

Using children’s literature to inspire service-learning projects in the early childhood classroom through pre-service teacher field experiences

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Abstract

This article discusses a model, created through the collaboration of two professors at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, for using children’s literature to inspire service-learning during an Early Childhood pre-student teacher field placement. It defines service-learning to promote active citizenship and civic engagement for young children. Research on best practices in social studies and utilizing high-quality children’s literature within the early childhood classroom to promote active citizenship through service-learning projects will be discussed. The article will provide a variety of instructional strategies for integrating relevant children’s literature to support service-learning. Finally, the article describes an example of a lesson based upon the model and taught by a pre-service teacher majoring in Early Childhood Education.

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Introduction

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1957)

During her four-week field practicum experience prior to student teaching, Miss G poses the question, “What is a citizen?” to her third graders and draws their attention to a K-W-L chart (Ogle, 1986) on the board. Miss G explains to the students that they will list what they “know” under the “K,” and what they “want to know” under the “W” regarding citizens. By completing the K-W-L chart, Miss G engages the children in the learning process and enhances their comprehension. First, the students activate their prior knowledge. However, they are unsure of the meaning of a citizen. Miss G describes a developmentally appropriate definition for the children and then questions them regarding the duties of a citizen. Next, she records citizenship under the “W” on the chart and leads them in identifying concepts they want to learn about, based upon the definition provided. They discuss a desire to learn more about citizenship, rules and consequences, volunteering, communities, and service-learning projects during their lesson. She further explains that at the end of the lesson, they will reflect on what they have “learned” under the “L.” Then, Miss G enthusiastically states, “I have a book to read to you, and it will help you think about citizenship. I will be asking you a few questions related to the book as I read. The book is called *Just Help! How to Build a Better World* (Sotomayor, 2022).”

Developing student understanding of democratic citizenship is at the heart of social studies education (Villotti & Berson, 2019). However, many early childhood educators find it challenging to incorporate social studies because of the lack of time dedicated to the subject due to accountability measures and testing in other content areas (i.e., literacy, mathematics, and science) (Dougherty & Moore, 2019; Harrington, 2016; Hodges et al., 2019). In addition, mentor teachers and pre-service teachers (PST) often demonstrate a low conceptual understanding of citizenship and democracy due to a general lack of preparation for teaching those topics (Bousalis, 2022; Lanahan & Phillips, 2014; Scott et al., 2022). Therefore, intervention is needed in the early childhood classroom. One method of intervention is

for teacher preparation programs to partner with mentor teachers and support early childhood PSTs’ citizenship education knowledge by encouraging the use of children’s literature in conjunction with social studies lessons to inspire civic engagement among their students (Baytaş & Schroeder, 2021). With accompanying high-quality literature, service-learning projects can be implemented with young learners to positively impact communities and increase citizenship knowledge among mentor teachers, PSTs, and pre-kindergarten through fourth grade learners. Within this article, a model is provided for implementing a literature-based lesson that led to a small-scale service-learning project to promote active citizenship within an early childhood classroom. First, active citizenship and service-learning will be defined. Next, research regarding best practice for integrating social studies and children’s literature for young learners will be discussed. A model of early childhood fieldwork will be shared. Finally, a sample lesson that integrates children’s literature to support service-learning will be described.

Defining Active Citizenship and Service-learning within the Democratic Classroom

The notion of a democratic classroom can be traced at least back to John Dewey’s (1916, 2012) *Democracy and Education*. A democratic classroom, according to Dewey, rejects a top-down relationship where the teacher maintains all authority and instead facilitates student decision making about assignments and how classrooms are managed. While schools in the United States may talk about democracy, they rarely implement democratic practices in order to show their students how to behave within a democracy (Kira, 2019). Democratic behaviors and community-mindedness are not always natural orientations for young learners in the United States. Some students perceive a disconnect between the rhetoric about democratic ideals and their lived experiences within democracy, diminishing further their trust in democratic institutions (Castro, 2020; Parker, 2003). Without practicing active democratic citizenship in the classroom, such as through service-learning and community engagement projects, young children often instead display individualistic behaviors (Burgh & Thornton, 2021). To combat such individualism, the democratic classroom attempts to scaffold students’ understanding of them-

selves as part of a community. Democratic classrooms promote this mindset by facilitating an “environment in which students recognize that they themselves are equal stakeholders in their educational experience” (Meinking & Hall, 2020, p. 189). Students are given the power to help guide their learning and experience collaboration. Through their collaborative opportunities students learn about community needs, just as they have individual needs.

