?</p>	<p>In this class, we learned a multitude of strategies to reach a culturally diverse student body. As I reflect upon my own teaching experiences, I remember a student I taught last year. The teacher I was working with couldn't seem to make a connection with the student, but she tried. One day, I asked the student about his own experiences and feelings about the subject being covered that day. I ended up talking to the student for about 15 minutes. He came alive and was a totally different student after my little chat with him. I had made a connection. This experience helped me to realize what we learned in <i>Six tips for using culturally relevant texts in diverse classrooms</i> (Kibler & Chapman, 2018). The article discusses how getting to know the students' background is an important factor in reaching an individual and making connections. The student must have felt isolated prior to that point, which led to his introverted behavior. I then knew the power teachers hold when they try to reach out and make connections with diverse students. I hope to make these connections with all of my students.</p>
<p>What is my vision of literacy instruction for my classroom?</p>	<p>I did not enter this profession for money or personal gain. I love serving my community. Through education, I am building upon community knowledge and enriching the lives of those I am able to reach. Through my students' successes, I gain a great sense of satisfaction. I hope to be able to make connections with</p>

	every student entering my class. We all have one teacher, coach, or mentor who made an impact in our lives. I strive to be that person for all of my students. I enjoy seeing students out in the community, and hearing about their successes beyond my classroom. I also enjoy hearing about the content I have taught them and how they are using that knowledge in their lives. Making connections and using thoughtful texts is so important to me. These are the lessons I will take away from this course, helping me to become a better educator.
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Reflections and Next Steps

In light of the pandemic, I altered the original plan. Originally, middle school students would create arts-based collages connected to their place-based short story writing samples. Instead, middle school students received their books by mail. The counselor kindly facilitated the process, along with sending literacy leadership t-shirts I provided in order to maintain a sense of community. However, it was not feasible to send additional supplies. My original plan also involved middle school students visiting the university classroom near the end of the semester. The students would share their respective place-based stories and arts-based collages, as well as conduct in-person writing and visual literacy conferences with pre-service educators.

While the sudden shift to online schooling has offered challenges to educators and families, this project highlighted an example of how innovative and meaningful teaching practices prepared middle school students to be critically engaged, collaborative, and adaptable to our rapidly changing reality. In this study, I plan to extend our work throughout the following academic year with another group of College of Education students and local middle school students from the school. Attendance for both sets of participants was inconsistent at times due to issues surrounding COVID-19 (such as variable Internet access for middle school students and quarantining periods for undergraduate students). However, despite these obstacles, university student course reflections and middle school student feedback demonstrate how transformative community literacy practices were achieved.

Justin relayed the following about his impression of the course and online format. The setting for this course was completely affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a college student and future educator, I wondered how I could make a real connection with these students online while being a student myself. I knew I had to cater my writing to topics that were both stimulating and relatable. The pandemic forced educators, parents, and students to generate new ways to connect and learn while

being limited in our physical encounters. I knew my writings had to be authentic to draw in a diverse audience.

I wrote about topics that were personal to me— those I could describe with as many details as possible. I maximized each opportunity with these students to make an impact. I was nervous at first because I wrote about something that was so personal to me. I expressed the sensory aspects of that place and time to enable the students to find something that held similar meaning from their own lives.

From our writings, the students understood how we were taking this interaction seriously in sharing personal memories. We were writing from the heart. The students understood that and dove headfirst into their writings. I used my grandparents' house as an example, and one of the other students did the same. Though we come from different backgrounds and locations, we were able to connect with this relatable topic we had in common. I appreciate the opportunity we had to complete this course semi-remote, and enjoyed our online interactions with the students. The platform with which we had to complete these sessions forced us to think outside the box and generate ways to engage these aspiring young writers.

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Larson & Marsh, 2015) emphasizes the importance of social interaction as central to education and development. Can we make these same connections through virtual means and online learning platforms? Additional research needs to be conducted on this subject; however, this class was an example of what possibilities might be moving forward. When the limitation of physical location is removed, you can reach a larger audience globally. Justin shared his experience as an elementary school student in writing letters to pen-pals in foreign countries. This literacy exchange introduced him to students from around the globe. The experience was similar to what the middle school students engaged in during this process, writing vignettes about their life stories and sharing them with pre-service educators. In our current digital age, the possibilities for these types of experiences are limitless. Middle school students experienced meaningful literacy interactions and writing conferences with university students in the context of their home, while university students were provided with a space to examine their literacy teacher identity through an online format over the course of a semester. Throughout this virtual community literacy process, we both gained new insights in regards to designing literacy interactions with students through virtual means while extending the reach of the classroom.

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