

# Connecting a Community through a Family Literacy Project and Virtual Writing Collaboration: University Students Facilitate Access to Literature during the Pandemic

**Anne Katz**

Georgia Southern University

**Alexandra Sledge-Tollerson**

Georgia Southern University

## **Abstract**

The importance of accessing and sharing children's literature took on new meaning as educators pivoted to remote and online learning models over the course of the past school year. In light of the pandemic, College of Education pre-service educators enrolled in a Fall 2020 Language and Literacy Development course (which is usually scheduled to meet face-to-face twice a week) was re-structured as hybrid, where a group of students were scheduled to meet partially face-to-face and partially online on a weekly basis. I planned to adapt my family literacy project collaboration with a local community center, an academic service learning assignment that I incorporate each semester as part of the course. A second community literacy project embedded in the course involved reading and discussing *Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks* (Reynolds, 2019), short stories that detail experiences of middle school characters on their walk home from school. My original plan was for both middle school students and pre-service educators to draft personal place-based writing short stories- inspired by the mentor text- and participate in writing conferences. Instead, Zoom sessions were conducted in which both sets of students virtually conferenced about their writing pieces when schedules allowed. In this manner, authentic conversations about writing were being cultivated through a virtual approach.

*Keywords:* Community literacy, partnership literacies, place-based reading and writing, middle school literacy, virtual writing conferences

## **Introduction**

The importance of accessing and sharing children's literature took on new meaning as educators pivoted to remote and online learning models over the course of the past school year. In light of the pandemic, College of Education pre-service educators enrolled in a Fall 2020 Language and Literacy Development course experienced a class that was restructured as hybrid. In this arrangement, a group of students were scheduled to meet partially face-to-face and partially online on a weekly basis. With insights shared from an undergraduate student and a professor, this article will describe two class assignments—a family literacy project designed for a local community center, as well as a place-based writing project conducted with local middle school students. A pre-service educator self-study intertwined with a professor's commentary will provide an additional lens for reflection.

In light of this course format, I adapted my family literacy project collaboration with a local community center, an academic service-learning assignment that is incorporated each

semester as part of the course. Students participated in online Discussion Boards and multiple Zoom sessions in order to peer conference, conference with the professor, revise, and present their projects—rather than traditional face-to-face conversations that were usually held in the college classroom. A second community literacy project embedded in the course involved reading and discussing *Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks* (Reynolds, 2019), short stories that detail experiences of middle school students on their walk home from school. My original plan (pre-COVID 19) was for both middle school students and pre-service educators to draft personal place-based writing short stories- inspired by the mentor text- and participate in face-to-face writing conferences at the university. Instead, Zoom sessions were conducted in which local middle school students and university students virtually conferenced about their writing pieces when schedules allowed, along with video recordings that allowed for writing conferences to be deconstructed at a later time.

This article provides insight into how authentic conversations about family literacy project development and place-based short story writing were cultivated through a virtual approach in the context of a university course. Teachers benefit from “carefully planned and mentored opportunities during preparation for debriefing and reconciling prior beliefs with new knowledge and theories about pedagogy” (Risko & Reid, 2019, p. 425). The purpose of this work is to contribute to the literature on literacy teacher identity and funds of knowledge for family literacy activity development and place-based writing initiatives. An additional purpose is to strengthen connections between undergraduate teacher education candidates and community members (members of a local community center as well as urban middle school students). This will support efforts to cultivate an appreciation for diverse perspectives.

### **Family Literacy Project for Local Community Center**

I provided each student in the course with a picture book for the family literacy project. All books were submissions that were sent to committee members in consideration for the 2020 Notable Books for a Global Society Awards Committee (Children’s Literature and Reading Special Interest Group, International Literacy Association)- <http://www.clrsig.org/nbgs-lists.html> Students were invited to design a family literacy activity around the picture book, incorporating research-based literacy skills and strategies they had learned over the course of the semester. These family literacy projects would be delivered to the Executive Director at a local community center for families at the Early Childhood Center to use with their children. Projects would include the following elements:

-Part 1- A thoughtful letter to parent(s)/caregiver(s) explaining the family literacy activity. Please include a discussion of effective verbal and nonverbal techniques to foster inquiry and collaboration.

-Part 2- Specific instructions for the activity. Please include all materials, step-by-step procedures, prompting questions, ideas for differentiation, and extensions.

