The Reading Professor

The Journal of Professors of Literacy and Teacher Education
A Special Interest Group of the International Literacy Association

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ABOUT THE COVER -

The New York Times bestsellers, Chicka Chicka 1, 2, 3; and Spunky Little Monkey were written by the educator on the cover, Dr. Michael Sampson, and his coauthor, Bill Martin, Jr. Dr. Sampson is Dean and Professor at St. John’s University, New York City. We selected Dean Sampson for this issue not only for his dedication to children’s literacy, but also because he is our newest PLTE member.

Jean-Philippe Cyprés, photographer
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The Reading Professor frequently receives queries about the Journal’s guidelines. They are printed below for the convenience of prospective authors.

The Reading Professor

Guidelines for Authors

The Reading Professor is a peer-reviewed electronic publication forum for Professors of Literacy and Teacher Education (PLTE). The Editorial Board members welcome the submission of research papers that address aspects of literacy instruction at all levels. Authors are encouraged to submit articles directed toward the improvement of reading instruction. The Reading Professor publishes instructional practices, innovative strategies, historical research, course development information, and book reviews.

Requirements and Evaluation

- Authors must be members of the Special Interest Group Professors of Literacy and Teacher Education and the International Literacy Association.

- The first author should submit a cover letter that includes contact information of author(s), and a statement verifying that the manuscript currently is not under consideration for publication by another journal.

- The first author should submit the manuscript via an e-mail attachment to johnsob3@stjohns.edu

- Manuscripts should be double-spaced (including references) and must follow the format of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.). Manuscripts that do not follow APA Style will not be sent out for review.

- Manuscripts should be limited to approximately 20 pages in length (including references).

- Authors’ names should appear only on the cover letters.

- Avoid inclusion of the authors’ identities in any portion of the manuscript to ensure an impartial review.

- Manuscripts are evaluated by at least three reviewers; authors’ names are not revealed to the reviewers.

- Manuscripts are evaluated in terms of significance of topic, clarity of communication, overall organization, methodology (if appropriate), interpretation of information, and aptness for the Journal.

- Decisions about publication usually are reached within two months, but this is not always possible due to workloads. Reviewers’ decisions are final.

- Accepted manuscripts may be edited due to space requirements.
Exploring the Use of Interest Inventories with Elementary Students: A Rich Foundation for Literacy Curriculum Making


Abstract

This pilot study implemented an undergraduate research project to explore the use of adapted interest inventories in university classroom and practicum settings related to literacy instruction. The responses of eight teacher candidates contributing as co-researchers offered contextualized understandings through questionnaire data. These responses related to curriculum making with particular connections to reading instruction, keeping children’s particular funds of knowledge in mind. Patterns and trends in the reflections of these teacher candidates illuminate Schwab’s curriculum commonplaces of teacher, learner, resources/subject matter, and milieu. Implications for use of adapted interest inventories and further curriculum development contextualized in children’s funds of knowledge are provided.

Introduction

Undergraduate courses in many Teacher Education programs discuss the importance of connecting students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, 1997) to the co-creation of curriculum (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 1988) with teacher candidates encouraged to develop lessons and unit plans with students in mind. This responsive process of curriculum development foregrounds teachers as curriculum makers, considering teachers and children in relationship as together they build the best possible roadmaps for learning. While notions of curriculum have often more narrowly related to Kelly’s (2009) description of subject area content, Schwab (1978) reminds us that curriculum commonplaces involve teachers, students, resources/subject matter, and milieu. Such commonplaces, according to Schwab, are necessary elements of curriculum that must be considered as part of curriculum development. Easier said than done, however. This study served as an examination of how interest inventories, used with students as ice-breakers and connected to subsequent lesson planning, might operate as avenues into all of these commonplaces, serving multiple purposes in lesson planning and delivery.

For educational institutions to realize the importance of indigenizing the curriculum, including Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge as essential elements of learning frameworks and learning, it is critical to address what Young (2005) criticizes in past practice: that “the existence of my people (Anishinabe and other Aboriginal people) was not part of the curriculum” (p. 23). In order to develop curriculum with all students in mind, it is necessary to create essential connections with students so that their particular backgrounds, gifts, and interests affect what Clandinin and Connelly (1992) describe in a definition of curriculum that stems from the Latin root of the word meaning “race course.” Teachers who drive this course, who actualize curriculum, need to be aware of their passengers as well as their own professional expertise in achieving authentic learner-centred targets. It is these children in this learning context that lessons must engage.

Jackson (1992) describes social meliorists who see school as a major force for social change and social justice. The belief that improvements to society depend on human effort adds importance to personal narrative in a quest for balance and integrity within and among schools. Teachers hold the reins which direct classroom communities on the roads taken into the wider world—a world that both impacts, and is impacted by, everyone. Yet this kind of change doesn’t happen without careful attention.

Our pilot study in an undergraduate Education context explored the responses of teacher candidates to the experience of adapting an interest inventory (Cooper, 1972) and applying it through literacy-related field experiences in an elementary school setting (see Appendix A for the teacher candidate questionnaire and Appendix B for the initial inventory questions). The children’s inventory results from one small-group lesson that framed two subsequent small-group lessons, planned and delivered by teacher candidates to 3-6 children in a grade 4/5 classroom setting. This paper explores the responses of the university instructor and the eight undergraduate students to this initiative, using the interest inventory as a conceptual framework within which relationships, ability, and content selection emerged as response themes. Results comprehensively connected Schwab’s (1978) curriculum commonplaces through intriguing examples in the response data. It is important to note that the students enrolled in the course were part of a university teacher-education program for self-identified students of Métis descent; some of the eight participants were Métis, and the others were of First Nations background.

Funding from the university’s undergraduate research office supported the involvement of a research coach, a graduate student hired to engage with the course material, assisting actualization of all aspects of the research plan through advice regarding the methodology as well as support for data analysis. The ethics of the project were satisfied by its contextualization as course evaluation, with results applicable to further iterations of this project and this course. The eight undergraduate co-researchers had the opportunity to review and revise this paper. In particular, they offered additional information related to their experiences with children following the delivery of the inventory questionnaire after the elementary classroom experiences were completed. Teacher candidate responses were also used to refine survey instruments designed to collect pre and post data related to curriculum making and outcomes for literacy teaching in the context of later courses, although a discussion of these surveys are not part of this article.

Related Literature
In educational contexts, the teacher has traditionally been viewed as separate from curriculum (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), regardless of the teacher’s role in curriculum actualization. Compelling work has suggested that the teacher’s role is important (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988) as instructors continually negotiate tensions between the curriculum commonplaces of teacher, learner, content/resources, and milieu (Schwab, 1983). In literacy education, early inventories were developed (e.g., Cooper, 1972) to connect teachers to student interests, anticipating that selection of resources could occur to match those interests and better motivate reading. Related survey tools for assessing early reading motivation have also been developed and applied in early childhood settings (Marinak et al., 2015). Research has extended the use of such inventories to literacy assessment measures in terms of guiding instruction for young adults (Comer, 2011) as well as improving instruction for struggling readers (Egan, 1996).

**Study Context**

The instructor in the undergraduate course context of the current study had used a standard interest inventory in her past teaching practice in schools, and had for twenty years built undergraduate assignments using an introductory interest inventory as preliminary to the teaching of reading. Previous teacher candidates had been provided the interest inventory, had used it with children in elementary settings, and had summarized their knowledge about those children in a reflective essay that also demonstrated how they might apply such knowledge with these children in imagined future classroom settings. At no time had the teacher candidates been offered the opportunity to review the inventory. In addition, the teacher candidates had not been asked to develop and deliver lessons based on inventory results.

The current project entailed an application of new practices for the instructor involved. In this iteration of her course, she presented a sample interest inventory as a foundation from which to build. The first part of the course assignment invited the teacher candidates to select, revise, discard, and add questions until the inventory was adapted to their satisfaction for the elementary grade level with which they would be involved for practice teaching.

During the first lesson in the school setting, the teacher candidates delivered the inventory (orally, by taking student dictation, or through independent writing by students, depending on ability levels involved). The teacher candidates engaged the students in conversations about the inventory questions and probed for deeper responses. Following the delivery of the inventory, the teacher candidates summarized their findings about the students in their group, and then planned two literacy lessons: the first, a storytelling by the teacher candidates that would lead into children’s oral language usage and subsequent writing and reading activities; and the second, a creative drama activity that began with oral responses to picture and word cue cards, resulting in oral dramatic scenes and then possibly writing and reading connections, time permitting.

Prior to their experiential assignment with children, the teacher candidates had been presented with the original interest inventory and completed it themselves. Data from these inventories was used by the instructor to support the integration of their funds of knowledge (Moll, 1997) into the university course design, where possible. The instructor applied particular details in terms of literature shared later in class to match teacher candidate needs, and provided coaching related to a future unit plan assignment based on teacher candidate interests. In this way, the curriculum building process was modeled by the instructor on a larger scale while at the same time expected of the teacher candidates regarding the work ahead with their own students.

**Research Design**

This was a qualitative study based on the key research question: “What patterns and themes will emerge in the responses of teacher candidates regarding the development and application of a student interest inventory in support of literacy lesson planning and delivery?” In addition to responding to questions about the interest inventory assignment (Appendix A), a survey about the teaching of reading and writing was also completed by the teacher candidates on the first day of class, and then again at the end of the term, in order to note any shifts in thinking throughout the duration of the course.

Following the completion of the revised interest inventories with small groups of 3-6 elementary students in a grade 4/5 classroom, the eight teacher candidates involved in the curriculum course, a small section of a required elementary literacy class in the B.Ed. program, created and presented two subsequent literacy lessons. These lessons were based on the required curriculum outcomes for this grade level (Saskatchewan Curriculum 2012a and b). They later reflected on these lessons in a narrative essay submitted to the instructor for evaluation. In addition to data from these reflective essays, an anonymous semi-structured questionnaire (Seidman, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) was completed by each of the teacher candidates, further investigating their responses to the inventory data (see Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire).

After the course grades were submitted at the end of the term, the instructor and research coach met to analyze the data for patterns and trends, using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model for conducting thematic analysis in a step-by-step manner. Working to become familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, were stages completed prior to presenting the themes in this final report. Informal attempts were made to triangulate data from the pre and post surveys, the questionnaire, and the reflective essay assignment, and summaries of this data were provided by email to the teacher candidates involved. Teacher candidates had the opportunity to contribute ideas to the research article and some of them volunteered further support regarding the interpretation of the study’s results and recommendations for further research.

