



# Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach English Language Arts & Social Studies through a Thematic Book Club Project

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## Abstract:

This study describes an interdisciplinary book club project designed to prepare preservice teachers to integrate English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies instruction through thematic learning. The project merged reading and social studies methods courses, engaging undergraduate teacher candidates in collaborative book clubs centered on middle-grade novels. Participants read and discussed texts with strong themes of place, space, and social justice, then developed instructional plans for transitional readers in grades 3–5. The project emphasized fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills while fostering spatial awareness and critical thinking through literary and geographical analysis. Findings suggest that preservice teachers gained pedagogical insight, enhanced collaboration skills, and recognized the value of interdisciplinary teaching. The study highlights the potential of thematic book clubs to break down educational silos and promote equity-focused, standards-aligned instruction.

## Keywords:

interdisciplinary teaching, preservice teachers, book clubs

## Introduction

In an effort to prepare preservice teachers to be collaborative and intentional in their interdisciplinary planning, we merged our methods of teaching reading and teaching social studies courses for a final interdisciplinary group project at the end of the semester. Recognizing that educators are tasked with a multitude of demands and expectations can often find themselves working in a silo and disconnected from their colleagues (Little, 1990; Ronfeldt et. al., 2015), we wanted to create an experience for preservice teachers that encouraged them to work closely with group members and to approach

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instructional planning through an interdisciplinary lens. The collaborative project was structured as follows: first, teacher candidates participated in a collaborative book club with a middle-grade novel of their choice; and second, they created instructional plans to teach the novel to early adolescent readers in grades 3–5.

The interdisciplinary book club project presented an authentic opportunity for our preservice teachers to engage with middle-grade novels and practice skills and strategies related to reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – the very same skills that they will promote in their future classrooms. Book clubs serve as an educational strategy addresses young adolescents’ intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development (George, 2004). The opportunity to give pre-service teachers first-hand experience as readers and members of book clubs presented a critical pedagogical opportunity. Specifically, book clubs can provide spaces that foster collaboration and lively conversations among peers (Harmon & Wood, 2001). Additionally, this thematic unit presented the chance for preservice teachers to also step back from the experience and think like teachers to design meaningful and engaging activities that could be used to engage transitional readers in the novel study. In this way, we provided preservice teachers with a common pedagogical experience and an opportunity to create instructional plans.

### **Statement of the Problem**

We recognize that the current landscape of education defined by accountability privileges reading and math proficiency and that these disciplines are emphasized more than other subject areas, specifically social studies (Schwartz, 2024). Our goal was to model for preservice teachers how social studies themes topics and themes including geography, equity, and social justice, could be incorporated into book clubs. Through participation in a small group book club, middle level readers can explore social studies themes while engaging skills in comprehension, vocabulary development, and speaking and listening skills. We created a thematic book club project prioritizing novels that weaved social justice themes with a strong sense of place and space. Additionally, we valued the process in which preservice teachers read a middle-grade novel and dialogued with one another about the complex characters, developing plot, and challenging themes presented. These conversations simulated an experience like ones they’ll share in upper elementary and middle school classrooms as they engage readers with literature.

## Literature Review

### *Interdisciplinary Book Clubs*

George (1983) advocates for using book clubs as a tool for engaging transitional readers, those who are proficient in foundational reading skills and who are developing fluency and comprehension. These readers are becoming more independent and are eager to explore more complex stories and a variety of genres. By participating in book clubs, transitional readers engage in a dynamic reading process that fosters discussions with their peers. Daniels (2002) emphasizes the importance of “choice” for preservice teachers in which book they will read and the power of “voice” as they engage in social interactions with their peers around the book. According to Daniels (2002), book clubs motivate preservice teachers to read for targeted discussions with their peers. Through this process, they should feel a sense of ownership towards their book club and enjoy benefits such as deeper reading comprehension and improved communication skills as they discuss. Just as they are being used with preservice teachers, book clubs can be differentiated to meet the needs of all learners, creating a sense of equity and inclusion in the classroom.

