

# ONLINE LITERATURE CIRCLES: DEVELOPING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRESERVICE TEACHERS

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of literature circles on teacher efficacy, empathy, and professional responsibility. An overwhelming number of preservice teachers lack the confidence in their ability to teach children with circumstance different from their own. Teacher educators have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers with the tools they need to teach children with varying backgrounds. This research is designed to facilitate a personal and professional connection to critical issues discussed in class that are relevant to today's children and families using online literature circles to promote discussion, reflection, and culturally responsive preservice teachers.*

Keywords: culturally responsive, preservice teachers, literature circles

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According to Covington and Beery (as cited in Alderman, 2004), schools not only have the responsibility for student learning but also of cultivating student's motivation to learn. Teachers must foster a high level of confidence and achievement for their students and provide them with the encouragement they need to believe in themselves; without an increase in teacher competence and confidence, neither will prosper. A positive classroom climate is critical in increasing student motivation and achievement. If students are to adopt the goals that lead to academic success, they must have access to environments in which everyone is supported and treated with respect and fairness (Alderman, 2004). When teachers are encouraged to have an empathic mindset, they help to foster and promote a greater sense of trust and belonging in their students (McBride, 2016). Teachers with low efficacy or those who lack the ability to connect with students who are experiencing difficult circumstances are less likely to create the environments that lead to higher levels of motivation and achievement. In fact, a teacher's sense of efficacy is an excellent predictor of future student success (Alderman, 2004). To this end, teacher educators and educator preparation providers (EPPs) have a responsibility to help prepare their preservice teachers with the tools to boost their efficacy so they are able to meet the needs of children with diverse backgrounds and/or challenging life circumstances. It is imperative that the training and experiences preservice teachers receive in their programs address teaching students of diverse cultures and backgrounds different from their own.

Seminal work conducted by researchers like Bandura (1989), Woolfolk and Hoy (1990) highlight the importance of high efficacy among teachers. Not only should teachers model self-efficacy, but how they feel about their ability to teach directly impacts students on a multitude of levels such as social-emotional intelligence, academic success, and student self-efficacy. It is clear that teachers plagued with self-doubt and low efficacy are unlikely to be up to the task of addressing the diverse needs of students or helping to motivate their low-achieving students (Tollefson, 2000) or those who might be experiencing difficult situations.

An understanding of diverse student populations and empathy for students dealing with difficult life circumstances that future teachers will encounter is important for identifying and utilizing strategies to meet those diverse needs. Hence, the following questions are an important focus for exploration: *How much empathy do preservice teachers have for children and families different from themselves? And, how do they feel about their ability to teach children different from themselves?* Therefore, a project was implemented in a required education course designed to connect preservice teachers to the critical issues discussed in class to their own personal lives and responsibilities as future educators. Consequently, two questions emerged from that project that frame this study. First, what types of responses and attitudes will result from online literature circles using young adult novels which focus on critical issues facing children and families in today's society? Secondly, will using contemporary, realistic, young adult fiction, featuring relatable, diverse, young main characters experiencing challenges, help preservice teachers develop a sense of empathy, professional responsibility, and teacher efficacy?

### Literature Review

The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of literature circles on teacher efficacy, empathy, and professional responsibility. An overwhelming number of preservice teachers lack the confidence in their ability to teach children with circumstances different from their own. Alderman (2004) calls this phenomenon a lack of teacher efficacy which she defines as, "the extent to which teachers believe that they have the capacity to affect student performance" (p. 184). Marshall (2006) suggests that teacher education programs include explicit discussions regarding identity, culture, and the way these intersect with the schooling process, as well as experiential learning in the communities in which preservice teachers will likely serve. At its core, multicultural education is that which seeks to create multicultural competence in individuals (Bennett, 2001). This requires a reconciliation with the self (Banks, 1996), demanding individuals in all groups to see past their own perspectives. Noddings (1992) stresses the importance of the teacher's role in teaching children to be the "recipients of care" (p. 108); children that have not learned to do this are at risk of failure. Teacher educators have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers with the tools they need to connect with and effectively teach children with circumstances different from their own.