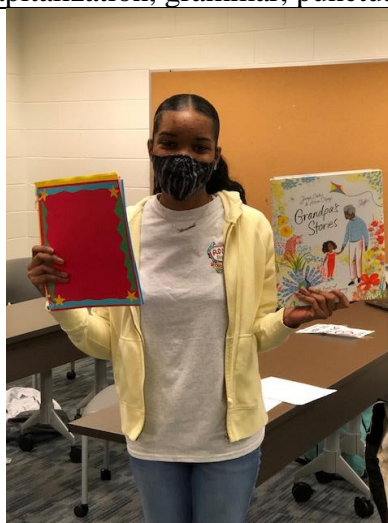
\*Parts 1 and 2 will be included with the book and materials in a Ziploc bag to be donated to the community center. Students were invited to consider the following items for the family literacy letter and activity creation:

### **Family Literacy Letter Constructs**

Length (at least 3 paragraphs). Thoughtful description introducing the family literacy activity.
Did the letter address all of these items? -Point out author and illustrator. Read the title and make a prediction about what the book might be about. -Do a picture walk to activate child’s interest. -Point out key vocabulary words/ discuss/ build schema. -Make text-to-self or text-to-text connections. -Encourage active conversation- extending questions.
Did the letter address all of these items? -Developing child’s identity as a reader. If your child enjoyed this book, you might consider checking out other books by this author. If your child was interested in topic, you might consider (another book). -Introduce ideas for connected field trip or research/ website/ community connection(s). -Developing the child’s identity as a writer. Writing connections, such as writing a letter or journal entry to the main character.
Letter is personable. Spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, professionalism.

### Family Literacy Activity Constructs

Name of book – author and illustrator/ list of materials and resources
Step-by-step procedures
Prompting questions (at least 5)
Ideas for differentiation (at least 2)
Extensions (at least 3)
Activity is personable. Spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, professionalism.



### Virtual Discussion Board and Zoom Sessions- Family Literacy Letter

Students were asked to post a draft of their letter to the Discussion Board. They were then invited to find their peer review partner on the list that the professor had posted. A detailed rubric was provided (Table 1) that students could open, type, save, and attach to their post. As I review

and reflect upon student posts and responses, I was impressed by the depth of student responses in this virtual format. For example, in response to Alexandria’s post, a colleague noted, “In the last paragraph, you could recommend that they visit a special place or take a trip into their city to a location they have never been to before to create a new memory.” The colleague also noted, “At the end of your letter, you provided another book that the child might be interested in if they liked the story. I would recommend maybe attaching a website about creating photo collages of memories.”

I was then able to provide additional feedback to Alexandria, as follows—

“Nice job, Alexandria. Thank you for your valuable feedback, Jordan.

A few more suggestions that you might want to incorporate in your final letter-

1. Strong intro. Perhaps focus a little more on providing an introduction to the book rather than current world events for this family literacy letter (although you can certainly mention). Please let me know if you have any questions.
2. "...any unfamiliar vocabulary that your child may not understand." (You might include an example of several sample vocabulary words that you recommend that they discuss and a page number in parentheses here).

Thank you for your hard work for the families of the community center,

Dr. Katz”

This virtual Discussion Board format enabled more in-depth exchanges between students, and provided students with a forum to review my feedback to each individual student. Students were encouraged to “Read the feedback from your peer review partner and from Dr. Katz on your letter. If you would like to respond, or ask a question about their feedback, please do so.” I noted that many students continued the conversation on the Discussion Board after their initial posts, responding to myself and colleagues, and ensuring their work incorporated feedback from all parties. During a Zoom session, several students commented that they planned to incorporate both my individual feedback to them, as well as other ideas gained from my feedback to colleagues, into their final letter. While I was initially concerned that this format would detract from authentic exchanges, the adapted virtual format in fact seemed to facilitate significant impact on students’ final family literacy letters, which was evidenced by the final product that was submitted.

**TABLE 1**

ITEM	FEEDBACK- Please fill in this column with your feedback.
A. Is the letter at least 3 paragraphs in length?	
B. Is there an area where you would like more detail? Please give the paragraph number and specific guidance (in a complete sentence please).	
C. Did the letter address all of these items? Please give specific feedback.	

