Textbooks and Trade Books: A Statewide Investigation of Texts Used in Undergraduate-Level Children’s Literature Courses

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Abstract

Learning about children’s literature should be both highly valued and respected as a critically important instructional component in preparing future teachers. Limited literature is available that explores preparation efforts with children's literature among preservice teachers, and no known studies specifically explore the types of textbooks and trade books used in children's literature courses. The current study used a qualitative research design to identify both the required textbooks and supplementary resources that are used in children's literature courses offered among educator preparation programs in the state of Texas. Data were collected from publicly available course syllabi from 52 undergraduate-level children's literature courses taught in educator preparation programs across Texas. Data were analyzed using content analysis techniques, which identified the titles of the most commonly used textbooks, along with patterns of recurrent topics addressed in these textbooks. Data analyses also generated a list of commonly used children's literature trade books that were used as supplemental course texts. Findings from this study have suggested that exposure and exploration of a wide variety of textbooks and trade books in children's literature courses has the potential to enhance preservice teachers' appreciation of children's literature, as well as enhance their pedagogical, theoretical, and literature understandings.

Keywords: children's literature, preservice teachers, preparation, textbooks, trade books

High-quality children's literature texts are motivational and evocative resources that can support the literacy development of students. Teachers who effectively use children's literature in their classrooms help students develop important literacy skills while fostering a love for reading (Tunks, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). Therefore, learning about children's literature should be highly valued and respected as a critically important instructional component in preparing future teachers (Hoewisch, 2010). In order to maximize the potential benefits associated with using children's literature in the classroom, preservice teachers must build their knowledge of how to effectively select and use children's literature in the classroom. This often occurs as a result of their experiences and exposure to acclaimed books during children's literature courses taken as part of their educator preparation programs (Tunks, et al., 2015).

Each state typically has an agency that oversees licensure requirements and professional standards for teacher certification. In Texas, the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) has developed standards for beginning teachers that align with the required state curriculum standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) (Texas Education Agency, 2017). The following English Language Arts and Reading standards address what Early Childhood - 6th Grade (EC-6) teachers should comprehend regarding children's literature:

The beginning teacher knows and understands:

- that reading comprehension begins with listening comprehension, and knows strategies to help students improve listening comprehension;
- how to model and teach literal comprehension skills (e.g., identifying stated main idea, details, sequence, and cause-and-effect relationships);
- factors affecting students' reading comprehension, such as oral language development, word analysis skills, prior knowledge, previous reading experiences, fluency, ability to monitor understanding, and the characteristics of specific texts (e.g., structure and vocabulary); and
- various literary genres (e.g., historical fiction, poetry, myths, and fables) and their characteristics. (p. 10)

These standards have also been identified as common learner outcomes associated with undergraduate-level children's literature courses offered as requirements and/or electives among university-based educator preparation programs in Texas (Sharp, Coneway, & Diego-Medrano, 2017).

Although many preservice teachers complete one or more children's literature courses during their educator preparation training, there is limited research examining the characteristics of children's literature courses and teacher preparation simultaneously (Sharp et al., 2017). In preparing for the current study, we were able to locate a plethora of research studies that explored texts used in children's literature courses involving specific learning activities and tasks (e.g., Barnes, 2006; Rule, Montgomery, & Vander Zanden, 2014; Ward, 2005; Wilson, 2013). However, we were unable to discover any research studies that specifically explored the types of texts used in children's literature courses. The paucity of prior research in this area became the impetus for the current study.

We used a qualitative research design to identify the types of texts that were required or used as supplementary resources in undergraduate-level children's literature courses offered among educator preparation programs in Texas. This research endeavor provided insights regarding the most commonly used textbooks and trade books, which also suggested patterns of concepts emphasized within children's literature courses. Findings will be useful to faculty members who teach children's literature courses, as well as
other educator preparation program stakeholders who are interested in enhancing learning among preservice teachers.

**Literature Review**

Studying children's literature may entice individuals to explore their own personal tastes with literature, examine different cultural perspectives, and learn about literary forms and elements (Joseph, 2015). Preservice teachers who critically explore and evaluate children's literature experience many benefits, such as the ability to formulate deeper responses and stronger intertextual connections (Fahrenbruck, Schall, Short, Smiles, & Storie, 2006). Exposure to culturally diverse children's literature also develops a more culturally responsive pedagogy among preservice teachers, particularly among those who have limited experiences with diversity (Barnes, 2006). Recent research revealed that preservice teachers who received more training with children's literature in their educator preparation programs used more nonfiction and informational literature, selected literature that broadened student's views of others, and shared classical children's literature texts more frequently in their future classrooms (Tunks et al., 2015). Furthermore, preservice teachers who receive a positive and enthusiastic induction into the world of children's literature are likely to pass on a love for reading among their future students (Anderson, 2013; Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman, 2007).