**Interpretation of the Inventories and Curriculum Commonplaces**

Within personal reflections generated from the university classroom activities and the activities with students at
the participating elementary school, interesting themes emerged. Most intriguingly, these themes aligned with all four curriculum commonplaces—the learner, the milieu, the teacher, and the subject matter (Schwab, 1978)—marking the interest inventory activity as meritorious on a number of levels. One important message in this regard relates to the possibility that “paying attention” to these commonplaces, in light of social justice issues, may have tremendous impact on the resulting curriculum. As Freire (2005) insists, we all, as teachers, have the privilege and the duty to unveil truths during acts of critical reflection.

The following examples of Schwab’s (1978) curriculum commonplaces appeared in data from the semi-structured questionnaires, spotlighting the importance of teacher-student and student-student relationships, student ability, and content selection in curriculum development and actualization. Quotations in each of the four “commonplace” categories present the advice that the preservice teachers are offering to others as well as exemplify the important learning they received from this experience going forward.

**Milieu**

The learning context provides and receives feedback from those in its grasp, affects curriculum, and yet is also affected by curriculum. While not always transparent in the manner in which it operates, milieu can be held accountable for the attitudes of its subjects. Attention to milieu was expressed by teacher candidates who provided survey comments related to children’s engagement related to these children’s personal funds of knowledge. One teacher candidate indicated that she was “not expecting how eager the students were to share this information.” Simply by asking children questions about their interests, the milieu had been affected in a positive way. Another teacher candidate commented on a child who “absolutely hated English, didn’t like reading or writing and didn’t own any books.” The only positive response he provided directly related to ELA subject matter involved movies, and the teacher candidate indicated that it was critical to apply movie-content in order to involve him in discussion. As another teacher candidate put it, “I was able to personalize my conversations with them.”

Another theme that emerged related to milieu involved finding common ground between teacher and students. One teacher candidate conducted a talking circle, picking random questions from the interest inventory and then asking each child to contribute a response. “I joined in as well to gain familiarity and comfortability with the students. I learned that the students and I had many things in common such as favourite books, similar pets, and a love of sleeping, of all things!” Seeing herself in these elementary-age children assisted connections that made all group members feel at ease, including the teacher candidate.

A final theme illuminating milieu appeared as teacher candidates reported how the interest inventories assisted children in finding common ground with each other. One teacher candidate indicated that the girl in her group connected to the movies the boys were talking about and, through that subject, became animated in a discussion that subsequently involved all group members.

**Resources/Subject Matter**

Vivian Paley is a non-fiction writer who portrays the living characters of her storied past with the richness of identities drawn with many traits. The children in *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* (Paley, 1997), for example, are never one thing or another, but presented as real people whose culture or different learning needs holds an important thread of their design, but only a single thread. Responding to the required reading of this text, the teacher candidates involved in this course reflected on aspects of Paley’s work they felt was important, in particular, the connection between the choices this teacher made in the classroom in terms of resources and the children themselves.

Noteworthy in terms of the findings from the current study included a report from all of the teacher candidates that lessons based on the interests of the students seemed easier and more interesting for the children. One teacher candidate indicated that “I would definitely do this activity at the beginning of the year…so I could gauge the class interest and cater the curriculum contents to their needs and wants.” Others also spoke of the value of doing the interest inventory early in the school year. “My students all like reading for enjoyment...they all like adventure and graphic novels. I would be able to incorporate these into my lessons.” Another teacher candidate suggested that, as the children’s teacher, she would be “sure to include their interest areas and input into the types of books I made available for classroom reading…I would also make sure to accommodate for a balance of listening to stories and reading stories as all indicated they liked listening to stories…I believe this is a way to evoke a love of reading, not just the enjoyment of listening to a story.”

One student asked specifically about culture, and said “this is the perfect opportunity to also include First Nations, Metis and Inuit material, and have students compare other cultures to their own, while learning about diversity.” Moving the questions from the inventory into other avenues of response was also recommended as a way to enhance student sharing including “a class-wide talking circle where students could share ideas or a journal entry reflecting their interests.” In addition, “students could also write an autobiography or short story” reflecting interests through various characters.

**Teachers**

As teachers, a variety of comments expressed appreciation for the connections the interest inventory experience allowed regarding these prospective students. The teacher candidates reported beginning to feel comfortable working with these children through hearing anecdotes about their pets, their sporting interests, and their families. One teacher candidate described the sharing of information as “a bonding experience.” In terms of the inventory itself, one teacher candidate reported “It was the first time I have seen one of these. I know it is important to know your students but I always thought it would take time.” Another teacher candidate suggested a similar idea: “By taking half an hour to invest in your students’ interests you can learn a lot about them, which is beneficial for any teacher at any
stage...” Extending the use of the inventory as a form of assessment, the teacher candidates commented on the power of observation. “Throughout the process of watching and helping the children fill out their interest inventories, I was able to gather information on their work habits and possibly what type of student they were in the classroom.”

Using the inventory as a tool to support differentiation of instruction based on interest and/or need was also mentioned as important, again focusing on the benefits to instructors whose goal was supportive teaching. Knowing the children’s interests “really helped when needing to keep them on track, when there was extra time to add in another activity, or when they needed some teacher input to get started on a task.” Another teacher candidate indicated that “I referred back to the students’ interests in sports, pets, hobbies, and other information...on several different occasions.” Many teacher candidates volunteered that they had connected activities to the students’ funds of knowledge. One teacher candidate confessed that she would not have thought to ask particular questions had she not had the inventory data. For example, “knowing whether students have access to books outside of school is an important thing.”

Learners

Responses from the group demonstrated that the children involved in the interest inventories appreciated the opportunity to talk about their interests, skills and experiences. Said one teacher candidate, “this activity was engaging and fun for the students because it brought up their interests.” Another teacher candidate suggested that “knowing that someone cares about your interests and what you like makes a difference in how you feel you want to perform, and will perform, as a student.”

Gaps in students’ knowledge was reported as data provided by the interest inventory. One preservice teacher discussed how she had asked a question to the inventory about culture and diversity, and that it was clear from all the children in her group that they had limited understanding in this respect. “There are countless things that could be done following an interest inventory, and by actually applying their results to your teachings and available resources, you encourage students to read, be engaged, and enjoy school and learning.”

Shifting Roles, Deepening Relationships

At times the teacher candidates and instructor engaged in this study operated as teachers, and at times they operated as learners, constantly shifting back and forth between both roles. The instructor of the course considered the children involved as her students, while at the same time she thought about the teacher candidates as her students, and the experience of relationship-building in a common context occurred for her at both levels as she shifted between stances as a teacher and as a learner.

In the elementary classroom, the instructor worked with one child whose interest inventory had illustrated his experiences with a cat named Rosie. “Tell me more about Rosie,” she prompted during an opportunity to work 1:1 with “Jason” in support of a dictated story that would become his independent reading text. Knowing about Rosie, and Jason’s enthusiasm for cat care, allowed the instructor to support this child in bringing his expertise into a classroom where his reading and writing skills appeared to be far below grade level. At the end of this project, she could still recall the sentences the child had dictated, and the pride he demonstrated when sharing his knowledge. She could also remember how he fluently read the dictated sentences, their context offering him a supportive framework for oral reading.

Relationship building for the instructor was not limited to working with the children. Knowing about her teacher candidates’ gifts and interests allowed her to work on framing course content through their perspectives. When one teacher candidate was searching for a topic on which to build the required unit plan, the instructor suggested “world travelling” because of the teacher candidates’ own travel experiences. Similarly, the instructor referred a second teacher candidate to a genre study on fantasy novels, and nudged a third towards the topic of “caring for the earth,” because she was aware of their interests in these subjects.

In addition to information provided on the interest inventories completed by the teacher candidates, the instructor also found common ground for discussion and understanding through the course’s shared readings. In particular, when one teacher candidate remarked, “I feel like Oliver,” a struggling student in Paley’s (1997) text The Girl with the Brown Crayon, it created a vivid picture towards understanding and the provision of additional supports.

Other comments about relationship building emerged as the teacher candidates debriefed the course content during the second to the last week of class. They commented on the positive connections they had developed with the children, and how they had been able to strategically encourage these students through the knowledge they had gained during the inventory process. In particular, the inventory results had affected their planning, their lesson delivery, and their assessment of children’s work. During the inventory activity, for example, one teacher candidate quickly realized a student’s strengths in oral language while his writing ability appeared well below grade level. One of these realizations without the other might have led to a less complete picture of this boy; together, they offered a chance to foreground his talents through dictated writing and then opportunities to strengthen his reading and writing skills within a strength-based experience.

Shifting Understandings about Literacy Teaching and Learning

Survey data from the beginning and end of the course offered a chance to explore changing perspectives on curriculum making and literacy teaching and learning. While this survey data is not specifically part of this paper, tensions were reported between what is generally expected of teachers—handing in unit plans to administrators at the beginning of the school year—and what was believed to be best practice—developing unit plans with specific learners in mind. Perhaps flexible designs for classroom start-up could be developed to offer classroom teachers the first week of school for eliciting students’ interests and funds of knowledge,
followed by a second week of school team-building activities led by community members and external consultants to allow teachers the time to create and adapt units for the term ahead.

We also wondered whether interest inventories could be expected as a standard school practice, and stored in students' cumulative files. Because these cumulative files are currently reserved for formal assessment documents by teachers and educational consultants, it seems positive to us that student could contribute something to their ongoing school records that self-reflects their identified funds of knowledge. Such inventories could offer a helpful balance between externally created and student-generated information about each student.

Further considerations of survey results caused us to reflect on whether the data signifying the importance of cultural understandings and connections as part of curriculum development might be richer than data provided by other groups of Education students who were not part of the significant cultural learning frameworks provided in our program designed for and by Aboriginal people. In response, we wondered how to frame additional questions about culture that would appear in future versions of the interest inventory tool.

