

## Chapter 16

# Using Virtual Book Clubs to Elevate Discussion and Diverse Voices

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### ABSTRACT

*Preservice teachers in educator preparation programs (EPPs) are rarely cognizant of programmatic structures outside their own EPP. This lack of awareness isolates preservice teachers within their own programs and university cultures. As teacher educators, the authors wondered: How might interacting with peers in other EPPs bolster our preservice teachers' disciplinary literacies, praxis, and cultural competency? How might cross-institutional virtual interaction expand preservice teachers' pre-professional networking opportunities? Virtual book clubs offer a structured way for preservice teachers to experience peer interaction across institutions and cultural contexts. These book clubs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to explore a diverse array of cultural, societal, and professional perspectives as they prepare to enter teaching as young professionals.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) provide preservice teachers with a pedagogical framework for teaching methods and instructional strategies in as close an approximation of “real world” praxis as is possible. While gaining foundational skills and pre-professional experiences within the context of the EPP, however, preservice teachers are usually unaware of the programmatic structure at neighboring institutions, and are especially unfamiliar with the structure of programs at schools across the state or in other parts of the country. This lack of awareness can create a silo effect, which isolates preservice teachers within their own institutional and programmatic cultures (Trust et al., 2017). When preservice teachers move from the institutional program setting and into the “real world” of classroom teaching practice, they often face situations and circumstances for which they feel unprepared. While this perception may be intensified by programmatic isolation, it can be lessened or ameliorated by creating connections across programs and institutions at the pre-professional level.

One-way to address this disconnect between EPPs and “real world” classroom experiences is to provide cross-institutional opportunities for preservice teachers to connect and engage in authentic literary praxis (Brookfield, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2013). Within the elementary classroom, teachers routinely use children’s literature to support instructional content and topics, and diverse children’s books are an essential resource for curating opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in their classroom libraries (Tschida et al., 2014). Such reflection was popularized by Bishop’s (1990) notion of *windows*, *mirrors*, and *sliding glass doors* as a means for students to connect to literature personally (mirrors), secondarily (windows), and collectively (sliding glass doors). Such opportunities allow teachers to generate purposeful lessons in which students engage in conversations about underrepresented topics within the classroom.

Book Clubs, as utilized by the authors, provide a structure for preservice teachers to interact with peers enrolled in EPPs at other institutions. The framework for each Book Club includes preservice teachers from each EPP reading targeted articles (see references for examples of suggested additional readings) related to the Book Club topic (Feeney & Moravcik, 2005; Loeffelholz, 2017; Tschida, et al., 2014) in preparation for literature circle activities and virtual discussions. Focusing on diverse texts during these Book Clubs enables teacher educators to illustrate how authentic classroom libraries full of rich, diverse books can serve as a catalyst for student discussion. Our intention was for inter-programmatic contact to bolster students’ cultural competency, disciplinary literacies, and ultimately, their praxis. In this chapter, authors from each participating university share vignettes highlighting their Book Club experiences in order to document how preservice teachers’ interaction with diverse books at the EPP level can build confidence, increasing the likelihood of their utility in future classrooms. We also provide a timeline for this multi-year, multi-institutional project, and explain how it is situated within our theoretical framework. Finally, we examine student perceptions of the Book Club, discuss current findings, and explore implications for future iterations and research.

## BACKGROUND

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) often use diverse children’s books as a primary tool to support and model culturally responsive instruction (Gay, 2002). While conversations about diverging issues can be challenging due to a lack of confidence or experience with certain topics (Hollie, 2017), recent

research suggests that many teachers are beginning to embrace such discussions within the classroom (Goldberg, 2020). EPPs can help bolster the confidence required for such discussion by providing diverse books representative of the student population in tandem with active opportunities for preservice teachers to navigate challenging topics in the curriculum.

