INTRODUCTION

“I shuffled through the papers on my desk again. Surely, 13 out of my 15 pre-service teachers had not written that they would not consider an urban teaching position? My path was clear. I had six months to help my students see the joys and rewards of urban teaching. A project began to form in my head.”

This was a statement I made at a faculty meeting of middle childhood education professors. As an assistant professor of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies at a Midwestern university, it is my job to help students see the benefits of teaching in all areas. Apparently, our latest placement in an urban field experience was not a success. The undergraduate students reported apathy on the part of the teachers and the students. They stated they saw teachers on cell phones to spouses and friends—while there were students in the room. Worst of all, they saw hopelessness. They then compared this experience to their other field experiences in suburban and rural areas. The contrast was great. I knew something had to change. I wanted to craft a positive urban experience for my students. An idea began to take shape. I contacted a former colleague of mine at an urban school district. She exemplified what it meant to be an excellent teacher anywhere, let alone an urban district. Together we crafted a plan.

This article will be an article in two voices. In one voice, you will hear from the university professor who desired to make urban teaching desirable. In another voice, you will hear from the practicing teacher who made the project a reality and saw benefits in her own students, too. Her voice will be represented in an italic script. A review of relevant literature will help frame the current study, as well as suggestions for carrying out a similar project with your own pre-service teachers or middle school students.
Pen Pals as an Avenue for Learning for Pre-Service Teachers

Pen pals have been used to foster pre-service teacher learning in a variety of ways (Rankin, 1992; Marshall & Davis, 1999; Moore & Ritter, 2008). Rankin identifies the ways that both parties, the pre-service teachers and students, grow through the practice of writing letters (1992). In her pre-service, special education course, students reflected on the growth their pen pals made in their writing over the exchanged letters and the cooperating teacher found unplanned benefits, using the letter writing as intervention for her elementary-age students. Moore and Ritter focused on the benefits to the pre-service teacher, analyzing letters across space (Montana to Kansas) and age-group (university to 8 year olds) (2008). Similar to the current study, Moore and Ritter, wished to expose their mostly white, suburban, female pre-service teacher population to a diverse population. Their letters provided a safe place for both populations to learn about each other.

Pen Pals as an Avenue for Learning for Children and Adolescents

Pen pals have also been used to explore friendship, culture, and reading and writing practices with children and adolescents (Shulman, Sieffman-Krenke, Dimitrosky, 1994; Teale & Gambrell, 2007; Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007). Benefits have included deep self-reflection, awareness of the world around them, and the stimulation to learn more about new topics (Barksdale, et al, 2007; Shulman, et al, 1994). Teale and Gambrell addressed how pen pal letters between adults and upper elementary aged students allowed for the students to engage in authentic literacy practices, versus the artificial practices often used for student learning (2007).

Mentoring/Tutoring to Explore Literacy Practices

Mentoring and tutoring practices with pre-service teachers and diverse student populations also serves the purpose of exposing pre-service teachers to backgrounds and literacy needs unlike their own (Brock, Moore, & Parks, 2007; Fresko & Wertheim, 2006). Students who are able to apply their learned
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Theories about diversity and literacy in real-life situations are more apt to be sensitive to students’ needs in their own classrooms (Brock, et al, 2007).

The Current Project

The current project combines aspects of each of the three categories of studies above:

1) Pre-service teachers exchanged letters with students in a diverse school setting (Rankin, 1992; Marshall & Davis, 1999; Moore & Ritter, 2008).

2) The school-aged students were given an authentic place to engage in literacy practices and explore another culture ((Shulman, Sieffman-Krenke, Dimitrosky, 1994; Teale & Gambrell, 2007; Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007).

3) Pre-service teachers were given an opportunity to apply learned theories and practices from coursework with students in a controlled environment (Brock, Moore, & Parks, 2007; Fresko & Wertheim, 2006).