### *The Pedagogy of Leading Interdisciplinary Book Clubs*

As faculty in a teacher preparation program, it is important to us that our preservice teachers gain the experience of participating in a book club and understand how they, as future teachers, can structure book clubs to engage their own students. Thomas Angelo (2017) describes this type of instructional approach as being on the dance floor, or active participants, and in the balcony, or reflective practitioners. When on the “dance floor,” the preservice teachers are engaging in book clubs. When on the “balcony,” they thoughtfully reflect on how book clubs can be an instructional strategy to promote interdisciplinary learning and essential literacy skills. While in the “balcony,” we ask the teacher candidates to complete the following: select powerful excerpts of place and space in their novels; select Tier Two vocabulary terms essential for comprehension; and to consider graphic organizers that could support preservice teachers’ understanding of the novel’s story elements. Through this dual approach, they acted as both participants of book clubs and planners fostering robust learning experiences.

### *Book Talks and Choice*

To begin a book club unit, it is important to select a few different texts and offer preservice teachers’ choice in what they read. These book talks are an effective strategy to use when starting a book club. Also, book talks capture interest and increase motivation for readers (Atwell, 2007). They are

a form of a book review to get preservice teachers interested in reading a specific book. By providing a short and persuasive description of a book's plot, characters, and themes, teachers can spark curiosity and interest for preservice teachers and enhance their motivation to read. Book talks can include a description of why or how the book was selected, a summary of the story, and a powerful excerpt. Once preservice teachers have heard the book talks, it is time for them to select which book they are most interested in reading in a small group book club. Providing readers with a choice in materials improves engagement (Allington, 2011; Gallagher, 2015). When given a choice, preservice teachers are more likely to read more resulting in enhanced self-efficacy and promoting a deeper connection between the reader and the text. These book talks model how they can pitch books to their future students.

### ***English Language Arts Skills: Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension***

We want preservice teachers to view book clubs as a way to engage transitional readers with authentic opportunities to engage their reading skills, specifically reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension development.

#### ***Fluency***

Reading fluency is an essential skill for young readers, as it is a bridge from word recognition accuracy to reading comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Specifically, reading fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, speed, and expression. Transitional readers benefit from daily practice reading texts and applying automatic word recognition and decoding strategies to read them fluently. As reading becomes more automatic and effortless, the reader's brain can focus on the meaning of the text and less on deciphering the words on the page. Allington (2010) advocates for building fluency instruction through book clubs. Further, Allington (2012) emphasizes the importance of providing time for preservice teachers to engage in successful independent reading. Classroom book clubs encourage preservice teachers to read extensively from self-selected books which dramatically increases their total reading volume. For transitional readers, it is essential that readers pick books that match their independent reading level, meaning that they can decode 98% of the words. By offering a variety of books and a range of reading levels to preservice teachers, they can best match readers to appropriate texts in their future classroom.

Our preservice teachers learn that oral reading fluency, at its best, should "sound like talking." Mem Fox (2008) who vividly describes the art of oral reading fluency:

We can do at least seven things with our voices to keep our listeners engaged. Six of these seven vocal gymnastics are contrasts: loud and soft; fast and slow; and high and low. And we can p-a-u-s-e. The words on the page will tell us which of these to choose.

The students learn the importance of pacing, expression, and voice modulation to bring a passage to life as well as strategies to encourage young readers to engage in fluency practice. They learn methods to promote fluency such as or rereading a poem or meaningful passage in a book. Reader's theater performances also provide developing readers with a wonderful opportunity to bring a script to life through their oral reading of it.

### ***Vocabulary***

Students were introduced to the three Tiers of Vocabulary framework (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013) including basic words (Tier 1), academic language for mature language users (Tier 2), and low-frequency discipline-specific words (Tier 3). Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) support the use of book clubs provide meaningful opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in vocabulary development activities. Teachers can provide direct instruction on Tier Two and Tier Three words in the novel by pre-selecting these words and teaching them explicitly. Students can actively use new vocabulary words from the text as they engage with the text, record "new to them" words, and dialogue with peers Vocabulary learning can also be reinforced through follow-up engagement activities such as word maps or writing prompts to reinforce their thinking and application of vocabulary terms.