More recently educational policies related to civic education in the classroom have been emphasized. (Educating for American Democracy Initiative, 2021). “When civic education succeeds, all people are prepared and motivated to participate effectively in civic life. They acquire and share the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective participation” (Educating for American Democracy Initiative, 2021, p. 5). Furthermore, civic education, especially in the early childhood classroom, is needed for students to fully process the changes affecting civic engagement, citizenship, and educational policy, among other issues, emanating from executive orders from the federal government (Exec. Order No. 14149, 2025; Exec. Order No. 14159, 2025; Exec. Order No. 14190). Teaching about democracy thus entails teaching about citizenship. Phillips and Moroney (2017) provide five concepts of citizenship which include: 1) “civic identity,” based on one’s participation in the community; 2) “collective responsibility,” caring for others; 3) “civic agency,” thinking through the actions that can be taken; 4) “civic deliberation,” considering diverse viewpoints of others; and 5) “civic participation,” collectively taking action for the betterment of the community (p. 88). Active citizenship can be defined as a person’s engagement and participation in supportive community activities (Kersh et al., 2021). Democratic classrooms must then provide opportunities for students to co-create their educational environment, with the expectation that they will immerse themselves in the larger community, not just as students, but as active citizens.

Community support activities may be planned and conducted within different levels of engagement. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) provide a useful framework for understanding the various levels of community involvement citizens typically engage in. They first address the “Personally Responsible Citizen” which

focuses primarily on individual character and behavior, such as picking up litter or obeying laws (p. 241). Westheimer and Kahne, however, criticize this model for lacking an emphasis on the need for collective action, or action through public institutions, sometimes failing to fully align with democratic principles. Next, they describe the “Participatory Citizen” as recognizing the need to engage in community-based service and initiatives, challenging students to plan efforts with the government or community organizations to care for people in need or change institutional policies. The “Participatory Citizen” embraces a more active role in their citizenship (pp. 241-242). Finally, the authors define the “Justice-Oriented Citizen” as being prepared to critically analyze social and structural problems of society, seeking to confront the root of social problems (pp. 242-243). While there is a clear preference for the more community-focused approaches, the authors note that the latter two types are less frequently adopted and may face implementation challenges depending on where educators teach.

The democratic classroom provides opportunities for students to learn about and practice their roles as citizens in a variety of ways. Teachers can begin preparing their students in democratic practices by creating assignments that incorporate service-learning. Service-learning projects provide teachers and their students with opportunities to practice all three types of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and embody citizenship concepts (Phillips & Moroney, 2017). Such projects engage students in their communities, while tying the experience to academic content and incorporating reflection (Montgomery et al., 2017). Community engagement, especially in the form of service-learning projects, facilitates participation, action, equity, and inclusion. Students are able to move beyond their specific personal concerns while connecting with ideas and people that drastically differ from themselves and their experiences (Cress & Donahue, 2011). Service-learning projects also encourage PSTs and mentor teachers to engage their students as active change agents who can improve their communities while developing their civic roles, as opposed to the more passive citizens in waiting (Heggart & Flowers, 2019; Lin & Bates, 2015).

Social Studies Best Practices: Using Children’s Literature to Inspire Service-Learning

Unfortunately, early childhood educators and PSTs may demonstrate low conceptual understandings of citizenship and democracy and a lack of substantial preparation for teaching those topics (Bousalis, 2022; Lanan & Phillips, 2014; Scott et al., 2022). Institutions of higher education can help to combat this issue by providing opportunities to facilitate such learning during PST’s field experiences in schools. In such experiences, mentor teachers and PSTs can collaboratively plan citizenship lessons and service-learning projects with support from university professors. This framework requires university professors to create meaningful assignments that guide PSTs through the initial planning stages by highlighting resources, providing feedback, and maintaining flexibility throughout the process.