The genesis of this project began in a class entitled Reading and Writing in Middle Childhood Education. In this six hour course, pre-service teachers study theory and practice in reading across content areas. All students in the Middle Childhood Education program at the university are required to take this course, along with its successor, Teaching Reading with Literature. In the former class, pre-service teachers engage in a thirty hour field experience at a rural school. Concurrently, they participate in a thirty hour field experience at an urban school, through another course. It was after these two experiences and a comparison of the two in a paper, that I encountered the misconceptions and refusal to consider an urban teaching placement by thirteen of fifteen pre-service teachers.

(Second author) is a teacher at an urban middle school, located one hour from the university where I teach. We had met during a year-long consultation that I embarked on at her school. I was
struck by her classroom teaching: she was poised, prepared, kind but firm, and her students soared. In my time spent in her classroom, I was drawn into multiple conversations with her students, who were excited to talk about the literature they were reading. (Second author) used a reading workshop approach in her classroom (Atwell, 1998) and her students were given extended opportunities to read, respond, and discuss books. It was during one of these conversations with (second author’s) students that the project began to take shape. I found myself chatting with a student about a favorite book and wishing I had brought a recorder so that the pre-service teachers in my course could hear the passion in this 7th grade student’s voice.

Participants

Pre-service teachers. There were fifteen pre-service teachers who participated in this project. Twelve were female and three were men. Fourteen were Caucasian and one was biracial (African American and Caucasian). Their ages ranged from twenty to forty-five years old. Students self-described their own school background: nine reported their background as “suburban,” five as “rural,” and one as “urban.” The university where this project took place is a regional campus of a large, eight campus university. The regional campus is located in a suburb of a large city. The campus is a commuter campus; many students still live with their parents.

Middle School Students. The class consisted of 11 female and 15 male students whose ages ranged from 12 to 15 years old. All were African American and all but one qualified for the federal government’s free or reduced lunch program. Two students were living with parents who had some college education, the remainder of the students lived with parents or guardians who had no college experience. The school is the only middle school in a district of about 4,000 students. The district has a 64% poverty rate and 95.1% minority students and is an inner-ring suburb of a large city.
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Goals of the project

My goal was to truly develop my pre-service teachers’ attitude toward diverse school environments and students (Haberman & Post, 1998). As a former urban school teacher myself (first author, 2002), I knew the risks and rewards of urban teaching. To benefit both populations, I situated the project in the latter class I teach with the same population of pre-service teachers, Teaching Reading with Literature. The set-up of the project occurred in this order:

1) The pre-service teachers would have an opportunity to explore various types of young adult literature.

2) They would exchange initial letters with students from (second author’s class), introducing themselves and talking about the kinds of books they liked to read.

3) Using the knowledge from the initial exchange of letters, the pre-service teachers would select a book that they would both enjoy reading.

4) Using monies provided by my department, I purchased the books for the middle school students to keep, as a way of thanking them for their participation in the project. The pre-service teachers were responsible for obtaining their own copy of the book.

5) Finally, the pre-service teachers set up a reading schedule to roughly follow with their student. They wrote this out, with a few statements introducing the book, for their pen pal.

I delivered the books and notebooks to (second author) and we were on our way!

When (first author) approached me about the project, I realized the many benefits that could come of it and agreed immediately. In addition to the obvious excitement about reading that the project would create, one of my primary goals was to expose my students to reading adults, which was something that they did not experience much (aside from their teachers). I was also pleased that they would be interacting with college students and hoped that the interactions would open up possibilities
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that my students would not have otherwise considered. The only concern was a cultural one: would a shared literacy experience be enough to unite my urban students with their suburban pen pals? I decided that the best way to address this concern was to focus on the literary aspect of the project and proceeded to introduce the idea to my students. The students did not ask about, nor did I mention the race of the college students that they would be corresponding with. I found that the opportunity to be social via the pen pal notebooks and the idea of getting a new book that would be all their own were the two things that got my students excited about the project.

Logistics

A few logistical issues existed that we worked out through the course of the project. The first issue was the choosing of the books. Despite the fact that they had spent the previous semester reading and exploring all aspects of young adult literature, the pre-service teachers found themselves nervous at the prospect of choosing a book beyond the literary canon they, themselves, were so familiar with (think Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Outsiders, etc.). I encouraged them to find new books that would broaden both their and their pen pals’ horizons. To this end, we used two textbooks: Living Literature: Using Children’s Literature to Support Reading and Language Arts (Kasten, Kristo, McClure, & Garthwait, 2004) and Literature for Today’s Young Adult (Nilsen & Donelson, 2008), lists from the American Library Association like Children’s Choices, and a few select websites to guide our exploration.