Exposing preservice teachers to a wide variety of high-quality literature supports their discovery and familiarity with both classical and new children's literature titles that may help their future students learn about different genres of literature and a variety of text structures (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006; Duke, 2000). Purposefully selecting and using children's literature with students during reading instruction enhances their literacy development and scaffolds their understandings with comprehension techniques, vocabulary, and important book features (Lennox, 2013; Neumann, 1999; Palinscar & Duke, 2004). Children's literature selections may also be used across the curriculum to develop knowledge and skills in a variety of content areas, build student interest, and introduce specialized vocabulary and content (Werderich, 2014).

As part of an educator preparation program, children's literature courses generally provide preservice teachers with broad knowledge about literature; focus on authors, illustrators, and poets; and provide preservice teachers with pedagogical understandings regarding effective uses of children's literature (Sharp et al., 2017). Teacher educators who address these learning outcomes in their children's literature courses will likely use textbooks and trade books to disseminate knowledge, build understandings, and model authentic uses of children's literature. In an effort to improve the quality of current preparation efforts, Hoewisch (2010) encouraged teacher educators to "systematically and carefully review our children's literature course syllabi" and "critically scrutinize" the textbooks and trade books used to prepare preservice teachers (para. 41).

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

To achieve the purpose for our study, we used a qualitative research design that encompassed purposeful sampling methods. To compile the sample, we first accessed the Texas Education Agency's (n.d.) online list of state-approved educator preparation programs (EPPs) to identify state-approved programs that offered teacher certification at the elementary grade levels (i.e., Core Subjects (Grade Level EC-6)). This search yielded 128 EPPs, which included both traditional and alternative certification programs. Due to programming differences, we determined that limiting our sample to university-based, traditional EPPs was the most appropriate choice to achieve the purpose of our study. After applying this data filter, we identified 69 eligible EPPs. Next, we carefully examined degree program requirements for each EPP and discovered that 17 EPPs did not require their preservice teachers to complete a course that specifically focused on children's literature. Therefore, we removed these EPPs from our sample, which narrowed our sample to include 52 EPPs.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The specific focus of our study was to discover the resource materials that were either required or used as supplementary texts in children's literature courses in the state of Texas. We sought to identify the most commonly used textbooks and trade books utilized within children's literature courses and to determine patterns of concepts emphasized within these educator preparation course materials. The guiding research questions for this research study were:

- What children's literature textbooks and trade books are the most commonly used in children's literature courses in the state of Texas?

- What patterns of concepts are frequently emphasized in the required and/or supplementary course materials used in children's literature courses?

Since syllabi are easily accessible documents that outline course content and usually include information about materials and texts used within a course, they are an excellent supplier of information (Priester et al., 2008). Data collection efforts entailed retrieving publicly accessible course syllabi that were published on the Internet for each children's literature course offered by the EPPs in our sample. We selected course syllabi as our data source because syllabi are informative documents that outline the content covered in a course, required materials and resources, learning tasks, and how student performance would be evaluated (Davis, 1993). Moreover, Texas state legislation enacted House Bill 2504 (2009), which mandated that all public universities make course syllabi for all credit-bearing, undergraduate-level courses available to the public on their university websites. According to this legislation, course syllabi must include several required components, including "lists of any required or recommended reading" (para. 3).

As a research team, we reviewed each course syllabus objectively and systematically using content analysis techniques (Berg, 2004; Marks & Yardley, 2004; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). First, we read through each course syllabus in its entirety to gain a comprehensive understanding. Next, we read through each syllabus a second time, citing all textbooks and trade books that were referenced as course
materials. To guide our data analyses, we created literature-based differentiations for “textbook” and “trade book” (Short, Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2014). We determined that textbooks were comprehensive texts used as the primary driver of instruction in the course. Trade books, on the other hand, were children's literature texts used for specific course learning activities or tasks. Finally, we examined the textbook and trade book data to identify common patterns and themes. We created summary sheets of our findings and organized the data into the following tables. Table 1 below provides information for each required course textbook: the text title, author information, year of publication, and a summary from the publisher regarding the content within the text. Table 2 provides the title, author and year of publication for the most commonly used trade books identified through this syllabi investigation.