While implementing literature circles in conjunction with reading strategies is commonplace in literacy courses, diverse books can also be used in social studies contexts to address salient issues such as incarceration, immigration, race, and activism. Using diverse books to teach these often neglected and polarizing topics allow preservice teachers to use books as *mirrors* for self-reflection, or as *windows* that offer a divergent view (Bishop, 1990; Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Davis 2016). In this Book Club, activities were designed specifically as *sliding glass doors* (Bishop, 1990) whereby preservice teachers are asked to actively step into the shoes of the characters in the book. This facilitates the opportunity to empathize with the experiences of the characters (Taylor, 2003) rather than simply viewing them secondhand. Situating diverse children's literature as a *sliding glass door* provides preservice teachers a more powerful context for understanding the experiences and cultures of others, while also instilling confidence to implement these methods in their own classrooms (Goldberg, 2020; Leftwich, 2002).

One way teacher educators can cultivate a safe atmosphere for discussing these challenging topics is to initiate the use of virtual discussion boards (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Goldberg 2020) that allow for open and honest virtual conversation among peers (Karchmer-Klein, 2020). Previous studies suggest online discussion boards provide a platform for preservice teachers to authentically and autonomously engage in the discourse, and suggest that users exhibit more engagement and confidence in sharing responses (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Smith & Robertson, 2018). Additionally, preservice educators who engage in these online and virtual activities report improved confidence in their own future teaching practices (Smith & Robertson, 2018). In this Book Club, virtual discussion boards were used as a primary platform to encourage cross-institutional collaboration and interactive discussion between preservice teachers.

## **Institutional Iterations of Virtual Book Club**

The first iteration of the Book Club procedure began as a pilot study between two preservice teacher cohorts housed in a Virginia and a Texas university (Pennington & Tackett, 2020). Across two semesters, synchronous meetings allowed cohorts from both institutions to engage in Book Clubs, but logistical considerations, such as the Virginia institution's inability to attach the Book Club to an academic course, an imbalance in the sizes of cohorts, and differences in time zones constrained the overall procedure while shedding light onto how to improve for the future. The four overarching goals for the pilot study were to (1) *discuss available children's literature and resources*; (2) *encourage active engagement with instructional strategies*; (3) *review social studies topics and content*; and (4) *provide opportunities to share different backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions related to the books* (Pennington & Tackett, 2020). An action research approach solicited continuous, anonymous feedback from participants concerning the effectiveness of these four goals. Responses indicated the pilot successfully executed the first two goals by providing exposure to high quality children's books and resources, and by providing authentic experiences for engaging with instructional strategies. Suggestions for improvement focused on the last two goals, with participants noting they wanted a deeper connection between the books and social studies content, and more opportunities to discuss the books with others without the aforementioned logistical limitations (Pennington & Tackett, 2020).

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Based on findings from the pilot study and identified areas for growth (Pennington & Tackett, 2020), current iterations of the Book Club procedure allow our research team to revisit the first, third, and fourth goals and findings, with a particular emphasis on the final two findings, which pilot study data indicated were areas for continued improvement. Specifically, current iterations focus on how Book Clubs primarily provide opportunities to 1) explore new, diverse books for their future classrooms, 2) learn new social studies content, and 3) discuss teaching ideas with other preservice teachers. Additionally, fluctuating numbers of preservice teachers enrolled in the EPPs each semester and ever shifting current trends and issues necessitate that the Book Club procedure, focal topics, and selection of diverse books undergo continual revision. Specifically, book selection takes place through a variety of means. Books related to Japanese American incarceration, refugees, and immigration, for example, were selected based on findings from content analyses conducted by the two initial researchers. The remaining texts were selected based on their presence on suggested book lists, recommendations from colleagues, and web and social media sites devoted to diverse children's books such as Lee and Low Books, @sojustbooks (Social Justice Books), or @diversebooks (We Need Diverse Books). A complete list of books that have been used during various iterations is included in Appendix A.

### **Timeline**

After the completion of the pilot study, both initial researchers took positions at different universities. One researcher relocated to a university in Illinois, and the other moved to another university in Virginia. Findings and feedback from the pilot study prompted the researchers to undertake a deeper focus on the benefits of cross-institutional collaboration and the broadened perspective it can afford preservice teachers. As such, the original researchers chose to expand the research team to include three additional professors who currently teach at different universities located in Virginia and Illinois (see Table 1). Moreover, one of the initial researchers has been unable to participate in Book Club iterations since the pilot study, but continues to contribute to and support the ongoing research. The research team currently implementing the Book Club procedure within their EPPs includes the second initial researcher now living in Illinois, and the three additional researchers located throughout Illinois and Virginia.