The actual medium for the pen pal letters needed to be decided upon, too. E-mail seemed like the easiest way to facilitate letters, but computer lab access for both groups, coupled with the tedium of typing for some students, vetoed that idea. We settled on notebooks so that both parties could have a record of what was talked about previously. This turned out to be quite useful as students looked back to build on written conversations in new letters.
The final logistic, from the professor point of view, was the delivery of the notebooks. Our initial goal was to have the students write back and forth every week but, as stated earlier, the middle school was located an hour from the university. Exchanges ended up happening roughly every other week. An average of seven letters was exchanged between pre-service teacher and middle school student, depending on attendance of either party to class.

In their initial letters, students described themselves and their taste in books in order to help their pen pals choose an appropriate book for them to read. Not surprisingly, we found that the students who had gone into greater detail about their reading preferences were the happiest with their pen pals’ choice of books. While none of the students were displeased with their chosen books, there was a concern raised by a parent. Her son’s pen pal had chosen *The Golden Compass* by Phillip Pullman and she preferred that he not read the book for religious reasons. Another book was selected for the student and the project went forward without issue.

I have a tendency to guard my instructional time carefully; therefore, I initially scheduled a predetermined amount time for students to read and respond to their pen pal letters. I soon found that I needed to be somewhat flexible with this time, as the excitement the letters created led to many excellent discussions of the books amongst my students. These discussions often brought about the eventual exchange of books so that students could read each other’s pen pal books. The broader reading and sense of community among readers that was created was well worth the instructional time that was spent at each exchange.

Reading and Writing Letters

Every other week, my students would arrive to class and clamor for their letters, similar to the students in Moore and Ritter’s study (2007). The notebooks would be spread out over a table in the front of the room and students eagerly rushed to snatch their notebooks and settle down to read. Each
week the notebooks arrived, I devoted the first 20-30 minutes of class to reading and writing to their pen pals. Students would laugh out loud as they read, exclaim over insights their pen pal had into their book, and occasionally shake their head, as they read something that shocked or saddened them. From their initial letter, the pre-service teachers had gotten a small glimpse into the middle school students’ lives. I encouraged them to follow up with these insights to learn more about their pen pal, in addition to writing about their books. One pre-service teacher in particular stands out; her pen pal had disclosed that her father was thinking of leaving the family. In a subsequent letter, it was revealed that he had left. The student wrote about the family’s struggles. I used these insights as teachable moments: first, what resources could we access to help this student? Second, if the student revealed something private, such as abuse or drug or alcohol use, what was our course of action? Many valuable ideas were discussed.

 Mostly, the pre-service teachers would chuckle over the middle school dramas of dating, friendship and school work. I heard many comments along this line: “This student is just like me when I was that age!"

 My seventh-graders quickly learned to identify the bag that the pen pals notebooks were carried in. They looked for it when they entered the classroom each day, and on the days that it was there, I was hard-pressed to keep their attention on anything else. Because of this, the notebooks were passed out immediately after bellwork, and the classroom was silent for a few moments as the students read their letters. Soon, however, students would begin to discuss with their group members and ask questions, laughing and referring to their books to compare notes.

 Often, cultural questions would arise. One pen pal had been asked about their favorite singer and listed Kenny Chesney, whom my students (rap music fans) had never heard of. Another pen pal was an equestrian and my student was surprised to know someone who actually owned horses, commenting,
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“She country.” The middle school students were jealous to find that one student’s pen pal spent their free time riding four-wheelers and dirt bikes. They had seen such activities on television, it seemed, and thought it looked like fun. Despite these differences, students also discovered common interests with their pen pals—hobbies such as video gaming, sports, and pets were often shared.