Table 1
Children’s Literature Textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Course Textbook</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Publisher Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s Literature Briefly (6th ed.) by Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, &amp; Bryan (2016)</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>A concise, engaging, practical overview of children’s literature that keeps the focus on the books that children read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charlotte Huck’s Children’s Literature in the Elementary School (9th ed.) by Kiefer, Hepler, &amp; Hickman (2007)</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>This classic text shows readers how children’s literature can capture the attention of K-8 students and foster a lifelong love of reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Children’s Literature: A Critical Introduction by Hintz &amp; Tribunella (2013)</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Informed by recent scholarship and interest in cultural studies and critical theory, this text introduces students to the historical contexts, genres, and issues of children’s literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature and the Child (8th ed.) by Galda, Sipe, Liang, &amp; Cullinan (2013)</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Covers the two major topical areas of children’s literature: the genres of children’s literature and the use of children’s literature in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s Books in Children’s Hands: A Brief Introduction to Their Literature (5th ed.) by Temple, Martinez, &amp; Yokota (2015)</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Designed to give pre- and in-service teachers a wealth of richly illustrated, practical ideas for sharing literature with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature for Children: A Short Introduction (8th ed.) by Russels (2015)</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A concise, accessible, text that provides a solid understanding of the foundations of children’s literature across its various genres from picture books to folk literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multicultural Children’s Literature: A Critical Issues Approach by Gopalakrishnan (2010)</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Designed to prepare K-12 pre-service and in-service teachers to address the social, cultural, and critical issues of our times through the use of multicultural children’s books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fifty Literacy Strategies: Step by Step by Tompkins (2012)</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>This conveniently organized resource book reflects the latest, most exciting ideas in literature focus units, reading/writing workshop, and thematic instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever (2nd ed.) by Fox (2008)</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Author Mem Fox reveals the incredible emotional and intellectual impact reading aloud to children has on their ability to learn to read.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We further examined each of the remaining required course textbooks, which were 11 traditional textbooks with similar content. We found that the following major topics were presented in each of the these textbooks: (a) value of quality children's literature; (b) evaluation and selection criteria; (c) historical milestones and literature trends; (d) art, illustration, and picture books; (e) instructional strategies for developing comprehension, vocabulary, and inferential language skills; (f) children's book awards, and (g) literary genres. We will provide a brief discussion of each of these main themes.

**Value of quality children’s literature.** Each of the 11 traditional children’s literature textbooks included an introductory section that defined children’s literature and provided a rationale for its value. For example, Short, Lynch-Brown, and Tomlinson (2014) highlighted the value of literature in children's lives and emphasized the importance of its aesthetic qualities, including enjoyment, identity, imagination, empathy, and literary and artistic preferences. Norton (2007) added that quality literature helps children develop emotional intelligence, while Kiefer et al. (2007) discussed the importance of storytelling, expressing that “narrative is the most common and effective way of ordering our world today” (p. 6).

**Evaluation and selection criteria.** Adults engaged in children’s lives have a responsibility for captivating children’s interest and sparking their delight in books. The texts in the analyses relayed multiple emotional and intellectual benefits that children experience when adults read aloud to them (Fox, 2008). These textbooks also underscored the sheer joy of adults and children sharing the pleasures of reading together and the influential role that teachers have in helping children develop as readers (Trelease, 2013). Teachers require practical guidelines for evaluating and selecting quality literature for classroom use (Lennox, 2013), and the textbooks in our analyses revealed this criteria through addressing specific genres. For example, Norton (2007) provided the following five objectives for selecting literature for use with children: (1) help children realize that literature is for enjoyment, (2) acquaint children with their literary heritage, (3) teach children the formal elements of literature, (4) guide children to understand themselves and the rest of humanity better, and (5) develop the ability to evaluate what children read.

**Historical milestones and literature trends.** Kiefer et al. (2007) stated, “As we study the changing history of children's literature, we find that social, cultural, and political norms have had an impact on [those] stories” (p. 71). The traditional textbooks in our analyses commonly traced the development of children's literature from the oral storytelling tradition through recent publications. Through these textbooks, preservice teachers are exposed to a variety of historical milestones and literature trends, including the theory of didacticism, the history of classic literature, the creation of postmodern literature, and the development of e-books and literature response blogs. In addition to looking at the history of children's literature globally, one of the textbooks defined the evolution of specific genres using an historical perspective (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2015). Short et al. (2014) also included easy-to-read charts highlighting significant historical milestones by literature genre.
Art, illustration, and picture books. Today's visual society demands well-developed visual literacy skills among students (Short et al., 2014; Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2016). Visual images are an integral part of children's literature because children's picture books can easily be used to demonstrate how visual images communicate ideas and convey information quickly and powerfully. Each traditional textbook in our analyses addressed art or illustrations in some manner. Many of these textbooks contained either a chapter or a section that addressed art and illustration in picture books, including artistic style, media, and visual elements.