Meyers (1995) also emphasizes the role collaboration plays in facilitating teachers' understanding of student attitudes and problems, and gains in long term academic achievement. Online communities (e.g. threaded discussion forums), "have the potential to alter the way new teachers communicate with one another (peer support) as well as with other professionals (collaborative consultation)" (DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003, p.312), and provide an opportunity for discussion and reflection of critical issues related to student achievement. Because communication can occur at any time, advancing technologies (e.g. web communities, email) offer unique opportunities for creating supportive learning environments.

### Study Design

This research was designed to facilitate a personal and professional connection to critical issues discussed in class that are relevant to today's children and families. The following research questions framed this study: (1) What type of responses and attitudes will result from online literature circles using realistic fiction? (2) Will using realistic fiction help preservice teachers develop a sense of empathy, professional responsibility, and teacher efficacy? The objectives of this study were to: (a) explore the attitudes of preservice teachers regarding critical issues facing children and families in today's society; (b) help preservice teachers connect to critical issues involving children and families in today's society through the

use of realistic fiction; and (c) determine whether the use of realistic fiction and online literature circles will develop a sense of empathy, professional responsibility, and teacher efficacy in preservice teachers.

Participants were provided a detailed outline of expectations for the online literature circles (See Appendix A). Two weeks into the project, the following additional instructions were given to each group for clarity.

Remember to respond to each other often and in a conversational type dialogue. It should read like you are having a face-to-face conversation. Please remember to pull in your own personal experience as it relates to the issues presented in the book, school, home, etc... Also, be sure to include how your book relates to your issue and the children and families you will later serve. Remember this is not a regurgitation of each chapter.

Class discussions and reflective thinking activities related to both professional and personal responsibilities of educators provided the catalyst for the project. Several critical issues guided the selection of novels for the project. These included abuse, death of a parent, peer pressure, and similar concerns (See Appendix B).

### Participants

Participants selected for this study were preservice teachers seeking elementary, middle school, or high school teacher certification. All participants were enrolled in a language arts method course and in their last year of teacher preparation. All research activities (online literature circles, reflective journals, and discussion posts) were required components of the language arts course. All enrolled students were eligible to participate and/or decline with no penalty; however, all students were required to participate in the online literature circles and reflective discussion assignments that were required of all students enrolled.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Two data sources were used for this project, transcripts of online literature discussions and individual reflective journals. A total of 165 discussions and journal entries were used in the initial data analysis. Eventually, 71 entries were discarded because they contained only regurgitations of the novel even after the additional instructions were given. In the end, 94 discussion entries and journal reflections were analyzed. A thorough analysis of the data was ensured by examining each entry multiple times to uncover recurring themes, categories, and patterns. As the analysis of the data was conducted, eight categories emerged: *personal reflections/experiences-positive*, *personal reflections/experiences-negative*, *empathy*, *blame or judgment*, *professional responsibility*, *self-doubt*, *teacher efficacy*, and *personal responsibility*.

Entries were coded as *personal reflections/experiences-positive* if the author identified with the victim or person portrayed as having a high moral character. Likewise, entries were coded as *personal reflections/experiences-negative*, if the author identified with the individual portrayed as causing harm or making inappropriate choices. The following table features these two codes with corresponding representative quotes.

Table 1

*Personal Reflections/Experiences-Positive & Personal Reflections/Experiences-Negative Codes with Illustrative Quotes*

Personal Reflection/Experiences-Positive	Personal Reflection/Experiences-Negative
<p>“I guess I don’t understand about the lazy moms and dads. My dad left the house by 5am and most of the time we didn’t see him until dark. He worked on the railroad, farmed, raised cattle so he was always busy. My mom stayed home, but our house was spotless. Our cars were always clean, everything was ironed, we had homemade supper every night, and a garden when we were young. We had hard times, but we always worked. My husband and I keep the same work ethic. Being poor doesn’t mean you have to be lazy and dirty. Poor Beatrice! “</p>	<p>“Hey guys. When you all were in school did you notice an atmosphere after a fight? I can. There are always the kids that try to egg on the fight kinda like Garrett. You guys would not guess this but I was a big bully in school. I would pick on people and start stuff between people. Well I guess I grew up and put it all behind me. Come to think about it, I didn’t have many friends and the teachers labeled me the trouble maker.”</p>

In order for an entry to be coded *empathy*, the entry had to show evidence of the author’s ability to identify with individuals dealing with negative life outcomes. For the purpose of this project, “empathy” will be defined as, “the ability to identify oneself mentally with a person or thing and so understand his feelings or its meaning” (American Oxford Dictionary, 2015). Entries were coded as *blame or judgment* if there was evidence of the author forming a negative opinion and assigning blame to another individual because of their life circumstances. The following table features these two codes with corresponding representative quotes.