Conclusion

Considerations of planning frameworks related to students' abilities and interests, cultural responsivity, and student record-keeping in terms of cumulative information, appear important in the results of this interest inventory project. This importance is compatible with the direction provincial Canadian Ministries of Education seem to be going with respect to student-centred planning and the values attributed to students' ideas and interests in contexts of curriculum actualization. It is one thing, however, to promote these values, and another to implement specific classroom activities that demonstrate student-centred planning. The depths to which these teacher candidates processed their experiences using the interest inventories appeared far greater to the course instructor than the learning evident in years past when the university students merely were asked to deliver the inventory and summarize the results. In addition, the new iterations of the inventory itself, developed by the teacher candidates through revision and addition of questions, were far superior to the original.

It appears likely that these new teachers see myriad possibilities with the inventory tool and intend to carry it with them into their future classrooms. As one teacher candidate said, "interest inventories are good because they are based on you. There is no right or wrong answer. They reflect on a range of topics that give you, the teacher, information on your students..." helping you "shape a classroom that will be based on interests." Deeply connected to Schwab's curriculum commonsplace, as evidenced by the teacher candidates' responses in this study, the interest inventory is a functional tool from past practice that has endured the test of time.

Thanks to the Undergraduate Research Initiative, University of Saskatchewan, for supporting the involvement of a research coach and related facilitation for this project.

References


**Appendix A Questionnaire Related to the Application of the Interest Inventory**

**Interest Inventory Debriefing Form**

Thank you for your responses related to this course-based undergraduate research project. The Research Mentor for this class, XXX, will be collecting your responses and compiling the results for the instructor, to share with her after the final marks for this class have been submitted in December.

1) What purpose (if any) did the interest inventory serve regarding your work with students at XXX School?
2) What questions (if any) did you add to the original inventory and why?
3) What questions (if any) did you remove from the original inventory and why?
4) Are there other questions you would add or remove from the inventory if you were to do this assignment again?
5) What decisions (if any) did you make regarding your lessons with the XXX students based on their responses for the inventory?
6) What advice (if any) do you have for teachers regarding the use of inventories such as the one you explored?
7) Your instructor presented you with an inventory on the first day of this course. Have you seen any connections between her work with you in this class and your responses on the inventory? If so, what?
8) What did you like about using the interest inventory with the XXX students, if anything?
9) What did you dislike about using the interest inventory with the XXX students, if anything?
10) As a future teacher, can you see yourself using an interest inventory? Why/why not?
11) Other comments:

**Appendix B Interest Inventory**

**Name:**

1. What sports do you like to play? What sports do you like to watch?
2. Do you have pets? What kinds?
3. Do you collect things? If so, what?
4. What are your hobbies? Please describe.
   a. computer?
   b. arts & crafts?
   c. music?
   d. repairing things?
   e. cooking?
   f. building things?
   g. science/nature?
   h. fishing/hunting?
   i. reading?

j. writing?
k. other?

5. Suppose you could have a wish come true; what would you wish for?
6. What school subject have you liked the best?
7. What school subject have you liked the least?
8. What is the best book you’ve read? What did you like about it?
9. Do you enjoy reading?
10. Do you prefer to listen to stories/books or read them independently?
11. Do you prefer to read handheld books or read online?
12. Do you remember enjoying being read to? By whom?
13. Outside of school related reading, how much time each day do you read?
14. Do you prefer to read for enjoyment or for information?
15. Does anyone in your family read for fun? Who?
16. Has anyone in your family encouraged you to read at home?
17. What are the names of some books you have been reading lately?
18. Do you have a public library card?
19. About how many books do you have of your own?
20. How many books have you borrowed from friends, or had friends recommend, during the last month? Give some titles if you can.
21. How many books have you loaned or recommended to friends during the last month? Give some titles if you can.
22. About how many books do you have in your home? Can you give the titles of some?
23. What kinds of reading do you enjoy most (Mark the ones you like with an X)?
   a. History?
   b. Travel?
   c. Plays?
   d. Essays?
   e. Adventure?
   f. Fantasy
   g. Science?
   h. Poetry?
   i. Novels?
   j. Detective Stories?
   k. Fairy Tales?
   l. Mystery Stories?
   m. Biography?
   n. Romance?
   o. Music?
   p. Graphic Novels?
   q. Comics?
   r. Cartoons?
   s. Email novels?
t. Newspapers?

u. Magazines?

v. Other?

24. Name some movies you last saw.

25. Name some other cities you have visited (or countries).

26. What kind of work are you interested in doing when you finish school? (For Teacher Candidates: what are you hoping for in terms of subject areas/grades?)


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Preparation of Preservice Teachers with Children’s Literature: A Statewide Analysis

Laurie A. Sharp, Betty Coneway, and Elsa Diego-Medrano

Abstract

Incorporating children’s literature during instruction is a powerful way to promote student learning. Preparing teachers to incorporate children’s literature effectively is important and requires a comprehensive preparation approach. However, recent studies have raised concerns regarding current preparation efforts and noted that stand-alone children’s literature courses were becoming obsolete. The purpose of this study was to conduct a statewide analysis of elementary teacher education programs to explore the presence and attributes of stand-alone children’s literature courses. Content analysis techniques were employed that utilized course descriptions published in university catalogs. Findings revealed pertinent course information, as well as three themes related to overall course focus, instructional approaches, and specific courses topics. Recommendations, limitations, and future directions were also described.

Keywords: children’s literature, preservice teachers, stand-alone course, content analysis

Introduction

Throughout its history, American children’s literature has continually reflected societal views towards young people (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013). Although texts specifically aimed toward children surfaced throughout the 1800s, the field of children’s literature was not officially recognized until the early 1900s. Throughout the 20th century, the production and popularity of children’s literature grew significantly, especially in school contexts. During this same time, reading instructional practices were shifting from a skills-based phonics approach that used basal readers to teach reading to a whole-language holistic approach that taught reading with quality children’s literature (Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999). Using authentic literature as the base for reading instruction transformed reading instruction into a more comprehensive approach to teach reading and writing through the inclusion of daily read-alouds, independent reading and writing activities, collaborative learning experiences, and interdisciplinary thematic approaches to instruction.

At the beginning of the 21st century, reading instruction took on a balanced approach, which merged the teaching of literacy skills with authentic literature (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000; Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998). Within the past 15 years, however, definitions of what it means to be literate, federal legislation, high-stakes testing, national standards, and technological advancements have broadened the concept of reading instruction to literacy instruction and changed the role of children’s literature in the classroom (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2012). Currently, children’s literature is viewed as a valuable and vital tool during literacy instruction. For example, the Common Core State Standards outlined the range of text types and levels of complexity with which students in each grade level must demonstrate proficiency (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

With this in mind, preparing teachers to incorporate children’s literature effectively is of primary importance. Practicing teachers must also be skilled in how to select quality children’s literature that portray accurate representations of diverse characters, value differences, and are free of stereotypes (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016). Additionally, preservice teacher candidates must learn the variety of ways in which they may incorporate children’s literature into instruction to promote student learning (Rogers, Cooper, Nesmith, & Purdum-Cassidy, 2015). Moreover, present-day curricular standards include language that necessitates the inclusion of a wide range of children’s literature during instruction. For example, the Common Core State Standards outlined the range of text types and levels of complexity with which students in each grade level must demonstrate proficiency (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

The recent research on this topic advocates for incorporating children’s literature during literacy instruction as a powerful way for teachers to:

- enhance aspects of emergent reading instruction, such as print awareness and features of language (Cetin & Bay, 2015; Serafini & Moses, 2014);
- model reading skills, such as fluent reading, vocabulary development, and comprehension (Johnston, 2016);
- support students’ learning in the content areas (Oliveira, 2015; Swain & Coleman, 2014);
- implement literature-based extension activities, such as discussions and crafts, that fosters students’ ownership, creativity and motivation (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015);
- reflect diverse cultures accurately and authentically (Sun, 2016);
- develop students’ awareness of global issues, as well as empathy and curiosity for people around the world (Monobe & Son, 2014); and
- address topics related to character education, such as bullying and social acceptance (Freeman, 2014; Ostrosky, Mouzouru, Dorsey, Favazza, & Leboeuf, 2015).

With this in mind, preparing teachers to incorporate children’s literature effectively is of primary importance. Practicing teachers must also be skilled in how to select quality children’s literature that portray accurate representations of diverse characters, value differences, and are free of stereotypes (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016). Additionally, preservice teacher candidates must learn the variety of ways in which they may incorporate children’s literature into instruction to promote student learning (Rogers, Cooper, Nesmith, & Purdum-Cassidy, 2015). In order to realize the benefits associated with the use of children’s literature during literacy instruction, preservice teachers must receive preparation through completion of related coursework throughout their respective educator preparation programs (Brindley & Laframboise, 2002; Greenberg, Walsh, McKee, 2015; National Council of Teachers of English, 2004; Tunks,
Preservice Teachers’ Preparation with Children’s Literature

Recent literature has expressed serious concerns with preservice teachers’ preparation with children’s literature, or lack thereof (Hoewisch, 2000). Preservice teachers must develop a “guiding set of theoretical principles through experiences” prior to their enrollment in children’s literature courses so that they are able to situate new knowledge and understandings within meaningful contexts (para. 7). However, a recent study suggested that children’s literature coursework was becoming an obsolete requirement in educator preparation programs (Tunks et al., 2015). Participation in children’s literature courses is paramount for preservice teachers because they are able to develop background knowledge and engage in self-reflective activities that prepare them for the multitude of diversity issues they will likely encounter as a practicing teacher (Davis, Brown, Liedel-Rice, & Soeder, 2005). Yet, several teacher educators have noted that many preservice teachers carry overt prejudices and demonstrate a lack of knowledge regarding diversity (Gibson, 2012; Morton, Siera, Grant, & Giese, 2008). Teacher educators have also expressed concerns that preservice teachers may not be prepared sufficiently to incorporate children’s literature and related activities effectively (Bouley, 2011; Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003). Without proper preparation concerning how to use children’s literature appropriately, preservice teachers lack the ability to evaluate and select high quality texts for use in elementary classrooms (Hug, 2010).