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Point out author and illustrator</li> <li>2. Read the title and make a prediction about what the book might be about</li> <li>3. Do a picture walk to activate child's interest</li> <li>4. Point out key vocabulary words/ discuss</li> <li>5. Making text-to-self or text-to-text connections</li> <li>6. Encouraging active conversation-extending questions</li> </ol>	
<p>D. Did the letter address all of these items? Please give specific feedback.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Developing child's identity as a reader. If your child enjoyed this book, you might consider checking out other books by this author. If your child was interested in topic, you might consider (another book).</li> <li>2. Introduce ideas for connected field trip or research/ website.</li> <li>3. Developing the child's identity as a writer. Writing connections, such as writing a letter or journal entry to the main character.</li> </ol>	
<p>E. Did you see any spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation items that could be fixed? Please be specific.</p>	
<p>F. Please give any general positive feedback about what your colleague did well.</p>	

### Family Literacy Letter

Alexandria's letter was as follows:

December 2020

Hello Parent(s) and Caregiver(s),

As a country, we are going through some hard times. Our young ones at home need something interactive and inspirational to do while at home. With COVID-19 among us, some of us have lost family members dear to us due to the virus and to other unfortunate events. Our young people need something to help cope with these losses. They need to recreate those memories in some shape or form that they have shared with those loved ones.

A book to help is *Grandpa's Stories*. The book follows a young girl who has to find a way to keep her grandfather's memories alive while also finding a way to say goodbye. The book is beautifully illustrated with watercolor pictures and poetic lines. The story follows the young girl's journey to recreating those memories that she shared with her late grandfather. Along with this book, I have created an activity for you and your young one to complete together. It will also help you both recreate and share those loving memories with each other

about a loved one. My hope for you all is that this activity will help create a bonding experience for you and your family. You can come together as a family by retelling stories and sharing memories about a loved one in a creative way.

The activity presented is inspired by the book *Grandpa's Stories*, written by Joseph Coelho and illustrated by Allison Colpoys. Together, you will both read the book, exploring a poetic and heartwarming story about memories that the young girl and grandfather have shared. As you read, please highlight how the authors use the seasons to express certain feelings, how the illustrations “paint a picture” for you as a reader, and any unfamiliar vocabulary (p. 2 - budding, p. 9 - rustle, p.10- kaleidoscope) that your child may not understand. Doing this together will help you complete the activity to go along with the book. As a family (or just you and your child), you will create a journal similar to the one the little girl creates at the end of the story. This will be a place for you to share your favorite memories for each season, and discuss certain places that you all shared with a family member that you’ve lost.

The goal is to be creative and bond as you share these memories with each other. Feel free to ask your young one about what emotions they feel when they talk about those memories. You can illustrate these feelings through drawings and words. Grieving a loved one is a difficult experience for both adults and children. I hope this project opens discussions in the home about emotions, and how writing and sharing with people who care and love about you can help. If your child seems engaged in this form of coping with grief, I suggest reading the book *I remember: Poems and pictures of heritage* (Hopkins, 2019). “When someone you love becomes a memory, the memories become a treasure.”

Best wishes,

Alexandria Joy

### **Virtual Discussion Boards and Zoom Sessions- Family Literacy Activity**

During the following week of the course, students were invited to post a draft of their family literacy activity to the Discussion Board. In order to build a sense of rapport with the colleague that reviewed their family literacy letter, students conducted a peer review with the same partner. A detailed rubric was provided (Table 2) that students could open, type, save, and attach to their post. As I review and reflect upon student posts and responses, I noticed thoughtful student responses in this virtual format. For example, in response to Alexandria’s post, a colleague noted “In your first extension idea, I think it would be helpful to give more explanation. You can suggest that they make memories with the family member they chose. They can create another page in their journal as an addition.” I built upon this student feedback by suggesting that the student provide several sentence stems to facilitate the writing process.