### ***Comprehension***

Students' comprehension of text is organically encouraged throughout the reading of the novels and the book club discussions. To explicitly teach comprehension as one of the critical reading skills, the class explored the importance for readers to understand narrative text at a literal, inferential, and evaluative (Barrett in Clymer, 1968). Additionally, the preservice teachers learn that the act of reading is not neutral, and that the reader approaches the text with a critical lens (Freire, 1985).

Through book club participation preservice teachers authentically engage with comprehension skills and strategies. Students learn about narrative story elements including characters, setting, rising action, solution, and theme (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Additionally, they can practice reading comprehension strategies (Durkin, 1978) such as summarizing, questioning, making predictions and inferences. Through book clubs, preservice teachers can collaboratively make predictions about the plot and/or how a character would respond to unfolding events. They also make connections between the book and the world, another text, or themselves. Pre-service teachers

come away from the project knowing that book club participants can be active learners who look for unknown words, comprehension breakdown, or clues as to the direction the plot will take. Later, as they near the conclusion of the book, preservice teachers can reflect on the predictions they made or the actions of the characters and share their thoughts and personal opinions about the story and its conclusion.

### ***Social Studies Connection: Space and Place***

With a goal of bridging literacy and social studies, we intentionally brought a focus on place and place into the unit by selecting texts that had significant settings and by providing explicit instruction in human geographical principles. We believed that literature presented a good opportunity to broaden our preservice teachers' understanding of geography to include spatial analysis. Before delving into the spatial elements associated with the novels' settings, we offered a few definitions to ground their inquiry. First, we introduced Yi Fu-Tuan's (1977) classic definitions of space and place. For Tuan (1977), "'Space' and 'place' are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space...Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other...Space and Place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted" (p. 3). To concretize the terms, we offered our local landscape as an example. We said that when one drives through Southwest Wisconsin, they see fields and farms dotting the landscape all the way to the horizon. For the motorist, the fields pass by—conjuring an experience of openness, or space. However, for the individuals who maintain and care for the fields and farms, the landscape has a sense of "felt value" (Tuan, 1977, p. 4). Because of this highly localized experience, the fields and farms are places.

After discussing the interconnected and slippery concepts of Space and Place, we narrowed our focus to place by having preservice teachers read excerpts from Tim Cresswell's *Place: An Introduction* (2004). While we pulled several quotes from the text's introduction for a discussion, preservice teachers especially resonated with Cresswell's conversation of the College Dormitory room. Early in the introduction, Cresswell posits the dorm room to transform space into place. Specifically, Cresswell asks the readers to,

cast your mind back to the first time you moved into a particular space – a room in a college accommodation is a good example. You are confronted with a particular area of floor space and a certain volume of air. In that room there may be a few rudimentary pieces of furniture such as a bed, a desk, a set of drawers and a cupboard. These are all common to all the rooms in the complex. They are not unique and mean nothing to you beyond the provision of certain necessities of student life. Even these bare essentials have a history. A close inspection may reveal that a former owner has inscribed her

name on the desk in an idle moment between classes. There on the carpet you notice a stain where someone has spilt coffee...These are the hauntings of past inhabitation. The anonymous space has a history – it meant something to other people. Now what do you do? A common strategy is to make the space say something about you. You add your own possessions, rearrange the furniture on the wall, arrange a few books purposefully on the desk. Thus space is turned into place. Your place (pp. 1–2)

Prior to launching in the discussion, we paired Cresswell's (2004) passage with the following selection from James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1949) and asked preservice teachers to reflect and discuss the following questions: 1. What role does place (and to a lesser extent) space play in the opening chapters of the novel? 2. Does spatial equity play a role in the first chapters, if so, what rhetorical devices does the novel use to make you feel as Cresswell states, "there" (description, dialogue, place/time signposts). 3. How does the book club as a pedagogical tool allow for space to share? 4. How could you bring the discussion to life with your preservice teachers? Ultimately, we wanted to see how space and place were not only important to the novels, but play a significant role in their own lives. The book club offers opportunities to talk about setting and characters' connections to familiar places, such as their town, home, and landscape. It also allowed for nuanced discussions about movement through spaces as settings changed throughout the novels.