As aforementioned, the research team has revised and improved the Book Club procedure over the course of several years, with the current iteration being executed at four universities as a series of

*Table 1. Virtual book club participation by academic year*

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Participating Institutions</b>
2017-2018 (Pilot)	Two Pilot Universities in Texas and Virginia
2018-2019	Illinois University 1 Virginia University 1 Virginia University 2 (Spring only)
2019-2020	Illinois University 1 Illinois University 2 Virginia University 1 Virginia University 2
2020-2021	Illinois University 1 Illinois University 2 Virginia University 1

scheduled class activities in the courses best suited for each author, most often a social studies methods or children's literature course. Currently, at the beginning of each semester, participants are assigned a small Book Club group homogeneously composed of preservice teachers from that university's EPP and given a children's book that relates to a specific topic. Topics covered thus far include Japanese American incarceration, refugees, activism, and race. Physical books or links to electronic versions are distributed the week prior to each Book Club meeting, and preservice teachers read their assigned book prior to class. During class, preservice teachers first complete an individual literature circle activity from a menu of 3-4 options, which is then shared with their small group (see Appendix B). Groups are then given a list of prompts to facilitate discussion to focus on pedagogy and critical analysis. Finally, preservice teachers engage in whole group conversation, discussing the prompts and briefly sharing a synopsis of their assigned book and their reactions to it.

In addition to homogenous small groups, preservice teachers are also assigned a virtual group that is heterogeneously composed of preservice teachers from EPPs at all participating universities. After the in-class component, preservice teachers have one week to engage with virtual group members using a set of different prompts related to the book. This discussion is asynchronous, with one deadline for an initial post and a second deadline for peer response. Supplemental articles are also offered to further address specific topics and to delve deeper into some of the raised issues. For example, several suggested readings offer additional tips for facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom (see references for examples of suggested additional readings). For the purpose of this Book Club, a Google Doc was the preferred method for virtual discussion.

### **Theoretical Framework: Action Research, Reflexivity, and "Messy Complications"**

As the Book Club procedure evolved over years, members of our research team grappled with the "complex and messy problems" of qualitative research (Staw, 1981). As mentioned, each academic year brought a new set of issues, challenges, and complications, making the procedure particularly well suited to an action research approach. The action research methodology emphasizes the interactivity of researcher and participants (Bell & Aldridge, 2014), a framework that also leaves expansive room for the reflexivity necessary in qualitative research study design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Action research enabled deep self-reflection and inquiry to guide improvements in the Book Club as an instructional tool while also attending to the needs of the preservice teachers (Bell & Aldridge, 2014). The complexity of connecting groups of preservice teachers and pre-program teacher education students across multiple institutions and multiple time zones was daunting and at times frustrating, but each discussion with students in class, and each virtual discussion among the participants themselves, revealed that our goal of peer interaction was improving the cultural competency of our students across the board. In the interest of "rich and thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Holloway, 1997) of these findings, we offer descriptive vignettes of the research sites in this ongoing study to illustrate the context in which this improvement in cultural competency using diverse children's literature occurs. The following vignettes offer contextual information, further detail into how the Book Club procedure was carried out in each of the four institutions, and provide insight into individual learnings and discoveries. Specific demographic information for each institution can be found in Appendix C.