Table 2

*Empathy & Blame/Judgement Codes with Illustrative Quotes*

Empathy	Blame/Judgment
<p>“I felt bad for Beatrice. Coming from a middle-class background, it was hard for me to relate to their situation at first. Hoot helped me see another point of view. I can imagine how hard it was for Beatrice growing up in poverty. However, it is hard for me to relate to the lazy father figure. My father worked from sun-up to sun-down. I will need to think about the children I will teach. Sometimes it is hard to wear the other shoe.”</p>	<p>“Any who, what kind of parent doesn’t know that their child is not at home in bed and is crashing out at goodness knows whose house? My middle little girl is 18 years old, and I still check in on her before I go to bed. Also, if I get up in the night to go to the bathroom or something, I make the rounds and check in on all the kids. I can’t even imagine what kind of people Beatrice’s parents are.”</p>

If the discussions identified the author stating their responsibility to their future students or the field of education, the entry was coded as *professional responsibility*. Likewise, if entries provided evidence of the author’s personal responsibility to their community in roles other than as an educator (e.g. parent, community leaders, etc...), the entry was coded as *personal responsibility*. The following table features these two codes with corresponding representative quotes.

Table 3  
*Professional Responsibility & Personal Responsibility Codes with Illustrative Quotes*

Professional Responsibility	Personal Responsibility
<p>“...That just goes to show that one person like Mullet Fingers can begin to change the world. I guess we could use this as teachers and take small steps and encourage others to help bring about a change. If you think about it teachers are very influential in children’s lives. I think that is because of the persona that we have and also the fact that we spend most of the day with the students. You know, Mrs. Curry always says that it just takes one lousy teacher to ruin a life time of learning. I think that it also takes just one awesome teacher to get a child hooked on learning. I guess we teachers need to step up to the plate.”</p>	<p>“What a good liar Beatrice is!!!! I’m impressed-it makes we wonder what my kids are up to!!! Anyway, the thought of the running boy with such a raging infection scares me—I can’t but help think of my little ones. Parents have such a huge responsibility to take care of their children.”</p>

The final codes that emerged were *self-doubt* and *teacher efficacy*. If the entries provided evidence of students doubting their ability to perform the duties of a professional educator, they were coded as *self-doubt*. Responses that contained evidence of the authors seeing themselves as positively affecting student outcomes and achievement were coded as *teacher efficacy*. The following table features these two codes with corresponding representative quotes.