### Research to Practice

The overarching goal for the book club project was to create a collaborative book club experience for undergraduate preservice teachers preparing for teaching careers in elementary and middle school. To frame our study, we asked the guiding question, "How can we model a collaborative ELA and Social Studies unit that will destabilize educational silos? More specifically, how can we encourage pre-service teachers to think critically about interdisciplinary problems and in turn help their future preservice teachers do the same through juvenile literature written for transitional readers in grades 3–5?"

To prepare for the unit, we met to discuss goals, develop a scope and sequence, and select middle-grade novels with a strong sense of space and place. The following middle-grade novels were selected for the project based on their notable quality and accessibility for our preservice teachers:

- *Esperanza Rising* (2002) by Pam Munoz Ryan
- *Moon over Manifest* (2011) by Clare Vanderpool
- *Rain Reign* (2014) by Ann M. Martin
- *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle* (2020) by Leslie Connor
- *Where the Watermelons Grow* (2020) by Cindy Baldwin

We taught the unit during the last four weeks of the semester. We enacted a 50/50 Co-Teaching Model, in which we collaboratively planned, delivered, assessed and reflected consistently throughout the unit. We opted to team teach our methods courses and met with preservice teachers for a total of 16 class periods (eight 75-minute-classes in English Language Arts, and eight 75-minute-classes in Social Studies).

***Academic Standards and Skills Addressed in the Unit***

This standards-based unit was designed to align with the Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts, which align with the Common Core State Standards. The following standards in the 3rd-5th grade band were central to the unit. Additionally, the project aligned with key Standards for Social Studies, a set of standards aligned with the National Council of the Social Studies Standards. The relevant standards are listed in the figure below.

**Figure 1**

*English Language Arts Standards to Guide the Book Club Project*

English Language Arts	
Fluency	Reading Foundational Skills RF4: Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
Comprehension: Key Ideas and Details	Anchor Standard R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly or implicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Vocabulary: Craft and Structure	Anchor Standard R4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

**Figure 2**

*Social Studies Standards to Guide the Book Club Project*

Social Studies	
Standard SS.Inq1: Wisconsin students will construct meaningful questions that initiate an inquiry.	SS.Inq1.a.i Develop a list of open- and closed-ended questions on a topic or issue.
Standard SS.Geog4: Wisconsin students will evaluate the relationship between identity and place.	SS.Geog4.a4: Describe how certain places may have meanings that distinguish them from other places...Identify and describe how people may view places in the community differently.

### ***Book Club Introduction***

We began the project by giving book talks about each of the five selected novels to the class. As we gave the book talks, we physically displayed each novel while giving a summary of it to the class. The cover art for each novel was also displayed on the screen in front of the class along with a relevant hashtag for each book to hook the pre-service teachers into the book.

Following the book talks, preservice teachers were given a moment to think about their first choice and to come to the front of the class to select the book. We made sure that we had more copies of books than preservice teachers so that all could choose the book that most appealed to them. Providing readers with a choice in materials improves engagement (Allington, 2011; Gallagher, 2015). We discussed if a classroom or school has a limited number of books, that their future students could record their first, second, and third choices on a piece of paper and the teacher could match readers to their top choices to ensure that everyone gets one of their top choices.

Following the book talks and selection, the preservice teachers organized into book clubs by joining peers who selected the same book as they did, and their first book club meeting commenced. One title, *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle*, was popular by the preservice teachers so we split the very large book club into two smaller ones to maximize participation opportunities.

Our first book club meetings began with each student taking a turn sharing why they picked the selected novel. They quickly transitioned into their book clubs also created an electronic space where they would record individual thoughts and group discussion themes throughout the project. Here, they recorded their thoughts on choosing the book and co-constructed a reading timeline. They were provided with book club meeting dates and times and determined how many pages needed to be read for each meeting so that they could read and discuss the entire novel in the allotted time. The first book club meetings concluded with a reminder of what the reading assignment was for the next meeting.