**TABLE 2**

ITEM	FEEDBACK- Please fill in this column with your feedback.
A. Are all items included? Please give specific feedback. Are there sections	

<p>where you would like a little more detail? Please explain.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name of your book- author and illustrator</li> <li>• a list of all materials</li> <li>• step-by -step procedures</li> <li>• prompting questions (at least 5)</li> <li>• ideas for differentiation (at least 2)</li> <li>• extensions (at least 3)</li> </ul>	
<p>B. Did you see any spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation items that could be fixed? Please be specific.</p>	
<p>C. Please give any general positive feedback about what your colleague did well!</p>	

In a similar fashion to the Discussion Boards around the family literacy letter described earlier, this virtual Discussion Board format enabled more in-depth exchanges between students. It also provided students with a forum to review my feedback to each individual student. Students were once again encouraged to “Read the feedback from your peer review partner and from Dr. Katz on your letter. If you would like to respond, or ask a question about their feedback, please do so.” I noted that many students continued the conversation on the Discussion Board, responding to myself and colleagues, and ensuring their work incorporated feedback from all parties. During a Zoom session, students clarified feedback from both colleagues and the professor. In addition, students shared additional ideas to strengthen their initial feedback, such as the importance of confirming that step-by-step directions were very clear to the reader and ensuring that ideas for differentiation appealed to a range of learning styles. I noted that the adapted virtual format strengthened students’ final family literacy activity submissions.

### Family Literacy Activity

Alexandria’s family literacy packet contained the following activity instructions:

A Time of Remembrance Journal Book: inspired by *Grandpa’s Stories*

Author: Joseph Coelho; Illustrated by: Allison Colpoys

*List of materials needed for this activity:*

♣ Handmade journal (gifted by me) ♣ Markers, crayons, colored pencils ♣ Pens/pencils ♣ Favorite family photos (copies)

*Step- by-Step Procedures:*

You and your child will read the book together before starting the activity. Key items to pay attention to as you both are reading include the following: a) notice the poetic lines that the author uses, b) discuss how the illustrations play a role in telling the story, c) and consider the repeated lines of “If all the world were. . .” to later use in your memory journal.

Also, as you read, please ask some of the following prompting questions to start a discussion.

1. After you have both read the book, have a discussion on which family member(s) you both would like to remember.
2. Once the family member(s) has been chosen, begin reflecting on some of those specific memories you shared together throughout each of the four seasons. Feel free to write these ideas down on a scrap piece of paper before you work on the final product.
3. Next, see if you all can find some pictures that reflect those memories. If not, feel free to be creative and let you and your child draw out these memories.
4. With those memories that were written down still on scrap paper, let's now put a poetic twist on them. Use the prompt "If all the world were (stories, dreams, memories, etc.), (memory you want use), (then describe the memory as done in the book). For example: If all the world were stories, I could make my grandpa better just by listening, listening, listening to every tale he has to tell.
5. You will use this prompt for each of the four seasons, as shown in the book.
6. Once you have a memory for each season, please take the time to write some more memories with the prompt of your choice. These do not need to relate to the season, but could be powerful memories in general that you would like to reflect upon.

*Prompting Questions:*

1. How does the little girl relate her grandfather to each season (summer, spring, fall/autumn, and winter)?
2. Are the illustrations for each season in the book similar to what you see during that season in your community? Why or why not? Please explain your thoughts, and discuss the illustrator's choices in the book.
3. Are any of the memories in the book similar to yours?
4. Do you know why people use journals to write out their feelings?
5. How is a journal similar to a photo album? How is it different?

*Ideas for Differentiation:*

- A. Please feel free to make the brainstorming of ideas for your journal a field trip. If the family member's house is close to home, or one of the locations that is associated with the memory is nearby, go visit it! Go to the park and do the project over a picnic to make it more relaxing!
- B. Instead of reading it together, let the Sankofa Read Aloud YouTube channel read it to you! This way, if your child is a visual learner, they not only have the book in front of them to follow along, but the audio to go with it as well. Link: [https://youtu.be/4K\\_K07a8LM](https://youtu.be/4K_K07a8LM)

*Extensions:*

1. Feel free to do this activity not only for family members who have passed away, but also to create memories for your child to reflect on for when they get older.



2. The illustrations in the book reflect watercolor painting. As a family, make a trip to your local art supply store or find a painting group to relieve some stress. This can help you get through the hard days of grieving by being creative.

3. The book is written in a poetic style, and poetry can be fun to explore on your own. Visit [http://www2.nkfust.edu.tw/~emchen/CLit/poetry\\_online.htm](http://www2.nkfust.edu.tw/~emchen/CLit/poetry_online.htm), where they explain what poetry is for children and also show them different forms and styles. Feel free to let your child and you both write some poetry of your own.