Table 4  
*Self-Doubt & Teacher Efficacy Codes with Illustrative Quotes*

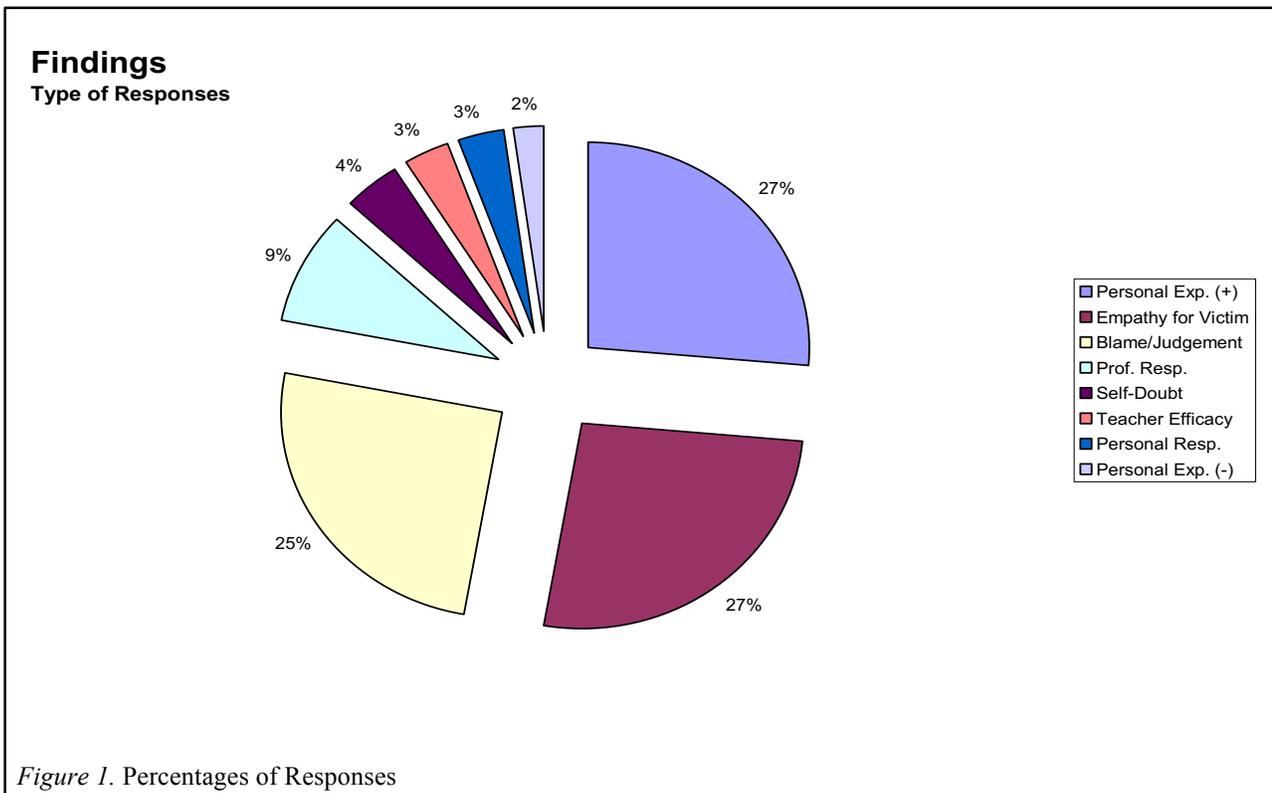
Self-Doubt	Teacher-Efficacy
<p>“...Yes, they were good parents. They seemed to have found a balance between being a friend and a parent which is not easy. In a way, we have to find that same balance in the classroom. We must be willing to listen to students and try to understand their concerns and viewpoints. At the same time, they must understand and accept our authority and follow the rules. I am really wondering if I am up to the challenge. I am almost finished and am having scary thoughts! Help!”</p>	<p>“It is hard to relate to some of the characters in this book. I for one do not understand how Mullet Fingers was allowed to skip school and simply disappear. Where are the teachers? I know that I would have done something to intervene. Called a social worker, school counselor, given extra help, worked with them after school, etc... I would have intervened before this point. It takes only one teacher to make a difference. I can’t wait until I have my own classroom. I have waited so long. I know I can make a difference for children like Beatrice and Mullet Fingers.”</p>