Instructional strategies. Many of the traditional textbooks we reviewed included a chapter that addressed specific instructional strategies regarding how to use children's literature in all content areas: English language arts, reading, math, science, and social studies. Information shared in these textbooks addressed specific ways in which works of children's literature become vehicles to develop comprehension, vocabulary, and language skills among students. Additionally, Lennox (2013) asserted that the use of literature-based instructional strategies across the curriculum has the potential to foster development of literacy skills, as well as a love for reading.

Children's literature book awards. Another common topic among the traditional textbooks we reviewed was children's literature book awards that recognize specific trade books, authors, and illustrators. Among these textbooks, two specific book awards were consistently presented: (a) the John Newbery Medal, which recognizes the author of the most distinguished American children's book; and (b) the Randolph Caldecott Medal, which recognizes the illustrator of the most distinguished picture book. Some of the textbooks highlighted children's literature book awards that recognized authors and illustrators for their body of works, such as the Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal. Other children's literature book awards addressed in the textbooks included:

- The Mildred L. Batchelder Award - Recognizes the most outstanding children's book originally published in a language other than English and in a country other than the United States, which was translated into English for publication in the United States.
- The Pura Belpré Award - Recognizes a Latino/Latina author and illustrator.
- The Coretta Scott King Award - Recognizes outstanding books for young adults and children by African American authors and illustrators that reflect the African American experience.
- The National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children – Recognizes a living American poet for their body of children's poetry.

Literary genres. Another common topic addressed in the traditional textbooks we reviewed was literary genres. In all of these textbooks, we found chapters that included descriptions for each literary genre, as well as salient information for each. Lennox (2013) stressed that “exposure to different genres helps children understand how various texts are organized and offers many different learning opportunities” (p. 383). The following literary genres were recognized in each textbook:

- Early childhood, picture books, traditional literature, modern fantasy, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, biography and autobiography, and informational texts.

Although most of the traditional textbooks introduced multicultural children's literature in some manner and provided insight regarding how to include diversity through literature in the classroom, one of the textbooks specifically focused on presenting multicultural children's literature through a critical literacies stance (Gopalakrishnan, 2010). This textbook described how to address significant social issues and theoretical perspectives of multiculturalism in the classroom during instruction through the use of children's literature.

Trade Books

Data analyses also revealed the presence of several trade books among course syllabi that were recorded as either required or supplementary course materials. In order to identify patterns within these trade book titles, we established the following criterion for analyses: trade book titles that were referenced only on one course syllabus were omitted. After applying this exclusion criterion, we identified 33 unique trade book titles that were commonly used in children's literature courses (see Table 2).

Analyses of these commonly used trade books revealed several patterns regarding book themes. Many trade books addressed concepts related to cultural diversity, while others focused on relevant contemporary social issues, such as racism, gender equality, immigration, and physical disabilities. The majority of trade books we reviewed were notable works of children's literature written by well-known authors and illustrated by well-respected illustrators who had been recognized with prestigious children's literature book awards. A large number of course syllabi also referenced specific trade book titles within the context of literary genres, such as:

- Greek myths - Favorite Greek Myths written by Robert Blaisdell (2012),
- fables - Aesop's Fables written by Aesop (2014),
- folktales - Favorite Folktales from Around the World edited by Jane Yolen (1988),
- fairy tales - The Blue Fairy Book edited by Andrew Lang (2012), and

We also found numerous references on course syllabi to supplementary materials, which were mainly novels, included as specific books sets, reading lists, or themed book titles. In many instances, course syllabi indicated that preservice teachers had choices with the selection of supplementary materials. For example, some of the course syllabi provided an instructor-created list of trade book titles from which preservice teachers could choose to complete a required learning activity or task. Other course syllabi referenced existing lists of trade book titles, such as a university-created reading list that accompanied their reading campaign or the Texas Library Association's Texas Bluebonnet Awards Master List. Choice with trade books was also extended to preservice teachers through lists of preselected themed book titles. In
These instances, course syllabi referenced groups of trade book titles that addressed specific themes, such as (a) racism/prejudice/immigration, (b) the Holocaust, (c) special needs/bullying, (d) lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender (LGBTQ), and (d) homelessness/poverty. Course syllabi that included themed book titles as supplementary materials instructed preservice teachers to self-select one book from the group with which to complete a specific learning activity or task. Several course syllabi also stated that the instructor would provide additional supplementary materials that were not listed on the syllabus.