4. Writing prompts can help a child develop writing skills and more. Visit Jason Reynolds, National Ambassador for Young People's Literature website (<https://guides.loc.gov/jason-reynolds/grab-the-mic/wrr>) where he has many prompts to spark creativity and discussion.

### Self-Study

Pre-service educators completed a pre-study survey and participated in a semi-structured interview to describe their current identity as a literacy educator at the beginning of the semester. Alexandria shared the following items, providing context for how she evolved as a literacy educator during the pandemic.

#### 1. *How do I view myself as a reader? As a reader, I . . .*

I see myself as a reader who branches out into the various genres and doesn't mind exploring text(s) beyond my horizons. When reading books, I tend to focus on the characters at hand and try to visualize how they would look and behave from descriptions. Also, if there is a family involved, that would be the key idea or part that will stick with me after finishing reading the book.

*(Professor commentary- There is a focus on expanding as a reader through exposure to different genres and visualization strategies, as well as remembering key themes).*

#### 2. *How do I view myself as a writer? As a writer, I . . .*

I'm just now gaining my confidence in all forms of writing. I would rather write poems or creative stories because it gives me a chance to be true to myself and tell stories from different perspectives. I believe that I'm a strong writer now that I'm in college, and have received additional help, when needed.

*(Professor commentary- There is a focus on gaining self-confidence as a writer, developing one's voice as a writer, and seeking help to better oneself as a writer).*

#### 3. *How will I reflect on my practice as a literacy teacher?*

Remembering to always evolve as a teacher and adjust my various tools with the different students I teach. I will take the time to reflect on certain instruction that does not work as effectively as I would have hoped. I will continue to improve in my practice.

*(Professor commentary- There is a focus on self-reflection as a teacher and finding strategies that best meet student needs. There is a focus on continuous self-improvement).*

4. *What literacy strategies or activities can I use to get to know my students and their background?*

Let them become storytellers; have them share some of their favorite memories from a different perspective than themselves. Explore different forms of creative writing to see what style they enjoy most. Host mini book fairs in the class to spark conversation on what their peers are reading to feed their imagination.

*(Professor commentary- There is a focus on encouraging students to explore perspective and genres of writing, as well as reading motivation through peer interactions).*

5. *What is my vision of literacy instruction for my classroom?*

To have both genders in the classroom be confident in their writing ability, communicating about text to their peers, and enjoy reading until the point where they are reading different types of literature. I will instill the importance of expanding their horizons through literacy, and how reading can open many curiosity doors.

*(Professor commentary- There is a focus on empowering students to be confident readers, writers, learners, and communicators).*

**Virtual Discussion Board and Zoom Sessions- Place-Based Short Story**

As the course progressed and we moved to the place-based short story project, students were invited to post an update on their writing progress to the Discussion Board. The following prompt was posted: “You might tell us about the topic of your story, something that you discovered while writing your short story, something that surprised you about your writing process, or how you are using what you read in the *Look both ways* text to inspire your own writing.” In order to continue building a sense of rapport with colleagues, students were invited to respond to two colleagues’ posts.

Alexandria shared the following: “For this short story, I choose to write about my neighborhood's hair store. My writing process for this story is pointing out small memories that remind me of the hair store. Then, I started coming up with the certain hairstyles that reminded me of the store and so on. This writing process is similar to what I'd normally do because I tend to always jot down my ideas first before writing. To help "paint the picture," I plan on using some key dialogue from myself and the people in the store and naming of some key hair products. As I'm writing this story, it made me realize how important this hair store has been in my journey as a young adult because this the only hair store I've been shopping at for my entire life!”

As I review and reflect upon student posts and responses, I noticed thoughtful student responses in this virtual format. For example, in response to Alexandria’s post, a colleague made a text-to-self connection as she wrote “I am excited for your short story because I remember my trips to the hair store and salon. When I was younger, I used to get my hair braided twice a month. My mom would take me to the hair store on the way to the salon to pick out the kinds of beads (I loved clear) and any other hair accessories, such as bows, to match my school uniform and so on. My writing process is similar to yours, as I first come up with key memories and then key descriptors. I like your idea of using key dialogue from your visits and key hair products. I think it is a great idea and will add a lot to your short-story.” I appreciated the meaningful

connections that were being shared among students through the online Discussion Board, and their insightful reflections on their writing process.