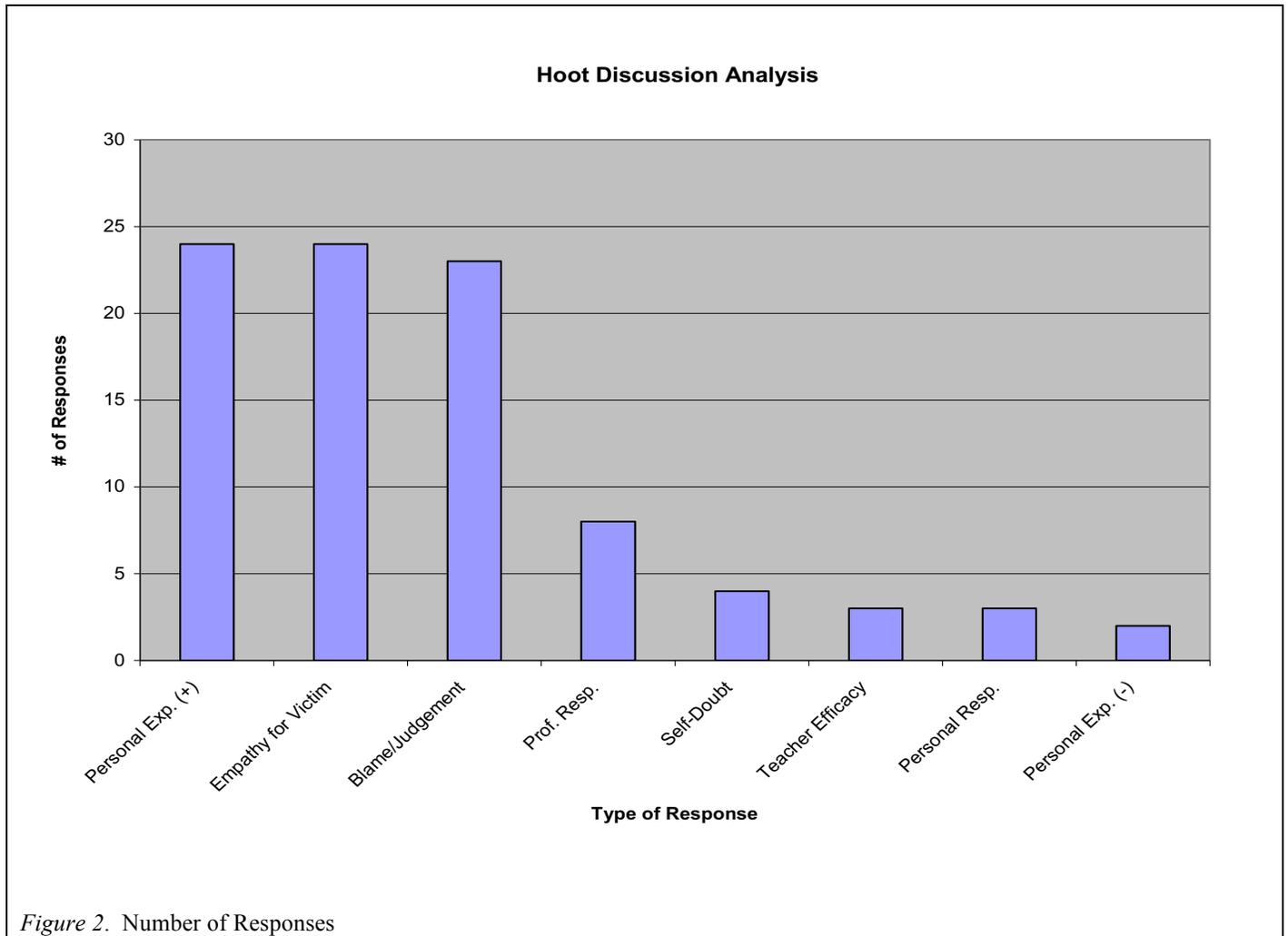
### Findings

The findings suggest there is still room for improvement for teacher educators in relation to developing empathy, teacher efficacy, and professional responsibility in their preservice teachers. As the themes began to emerge from the coded data, the results were surprising. *Personal reflections/experiences-positive* and *empathy* comprised over 50% of the entries coded. This may seem positive until the data is further scrutinized. Initially, it seemed that the students were developing a sense of empathy for the characters who are not unlike the future students they will have; however, the majority of responses for both categories--*empathy* and *personal reflections/Experiences-positive*--reflected responses that involved the students identifying with the positively portrayed person or the person of high moral standards.

Only 2% of the responses identified a personal connection to the less desirable character or person making inappropriate choices. Not a single entry indicating empathy for a less desirable character was present (e.g. out of work father, bully, etc...). For example, one entry described an out of work father as lazy and responsible for his family's problems even though there was absolutely no evidence in the novel to back these claims. In fact, the book does not give enough information on the circumstances surrounding the father's situation. A surprising 25% of the responses involved the students placing blame or judgment on individuals because of their life circumstances or inappropriate choices.