I found my student’s literary analyses to be insightful and in-depth in their letters to the college students, more so than in their typical discussions with peers. When asked about this, students explained that they wanted to seem intelligent to their older pen pals. My students were thrilled when they would get ahead of their pen pals in the books they were reading together and loved to joke that they could read faster than a college student. One of my students even corrected her pen pal’s spelling of “alot”, writing that “a lot is two words and you should know that since you’re in college.” An often-asked question that I noticed in their letters was “is college hard?” The typical response was that even though college is challenging and involved quite a bit of work, it’s worthwhile and anyone could do it if they were willing to put in the effort. My students were realizing that these college students weren’t that different from themselves and that maybe college wasn’t that impossible after all.

Culminating Activity

It became obvious over the course of the project that our students desperately wanted to meet each other. (Second author) and I decided to facilitate a field trip for the pre-service teachers. In lieu of class towards the end of the semester, the pre-service teachers carpooled to the school to participate in a Book Bistro with their pen pals. In a Book Bistro, readers participate in sharing of literature to learn about new books, while enjoying treats in a coffee-house like atmosphere (Kasten & first author, 2003). Both the pre-service teachers and the middle school students had participated in such an event in their respective classes, so this seemed like the perfect choice to celebrate the books that had been read and find new ones to individually read next.
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The atmosphere in [second author’s] classroom was filled with excitement and anticipation on the day of the Book Bistro. As the pre-service teachers filed in, the middle school students would whisper and wonder which was their pen pal. We introduced the pairs to each other and they sat down to create a book talk to present their book during the Book Bistro. We then arranged pen pals into groups to share their books and enjoy a small treat.

Insert picture of Book Bistro here

After the Book Bistro, we had two sharing sessions. First, the middle school students were allowed to ask the pre-service students questions about attending college. Important questions about financial aid, programs of study, and the difficulty of attending college were asked and answered. Second, the authors asked the students to give advice to the pre-service teachers about being good teachers. Hilarious statements about the amount of homework they should give, the difficulty of tests, and the engaging types of work they should produce were laughed about. However, one moment of seriousness came out in this line of questioning. One of the middle school students advised the pre-service teachers to not try and be the students’ friends. When one of the pre-service teachers asked for an explanation he said, “Well, you should be like [second author]. She is hard on us, but she is like that because she cares.” Students around him echoed the sentiment.

Impact

Pre-service teacher impact. To see if I had accomplished my goals with the pre-service teachers during the Pen Pal project, I asked the students to respond in an e-mail to 4 specific questions:

1) What did you get out of having a pen pal?
2) Do you think you picked the right book? Why or why not?
3) Is this something that should be repeated for future pre-service teachers? Why or why not?
4) What changes might you suggest for the program?

To analyze these answers, grounded theory was used to discover recurring themes by question. These themes are presented in the tables below, with explanatory narrative following.

Insert Table One here

Table One indicates the recurring themes from question one. Fourteen of the fifteen answers analyzed spoke to these themes in one way or another. One outlier stood out; one of the pre-service teachers stated that she did not get much out of the experience because the students came from her own background.

Insert Table Two Here

Table two indicates that the majority of the students felt that they chose the right book for the pen pal for a variety of reasons. The students who responded “no” also indicated ideas they had about picking future books for shared reads in their classrooms, an unintended benefit of the project.

Insert Table Three Here

Not a single student responded “no” to this question. The depth of reflection in their answers to this question truly validated the use of the project to not only expose them to students different from themselves but to develop their skills in relating to all students.

Insert Table Four Here

Table four presents student responses to question four. Many of the pre-service teachers gave constructive ideas to help improve the program for future pre-service teachers.

The ultimate validation of the Pen Pal project came in the form of an exit slip after the Book Bistro. After sharing the details of the day, I asked each pre-service teacher to consider their point of view from the previous semester regarding an urban teaching placement. I passed back their papers so
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they could see their response. I then asked them on a separate piece of paper to answer the question again, “Would you consider an urban teaching placement? Why or why not?” This time, the response was different. All fifteen students responded that they would consider an urban teaching placement. Twelve of them specifically mentioned the Pen Pal Project, responding with statements like: “My experience with my pen pal showed me that I can teach all students.” “(second author) showed me that you just need to have high expectations and respect for your students.” “Middle school students are all the same. The pen pal project showed me that.”