Educator preparation programs should take a comprehensive approach to foster preservice teachers’ pedagogy with children’s literature throughout their programs (Brindley & Laframboise, 2002; Hoewisch, 2000), and teacher educators must “demand that children’s literature courses be offered” (Hoewisch, 2000, para. 8). Through a stand-alone children’s literature course, teacher educators have the ability to advance preservice teachers’ pedagogy with children’s literature. A search of the library’s electronic databases did not reveal any published empirical studies that explored preparation efforts among educator preparation programs who offer stand-alone children’s literature courses. Given the importance of children’s literature to teaching, we were interested in exploring this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

For years, universities have published catalogs that serve as the official source for information related to the university’s academic programs, courses, policies, and procedures. Within each university’s catalog, course information includes course descriptions that provide pertinent information for each course offered, such as the course title, the level at which it is taught, a brief overview of the course, and any required prerequisites or co-requisites.

With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to conduct a systematic analysis of stand-alone children’s literature courses using electronically published course catalog descriptions among educator preparation programs (EPPs) in Texas. Conducting a content analysis of course descriptions has been a customary method to identify the names and characteristics of courses offered at higher education institutions (e.g., Irwin, 2002; Miller & Crain, 2011; Shepperson, 2013). The following research question guided our analyses: What are the specialized attributes of a stand-alone children’s literature course required in an EPP?

Methodology

To investigate our research question, we collected electronically published course descriptions for stand-alone children’s literature courses required within EPPs in Texas. Each course description was reviewed objectively and systematically using content analysis techniques as described by Berg (2001) and Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999). In this study, course descriptions were viewed as permanent records of stand-alone children’s literature courses that specified the name and characteristics of the course (Miller & Crain, 2011).

Sampling and Data Collection

Purposeful sampling methods were utilized in this study. To compile the sample, we accessed the Texas Education Agency’s (2016) online list of state-approved EPPs and searched among these entities by the approved certificate area of Generalist (Grade Level EC-6). This search yielded 128 EPPs, which included both traditional and alternative certification programs. We determined that university-based, traditional certification programs were most appropriate to achieve the purpose of this study due to differences in certification program requirements. Applying this filter identified 69 eligible EPPs, and subsequent web searches were conducted among institutional websites to locate degree program information for the certificate area of Generalist (Grade Level EC-6). An examination of this degree program information revealed that 53 EPPs required a stand-alone children’s literature course. Among these EPPs, their respective university’s most recently published catalog was accessed electronically and course descriptions were gathered for each stand-alone children’s literature course.

Content Analyses Procedures

Content analyses were performed with the course catalog descriptions that involved mostly manifest content, although some interpretations were required with latent content (Berg, 2001). Members of the research team evaluated the 53 course catalog descriptions independently using open coding to label initial concepts and identify themes present in the data. Members of the research team then used coding frames to group codes with similar themes together and axial coding to confirm the accuracy of codes within themes. Once independent reviews of course catalog descriptions were completed, members of the research team shared their findings and found that their independent analyses reflected almost 100% accuracy, thus reflecting reliability and validity with the data (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). One member of the research team created a summary sheet of these findings, which was approved by the other two members.
of the research team.

**Findings**

Content analyses conducted with the 53 course catalog descriptions revealed information related to the level at which the stand-alone children's literature course was taught, the course prefix, and required prerequisites. Findings showed that EPPs taught their stand-alone children's literature course at the sophomore level \((n = 4)\), junior level \((n = 37)\), or senior level \((n = 12)\). Further analyses revealed several different course prefixes used by EPPs (see Table 1). Assigned course prefixes included variations of reading \((n = 26)\), education \((n = 11)\), English \((n = 11)\), library science \((n = 3)\), and literacy \((n = 2)\). Content analyses also produced three explicitly stated prerequisites within the course catalog descriptions. Fourteen EPPs required successful completion of one or more specific courses within the following subject areas prior to enrollment in the stand-alone children's literature course: English, education, English as a second language, humanities, pedagogy, psychology, and/or reading. Two EPPs also stated admission to their program as a prerequisite, one EPP required sophomore classification, and one EPP recommended junior classification. Although not stated as a course prerequisite, one EPP required an advisor code for registration into the stand-alone children's literature course.

Content analyses conducted with the course catalog descriptions also produced the following three themes: Overarching Course Focus, Instructional Approaches with Preservice Teachers, and Specific Course Topics Addressed.

### Table 1

**Course Prefixes Assigned by EPPs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Number of EPPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EDU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education – Early Childhood</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDEC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education – Elementary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELED</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Literature</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDLI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGLISH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Literacy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDLL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLLS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading/Reading</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDRD</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EDRF</td>
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<td>EDRG</td>
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<td>REA</td>
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<td>RDG</td>
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<tr>
<td>RDNG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RDGED</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Overarching course focus.** Over half of the EPPs noted that the overarching focus of their stand-alone children's literature course was children's books/literature \((n = 30)\). Of these, 18 EPPs specified that the course focus included both children's and adolescent literature, while 12 EPPs restricted the course focus to literature at the preschool and elementary levels (i.e., Grade Level EC-6).
Instructional approaches with preservice teachers. As shown in Table 2, 43 references were made within the course catalog descriptions regarding specific instructional approaches. Interactions with print and non-print materials was the most cited instructional approach \((n = 23)\), followed by analysis and interpretations of children’s literature \((n = 8)\), then authentic experiences with children’s literature \((n = 6)\). An equal number of references were made to literacy projects, oral reading of children’s literature, and discussion of children’s literature \((n = 2)\).

Table 2
Instructional Approaches with Preservice Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Approaches</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with print and non-print materials</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and interpretations of children’s literature</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic experiences using children’s literature</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy projects</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral reading of children’s literature</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of children’s literature</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specific course topics addressed. Analyses of the course catalog descriptions yielded fifteen specific course topics that were addressed in stand-alone children’s literature courses (see Table 3). Teaching techniques and methods was the most cited topic addressed \((n = 56)\) and included the training of preservice teachers to (a) plan and implement literature-based activities, (b) address diverse learning needs, (c) integrate children’s literature across the curriculum, (d) incorporate dramatization, (e) practice storytelling, and (f) use children’s literature as a tool to motivate and engage students.

Table 3
Specific Course Topics Addressed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Topic</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching techniques and methods</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature-based activities</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching techniques and methods for diverse learning needs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating children’s literature across the curriculum</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatization</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching techniques and methods that motivate and engage students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s literature genre studies</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of children’s literature</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical background and context of children’s literature</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of children’s literature</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural milieus and diverse children’s literature</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s literature illustrators’ studies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of a theoretical base and appreciation for children’s literature</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of lifetime reading habits and reading for enjoyment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s literature authors’ studies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various representations of children’s literature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current trends and contemporary issues</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning use of children’s literature with state standards and competencies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building equitable and balanced collections of children’s literature</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections between children’s literature and writing processes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and Recommendations

Although our study focused on educator preparation efforts with children’s literature among preservice teachers seeking Generalist (Grade Level EC-6) Texas teaching certification, our findings provided valuable insights. First, we found the level at which EPPs taught their stand-alone children’s literature course interesting - the majority were offered at the junior and senior levels. It is important to consider Hoewisch’s (2000) assertion that preservice teachers must engage with frequent experiences with children’s literature prior to their enrollment in a stand-alone children’s literature course. In doing so, preservice teachers...
have meaningful experiences within a context with which to position new understandings related to children's literature. Therefore, EPPs should carefully consider the content of course offerings that precede their stand-alone children's literature course in order to provide preservice teachers with the maximum potential for learning.

Course prefixes represent the type of course or related academic discipline (Texas Common Course Numbering System, 2015). Our findings revealed that a variety of course prefixes were attached to the stand-alone children's literature courses. The majority of course prefixes corresponded to either education or reading academic departments; however, a considerable number corresponded to English academic departments. Within higher education environments, academic departments vary extensively due to their educational emphasis, faculty qualifications, and other internal and external components (Singleton & Atkins, 2016). Thus, the educational emphasis and expertise of the instructor are factors that may have a significant effect on the content and instructional approach within a course. In order to further explore this phenomenon, we recommend that a future study be conducted with stand-alone children's literature courses and their corresponding academic department that examines course syllabi, readings, and learning experiences.

Guidry, Lake, Jones, and Rice (2005) noted that the “hallmarks” of a good children's literature course include the selection of children's literature, a wide variety of diverse teaching techniques and methods, and genre studies (p. 232). Our findings suggested that these elements were mostly present in many of the stand-alone children's literature courses. However, we were surprised by the wide variety of specific course topics addressed. Although we do not advocate that every stand-alone literature course should look exactly the same, we feel that a moderate level of consistency is important so that preservice teachers develop essential understandings and pedagogy related to children's literature that they may carry into their classrooms as beginning teachers (Kosnik & Beck, 2008).

Limitations and Future Directions

Each state has its own unique rules, criteria, and guidelines concerning EPPs that lead to state-level teacher certification, and these may also differ between traditional certification programs and alternative certification programs. Therefore, we limited our analysis to traditional certification programs in Texas. Another limitation of this study entailed limiting our analyses to courses descriptions associated with stand-alone children's literature courses that were specified as one of the required courses within their respective Generalist (Grade Level EC-6) teacher certification programs. Requirements set by Texas legislation and Texas teacher certification requirements compelled us to do so. However, exploring preparation efforts among preservice teachers seeking teacher certification at the middle and high school levels, as well as among preservice teachers who have the option to take a stand-alone children’s literature course as an elective, would provide a more comprehensive understanding to our research question. A final limitation was with the sources from which we collected data: university course catalogs. Although the sources are intended to reflect accurate and up-to-date data, there was not a mechanism in place to confirm accuracy of information obtained.

Results from this study revealed pertinent information regarding current preparation efforts among preservice teachers with children's literature. We recommend that further studies be conducted among alternative certification programs, as well as among EPPs that prepare teachers for the middle and high school levels, because children's literature has been identified as an effective instructional tool across all content areas (Anderson, 2013). We also recommend that future studies seek to investigate preparation efforts more deeply using course syllabi, recommended and required readings, objectives, and assignments to better understand the characteristics of stand-alone children's literature courses. Finally, we feel that exploring new teachers' perceptions regarding their preparation with children's literature has value because concepts addressed by the faculty associated with an EPP may or may not align with what preservice teachers perceived that they learned (Kosnik & Beck, 2008).