### **Figure 3**

#### *Sample Book Club Timeline*

#### **Timeline**

We will read 53 pages before every class period.

Read up until...

- April 17: 1 - 57
- April 22: 58 - 99
- April 24: 100 - 157
- April 29: 158 - 213
- May 1: 214 - 262

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## ***Engaging English Language Arts Skills***

A goal of the project was for preservice teachers to engage with text in authentic ways and simultaneously explore strategies for teaching fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. We used class time to define of the essential reading skills, engage the preservice teachers in tasks to encourage their exploration of each skill, and challenge to “mine” the text of the novel for an opportunity to teach the skill to developing and transitional readers.

### ***Reading Fluency***

We emphasized that reading fluency is an essential skill for young readers. Reading longer texts, such as novels, promote reading fluency as readers engage in text. Many of our students share that they don't have time for leisure reading in addition to the coursework they complete. The opportunity to read a middle-grade novel encourages them to engage critical reading skills for their future students. As the readers engage in reading their novels, we ask them to be on the lookout for impactful passages in the book – these passages could tell a critical event in the plot line or include particularly lovely word choices or use of imagery. Students can note or mark these passages and come to book club prepared to share these along with a rationale of why they selected the passage.

### ***Vocabulary***

We designed vocabulary mini-lessons that reinforced the notion to preservice teachers of critical importance that vocabulary has on comprehension. The students learn methods for teaching vocabulary knowledge for students and were asked to select Tier Two academic language terms from their texts and plan engagements for students. For example, the preservice teachers were asked to infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word provided in the context of a sentence. We displayed the following sentence on the board for preservice teachers:

*Exhausted, the Man Pandiculated Before Crawling into Bed*

We led preservice teachers through an inquiry discussion asking them to hypothesize the meaning of the unknown word, pandiculate, by sharing what they know. Students recognized that the unknown word is a verb and situate it within the context of being tired in the evening. On the next slide, students viewed several pictures depicting humans and animals as they pandiculate or engage in a full-body stretch. Through this activity, we modeled how preservice teachers can intelligently determine the meaning of an unknown word by drawing on their background knowledge, utilizing contextual clues, and viewing images.

Following this activity, book club participants were prompted to “mine” their novel for Tier 2 words that may challenge their fourth-grade readers. I asked them to select two important terms from the book and to analyze one using the Frayer Model, a graphic organizer developed by Dorothy Frayer and her colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1969. The Frayer model encourages vocabulary learning by asking students to generate a student-friendly definition of the target word, provide examples and non-examples of the word, and use the word in a sentence. Additionally, they learned an instructional routine recommended by Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013) and were asked to plan a vocabulary mini lesson following this routine using an essential Tier Two vocabulary word from their text. The vocabulary routine includes the following steps:

1. Present the target vocabulary word in context. (We recommend sharing a poster with the word and an accompanying picture to support visual learners.)
2. Provide a student-friendly definition.
3. Provide an example of the word in context.
4. Prompt student engagement by asking students to generate their own examples of the word. Ask them to state the word in their examples. (Aim for 7+ exposures to the word).
5. Ask students what the new word is and what it means.

As a class, we debrief the value of the vocabulary activities, and the preservice teachers plan explicit instruction for teaching the target vocabulary terms from their book.

### ***Comprehension***

We organically encouraged students’ comprehension of text throughout the reading of the novels and the book club discussions. Students also enacted comprehension strategies as they engaged with reading the novels and discussing it. Our students learned about narrative story elements including characters, setting, rising action, solution, and theme. At times they made predictions about the plot and/or how a character would respond to unfolding events. They also made connections between the book and the world, another text, or themselves. Students were invited to use sticky notes to ask and record questions they had about a word, an idea, or the story itself. As they neared the conclusion of the book, preservice teachers reflected on predictions they made or actions of the characters and shared their thoughts and reflections about the story and its conclusion. They also reviewed many examples of graphic organizers and selected formats that best fit the story arc and themes from their novel.