Because of the pen pal project, my students benefitted from a positive experience that taught them that reading can be a social act. Middle schoolers are very social creatures who tend to see reading as an isolated activity, and the pen pal project opened their eyes to the benefits of shared literacy. One student summed this up perfectly when she wrote that she “learned that having a partner is better than reading by yourself because it makes you more into the book.” Not only did they form a new friendship; their letters and common reading experience were the foundation of a friendship with someone of a different race, culture, and age group. These differences became less and less of a focus as the exchanges progressed. One student even stated that “the best part about having a pen pal is that I am reading a book with someone I can relate to.”

Academically, my students experienced deep and authentic reading that is difficult to provide to them within the classroom. Genuine conversations about the book occurred in their correspondence, causing them to make connections with the text, analyze characters, make inferences and predictions, and explore plot. Their pen pals modeled for them the thought processes of successful readers in an informal and genuine way. This glimpse into the mind of an experienced reader is invaluable to my students, who have not had regular exposure to reading adults (other than their classroom teachers).
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Because so many of my students did not know anyone who had been to college, the opportunity to learn about college life was incredibly beneficial to the middle schoolers. In their letters, students took the opportunity to ask questions about getting in to college, what the classes are like, how much it costs, how difficult it is, and how to decided on a major. The majority of my students acknowledged the benefit of this in the reflections they wrote at the conclusion of the project. Some of their thoughts included:

- “I like having someone to give me advice about school.”
- “I learned a lot about college, too.”
- “I learned what it’s like to be in college.”
- “She told me that if she could make it through college, I could too!”
- “I learned that going college can be easier than it seems.”

I know that this experience may be the only opportunity my students will have to “talk shop” with a college student and I sincerely hope that it will open up a new world of possibility to them.

There are countless other benefits of the pen pal project including the excitement about reading that is generated, exposure to new books and authors, student book ownership, instructional novelty, cultural exchanges, and self-esteem building. I heartily agree with the student who wrote “I wish we could do this all year long!”

Implications for pre-service teachers

Through the Pen Pal project, specific implications for pre-service teachers became apparent.

Pre-service teachers need positive role models during their urban field experiences. Prior to the Pen Pal project, the pre-service teachers mentioned the hopelessness they felt during an urban field placement. After seeing the positive influence of (second author) many commented during class discussion on her professional demeanor and obvious kindness and caring for her students. Although we cannot often be fastidious in our placements of pre-service teachers, we must continue to strive to
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find positive role models in the classrooms so that pre-service teachers have something to mentors to look up to.

Pre-service teachers need time to develop relationships with students during their pre-service experiences. So often in field experiences, pre-service teachers are given a laundry list of tasks to accomplish. Many pre-service teachers in this study spoke about how reassuring it was to learn that students from a background unlike their own were “just like them,” and that this was something they would not have known if it wasn’t for their letters. We need to find time in field experiences for pre-service teachers to simply talk to and understand the students they will be teaching.

Pre-service teachers need time to try out new ideas in a safe environment. Many of the pre-service teachers commented on the value of getting a chance to try out questioning techniques, choosing literature, and creating a line between authority figure and friend during the Pen Pal project. The notebooks served as a safe place for students to try out the theories they had read about in textbooks without the immediacy of failure that often presents itself in a field experience. This in-between experience allowed them to time to reflect, as they made these instructional decisions and then react with support and scaffolding by the professor as needed.

Implications for practicing teachers

Specific implications for middle school student also became apparent through the Pen Pal project.

Urban middle schoolers need to see reading as a social act. The social nature of middle school students can cause them to dislike reading, because they view reading as a solitary activity. The opportunity to share a book and build a friendship around the experience creates a realization that reading does not have to be an isolated task. Once students participate in shared reading and
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understand the sense of closeness that can result, they both desire and know how to recreate the experience. The pen pal project inspired my students to form their own books clubs and reading partnerships to continue the feeling of community that they had been exposed to.