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et al.: Volume 39, Issue1

The Reading Professor, Vol. 39 No. 1, Spring, 2017

Published by St. John's Scholar, 2017

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Fostering Culturally-Relevant Children's Literature Knowledge with a Community-Engaged Literacy Event

Susan M. Tancock, Eva Zygmunt, Patricia Clark, Winnie Mucherah, Jon Clausen

Abstract

This paper describes a community-engaged project in which preservice teachers selected culturally-relevant children's literature and then facilitated a literacy event in which they presented the books to community members for their critique. Community members made decisions about which of the books they believed would be best for the children in their community. Implications for affecting teacher candidates' understanding of cultural relevance while involved in a community-university partnership are described.

Fostering Culturally-Relevant Children's Literature Knowledge with a Community-Based Literacy Event

Teacher education candidates traditionally have little opportunity to be immersed in the communities in which they complete their field experiences (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 2010). They typically do “guerilla teaching,” in which they visit a school for a few hours each week, do some observing or teaching, and then return to the university for the remainder of their coursework. As candidates are planning instruction for children in the classrooms in which they do their practica experiences, they struggle because they do not understand the history, frames of reference, funds of knowledge, daily life experiences, or routines of the children for whom they are planning the lessons (Greenberg, 1989; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Nor do they understand the aspirations, desires, and dreams parents in the community have for their children. This makes it nearly impossible for candidates to understand the nature of culturally-relevant instruction, develop an affirming view of diverse students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), or plan and implement culturally-responsive learning instruction in a way that truly impacts children. Delpit (2012) asserts that in order for white teachers to effectively educate children of color, or “other people’s children,” they must confront issues of power and be able to communicate across cultures. Further, she argues that teachers must truly understand their students' lived experiences—their cultures, interests, and histories in order to provide high-quality instruction.

Most teacher education candidates are white, middle-class women, yet the children they will teach will likely come from diverse backgrounds (Lowenstein, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). Candidates must have the opportunity to discover that there may be differences among their cultures and those of their students that will present challenges (Delpit, 1995; Delpit, 2012), challenges that need to be discussed and directly addressed as candidates move through their teacher education program. How issues of race and culture affect instruction and student learning are essential discussion topics and are included in many teacher preparation courses.

However, authentic opportunities to wrestle with these issues are not often a part of teacher preparation. Teacher education candidates need opportunities to develop and implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their practica experiences in order to build the specific teaching skills necessary to offer high-quality instruction to African-American children (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and maintain high standards for them as well.

In this paper we describe a community-engaged project in which teacher education candidates selected culturally-relevant children's literature and then facilitated a literacy event where they presented the books to community members for their critiques. Community members made decisions about which of the books they wished to be used with children in their community, and the candidates learned which books would be best to integrate into their teaching curriculum.

Educating Children Across Cultures

One of the most important factors in planning culturally-relevant instruction is developing community and collaborative partnerships (Murrell, 2001). Delpit (cited in Goldstein, 2012) argues that new teachers need various experiences to develop knowledge of their students, such as participating in community organizations, visiting churches, and working with children in after-school programs. Contributing greatly to a candidate’s toolkit would be the opportunity to participate with members of the community to plan for that community's children.

Many different routes to developing culturally-relevant dispositions, skills, and knowledge bases have been implemented, on a continuum from traditional university-based coursework, to fully immersive, field-based experiences. Courses focused specifically on culturally-relevant teaching, as well as anthropology courses focusing on culture, with opportunities for students to read, discuss, and respond to professional literature about culturally-relevant teaching, provide one route to knowledge and skill building for candidates (Colby & Lyon, 2004; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2011). Another approach has been to offer restructured field experiences for candidates so they can observe expert teachers and models of culturally-relevant teaching (Frye, Button, Kelly, & Button, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Teacher education candidates also have been involved in the reading and discussion of children's literature to build an understanding of cultures, foster empathy, and instill a sense of social justice (Escamilla & Nathenson-Meija, 2003; Fredricks, 2012; Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009; Laframboise & Griffith, 1997; Whitney, 2005). Alternatively, case-based instruction methods have been implemented in lieu of direct experiences for candidates in the field (Gunn, 2010; Laframboise & Griffith, 1997). In another project, Dana & Lynch-Brown (1993) had candidates communicate as pen...
pals with children from diverse cultures and offered field trips and community experiences for their candidates.

Each of the previously mentioned routes/frameworks/experiences for building culturally-relevant teaching expertise with teacher education candidates has shown some positive movement toward the goal of preparing quality teachers who can provide culturally-relevant instruction. University instructors, practica supervisors, teachers, and administrators have partnered in a variety of ways and struggled with how best to offer meaningful, research-based, practical opportunities for candidates to build competence for teaching a diverse population.

The Need for Culturally-Relevant Literature

All children need to see themselves reflected in the literature they read and the literature that teachers present to them. Our classrooms need to be places where all children from all cultures in American society can find their mirrors (Sims Bishop, 1990). At the same time, children from the dominant cultural groups need to have books about the reality of others who are not like them so they can view themselves as a part of the larger community, one in which the importance of their cultural group is not the sole focus.

Peter Murrell (2002) suggests that culturally-relevant children's literature can play a major part in the identity development of African-American children. But, in order for this to happen, the books must be a part of the curriculum. Getting them into the hands of candidates is a first step in getting them into the hands of the African-American children they may teach one day.

This project was an attempt to offer an experience for teacher candidates to learn about African-American children's literature while at the same time developing their foundation for what makes texts culturally relevant to the community in which they were teaching and learning.

Developing an Idea

The teacher education candidates in this project were involved in a nationally-recognized, immersive, and culturally-relevant teacher education program called Schools Within the Context of Communities (SCC), in which they take all of their courses at a community center in a low-income, African-American community near the university campus for a semester (Zygmunt & Clark, 2015). The candidates complete their practica experiences in the elementary school in the morning and then take their university courses in the afternoon at the community center, with the five faculty members (the authors of this manuscript) providing experiences, facilitation, and instruction in an integrated fashion. After school, the elementary children come to the community center for three hours of after-school programming, led by licensed teachers who are assisted by candidates. In addition to their in-school and after-school work with children, the candidates attend many community-based activities such as religious services, community council meetings, community clean ups, fundraisers, school open houses, and school chili suppers, to name a few. Each candidate is also matched with a host family whose members serve as the candidate's liaison to the community and with whom the candidate interacts professionally, personally, and socially throughout the semester. The SCC faculty members strive to create a circle of practice that includes faculty, parents, community-engaged educators, and cooperating teachers who work toward improving education for children in the school and community while at the same time educating the preservice teachers (Murrell, 2001).

Three of the faculty members who led this project are White women, one is a White man, and one is an African woman who was raised in Kenya and came to America as an adult. The idea for this project was born when teacher candidates involved in the SCC Program began asking the faculty members for suggestions regarding children's literature to use with the children in the after-school program. All of the faculty members had some background in multicultural children's literature, but they were uncomfortable giving advice about the texts. They believed that because they did not come from this community they were not experts on which books would be best to use with the African-American children in the program. They decided to enlist the help of the candidates in discovering how to determine which books would be used in the after-school program. Together with the candidates, they developed a process for determining a collection of books to present to community members for their review and approval.

Determining Evaluation Criteria

To start the process of discovering the best children's books, the candidates were tasked with finding existing evaluation criteria on the Internet. They spent several hours searching for checklists, rubrics, and descriptors. A Google document was created, and as candidates found criteria for evaluating African-American children's literature, they added those criteria to the document. Once they began to find duplication, they ended the criteria search and the result was a checklist (see Appendix A), which was later used to evaluate the books. This search offered a purposeful experience for candidates to become familiar with awards given to diverse children's literature and writers, such as the Coretta Scott King Award, the Carter G. Woodson Book Award, the Children's African Book Awards, and the Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Candidates also became familiar with blogs, Facebook pages, and sites recommending diverse literature, such as Just Us Books, Black Threads in Kids Lit, Children Kissed by the Sun, The Brown Bookshelf, A Mighty Girl, Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature, and Ashay by the Bay. They looked at publishers and distributors of books for African-American children, including Brown Sugar & Spice Book Educational Services, Lee and Low Books, and Black Books Direct, as well as organizations that focus on issues related to multicultural children's literature and education, such as the Cooperative Children's Book Center and Teaching Tolerance. Taken together, the lists, blogs, and publishers fostered the development of a foundation of knowledge and understanding of African-American children's literature for the candidates.

Finding High-Quality Books

To begin searching for high-quality books, candidates
created a database in Google Docs and began to add book information. Candidates developed a guideline that each book must be listed on at least two award lists, booklists, or book review sites to be included on the database. This process allowed the instructors to discuss issues of how to determine a reliable source. That is, they explored how to find and evaluate the credentials of the organization or author of the list. To determine if the creator of the booklist or review was credible, they examined the type of web site (i.e., government, commercial, university, non-profit), as well as the credentials of the list's author. Candidates looked to see if the booklist's author had experience creating lists about diverse cultures or if there were other links to academic articles and resources to support the booklist's development.

At the end of two weeks, the candidates had a list of books on the database that had been recommended by at least two credible sources, and they began collecting the books to read. Books came from a variety of sources: instructors' collections, public libraries, elementary teachers' libraries, bookstores, and library sales.

**Reading and Reviewing the Books**

Candidates collected over 100 books to read and review. In small groups they skimmed the books and sorted them into categories by theme. As the candidates read the books there were many interesting conversations. The conversation topics included wonderings such as, "Why are there so few books with multiracial families?"; "Why are there few variations in the skin tones and hair colors of the people in the illustrations?"; "Why are there so many books focused on slavery, discrimination, and segregation?"; and "How will the children respond to dialogue written in African-American dialect?" The instructors circulated around the room and stopped at each group to facilitate discussions about these topics as they ensued. Rather than the instructors deciding a priori what the topic of discussion would be during class time, sorting the books offered an opportunity for these topics to authentically emerge.

Since the candidates designed the checklist, they had the book evaluation criteria in mind as they read and reviewed the books, and they also considered the children they knew from their practica classrooms and from the after-school program at the community center. The sorting and evaluation process narrowed the collection into 66 books, all of which met the evaluation criteria and had been recommended by two reliable sources. The books were made available to the candidates who read them during their lunch time and after classes were over for the day. With each phase of the project, candidates became familiar with more of the books until they were ultimately acquainted with the entire collection. Finally, the groups sorted the books into categories and named the categories: Folktales & Fairy Tales, Culture & Traditions, Race & Self-Acceptance, Friendship & Family, Slavery & Segregation, and Reaching Goals.