### *Spatial Analysis in Texts*

We began the social studies portion of the book club project by asking the following question: Why Geography? For many of our pre-service educators, geography was limited to cartographic creation and inquiry. We believed that literature presented a good opportunity to broaden our preservice teachers' understanding of geography to include spatial analysis. What is spatial analysis? How would preservice teachers engage with it during reading?

To help preservice teachers expand their sense of place, we asked the following guiding question: How do you create a socially just narrative of a place if you are not deeply connected to the place? For much of the social studies, and geography in particular, it is essential to build contextualize the relationship between places and experiences (Solnit, 2010). In order to help round out the context, we used the example of Los Angeles. By reading salient excerpts from Ross Macdonald's *The Chill* (1963) and Sallias's *Drive* (2005) and pairing them with contemporary maps, images, of the city we were able to create an imagined geography (Gregory, 1994) of the city. We were careful to note that our imaginary was one of a multiplicity that could be created. Using one Los Angeles imaginary, we communicated to the preservice teachers that as social studies educators, it is our responsibility to create socially just narratives and geographical imaginaries of places and events that their future preservice teachers may not have a personal connection. In doing so, we encourage our future preservice teachers to critically engage with the sedimented world(s) that they help shape. Just as Derrick Gregory (1994) states, "history is never innocent, it is always history for" (p. 6), we reminded our preservice teachers that the same could be stated for geographical imaginaries. From there we were able to have a discussion about developing context.

To help preservice teachers round out the context of the novel, we encouraged our pre-service teachers to look up the author's biography, evaluate salient regional and world events that may have influenced the writing of the novel, and what other texts were available around the same time that their novel was published. By engaging in these activities, we emphasized the following: all authorial choices are political, as they deliberate choices, the authors are embedded in a particular cultural milieu. We were then able to build on the authorial contextualization to evaluate the setting (time/place(s)) of their novel. Several of the novels took place in the contemporary context that they were written or had a nebulous setting timeframe. In these instances, we asked the preservice teachers to watch for signposts, such as events and/or technology.

The National Council of the Social Studies is committed to ensuring that social studies is aligned with social justice. Just as contextualizing the milieu in which the author was writing is significant, so too are the social issues that the novels addressed. We discussed how teaching social issues, such as

poverty and mental health awareness could be generative for developing empathy. Students worked in their book clubs in discussing what they already knew about the social issue and spent time in class conducting preliminary research on the issue. After building their content knowledge, they connected the issue and content knowledge to a standard and sketched an activity for future preservice teachers.

### ***Concluding the Unit***

Once preservice teachers completed their novels, we changed our focus from reading and engaging essential skills of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension to the pedagogical work of teaching the book to middle-grade readers. We asked the preservice teachers to prepare a final project in which they a) summarized the book to the class along with a recommendation and b) suggested activities to engage middle grade preservice teachers with the novel. We provided preservice teachers with time in class to collaborate on these projects while we observed their interactions and were available for support. We also offered preservice teachers with a survey to share their feedback on the book club project and opportunity to engage in thematic learning across their methods courses in reading and Social Studies. The professors analyzed the survey results by reading through them to identify common themes including successes and challenges. Qualitative analysis was used to find patterns and interpret their meaning (Stringer, 2017).

In their reflections on learning to teach reading through a book club project, preservice teachers reported enjoying the benefits described by Daniels (2002) in his book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs & Reading Groups*. They reported feeling motivated to read the book, enjoyed the social connection to their peers, engaged their reading skills, and were provided an opportunity to experience different perspectives from their book club members. One student stated, “I think [the book club project] went well. It was nice being able to engage in peer discussion and share our ideas and thoughts. We noticed and interpreted things differently, so it was interesting to see what the others’ thought.”