### **Place-Based Short Story**

Alexandria wrote the short story “Hair Trips that Last a Lifetime” to share with the middle school students, inspired by the mentor text. The short story follows:

It was going to be a great weekend if I was going to the beauty supply store, “It’s Amazing.” Going to the beauty store was like winning the lottery. You had so many things you could buy—from hair products, flat irons, blow dryers, and anything else you could imagine! My neighborhood’s beauty store was five minutes driving time from my house and ten minutes if you were walking. For as long as I can remember, this is the only beauty supply store that my family and I’ve used. Red glowing lights in a Times New Roman font with the size of about 82 read the words “It’s Amazing.” The parking lot was never full of cars so that meant we always had a chance to park right up to the front doors. As my mother and I, or even my grandmother, would enter the store, we would take the time to admire the hundreds of business cards, music promoters’ flyers, and local things happening in the neighborhood plastered all over the front door. “Look at that hairstyle on that little girl, that’d be cute on you!” my mom would say as she read the many business cards of local hair stylists.

Trips like these only came up once every month, twice if we had a special occasion approaching soon. The routine for the hair store was different for each hair style. If it was braids, it was the same ole phrase, no matter who did them. “You are going to need about 8-10 packs of hair, since YOU got a big head girl!” the hair braider would typically say. I’d go down the long aisles of the hair stores, like the ones you’d see in your churches. My hands would touch any and every pack of braiding hair as my mom would search for the color I needed. Once we reached the aisle, my mom would normally say, “Ah! Found it Alex, 1B. How many packs do you need again? Come here, girl, and stop messing around!” Sometimes, I would get my natural hair braided by my aunt’s close friend, so that didn’t require us to buy any packs of hair, just JAM. The JAM would come in at least three different sizes, different holds, and each size was represented by a color. For as long as I can remember, we’ve always bought the medium sized, orange container, maximum ten hold! I loved the smell of the JAM. It sometimes smelled like fruit, and other times it reminded me of the smell of fresh wax.

Now, if it was a simple “do-it yourself” hairstyle presented by yours truly, Jocelyn aka my mother, it was time to really do some serious spending. Shopping for bows, beads, barrettes, knockers, and things of that nature was like shopping in a candy store. My mom normally would get the accessories that matched my school’s uniform. Those colors consisted of a navy blue, khaki, shiny teeth white, and any other color that would match my stylish elementary wardrobe. The aisle for the accessories were always next to the wigs and a huge mirror. I’d normally wander over there while my mom would choose the accessories. I’d do a couple of ballerina twists, maybe a Kool-Aid smile, or just play with the wigs before my mom would come looking for me. “Alex! Alexxx! Alexandria!” my mom would exclaim. I’d come running, just like Alex the Lion from Madagascar, just to show her that I heard her, and I wasn’t playing around.

There would be some days we’d just go to the hair store for just my mother, or just to go! Those trips were always time consuming, but it was fun because it meant I can wander around

the entire store! My mom would go on her separate journey, while I took my own into the wondrous aisles of products, jewelry, and my favorite—the wigs. The wig aisle consisted of two to three rows of a hundred types of wigs. You had your low pixie cut wigs, mid shoulder long swoop bang wigs, side part wigs with a splash of color, Afro funk wigs, and anything else you could imagine a mom, young adult, or maybe even your oldest sister would wear. That wasn't even the best part of the wigs, it was the mannequin heads they were placed on! Some were a bit scary because they were missing the paint off of their eye, or they had no eyes! It was like walking down a haunted forest trail for Halloween. Imagine every time you walked past a mannequin head- the doll had pretty hair, but barely had a face! I'd normally run from the wig section to the jewelry section because they were surrounded by the bright, moon-like white lights. What topped the area off was the plush red carpet that filled it. I felt like a famous movie star window shopping for her Grammy or movie debut that was happening later that night.

As our trips would come to an end, we'd make our way to the one cash register in the front of the store. The cash register was so high up. The man behind the counter looked down to grab each item that was handpicked by my mother and I. "You all had a wonderful shopping experience, I see. Some accessories for the cutie, and jewelry for you, ma'am?" the cashier typically always said. The sound of him typing the prices on the register was somewhat soothing because you knew each item was yours to take as soon as he read you the total. The total would range from about 30 to 50 dollars a majority of the time. My mother would pay with either cash or card. The cashier would then hand us our receipt, and we'll be on our way. It was sad to walk out of those front doors, but you knew your journey had come to a great end. You had just filled a cabinet, top of a dresser, or drawer with new hair items and were on your way to getting a new hairdo! That was the typical journey of our hair store trips, and it was something I'd look forward to all the time.