**Preparing Booktalks**

The candidates selected one of the themes and became a facilitator for the community members' reviews of the books in that theme on the day of the literacy event. Candidates selected two books from their theme for which they prepared booktalks. The booktalks provided an opportunity for the students to practice the skill of introducing, creating interest in, summarizing, and “selling” a book.

**Inviting Community Members**

Because the SCC immersive experience was in its third year, the faculty members were embedded in the community and had established a high level of trust with community members. Invitations to the literacy event were sent via US mail and e-mail, which were accepted by parents, clergy members, teachers, school administrators, family members, day care staff, community center personnel, local politicians, local business people, church members, and the principal of the elementary school. As the 20 community members checked in on the day of the event, they received a nametag and a small bag containing pens, sticky notes, and colored dots that they would use for voting on the books. The community members were assigned one table at which to begin their reviews. Three candidates were stationed at each table, and each table contained books pertaining to one of the themes. Signs with the themes were at each table along with the evaluation rubric for reference.

An introduction was made by faculty welcoming the participants and reminding the community members that they were the experts on their children and that the faculty and candidates were grateful to them for sharing their expertise—that the faculty and candidates had much to learn from them. At each table the candidates gave one booktalk for one of their favorite books in that category. As they listened to the booktalks, community members took notes that they later shared with candidates. Participants then skimmed and read the books at the table. It was expected that the community members would give their critiques and insights about the children's literature, but what actually happened was more valuable. The participants began to tell stories about their childhoods that related to the books. They talked about how a book evoked fond memories for them. They talked about how they had recently experienced discrimination, similar to what happened in the book in the 1960s. They talked about their struggles with their skin color and with their hair. They talked about participating in sit-ins at lunch counters and about marching in protest rallies during the Civil Rights Movement. They talked about remembering when the local public pool first opened to African Americans and how they felt about that. They talked about recently being denied entry to a wedding ceremony because they were African-American. They talked about how their family came up from the South, as in *The Great Migration* (Lawrence, 1993) or that they were descendants of the Ibo people as in the book, *In the Time of the Drums* (Siegelson, 1999). The candidates, most of whom were White, had never heard firsthand accounts of these types of experiences before. One of the candidates said:

*One of the books was about Michael Jordan, and that was a powerful one. One of the community members was reading it, and it was amazing how she just brought it to life and connected with it. It was really wonderful to see how the community members could connect with these books. They...*
said that certain people they know looked like the ones in the book, and they thought that their stories would connect with the children.

In addition, the participants talked about how specific children in the community would love certain books and why. This was especially poignant because the candidates knew the children to whom the community members referred. The candidates made connections with the participants and felt honored to have heard their stories. One candidate expressed this:

*Being able to join with the community members to pick those books out...literature opens up people in a way nothing else can. They would start tearing up and have these amazing stories of their own to tell. It was absolutely amazing!*  

After the participants had reviewed all the books at one table, added comments on sticky notes to the books, and made notations to themselves about the books, they moved to the next table containing the next category of books.

Once participants had visited each table and reviewed all of the books, they were told they could place only one colored sticker on each book until they used all of their ten dots. As they made their decisions, participants referred to their notes, and talked to one another before placing their votes. All of this talk was processed by the candidates and helped them understand more clearly why community members placed value on certain aspects of the books. In the end, the 22 books with the most dots were included on the list (See Appendix B). The books were taken into the room where lunch was served, and the “winning” books were announced.

Realizations Made

There were several important outcomes of this event. The candidates were able to observe and learn which books the community members preferred and why. Some of the books that were favorites of the candidates were not chosen by the community members. The candidates were able to hear firsthand what the community members liked and disliked about the books, what memories the community members had about the topics in the books, how the community members believed the children in the community would react to the books, and the degree to which the community members believed the themes and topics in the books accurately portrayed their history and daily realities. For example, one parent said:

*Coming to the literacy event here as a parent and a community member, it gave me a chance to say, "This looks like a fine book, but this is not one I would want my child reading. This is a little bit too strong—a little bit too harsh". Or,"it's a little bit too fake. It's not realistic. They can't relate to this!"*

Most importantly candidates saw the value in holding the community as knowledge experts in the instructional process. They saw how this project positioned the community members as experts and how that positioning strengthened the relationship between the university and the community. Candidates were able to see the value in eliciting the perspective of the community in helping them choose what is culturally relevant for the children they teach. This experience gave them a framework for understanding how important understanding the culture of children is in planning instruction for them. As one candidate said:

*It definitely reminded me that since I may not be a member of these communities I may be teaching in—that I might not identify with them directly, it is important to have conversations with them and interactions with them that will let me know what they need as a community, what their values are, and what they want to see in the literature that their kids are reading.*

Following Up after the Literacy Event

Sets of the 22 books were donated to a variety of agencies and organization in the community, including a day care center, preschool, church, and community center. In addition, sets were given to the elementary school. To maintain momentum after the literacy event, additional events were held to introduce community members to the canon of children's literature chosen during the event at one of the churches and at the Community Council meeting. An article published in the local paper that gave the list of the top-ranked books helped publicize the event.

The literature continues to get wide exposure in the community, where many of the community members noted that they were not even aware books like this existed for their children. Some pilots of curriculum development have been offered to the community and are being used in a local day care center as well as an after-school program. Books from the collection are used extensively by candidates in planning classroom lessons and guided reading lessons for their tutoring sessions with children. Pertinent books have been used to develop a week-long Civil Rights Unit in the after-school program. During the next academic year candidates in the teacher education program will develop expansive culturally-relevant literacy curriculum around these books that will be used by all the classroom teachers in the elementary school. The future impact of this project is still evolving.

This project is an excellent example of how cross-cultural communication can be achieved (Gay, 2002). Candidates, university faculty members, and community members came together and learned from each other in a circle of practice (Murrell, 2001). The community members were introduced to the high-quality and culturally-relevant literature. The candidates were able to listen to the points of views of the community members and see how they rated the books, and the university faculty members learned from observing the interaction between the two groups.

In their research and development of a tool for observation and assessment of culturally-responsive literacy instruction, Powell and Rightmyer (2011) present criteria for parent collaboration that includes honoring community funds of knowledge and using that to plan for instruction. Because this was a positive experience for all involved, there is likely to be more involvement by community members when they are asked to participate in future events. Candidates have experienced a successful model for how to meaningfully plan and involve parents in a way that honors their funds of
knowledge and one that may foster the learning of students of diverse backgrounds by creating a new balance of power between the community, the university, and the school. These connections to the community resources will result in greater teaching and learning (Au, 2011).

This project also has implications for how higher education trains teachers. Teacher education programs must change in ways that make community-based practica experiences for candidates more available. It is nearly impossible to develop a theoretical and practical understanding of culturally-relevant instruction if candidates are not immersed in communities as they develop their teaching knowledge and dispositions. This project can be an example of the fundamental principle of immersing candidates in the community in order to assist them in developing an understanding of culturally-relevant instruction and helping them learn to develop community-school partnerships. As one of the faculty members in this project stated:

>This is probably one of the most significant events I have had with preservice teachers and the community coming together in a truly collaborative and interactive fashion—probably one of the most significant embodiments of how community members can be enlisted as teacher educators.

Appendix A

Criteria for Evaluating African-American Children’s Literature

Relevance to the Child
- Are the situations in the book realistic ones children in this community could experience?
- Can the child see her or himself within the story (relate)?
- Does the book show positive role models?
- Does the book reflect the history of the students in this community?
- Is the overall message of the story positive or negative?

Illustrations
- Do the illustrations accurately show African American culture and people?
- Are the story and/or illustrations offensive?
- Do the illustrations show people with varied skin, eye, and hair colors?

Cultural Appropriateness
- Does the book reflect the values, traditions, histories, and experiences of this culture?
- Does the literature show the strong religious ties in the African American community?
- Does the book focus on the wide range of experiences of African Americans—not just in the South?
- Does this book portray the strength of the African American family?
- Does the book dispel prejudices instead of enhancing them?
- Does the book make race seem like a problem to be fixed?
- How does this book portray African Americans as a people (e.g., strong, proud, weak)?
- Does the literature emphasize that not just a few leaders were in charge of change in the African American community?

Language:
- Does the book use offensive language, negative attitudes, or stereotypes?
- Is the dialogue in the book culturally authentic?
- Is the language used by the narrator or main character language children would hear in an African American family or community?

Credibility
- Does the book have any culturally meritorious awards, such as the Coretta Scott King Award?
- Are the author and illustrator African American?
- Are there any citations in the book showing research has been done?
- Has the author experienced the culture and/or is a part of the culture?

Appendix B

Final Booklist

References


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Asking the Right Questions: An Updated Checklist to Facilitate the Evaluation of Informal Reading Inventories

Kathleen McGrath, Kayla Jaehn, Stephanie Kowalski, MaKayla Olden McGee, Jessica Templin

Abstract

Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs) can be a valuable tool for examining reading abilities, determining instructional strengths and needs, and ultimately, facilitating high-quality instructional decisions. Arguably, in the current educational climate, with emphasis placed on evidence-based instruction, progress monitoring, and the evaluation of program effectiveness, the formative information provided by IRIs is even more important for responsive instruction. However, finding an IRI that will meet assessment needs for all students can be a complex task. Educational professionals, especially advanced literacy specialist candidates, should be knowledgeable about IRIs, the particular assessment information that can be gleaned from them, as well as the nuances across IRIs that lend advantages and disadvantages to different contexts and different children. Our hope is that the Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist (IRIEC) will be a helpful and user-friendly resource in facilitating this critical thinking.

Background

There are many challenges facing educators of the 21st century. Reform initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, and the Common Core State Standards, have led to a heightened focus on educational accountability. Despite the best intentions of many, we have entered an era of what some have termed a “testing frenzy,” (Flippo, Holland, McCarthy & Swinning, 2009) where the emphasis has been placed on the prolific evaluation of student progress and program effectiveness through use of formal measures such as standardized tests. While formal measures provide valuable summative information, many educators argue that these measures are limited in terms of the formative information they may provide, or in their ability to guide instruction (Gillet, Temple, & Crawford, 2011; Lipson & Wixson, 2003; Nilsson, 2013; Spinelli, 2008; Stiggins, 2004).