Students also reported enjoyed the opportunity to participate in book clubs as they were simultaneously learning how book clubs can be an effective instructional strategy to teach middle grade readers. One student stated, “I found it beneficial to discuss [the book] with my peers. I specifically enjoyed discussing the teaching side of the book and how we would implement [the teaching of the book] in the classroom. Another student addressed the practical and relevant nature of participating in the book club. They stated, “I enjoyed it, I thought it was nice to read a story that middle school students would actually read. I also enjoyed coming up with ideas for lesson plan that I would actually use.”

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To wrap up the social studies portion, we started by asking preservice teachers to reflect on the following quote:

Simply assigning a piece of historical fiction, however, is not sufficient to encourage the kind of thinking that is a goal of social studies. Rather the use of historical fiction requires careful selection, opportunity for discussion and reflection, the provision of time and resources for further inquiry, and a teacher willing to encourage careful analysis of books from the dual perspectives of literature and history” (Freeman & Levstick, 1988, p. 330).

To reflect holistically on the quote, we asked the preservice teachers to think about the following questions: 1. How are the disciplines of English Language Arts and Social Studies different and/or similar? And 2. What do the authors mean by further inquiry? After initial reflection we spiraled the social issues by having them engage in an expanding context. We wanted them to communicate the provenance of the theme, by connecting it to text to self, text to text, and text to world. We then concluded by asking them to reflect on how their theme addressed how place was integral to the text.

### Discussion

Assessment played a significant role in the collaborative book club project. The authors agree that the greatest method of formative assessment used was observations of preservice teachers at work through our anecdotal notes. The great value of team teaching the unit was the opportunity for us to engage deeply with the preservice teachers by observing and participating in their knowledge construction.

Students were invited to create a shared electronic space to record the “tracks” of their work. Many groups opted to create a Google Slide space. In this space, they recorded summaries of their book club discussions and kept records of the artifacts they created during their minilessons. They also used this space as they began to design and envision their final project. The instructors regularly viewed these Journals to monitor the progress of the group.

As a final summative assessment for the unit, the small book clubs were tasked with presenting a summary of their novel to the class along with their recommended teaching methods to engage preservice teachers in Social Studies and Reading methodologies as they read the book. The small groups presented their ideas to the class during finals week along with exemplars of instructional activities recommended.

## Reflections

Participants completed a final reflection on their experience with the book club project. The responses indicate that the preservice teachers saw great value in the project that blended learning in social studies and reading. One student shared, “A big thing I will take away is that it’s possible to support both literacy and social studies. I would have never thought you could teach both at the same time.” This sentiment resonated with the authors as we acknowledge the opportunity that thematic units present for providing preservice teachers with greater opportunities to engage with social studies content. Another student had a similar takeaway, stating, “There are many different ways to teach social studies, and it doesn’t just need to be done through a textbook.... Project-based learning is very effective and can provide an opportunity to teach reading strategies.” A final student remarked on the opportunity the project provided on the development of cognition. The student shared that the collaborative book club project taught her “how to ask preservice teachers’ questions that involve critical thinking and how to lead discussions about the book.” The same student valued the development of activities to support reading the book to “expand knowledge and allow growth.”

## Limitations

The interdisciplinary book club project had some limitations. Select preservice teachers shared they had difficulty engaging with the middle-grade texts. We could address this by initially addressing the choice of books to mimic the type of texts they will use with their future transitional readers. Additionally, inherent in assigned group work is the reality that not all group members contributed equally. In some cases, we observed that the group leaders shouldered the responsibility for tasks and discussion and that some group members participated to a lesser extent.

## Conclusion

The book club project provides two significant learning opportunities for preservice teachers. First, by contextualizing a book club study with a geography and place focus, preservice teachers are simultaneously meeting social studies standards through the construction of inquiry and spatial awareness skills while also engaging literacy skills of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The authors argue that a design such as this can bring social studies, as a discipline, to the forefront and allow greater engagement by preservice teachers with the discipline. Second, the interdisciplinary nature of the spatial equity book club promotes preservice teachers’ critical thinking, community building and collaboration skills, and helps them to make connections between disciplines. Our goal for future teachers is to consider both co-teaching as well as strategic interdisciplinary work in their future classrooms.

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