## **BOOK CLUB IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Illinois University 1 (Lisa K. Pennington)**

The Book Club was implemented in my elementary social studies methods course. This particular course is taken in the penultimate semester of the EPP, along with a science and math methods course and students' second field experience. Within this course, we focus on best practices for teaching social studies in elementary grades, designated grades 1-6 in Illinois. Some time is spent focusing on particular content areas (e.g., geography, economics, civics) as well as social justice topics (e.g., gender, race, immigration). The first three semesters (Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Fall 2019) the Book Club occurred during face-to-face class meetings, with the virtual component occurring with the partner universities after our in-person meetings. In semester four (Spring 2020) the Book Club activity began during face-to-face class meetings and we completed the first Book Club activity. We moved to remote learning after spring break that semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the second and third Book Club activities took place during virtual synchronous class meetings. As instructors, we decided to forgo the virtual discussion between universities to reduce stress and screen time. In Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, we remained remote, and we continued to hold Book Club activities during virtual synchronous sessions, while forgoing the virtual discussion between universities. The first four semesters we maintained the three Book Club activities per semester. In Fall 2020, due to many events including the deaths of Black individuals such as George Floyd at the hands of police and the resulting protests, we chose to add a fourth Book Club focused on activism. All Book Club activities are included in the syllabus, and preservice teachers receive points toward their final grade for their participation.

As a minority serving institution, there is diversity in my methods classes; however, variance tends to be more reflective of the sex and racial makeup of teaching as a whole. My preservice teachers are predominantly women, and in six semesters, I have had three males, two of whom were in the same cohort. Within a particular class, typically at least half the preservice teachers are white women. This institution serves large communities of Arab immigrants and Arab Americans, and there is generally at least one Arab Muslim preservice teacher in each cohort. There have been an almost equal number of Latinx women throughout my six semesters, although there is not always a Latinx woman in each course. Additionally, there have been four Black women in the elementary program in my experience thus far, and only one Black male.

Each semester, the Book Club procedure has been well received by the preservice teachers, as indicated by end of semester student evaluations and in-class feedback during the Book Club activities. Many have commented they appreciate the routine of the activity, the format, and rotating individual activities during each Book Club so they have hands-on experience and a variety of ideas to carry into their own classrooms.

The first Book Club each semester focuses on Japanese American incarceration. The number of preservice teachers who are familiar with this topic varies, and there has always been at least one participant who is unfamiliar with this event. I feel that using this topic to introduce students to Book Club is useful for several reasons: 1) It familiarizes the class with the format; 2) provides examples of children's literature that offers a different perspective; 3) showcases how children's books may cover historical events; 4) introduces preservice teachers to the idea that children's literature may be used to discuss complex topics; and 5) eases preservice teachers into the idea that we can and should discuss history in a more complete and accurate way in elementary schools and avoid glossing over low points

in our past. Additionally, beginning with incarceration helps preservice teachers see how they may address injustices throughout the social studies curriculum, and we frequently refer back to this first Book Club as we move through the semester and discuss topics such as citizenship.

With the addition of the Book Club on activism in Fall 2020, I rearranged the order and included the activism Book Club as our second activity. The books touch on a variety of topics that have been the focus of protests in recent years, including the Dakota Access Pipeline, police brutality, and LGBTQ rights. It is during this Book Club that preservice teachers really begin to grasp the idea that children's literature is helpful for discussing difficult topics, and with this set of books, making connections to current events. In the two semesters we have used the books on activism, many participants have remarked that they do not keep up with current events very well and believe they will need to do a better job of doing so in order to help guide future class discussions or to address student questions.

Our third Book Club focuses on race, and occurs later in the semester, after preservice teachers have had an opportunity to get to know me. It is this Book Club that participants feel is most important, but it is also the one in which they feel they may face the most difficulty in implementing or face the most backlash from administrators or parents/guardians. Preservice teachers continue making current event connections here, we discuss contemporary and historical examples, and I share resources to help them navigate discussions of race in the classroom. I also pair this Book Club with news articles and examples of racism presented in multiple areas of society, such as education, housing, policing, and entertainment, to show how embedded systemic racism is in our society. This approach helps participants realize how racism presents in many forms, and showcases the need to include books and discussions on racism with their future classes. My own preservice teachers are often familiar with highly publicized racist acts, such as police brutality cases, but are less familiar with housing or educational policies that demonstrate institutional racism, and they tend to find this information shocking.