### **Middle School Student Story**

A middle school student wrote the short story "Peace of the Night and Day" to share with the college students, inspired by the mentor text. An excerpt of the short story follows:

The most important place for me is the backyard. It has two large iguana green outdoor chairs and a square patio table. Even though it is not such a big space, there are some really amazing hiding places, like in between the gate behind the house and also behind the firepit. I can sense the colors just by looking at the sky and feeling the wind blow around me. It's calm and it's also a place to meditate, play, and be peaceful.

I always sit in the first chair to the right when I first enter the backyard. When the wind brushes on me, I feel relaxed (especially at night time because that's the quietest time). I think the world is allowing me to release my stress and letting me finally untense. I've been tensing up ever since school started, beginning in 5th grade. The thing is you can imagine playing games and then hide and seek in the backyard Also, we pretend we're playing our favorite imagination games too.

### **Virtual Writing Conferences**

Zoom sessions were conducted in which both sets of students virtually conferenced about their writing pieces when schedules allowed. The reading professor also shared sample middle school student writing with university students during our in-person courses and noted student

feedback, which was subsequently shared with middle school students. In addition, the reading professor shared university student writing with middle school students during our virtual sessions, recording elements of the conversation to share with the college students afterwards. In this manner, authentic conversations about writing were being cultivated through a virtual approach.

Middle school students commented that Alexandria’s story “used strong detail” that made them feel like they were at the hair store along with her. A middle school student said that “you could feel her excitement as you are reading it. It almost felt like I was watching a video of her trip because there were so many adjectives and descriptions. I would like to try that in my writing soon.” A second middle school student noted that “I can hear her voice in the story, and that makes me want to try that strategy in my own writing in the future.” Another middle student stated that it “made me think about special memories and times that I spend with my mom. Reading this story made me want to talk about them with her, and then later write about them as well. I realized that it is important to record these memories and put them on paper.” Alexandria found this feedback from middle school students to be powerful, and it made her proud of her writing piece. In reflecting upon these interactions, it is evident that these virtual writing conferences impacted both middle school and university students along their writing journey.

### Conclusion

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

<b>Prompt</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
<i>How do I view myself as a reader?</i>	As a reader, I now know how to make the reading more relatable to the world around me for my future students. I’ve become more critical about how things around me can have more than one meaning when taking in other perspectives. I can thank the film <i>Life, Animated</i> (Williams, 2016) for helping me understand that the way someone intended for something to be can be seen differently by its intended audience. The way Owen can take simple Disney movies and create life lessons from them is now how I look at books that I choose to read. I now dissect the text of a book and try and make it relate to my world around me, as well as find a life lesson that I can now use for myself.	The student has made gains in their literacy teacher self-identity. She possesses strategies for connecting reading to the outside world and teaching perspective-taking strategies to future students.

<p><i>How do I view myself as a writer?</i></p>	<p>As a writer, I have grown from the start of this Fall semester to now. At the start of this course, we introduced ourselves through “I am From” poems. This is where my spark for creative writing was planted once again. I began to become more confident in my writing from this activity, as I explored what is important to me. Also, through Jason Reynolds “Write, Right, Rite” prompts that we were introduced to in class, I have grown as a writer. I feel more confident from these exercises to express myself, through whether it be poetry or any other form of creative writing.</p>	<p>The student has grown as a writer through poetry, creative writing, and in-class writing activities. She feels more confident as a writer, which will transfer to confidence as a writing teacher.</p>
<p><i>How will I reflect on my practice as a literacy teacher?</i></p>	<p>Self-reflection will always be a start to see how effective the activities or strategies I choose to implement are being received. I will also take feedback from my students and colleagues. I would monitor my students’ progress and engagement level when giving certain activities/strategies, and even keep a self-reflection journal to jot down the “wins and wobbles” of how instruction went in the classroom. In addition to that, Dr. Victoria Purcell-Gates (2012) suggests that we should also find ways to learn from our communities and parents— to see how as teachers we can learn more about our students. In the video “How Teachers Can Learn from Communities and Parents,” she states that we must remember that as teachers, we aren’t the only ones with the answers. In order to better ourselves and students learning in the</p>	<p>The student will continuously self-reflect. She will enlist feedback from students and colleagues in order to grow as a literacy educator. The student will learn from researchers, in addition to maintaining connections with the families and communities that she teaches.</p>