Assignments that promote integration with a variety of disciplines are one way professors can encourage mentors and PSTs to identify opportunities for active citizenship and service-learning projects. Early childhood educators routinely teach using children’s literature, which provides an opportunity for social studies integration (Batyas & Schroeder, 2021). Sharing children’s literature can “expose the reader to certain moral dilemmas and give them the opportunity to evaluate and develop an understanding of the concept of citizenship” (Bradbery, 2018, p. 10). Children’s literature focused on civics and government content may lead to active, student-centered, service-learning projects that enhance desirable citizenship habits.

Meaningful design is critical to assignments requiring cross-curricular service-learning projects. According to Hill (2017), the following elements must be incorporated within interdisciplinary service-learning projects: promoting collaboration with others while building healthy relationships, supporting school-based experiences to build civic engagement, focusing on students’ interests as a motivational factor, allowing for self-reflection to consider one’s own views and the views of others, and relating to standards aligned-practices to meet mandates. Thus, service-learning projects coupled with children’s literature embrace interdisciplinary content ideas, engage learners in active citizenship, and promote learning in the English language arts.

Active citizenship practices also embrace equity and inclusion (Vilotti & Berson, 2019a; Vilotti & Berson, 2019b). Sharing children’s literature with young students to promote service-learning encourages students to examine others’ perspectives and develop empathy (Muetterties & Darolia, 2020; Torres, 2019). Teachers and PSTs can guide children as they learn how to identify and collaboratively solve problems while addressing issues of injustice and public awareness (Batyas & Schroeder, 2021; Hill, 2017). As Carr and Thésée (2017) note, teachers and children should facilitate “critical discussions, resolutions of conflict, critical thinking, and positive action to be included throughout the entire educational experience” (p. 2). Classroom curriculum and academic standards must align with learning opportunities that include collaborating with others and considering broader views of the world (Schlemper & Stewart, 2019). Thus, critical literacy can be used by mentor teachers and PSTs while integrating children’s literature and social studies to develop lessons that require students to consider various perspectives and views, discuss topics related to social justice, promote social action, and analyze texts (Muetterties & Darolia, 2020).

Early Childhood Education Fieldwork: Integrating Children’s Literature Within Citizenship and Service-Learning Lessons

During a 4 week field placement prior to student teaching, PSTs are required to implement a small-scale service-learning project within an early childhood classroom as part of their upper-level coursework. Early Childhood Social Studies and Literacy Methods professors collaborated over the last three years to develop a project that required PSTs to identify children’s literature aligned with Pennsylvania civics and government Standards, English Language Arts Standards, and College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). The authors of this manuscript collaborated across courses, requiring PSTs to unpack the standards (i.e., determining the big ideas that are focused upon within the standards) using the Understanding by Design (UbD) Model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). PSTs then worked within their Social Studies Methods course to develop compelling questions and their Curriculum and Instruction Methods course to write

essential questions to inspire integrated citizenship and service-learning lessons. The compelling questions and essential questions are derived by the PSTs through the Inquiry Design Model (Grant, Lee, & Swan, 2022) and the UbD Model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) during coursework. Thus, the questions drive young children’s inquiry regarding how they may begin to support their communities.

Table 1 shows examples of aligning projects to relevant Pennsylvania Standards for Civics and Government with Core Standards for English Language Arts Reading for third grade, and the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

After PSTs gain a familiarity with relevant standards, they are tasked with incorporating social studies standards into literature assignments. Author B supplements PST preparation for this phase of the project by working with PSTs to create meaningful assignments that embrace best practices for students selecting children’s literature. During this phase, Author A’s Social Studies methods course requires mentor teachers and PSTs to collaboratively develop service-learning projects inspired by children’s literature in

the two weeks prior to their four-week field placement, allowing for informed flexibility and adaptation as needed as the project becomes further developed. Such a framework encourages a team-teaching dynamic where both the mentors and PSTs are learning and constructing new knowledge together (Baeten & Simmons, 2014).