The final Book Club on immigration is one in which preservice teachers also make historical and contemporary connections, but also the most personal connections, since many participants are themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants. In both small and whole group discussions, many students are willing to share their experiences, or the experiences of their families, as we discuss this set of texts. This final Book Club also sees participants making connections to topics we have discussed throughout the semester, including activism, citizenship, and racism. Here too, I share real world examples of immigration history and policy, as well as current events, to help participants who do not have this experience make connections between the texts and the real world. Perhaps since immigration was such a forefront topic during the Trump administration, participants were familiar with the border wall and immigrant detention centers at our southern border. They were less familiar with the history of immigration policy, and push and pull factors that influence immigration. By this point in the semester, participants are also more comfortable analyzing and therefore criticizing texts they feel fall short in addressing the topic at hand. With the race and immigration texts in particular, preservice teachers have shared how they feel books geared for younger grades are too glossed over and happy, and would require additional texts, discussion, or sources to more completely address the topic. At the same time, they are very cognizant of age and grade level appropriateness, and making sure resources match the level of particular students.

As we move through the semester, it is evident the preservice teachers are making connections across topics and books, and grasping the need for diverse classroom libraries that provide *windows*, *mirrors*, and *sliding glass doors* (Bishop, 1990). Preservice teachers will share books they have found, mention books they read in previous classes, or ask for recommendations. Several preservice teachers have also used Book Club books in other assignments, including Book Club books as resources in their

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final journey box assignment, in lesson plans for accompanying field experiences, or in their focused inquiry assignment, which pairs children's literature with primary sources. Preservice teachers have also reached out after they have finished my methods class during their student teaching experiences, which I believe indicates that the Book Club activity is critical in helping them realize and want to teach social studies in accurate and appropriate ways and tackle difficult topics. For example, several weeks after the death of George Floyd, a preservice teacher who was in my Spring 2020 methods course reached out seeking further resources, information, and suggestions for what she could do to continue her learning about systemic racism and police brutality, what actions she could take, and what she might do in her future classroom. Though we of course had these discussions over the semester, and she had contributed frequently, it was not until she contacted me over the summer that it was clear how much she had taken from the course and how much she wanted to continue her own learning and implement the strategies we discussed with her own students.

### **Illinois University 2 (Meghan A. Kessler)**

As the most recent addition to the collaboration, I have been able to facilitate the Book Club with my preservice teachers in Illinois in my elementary social studies methods course during a total of four semesters over three academic years (in year two the course was offered in both fall and spring due to some programmatic changes). The first two semesters were conducted in a traditional, face-to-face format, the third semester was moved to virtual format after the pandemic struck, and the fourth semester was completely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, enrollment in year two was unusually low.

The students who are enrolled in our program are a mixture of traditional-track teacher education undergraduate students and post-baccalaureate students (non-degree) working towards licensure. Many students in the latter group are working as paraprofessionals or substitute teachers in the local school districts; others are approaching teaching as a career change. This creates an interesting and diverse classroom environment. Many of my students have children of their own, and consider course content from the perspective of a future teacher *and* a parent. This dual perspective has often opened up Book Club discussions to include the perceptions (or perceived perceptions) of parents, family members, and caregivers.

During one Book Club conversation about teaching about forced migration, refugees, and government imprisonment of citizens, a student expressed concern that the content could be too frightening for her own children, the youngest of whom was four years old. However, I soon realized that one reason for the hesitancy may have been lack of understanding about current U.S. and global events related to the displacement and forced removal of ethnic and religious groups. I then added a modeling lesson in which we analyzed news reports and first-hand accounts of children who were victims of the Syrian refugee crisis. This included exploration of stories through Al Jazeera's *Life on Hold* project (<http://lifeonhold.aljazeera.com>). After exploring these stories, my students began to discuss the importance of building empathy and understanding through first-hand accounts in coordination with children's books.

Whether or not topics were too "frightening" was also a concern for students when discussing some of the difficult topics such as racial injustices and LGBTQ and transgender oppression. However, classmates also pointed out that the ages of historical and contemporary refugees could also be very young, thereby raising the possibility to build empathy and highlight lessons on human rights and resilience. For instance, some of my students were not aware or had not yet considered that American *children* of Japanese heritage were also imprisoned by the U.S. government during World War II. In my students'



K-12 history courses, this historical event was either misunderstood or perhaps not discussed at enough length to fully consider the impact of incarceration on children. Likewise, some of my students had not considered in depth the impact on children whose families have fled the violence in Syria. When considering these two events from the perspective of a parent or caretaker of children via the children's literature featured in class, my students were able to empathize with the first-person narratives and developmental concerns of young children caught in political upheaval and trauma. As my co-authors have also noted, the children's books also provided accessible grounding for conversations about such sticky and potentially upsetting topics. One student raised the point that if we are not able to discuss such topics in the safe environment of a classroom, we may be doing our students a disservice by not helping them build the conceptual frameworks necessary for processing such topics.