We observed that *Rumpelstiltskin* by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm (1905), a beloved traditional fairy tale associated with Germany, was included in the list of commonly used trade books. While the Grimm version of this story is traditionally the most cited, it is important to mention that several authors have retold, adapted, and illustrated this classic traditional tale in many different languages and cultures.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960) was listed on two Children's Literature course syllabi, so this title was included in our findings. While most people would not categorize *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a children's book, the theme of basic human dignity is important for all children, adolescents, and adults. According to one book reviewer, "If you are a human being with emotions, this book will impact you, regardless of age, gender or background (OriTheBookworm, 2015).

**Discussion and Implications**

Children's literature courses have the potential to empower preservice teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively share high-quality literature with their future students (Serafini, 2003). Children's literature course learning outcomes generally focus on the development of personal and professional knowledge about literature among preservice teachers, as well as ways in which they may employ literature-based instructional strategies to benefit the literacy development of their future students (Sharp et al., 2017). With this in mind, the required and supplemental textbooks and trade books selected for use within children's literature courses play a significant role in shaping theoretical, pedagogical and literature understandings among preservice teachers (Serafini, 2003).

Through our investigation of texts used in children's literature courses offered across EPPs in the state of Texas, we assert that preservice teacher candidates are being exposed to quality materials and key knowledge that support their growth as effective literacy educators. Our biggest concern rests with the preservice teachers who are not required to complete a children's literature course as part of their teacher training. This phenomenon begs the following questions: How will these future teachers develop theoretical understandings that underpin the value of literature? How will these future teachers develop professional, pedagogical understandings related to effective uses of literature-based instruction? How will these future teachers further their own personal understandings of literature?

If teacher candidates are not required or encouraged to take a children's literature course, then many future teachers will not develop an appreciation for children's literature nor possess the knowledge and skills necessary to introduce young children to the world of books and the joy of reading. This is a crucial understanding that can change a child's world. Mary McLeod Bethune, a noted education advocate, shared, "The whole world opened to me when I learned to read" (National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2013, p. 8). Young children deserve well-prepared teachers who will open the world of books to them.

As new pathways emerge to prepare qualified teachers and state licensure requirements change, some EPPs have altered pre-existing requirements, such as successful completion of one or more courses in children's literature (Hoewisch, 2010; Tunks et al., 2015). Based upon our findings, we strongly recommend that educator preparation programs continue to require successful completion of at least one children's literature course. Participation in a course specific to children's literature exposes preservice teachers to rich and varied literature and cultivates their understandings regarding how to engage students with high-quality literature. We concur with Hoewisch (2010) that preservice teachers must respect and value children's literature as an important literary form that can be incorporated across the curriculum to promote the development of literacy skills among their future students. Children's literature courses are vital components within educator preparation programs.

**Limitations & Future Research**

As with any research study, there were a few limitations present with our investigation. First, our analyses of data relied solely on information that was provided in publicly accessible course syllabi that were published on the Internet. Thus, we approached our analyses of data with the assumption that each course syllabus accurately portrayed that information required by state legislation. In order to enhance validity with our findings, we recommend that follow-up research studies are conducted that utilize additional data sources, such as subjective feedback from teacher educators who teach children's literature courses. Another limitation with our study was related to our sampling methods. We limited our sample to include only university-based traditional educator preparation programs in one state and within one teaching certification area. Although these limitations narrowed our sample, they were necessary in order to achieve a representative sample. We acknowledge that differences exist among state teacher licensure agencies, alternative and traditional educator preparation programs, and even among teaching certification areas. Therefore, we recommend that future studies replicate the design of our study with these considerations in mind to investigate the types of textbooks and trade books used in children's literature courses in other states, alternative types of educator preparation programs, and additional areas of teaching certification.

**Conclusion**

Within educator preparation programs, children's literature courses provide a positive and motivating means to help preservice teachers learn about classical and contemporary literature. Through exposure to high-quality children's literature selections, preservice teachers are better equipped to impact the literacy development of their future students.
The textbooks and trade books used within children’s literature courses have the potential to provide a comprehensive and valuable way for preservice teachers to acquire a rich literary knowledge base and learn pedagogically-sound approaches to using children’s literature as a way to enhance the learning and love of reading among generations of future students.

References


### Children’s Literature Trade Book References


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