	<p>classroom, we must communicate with both parents and the communities.</p>	
<p><i>What literacy strategies or activities can I use to get to know my students and their background?</i></p>	<p>I would love to incorporate the “I am From” poems as an introductory activity in my elementary classroom to get to not only know my students, but also their background, values, and goals. Including books/text like Jason Reynolds <i>Look both ways</i> to spark interests about cultures and neighborhoods that have shaped students to be the person they are becoming will be an activity I would use as well. The article <i>Six tips for using culturally relevant text in diverse classrooms</i> (Kibler &amp; Chapman, 2018) suggests that a future teacher creates transformative experiences during reading. As a teacher, we can include text that shows students many perspectives from different individuals. While incorporating those types of text, I love the idea of using fishbowls to facilitate discussions regarding what has been read.</p>	<p>The student will incorporate authentic literacy texts and meaningful activities in her future classroom. She will draw upon students’ funds of knowledge and research-based strategies in order to build a strong literacy program for her future students.</p>
<p><i>What is my vision of literacy instruction for my classroom?</i></p>	<p>My vision for literacy instruction in the classroom is to make the instruction as much of a creative and interactive process as it can be. Students will already come into the classroom with misconceptions about literacy. My goal as a teacher will be to try and eliminate those misconceptions, and to show them different strategies through various activities. Also, I want to make literacy learning hands-on and meaningful for my students. The close reading activity is something that I would want to</p>	<p>The student will incorporate close reading strategies as a future teacher. She is dedicated to ensuring that her students are critical readers who have access to hands-on, meaningful learning opportunities.</p>

	<p>incorporate into my classroom when discussing those difficult texts to make it interactive. The activity really helped me as a college student become engaged in my reading by being able to use different colored Avery dots to represent how the text is working for the reader.</p>	
--	---	--

Alexandria presented on these two community literacy outreach projects during the university’s virtual Research Symposium. She shared the following insights: “These experiences have made me confident in my future career as a teacher, as it has helped me re-consider how we approach literacy in our daily lives. Thank you for the opportunity to highlight the course and my transformative experiences.” I would like to express my gratitude to Alexandria for sharing her experiences with us. Can literacy educators forge these powerful personal connections around literature with students and families through innovative academic service learning outreach initiatives, and through the use of online platforms, during challenging times? A family literacy project and a virtual writing collaboration with middle school students sheds light on how university students facilitated access to literature for their local community during the pandemic, helping local students thrive.

Author’s Note: I wish to acknowledge the Faculty Research Committee of Georgia Southern University for their support of this publication.

#### References

- Coelho, J. (2019). *Grandpa’s stories: A book of remembering*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Hopkins, L.B. (2019). *I remember: Poems and pictures of heritage*. New York: Lee & Low Books.
- Kibler, K., & Chapman, L. A. (2018). Six tips for using culturally relevant texts in diverse classrooms. *The Reading Teacher*, 72 (6), 741–744. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1775>
- Learning for Justice. (2012, March 15). *How teachers can learn from communities and parents: Dr. Victoria Purcell-Gates*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37-vSuX0fd4&feature=youtu.be>
- Lyon, G. E. (1999). *Where I’m From*. Retrieved from <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>



Notable Books for a Global Society. Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group, International Literacy Association. Retrieved from <http://www.clrsig.org/nbgs-lists.html>

Reynolds, J. (2021) Library of Congress Research Guide: "Write. Right. Rite." Series. <https://guides.loc.gov/jason-reynolds/grab-the-mic/wrr>

Reynolds, J. (2019). *Look both ways: A tale told in ten blocks*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Risko, V. & Reid, L. (2019). What really matters for literacy teacher preparation? *The Reading Teacher*, 72(4), 423-429.

Sankofa Read-Aloud Channel. (2019, September 11). *Grandpa's Stories*. [Video]. YouTube. [https://youtu.be/\\_4K\\_K07a8LM](https://youtu.be/_4K_K07a8LM)

Williams, R. R. (Director). (2016). *Life, animated* [Film]. United States: Motto Pictures.