There was also very little evidence of *professional responsibility* or *teacher efficacy*. Only 9% of the responses indicated the students taking responsibility for their future students, and only 3% of the responses indicated that students felt they were able to teach children different from themselves. *Personal responsibility* was only evident in 3% of the entries coded. However, a low percentage of responses indicated a lack of confidence in the students' ability to teach. In fact, only 4% of the responses indicated *self-doubt* on the students' ability to function effectively as an educator. Figures 1 & 2 illustrate the findings from the data.





### Discussion

So where do we go from here? This is a difficult question to answer. Even though the results were not anticipated, there is room for improvement for teacher educators in preparing preservice teachers for the future. Pinpointing issues within the EPP is critical for how can we make a difference if we are unaware of the problems. By addressing the issues, we are better able to formulate a plan of action to address the weaknesses and better prepare our preservice teachers for the challenges they will face. Preservice teachers must be given the skills they need to work in diverse settings and develop the efficacy needed to meet a variety of challenges in the classroom including supporting students with challenging life situations.

In order for students to succeed, they must have a positive learning environment. Having access to a positive class environment is difficult without teacher support. In fact, teacher support is critical in the development of a positive classroom climate (Alderman, 2004). Teachers have a duty to foster an environment in which students and teachers support each other for learning and care about the success and failure of each other (Alderman, 2004). How can teachers support a positive classroom climate in which each child feels a belongingness to the group if they have hidden biases or lack confidence about their ability to teach children experiencing challenging life situations? When preservice teachers feel adequately prepared for their future, teacher efficacy will increase.

The question is what can teacher educators do now to improve teacher efficacy, empathy, professional responsibility, and motivation among their preservice teachers? First, just because students show evidence of empathy and connections to diverse groups of students, doesn't mean the job is finished. Teacher educators must look beyond the surface to determine if preservice teachers embrace all groups or just those groups that are portrayed in a positive manner. We must help teacher candidates uncover hidden biases or negative attitudes about certain groups of children and families. It is simply not enough to prepare preservice teachers with pedagogical knowledge and academic content; we must also help them develop positive attitudes about their future students and their ability to teach children of diverse cultures and backgrounds, children that are most likely different from themselves.

Teachers also have a responsibility to provide effective instruction for children from all backgrounds (Alderman, 2004). It is the responsibility of teacher educators to prepare preservice teachers to accept this responsibility. Secondly, teacher educators cannot assume that class activities, readings, and discussions will help teacher candidates develop empathy, professional responsibility, and teacher efficacy; development of these characteristics require diverse experiences that must constantly be assessed to ensure they are in fact making a difference.

Even though the results of this project indicate that some preservice teachers struggle to connect with students in difficult situations, further research will help decide on the best intervention to reverse this problem. In the future, activities that will specifically address the areas of teacher efficacy, empathy, and professional responsibility will be incorporated. Additionally, the effects of more structured online literature circles in which the instructor takes an active role in the discussions will be investigated in order to unearth problem areas and guide discussions to more meaningful topics. Also, more prompts to direct their journaling on the topics of teacher efficacy, professional responsibility, and student motivation will be provided. Moreover, more frequent instructor input in the journal responses will also be beneficial. In addition to these class activities, case studies and field experiences should be incorporated into preservice teacher curriculum. Preservice teachers should have multiple opportunities to work directly with diverse children and their families. Another area that should be explored is the role of community service in developing empathy and professional responsibility in my preservice teachers.

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## Appendix A

## Early Childhood Issue Presentation Guidelines

**Early Childhood Issue Presentation (30 points)****Step One (Journal and Online Discussion): 6 points**

- Groups of 4 to 6 students will be decided in class.
  - The group will select a novel for young adults that deals with an early childhood issue from chapter 2 (see book list on Web CT). More details will be given during class.
  - Each member will obtain a copy of the book (library, Amazon.com, Half.com, Hastings, Books a Million, etc...)
1. **Online Discussion Boards:** Each member will begin to read the book and engage in an online discussion (with their group members) pertaining to what they read each day. Discussions should allow students to make connections between the book and their own personal experiences, related readings, current events, social issues, etc... Group members will be required to engage in an in-depth discussion with their group. Remember these discussions should read like a conversation. We will discuss this more in class. **Discussions are worth 3 points of your total grade.**
  2. **Reflective Journal:** Each group member will also keep a reflective journal documenting their concerns and feelings regarding the book and their early childhood issue. The journal should consist of at least 6 entries and should be typed and double-spaced. You may use your online discussions, text/novel readings, and personal experiences to guide your reflections. This journal should be included in your group notebook (see below, step two). **The reflective journal is worth 3 points of your total grade.**