To identify high quality children’s literature that they can apply to their service-learning projects, PSTs are provided with access to the libraries of Author A, Author B, and the university library, as well as databases to identify high quality children’s literature that can drive citizenship lessons and service learning projects. PSTs are encouraged to work with their mentor teachers to examine their classroom libraries as well. Table 2 contains useful websites for educators and PSTs when choosing civics-centered, high-quality children’s literature to incorporate into the classroom and inspire service-learning. There is a plethora of diverse titles to consider; therefore, teachers and PSTs must carefully choose the literature to best meet their students’ and their community’s needs.

Table 1

Indicators of the C3 Framework and a Core Standard Connected to the Lesson and Service-Learning Project

Relevant C3 Framework Civics Indicators	
D2.Civ.6.3-5.	Describe ways in which people benefit from and are challenged by working together, including through government, workplaces, voluntary organizations, and families.
D2.Civ.7.3-5.	Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school settings.
D2.Civ.8.3-5.	Identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities.
D2.Civ.14.3-5.	Illustrate historical and contemporary means of changing society.
English Language Arts Core Standard - Reading Literature – Grade 3	
CCSS.ELA–LITERACY.RL.3.3	Key Ideas and Details – 3. Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.
PA Standards for Civics and Government – Grade 3	
5.2.3.C	Identify leadership and public service opportunities in the school, community, state, and nation.
5.2.3.D	Describe how citizens participate in school and community activities.

Table 2*Websites for Selecting High-quality Children’s Literature to Inspire Service-Learning*

Websites to Locate Civics-Centered Children’s Literature
Center for the Study of Multicultural Children’s Literature. CSMCL Best Books. https://www.csmcl.org/about1-cop0
National Council for Social Studies. Carter G. Woodson Book Award Winners. https://www.socialstudies.org/get-involved/carter-g-woodson-book-award-and-honor-winners
National Council for Social Studies. Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. https://www.socialstudies.org/notable-trade-books
United States Board of Books for Young People. USBBY-CBC Outstanding Books. https://www.usbby.org/outstanding-international-books-list.html

Center for the Study of Multicultural Children’s Literature, 2023; National Council for Social Studies, 2023a, 2023b; United States Board of Books for Young People, 2023.

Table 3*Checklist for Selecting High-quality Children’s Literature to Inspire Service-Learning*

Selection Criteria for Children’s Literature	Yes	No
Presents a variety of diverse perspectives		
Offers an original theme regarding a topic of importance		
Promotes rich classroom discussions		
Incorporates moral dilemmas/social issues that are developmentally appropriate for young children		
Includes various communities for students to think about others who are not like them		
Illustrations compliment the text and accurately portray characters who are from a variety of races, ethnicities, and cultures		

Adapted from National Council for Social Studies, 2023b; Torres, 2019.

Author A and Author B also developed a checklist for PSTs to use when selecting books and are expected to defend their choices in Author A’s Social Studies Methods course. Table 3 contains the checklist for selection of children’s literature to encourage active citizenship and promote inquiry within the early childhood classroom.

Finally, the authors adapted Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) model and incorporated concepts from Daneels (2020) and Paul (2018) to identify high-quality children’s literature that can drive impactful service-learning instruction with a focus on citizenship within communities.

Table 4 aligns models of citizenship and service-learning practices with examples of high-quality children’s literature.

Description of a Sample Lesson and Service-Learning Project in an Early Childhood Classroom

The lesson and service-learning project occurred over six days in a third grade classroom within a rural town in Pennsylvania and was observed by Author B. Miss G, a PST, utilized a 35-minute block dedicated to English Language Arts to implement citizenship education. Prior to the lesson Miss G discussed volunteering and community service briefly with the students and brainstormed how they could help or volunteer in the community. The students generated three different ideas, which included: cleaning up the community (e.g., picking up trash), donating to the local food bank, or donating to the local Humane Society.