According to Manzo & Manzo (2013), the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) is the “quintessential performance-based assessment” (p. 241). IRIs are individually administered formative assessments that provide “windows” of insight into reading abilities including decoding skills, sight word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. They typically include graded sight vocabulary word lists and passages ranging from the preprimer level to middle or high school levels. Students may read these passages orally or silently, then produce a retelling and respond to comprehension questions. Oral readings allow educators to perform a running record and subsequent miscue analysis, which provide information as to abilities across phonemic awareness, phonic, and fluency, including rate, accuracy, and prosody (i.e., pitch, tempo, intonation). Additionally, IRIs might include measures of prior knowledge, as well as provide insight into the student’s engagement with text.

Nilsson (2013) asserts that the IRI continues to be a valuable tool for examining reading abilities, determining instructional needs, and guiding instruction (see also, Allen & Hancock, 2008; Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2006; Ford & Opitz, 2008; Kennedy, 2004; Li & Zhang, 2004; Luckner & Bowen, 2006; McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petroski, 2008; Rush, 2004; Spear-Swerling, 2004). First, IRIs are versatile and flexible; educators can probe multiple ages and instructional ranges, use IRIs as pre/post measures to gauge literacy growth, or use them in combination with other measures to provide a comprehensive picture of a student’s literacy abilities. Second, by their inherent nature, IRIs allow insights not possible with assessment options, particularly computerized assessments where students work independently and often under time constraints. Instead, sitting side-by-side, teachers can both hear and see what strategies the child is using or not using. Finally, IRIs offer a relatively quick and inexpensive assessment option as compared to other options.

Although IRIs have been touted as a valuable resource in evaluating reading abilities and informing instruction, they have also come under harsh criticism, some arguing that their “utility is severely limited” (Spector, 2005, p. 601) by their lack of reported reliability and that the IRIs that do report reliability do not adequately meet the minimum criteria established by Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (as cited by Spector, 2005, American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). In fact, Spector cautions, “any test—no matter how informal—has the potential for harm if the information it provides is imprecise or misleading” (pp. 599–600). Others have noted additional limitations of IRIs including the extensive training and professional development required for effective selection and administration of IRIs, as well as the accurate interpretation of their results (Paris & Hoffman, 2004; Nilsson, 2013).

In contrast, Manzo and Manzo (2013) argue that “it is this kind of thinking that poses the greater danger to the vitality of the field and the consequent services that reading educators are equipped to provide to children” (p. 242), purporting that IRIs are useful tools that should be considered as a series of options to be used purposefully and flexibly to inform instruction.

In the last decade, it is clear that authors of IRIs have considered the criticisms put forth by Spector (2005)
and others (e.g., Walpole & McKenna, 2006), and many have addressed the issues of validity and reliability raised in this body of work. As well, there have been many edition updates that have increased the potential of the IRI to become a cost-efficient instrument with even greater applications. Nonetheless, educators and researchers are advised to become “informed and critical consumers of IRIs in order to make smart choices in selecting IRIs and choosing specific IRI components well suited to their needs” (Nilsson, 2013, p. 228).

These issues are particularly critical for the consideration of literacy-specialists-in-training. Indeed, ILA Standard 3 requires candidates “use a variety of assessment tools and practices to plan and evaluate effective reading and writing instruction” (IRA, 2010) and that “teacher educators who specialize in literacy play a critical role in preparing teachers for multifaceted assessment responsibilities: (IRA, 2010). Becoming informed and critical consumers of IRIs should be an important part of a literacy specialist’s training.

In 2009, Flippo et al. took on this task through the development of a checklist that would guide the thoughtful analysis of an IRI. This checklist provides practitioners not only with a quick and easy means for evaluating IRIs, but facilitates informed decisions about the suitability of a given IRI relative to assessment and instructional need.

Eight years later, in the wake of tremendous educational reform initiatives, as well as the current climate which reflects a heavy focus on testing, our team, in a similar graduate class activity, collaborated to update the checklist, mindful that the Informal Reading Inventory continues to be an effective tool for assessing reading abilities, providing formative information, and informing instruction.

Our Take

In the Fall of 2015, our team participated in the capstone course of the Advanced Literacy Specialist program, Reading Difficulties: Identification and Intervention. The goal of this course was to explore assessment and instruction from the lens of Response to Intervention Tier III.

As one of our class activities, we were given the article written by Flippo et al. (2009), as well as their checklist for use in evaluating several popular IRIs, identified by Applegate et al. (2006), as the most widely disseminated IRIs. These included: Analytical Reading Inventory, 10th edition (ARI; Woods & Moe, 2014); Bader Reading and Language Inventory, 7th edition (B-RI; Bader & Pearce, 2013); Basic Reading Inventory 11th edition (BRI; Johns, 2012); Classroom Reading Inventory, 12th edition (CRI; Wheelock, Campbell, & Silvaroli, 2011); Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, 6th edition (ESRI; Ekwall & Cockrum, 2013); Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System: Grades K-2 (Fountas, 2008); Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6; Leslie & Caldwell, 2017); Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 5th edition (RIC; Flynt & Cooter, 2007).

With the ultimate goal of sharing our evaluation with the rest of the class, each team chose one of the IRIs and used the checklist to facilitate its evaluation. While using this checklist, we found that we had many suggestions about how it could be updated to reflect what we were learning in class, as well as the current educational climate. As students, and also as teachers, we wanted more clarification on certain questions and more applicable questions to aid in the comprehensive evaluation and selection of an IRI.

During the subsequent class debriefing, we discussed specific ways the checklist had guided our evaluations and possible ways it could be updated to better capture the nuances across IRIs that lend advantages and disadvantages to different contexts and different children. We felt invited to do so based on the suggestion made by Flippo et al. (2009): “Teachers may naturally want to add their own questions to customize our list for an even better fit with their specific classroom needs” (p. 80).

Our Process

Over the next semester, our team worked to update the original checklist, using the twelve steps, as outlined by Stufflebeam (2012), for developing a sound evaluation checklist. These steps include:

1. Focus the checklist task
2. Make a candidate list of checkpoints
3. Classify and sort the checkpoints
4. Define and flesh out the categories
5. Determine the order of categories
6. Obtain initial reviews of the checklist
7. Revise the checklist content
8. Delinate and format the checklist to serve the intended uses
9. Evaluate the checklist
10. Finalize the checklist
11. Apply and disseminate the checklist
12. Periodically review and revise the checklist (pp. 2-3).

The final product of our work can be seen in Figure 1: Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist (IRIEC).

We use the following sections to outline and discuss this process: (1) Checklist creation, (2) Checklist field-testing and revision, (3) Final checklist development.

Checklist Creation

Initially, we met to discuss potential revisions to the checklist as well as to begin brainstorming our ideas for its update. We also completed a review of the literature on IRIs. During our brainstorming session, we determined what we wanted to take from the original checklist, then began adding our own ideas and questions, which were based upon our review of the literature, with the goal of keeping the integrity of the original checklist. Mindful that the educational climate has dramatically changed in the last decade, we considered how recent initiatives might have impacted revisions of IRIs during this timeframe and how expanded questions might help educational professionals make informed decisions about IRI adoption.

For example, Nilsson (2013) points out that federal guidelines specify that schools receiving Reading First grants must utilize screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional assessments that have proven validity and reliability (Department of Education, 2002). In light of the heavy criticism of IRIs’ traditional handling of this aspect, as well as the fact that many IRI authors have addressed this issue, our update includes explicit questions for the consideration of content validity and reliability that were...
The Common Core Standards-ELA were also considered in our update, specifically its call for an interdisciplinary approach to literacy instruction with a greater emphasis on informational text (National Governors Association Center, 2010). We included questions that would capture insights as to the IRIs ability to provide a lens into students' abilities for handling the specific demands for successful reading of expository text.

Additionally, we considered factors illuminated by Nilsson's (2013) evaluation of eight IRIs including evidence of content validity, provision of passage genre options, passage length, provision picture and graphic supplements, provision of comprehension/recall measures, form equivalence/reliability, and measurements of vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Also given thought were extraneous variables that can impact comprehension including measures of prior knowledge (Bader, 2013; Johns, 2012; Leslie & Caldwell, 2017; Wheelock, Campbell, & Silvaroli, 2011; Woods & Moe, 2014), emotional status (Woods & Moe, 2014), and level of engagement (Johns, 2012).

After the initial brainstorming session, we classified and sorted our questions and developed categories including: (1) Overall assessment needs, (2) Technical aspects, (3) Content and skills assessed, (4) Comprehension (5) Administration (6) Interpretation (7) Ancillary supports (8) Reflection. Although most of the categories were easily identified, we deliberated about designating a separate category for comprehension because it can be categorized as a skill area and therefore, could have been included in the Content and skills assessed category. It was decided that because there are so many aspects involved in comprehension (e.g. monitoring, visualizing, inferencing), a separate category was warranted to better capture the many nuances involved in comprehension.

To clarify each category, we developed working definitions that were used to finalize our categories. As well, we continued to add, subtract, and rewrite the questions to better reflect our categories and their respective definitions. Ultimately our working definitions were abridged to form our headings.

After the checkpoints had been grouped, a determination was made regarding the ordering of the categories. Our categories start with broad considerations of the IRI, move to more focused considerations of individual aspects, and then end with an overall reflection of the IRI as a whole. The logic behind this decision is as follows: if the IRI could not suit broad needs, such as its ability to assess specific age/grade level(s) or specific student populations, the evaluator might stop there and move on to another IRI. If broad needs were met, the evaluator could progress through the checklist to consider more focused issues that differ across IRIs. The final reflection section allows for the evaluator to consider the IRI holistically.

Once the checklist categories and individual checkpoints have been appropriately sequenced, Stufflebeam (2012) recommends that the checklist be reviewed by potential users who are instructed to provide written, critical reviews of the checklist. This feedback is then utilized to continue to refine, clarify, and more fully develop the checklist.

Checklist Field-testing and Revision

The first iteration of field-testing took place during the spring of 2016, with a group of seventeen Advanced Literacy Specialist candidates who were participating in a clinical level diagnostic course entitle: Reading Difficulties: Identification & Intervention — the course we had taken the prior semester prior. Because this course is the capstone course in the program, we felt the participants would have enough background knowledge on IRIs to be able to critically analyze our draft and to be able to provide useful feedback on its continued development.