Urban students need reading role models beyond their classroom teachers. Urban students need to see reading as something that normal people do on a regular basis. When teachers are the only adults that students see reading, they attribute our reading habits to our jobs. However, when they learn that their pen pals enjoy and value reading, it exposes them to the idea that reading is worthwhile outside of school. When students receive book and author recommendations from someone that they think of as a friend, they are more apt to follow through on the recommendation.

Urban middle schoolers benefit greatly from exposure to college students. Not knowing anyone with college experience is an enormous detriment to urban students. Even the short-term access to a college student provided by the Pen Pal project creates a level of understanding and opportunity that many students may never have afforded otherwise.

Changes to the Pen Pal Project

The Pen Pal project is now in its third successful year. Based on pre-service teacher input, we have been able to make a few changes to ensure its smooth running:

1) The middle school students now tell the pre-service teachers what their favorite book is and any books they might be interested in reading in order to facilitate ease of choice of books.

2) Taking advantage of technology, students and pre-service teachers used video-conferencing this year to “meet” face-to-face at the beginning of the program.
3) (Second author) and I have been working to get the participants more letter exchanges. This has been helped by the fact that (second author) is now teaching as an adjunct at the university and can bring the notebooks with her to class.

**Conclusion**

We are now halfway through our third year of a successful Pen Pal project. The pre-service teachers are just as excited to receive their letters as the first group was. I hear the same chuckles, gasps, and concerns. They are excited to meet their Pen Pals during the Book Bistro in a month.

Whenever I encounter a past student who was in a class that participated in the Pen Pal project, the topic is sure to come up. “Are you still doing that pen pal thing?” they ask. I assure them that we are, and they take the opportunity to reminisce about how much they enjoyed the activity. I take a moment too, to appreciate the rare opportunity to be involved in an educational practice that is both enjoyable and extremely rewarding.
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References


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Table One – Question One: What did you get out of having a pen pal?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Answers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The students are just like me</td>
<td>“He seemed like any other kid to me.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It reminded me how much I had forgotten about being a teenager.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“She had so much in common with my 7th grade self”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I learned that middle school girls are basically the same no matter where you are”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Urban students are really not any different than other students”</td>
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<tr>
<td>I was exposed to urban experiences in a new light</td>
<td>“She has seen so much in her young life”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It was delightful to hear how positive the students see their future”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I was really impressed with their goals in life”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I need to learn a new dialect; I think that is why I had trouble with the urban students previously”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“This gets away from the stereotype that urban kids aren’t as good as their suburban counterparts”</td>
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<td>Getting to know a middle school student on a personal level</td>
<td>“It gives me an idea on how the students think”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It was so fun to talk about the book and see what she thought”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I loved having them talk to me about different things like what they wanted to do when they grew up”</td>
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Table 2 – Question Two: Do you think you picked the right book? Why or why not?

| Yes | “I definitely picked the right book because both girls couldn’t stop reading it! They loved it!” |
|     | They repeatedly gave positive feedback about the book and both of them were able to relate to many aspects of the book.” |
|     | “She actually read the book twice!” |
|     | “I was told by the teacher that my student was one of the first finish his books, because he liked it so much.” |
|     | “My student said he was going to have start the series now!” |
| No  | “It was too long. I needed to adjust my expectations to fit in with their other schoolwork.” |
|     | “I am not sure. He began to read it and then stopped and now said he will start again.” |
|     | “It wasn’t a great book to discuss. I know to pick something with more of a plot for my students now.” |

Table Three – Question Three: Is this something that should be repeated for future pre-service teachers? Why or why not?
Table Four – Question Four: What changes might you suggest for the program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extend the writing period</td>
<td>“Maybe a few more writings back and forth.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Do it all year! Start in R&amp;W and extend through TRL.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>More student choice</td>
<td>“The students could write down a few books that they would like to read.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Pair students up based on common interests or genre.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Give students a little more input in what their book will be.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>More face-to-face time</td>
<td>“I would have liked to spend more time with them! I was disappointed when it was time to go!”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Maybe spend a full day with the students at the end, not just a class period.”</td>
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