First, Miss G instructed students about citizenship via

Table 4*Types of citizens, examples, and related children’s literature.*

Type of Citizen	Personally Responsible	Participatory	Justice-Oriented
Description	Uphold ethical beliefs and values Act in a responsible manner Demonstrate care for others	Actively serve as a member of a group within society Organize and manage efforts Work with agencies (e.g., local government)	Critically analyze issues to determine the cause(s) Research issues and speak out regarding injustice (e.g., race, class, gender, poverty, pollution) Make an impact through systematic change
Example actions for young children	Donate to a food drive or clothing drive Donate to the Humane Society	Organize and oversee a food drive or clothing drive Assist at the Humane Society	Create a petition for businesses to use environmentally friendly products Start an anti-bullying program
Children’s literature	<i>What can a citizen do?</i> (Eggers, 2018) <i>Home</i> (Lippert, 2022) <i>The Power of one: Every act of kindness counts</i> (Ludwig, 2020)	<i>Alex and the amazing lemonade stand</i> (Scott & Scott, 2012) <i>Maybe something beautiful: How art transformed a neighborhood</i> (Campoy & Howell, 2016) <i>Olivia’s birds: Saving the gulf</i> (Bouler, 2011).	<i>Global citizenship: Engage in the politics of a changing world</i> (Knutson, 2020) <i>The Youngest marcher: The story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a young civil rights activist.</i> (Levinson, 2017) <i>You are mighty: A guide to changing the world.</i> (Paul, 2018)
<i>How to make a better world</i> (Swift, 2020)			
Note. This book could be used to support growth for all “types of citizens.”			

a PowerPoint presentation and discussion, allowing them to address their prior knowledge and their interests in the topic through a K-W-L chart. After the discussion, Miss G called the students together to read *Just Help! How to Build a Better World* (Sotomayor, 2022). While reading aloud, Miss G implemented further discussion to build upon knowledge uncovered in the previous portion of the lesson. Discussion centered upon the compelling question, “How can small acts of kindness and empathy make a big difference in our communities?” Through discussion, Miss G introduced foundational concepts of citizenship to her students. Throughout the read aloud, she provided opportunities for students to consider what citizenship is

like through the lens of the main character to provide inspiration for her own students’ service-learning project to follow.

Miss G then engaged students in a discussion about the main steps of service-learning projects, as identified by Kaye (2010): 1) Investigation; 2) Preparation; 3) Action; 4) Reflection; and 5) Demonstration. After time inquiring about service-learning opportunities in the classroom, Miss G and her students narrowed the options for a project to either collecting for the local food bank or the Humane Society. She tallied a majority vote, and the students chose to collect for the Humane Society. They were allotted four days to collect donations for their service-learning project. After collection,

Miss G had the students reflect upon their actions and the impact it had on them as citizens. Finally, she and the students evaluated their efforts and discussed how they could improve the project.

Discussion

The model described in this article demonstrates how social studies and literacy methods professors, PSTs, mentor teachers, and school administration, along with community partners can begin to incorporate citizenship education and service-learning projects inspired by children's literature within early childhood classrooms. Read alouds with children's literature allow students to consider various topics related to civic engagement through developmentally appropriate methods. In order to engage young children in meaningful inter-disciplinary lessons, the approaches in this article can be adapted for full-time early childhood educators, as well as PSTs, in their student teaching placements. As young children collaborate to implement service-learning projects, they learn firsthand how to work together, consider various viewpoints, and contribute to communities and society as a whole. Active citizenship must be just that, active, to build democratic classrooms and ultimately a democratic society.

The PST involved in the project, Miss G, and her students chose a project most aligned with the Personally Responsible model for citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Projects through the past few years have typically aligned with this model, reflecting the restrictive nature of the four-week placement and the PST status as a guest within the mentor teacher's classroom. Future research into the barriers that PSTs and mentor teachers encounter during this project is needed to further verify this hypothesis and identify potential opportunities, for early childhood educators to engage in the more active forms of citizenship education promoted by the Participatory and Justice-Oriented models (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

As well, further research should collect empirical and reflective data on knowledge growth regarding citizenship concepts from the learners participating and those facilitating the project (pre-kindergarten through fourth grade students, PSTs, and mentor teachers). There is a need to establish whether each of these groups better comprehend the concepts of citizenship

and democracy after service-learning projects are implemented. Long-term studies identifying how likely PSTs and the mentor teachers are to implement service-learning projects inspired by children's literature and citizenship lessons beyond this assignment would also provide necessary data to prove the efficacy of the project.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Mykenna Gardner for granting us permission to use her lesson in our article. Her work in the field allowed us to share a firsthand classroom example that incorporates children's literature and a service-learning project with young children.

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