The class was divided into groups of two to three students; each group was given one IRI to review, using the checklist as a guide. Groups were asked to highlight any questions that were unclear, poorly worded, or unnecessary. As well, we asked each group to provide any additional comments or feedback that would be helpful in our continued revision of the checklist.

We took the feedback that we received from the graduate students and continued to update and add points that were necessary. The students thought it might be more applicable to keep the language teacher-friendly. We agreed it was important to keep the checklist teacher-friendly, yet wanted to keep it technically specific for clarity. We changed some of the wording to reflect this suggestion, but were mindful that our wording needed to be specific enough to be helpful to other educational professionals who might be involved in the review of an IRI including literacy specialists, school psychologists, and administrators.

After reflecting upon the revisions made during the first iteration of our field-testing, another draft was created for a second iteration of field-testing that included two elementary level classroom teachers and two certified literacy specialists. This group was asked to review the checklist and provide feedback as to its practicality, as well as highlight any questions that were unclear, poorly worded, or unnecessary. We asked one certified literacy specialist and a graduate of our program to use the checklist as a guide to evaluate the newest edition of the Qualitative Reading Inventory-6.

Although feedback was positive and suggested that the checklist was a helpful tool they could use in the future to better evaluate IRIs and their assessment process, there were additional recommendations for revision. For example, we added questions regarding the extent of technical support, such as on-line forms, websites, blogs, on-line frequently asked questions, and YouTube ™ links.
Final Checklist Development

We accessed a checklist template from Microsoft Word™, created a final draft, and used this draft for our final iteration of field-testing. During this iteration, the research team used the checklist to evaluate the following IRIs: Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, 6th edition (ESRI; Shanker & Cockrum, 2013), Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6; Leslie & Caldwell, 2016), and Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 5th edition (RIC; Flynt & Cooter, 2007).

During the final iteration, we discovered that we needed to develop questions that would allow for the evaluation of other extraneous factors not addressed during earlier drafts. For example, when analyzing the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, 6th edition (ESRI; Shanker & Cockrum, 2013), we realized we needed to include questions as to the IRI’s ability to assess dictionary skills, visual and auditory letter knowledge, and whether there was ELA Common Core alignment. After examining Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 5th edition (RIC; Flynt & Cooter, 2007), we added sub-questions about report writing and interest/attitude surveys. Finally, after reviewing, the Qualitative Reading Inventory-6 (QRI-6; Leslie & Caldwell, 2017), we expanded our questions regarding validity and reliability (see Figure 1 for Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist).

Future Considerations

We have reached the steps Stufflebeam (2012) refer to as “apply and disseminate the checklist” as well as “periodically review and revise” (p. 10). He writes, “Whenever one disseminates a checklist, it is wise to invite feedback describing and assessing the applications...it is always desirable to invite users to provide critical feedback, since checklist development is an ongoing process” (p. 10).

It is in the spirit of the invitation extended by Flippo et al. (2009), that we invite educational professionals who might use this checklist to evaluate and customize it as necessary to best suit assessment and instructional needs as well as changing trends in education.

Concluding Comments

IRIs can be a valuable tool for examining reading abilities, determining instructional strengths and needs, and ultimately, facilitating high-quality instructional decisions. However, nuances across IRIs lend themselves better to particular contexts, circumstances, and students. Determining “best fit” can be a complex task. Educational professionals, especially those charged with making critical assessment decisions, should be knowledgeable about IRIs and their potential for facilitating high-quality instruction. Our hope is that educators charged with evaluating and selecting IRIs will find this updated checklist user-friendly and a helpful resource in determining the IRI that will best suit assessment goals and needs.
Informal Reading Inventory Evaluation Checklist

Informal Reading Inventory: _____________________________________________________________
Edition and Year: ___________________________________________________________________
Evaluator: ___________________________________________________________________________
Date of Evaluation: ___________________________________________________________________

The IRIEC is designed to aid in the evaluation of an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI). The following questions were developed to help educational professionals (1) consider the IRI broadly, (2) consider more focused aspects such as the IRI’s ability to illuminate specific reading abilities, and (3) reflect on the IRI as a whole. Taken together, these elements will illuminate which IRIs might best suit specific assessment needs, goals, and purposes.
Place a checkmark where appropriate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Assessment Needs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the IRI align with what you are assessing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI include the grade level or range of grade levels you would like to assess?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI include assessments for pre-readers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI address diverse populations</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Language Learners?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students with IEP/504 plan?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI align with Common Core State Standards (e.g. ELA/Lexile)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does this IRI overlap with classroom assessment and/or outside testing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can the IRI be used for group assessments?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Technical Aspects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has content validity been established?</td>
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<tr>
<td>_ Research based?</td>
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<tr>
<td>_ Field tested?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has reliability been established?</td>
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<tr>
<td>_ Research based?</td>
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<tr>
<td>_ Field tested?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Passages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the IRI include a balance of expository and narrative passages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider the length of passages. Are they adequate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are passages high interest and relevant?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do the reading passages rely heavily on background knowledge for comprehension?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the IRI include pictures or illustrations appropriate to the text or other commonly used contextual aids?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the passages available in alternate languages?</td>
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### Skills Assessed

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<td>Background knowledge?</td>
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<td>Predicting?</td>
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<td>Sight Words?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Concepts about print?</td>
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<td>Word analysis skills (e.g. chunking, beginning/ending sounds, context clues)?</td>
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<td>Letter knowledge/alphabets?</td>
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<td>Fluency?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>__Accuracy</td>
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<td>__Automaticity</td>
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<td>__Prosodoy</td>
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<td>Writing?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Listening comprehension/Listening capacity?</td>
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### Comprehension Skills & Strategies

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do the comprehension questions assess __background knowledge?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__explicit comprehension?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__implicit comprehension?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are there enough comprehension and vocabulary questions per selection?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Does the IRI assess comprehension strategies?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__Monitoring?</td>
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<td>__Visualizing?</td>
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<td>__Inferencing?</td>
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<td>__Connecting?</td>
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<td>__Predicting?</td>
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<td>__Questioning?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>__Synthesizing?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__Summarizing</td>
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### Administration

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does the author provide explanations for each subtest?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are tips for preparation or administration given?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Does the author provide multiple uses for subtests?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are the data sheets provided adequate?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there a way to determine at what level to start passage administration (e.g. word lists?)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__sight words embedded in sentences or phrases?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__sight words embedded in text?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__sight words out of context?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can a teacher easily administer this with his/her own choice of reading selections?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you agree with the miscue analysis procedures?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are instructions provided for interpreting results?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are the results of this IRI going to prove to be an effective use of my time?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI provide suggestions for instruction?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI provide specific guidelines for determining different levels?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provides template to report findings (e.g., administration, colleagues, and/or parents)?</td>
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<td>Does the IRI provide suggestions for specialist referral options?</td>
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<th>Ancillary Supports</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are all forms included with original purchase?</td>
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<tr>
<td>____ Is a disk included?</td>
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<td>____ Are there multiple forms of each test per level</td>
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<td>Are there technology supports?</td>
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<td>____ on-line forms?</td>
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<td>____ website?</td>
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<td>____ blog?</td>
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<td>____ on-line training support?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the IRI have a glossary of assessment terms?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Reflection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, is the IRI easy to use, understand and suit my purposes for assessment?</td>
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<th>Additional Notes</th>
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References


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Book Review

Title: Reading Instruction in America [2015]

Author: Dr. Barbara Ruth Peltzman
Reviewer: Dr. Terrence V. Stange, Professor, Marshall University, Graduate College

The Author and Scholar, Dr. Barbara Peltzman, is an Associate Professor of Education, St. John’s University, School of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Staten Island Campus, located on Staten Island, New York. Her research interests include literacy, children’s literature and early childhood, to name a few. Dr. Peltzman was voted Outstanding Education Professor by her Staten Island students in 2015!
The Audience of her scholarly work will discover a:

Comprehensive text exploring reading education methods from 19th – 21st Century
Noteworthy text for teachers investigating methods to use in their classrooms
Exceptional resource highlighting prominent Pioneers in the field of reading
Significant text for conducting research in reading at the University/College level

The Text will capture the interest and attention of educators in the field of reading education, for many purposes, including the timesaving benefit of annotated bibliographies in each Chapter. The well-written annotations are practical and provide an opportunity to review references and determine quickly/efficiently that the citation will be useful for specific research. For example, if you peruse the Chapter on Readability, you can review the Bibliography, read the annotations, and discover research to support your own scholarly work on the topic.

The Table of Contents reveals many, varied methods of reading instruction in America over time. There are at least thirty [30] instructional methods referred to in the text, addressed in chronological order and defined to help teachers in the classroom, including some examples such as the Initial Teaching Alphabet, the Four Blocks Framework, Emergent Literacy and Reading-Writing Workshops. The strategies can be adapted/tailored to both individualized and group instruction. Like, Dr. Peltzman, I favor flexible approaches to reading instruction to best meet the needs of students in the classroom.

There is an extraordinary appeal to the author’s presentation of
the Chapters about many Pioneers in the field of reading instruction, including and beginning in 1778 with Noah Webster, Jr. and William Holmes McGuffey in 1826! Not only does Dr. Peltzman describe the influences and achievements of phenomenal leaders in American education, but she also manages to reveal the human side to their experiences and expertise.

After I read the text, Reading Instruction in America, I immediately added it to my Bibliography for advanced level practicum courses for Candidates pursuing Degrees in Reading Education. The text will be a valuable addition to the references outlined in their assigned reading and course requirements. Thank you to Dr. Peltzman for her dedication of time and expertise in writing this book.

The Reviewer, Terrence V. Stange, Ph.D., is a Professor at Marshall University, Graduate College, Reading Education, S Charleston, West Virginia, United States. Dr. Stange earned his Ph.D. in Reading at The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. He teaches both graduate foundation and advanced level graduate reading courses for Candidates pursuing a Master’s Degree or Certification in Reading Education. Dr. Stange’s current research interests include listening comprehension, reading language assessment, text level complexity, and children’s capacity and potential to progress.
The Reading Professor Vol. 39 No. 1, Spring, 2017

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