**Step Two (Issue Research/Notebook): 16 points**

- Research a critical issue facing children and families today. The issue should be related to the young adult novel decided on by your group. Use the library databases to locate newspaper articles, educational journals, etc... to support your issue.
- Locate at least three **credible** sources to support your issue.

**Notebook: Each group** (there will be one notebook submitted for each group) **will turn in the following using paragraph form (use a 3-ring notebook with dividers to organize each of the following seven sections):**

**Issue Description:** A description of the critical issue facing children and families today (at least 1 page, double-spaced),  
- (2 points)

**Novel Summary:** A summary of the young adult novel and an explanation of how it relates to your selected issue (at least 1 page, double-spaced) - (2 points)

**Source Summaries (3):** A bibliography and summary for **each** source (1/2 page for each of the three sources, double-spaced; include a copy of the source) - (2 points)

**Influences:** An explanation of the influences this issue has on curriculum, teaching, and the life outcomes of children and families (at least 2 pages, double-spaced) - (4 points)

**Professional Responsibility:** An explanation of how early childhood professionals can respond to this issue for the betterment of children and families (at least 2 pages, double-spaced) - **(3 points)**

1. **Reflective Journals:** The notebook should also contain the reflective journals for each group member (see explanation in step one).
2. **Individual Contributions:** Each group member will prepare a typed explanation of the contributions they made to the project. This document may also include your thoughts and feelings about the issue and/or project. This document should be **at least** one page in length, double-spaced. – **(3 points)**

**Step Three (Presentation): 8 points**

**Presentation Design:** Each group will be required to design a presentation regarding their issue. The group will use their issue research and young adult novel for the basis of this presentation, however, outside resources may also be used (poems, songs, dramatizations, video clips, etc...). The presentation should last approximately 10-15 minutes and should captivate and excite the audience. I am looking for unique and creative presentations that grab the attention of the audience and make them think! Remember to think “outside the box” and take into consideration the different perspectives of others! I want the audience to be moved by your presentation!

Appendix B  
Novel Choices Aligned with Critical Issues

Critical Issue	Novel Choices
Abuse (physical or emotional)	Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Curtis Hoot by Carl Hiaasen A Child Called It Letters from the Inside
Adoption	Saffy's Angel by Hilary McKay The Wanderer by Sharon Creech Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher
Death/ Loss of a Parent(s) (i.e. death, divorce, abandonment)	A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park Because of Winn Dixie by Kate Di Camillo Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson Dear Mr. Henshaw by Beverly Cleary Getting Near to Baby by Audrey Coulombis Lily's Crossing by Patricia Giff Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse Phoenix Rising by Karen Hesse The Wanderer by Sharon Creech Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech What Daddy Did by Neal Shusterman
Foster Children	Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Curtis Dakota's Dream by James Bennett Pictures of Hollis Woods by Patricia Giff Ruby Holler by Sharon Creech The Wanderer by Sharon Creech When the Bough Breaks by Anna Myers
Mental/Learning Disabilities	A Corner of the Universe by Ann Martin Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes Loser by Jerry Spinelli
Obesity	One Fat Summer by Robert Lipsyte Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes by Chris Crutcher
Peer Pressure/Bullying	Hoot by Carl Hiaasen Loser by Jerry Spinelli One Fat Summer by Robert Lipsyte Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli Tangerine by Edward Bloor The Skin I'm In by Sharon Flake Wringer by Jerry Spinelli
Physical Disabilities/ Illness	Peeling the Onion by Wendy Orr Tangerine by Edward Bloor
Poverty	Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson Downsiders by Neal Shusterman Hoot by Carl Hiaasen Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli Night Hoops by Carl Deuker Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park Witness by Karen Hesse
Racism	Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli The Skin I'm In by Sharon Flake Witness by Karen Hesse