I also noticed, as the years progressed and the events of 2019-2020 emerged, some of my preservice teachers were beginning to take initiative to build their own library of books related to social justice, anti-racism, and activism. Several began reaching out, even after the elementary social studies course had concluded, to share new books, videos, and materials with me and their classmates. This was inspiring and elevated the conversation during the Book Club literature circles. For these participants, I was no longer the first person to introduce them to the concept of social justice and multiculturalism in children's literature or social studies education. This benefitted their classmates as well. We were able to move the Book Club discussions faster and farther into more critically engaging territory. Power, privilege, and oppression were now themes that more students were interested in exploring at the elementary level. Therefore, during the fall 2020 semester, our conversations centered more around how the Book Club books could be utilized as one tool among many for anti-racist education, not simply to increase representation, but putting a critical twist on the world while offering students *windows*, *mirrors*, and *sliding glass doors* (Bishop, 1990) into the experiences of themselves and others. It was inspiring to see how my preservice teachers were empowered by the racial, political, and economic movements of 2020. One even reached out to me over the summer of 2020 to say how she had a new appreciation for the topics we had covered during her social studies methods course the previous spring; she was now seeking additional resources to support anti-racist pedagogies during her student teaching semester. It was clear this preservice teacher and others had new appreciation for the "why" of diverse, socially just children's literature. As a teacher educator, I now find myself inspired by their increased enthusiasm. I have also begun researching new materials and revising my syllabi to even more directly address the "how" as well as the "why" when it comes to the integration of social justice topics and children's books.

### **Virginia University 1 (Donna Fortune)**

Preservice teachers at this Virginia University were enrolled in the social studies methods course required for licensure as an elementary teacher (PreK-6). The course is part of a structured master's degree program that leads to elementary licensure in the state of Virginia and is taken during the fall early field experience (20 hours field placement). The preservice teachers are engaged throughout the course in authentic practices (workshops, strategy groups, grade-level partners, etc.) implementing primary documents, National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) themes, and children's literature as a basis for beginning social studies instruction. The primary text for this class is *Every Book is a Social Studies Book* (Libresco et al., 2011) and is used to demonstrate the importance of using stories to help students retain and understand topics for implementing effective instruction in social studies methods. The structure of this course was highly conducive for the Book Club discussions to help prepare preservice teachers'

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strategies to engage in beginning conversations about the topics of race, immigration, and internment. Book Clubs have been implemented during the past three years, with the majority of students from this university identifying as white females. The assignments for the Book Club activities are listed on the syllabus and are required course activities that are graded for participation.

There are specific general education courses required for licensure in Virginia. For example, they have to take four social studies courses (US History, ancient/world history, economics, and geography). Because of these requirements for licensure, it was surprising that many of the preservice teachers (with undergraduate degrees) were not aware that the United States had Japanese American incarceration centers or of the worldwide immigration crisis. Their limited understanding of some of the topics in the Book Club demonstrated a need for this continued collaborative project. In-class discussions about the Book Club activities have consistently been positive with participants becoming more aware of the need to engage their students with topics that are often neglected in elementary classrooms. The K-12 discussion boards were beneficial to both elementary and secondary preservice teachers in that they began to see different perspectives from the different grade-level virtual discussions.

In order to facilitate these discussions, the preservice teachers read articles related to the specific Book Club topics (Feeney & Moravcik, 2005; Loeffelholz, 2017; Tschida et al., 2014). This gave the students some background information prior to engaging in the literature circle activities and helped the instructors to better facilitate the conversations and discussions during the Book Club activities. The literature circle activities allowed the students to read the assigned children's literature more deeply and provided them the opportunity to share their book with the other members who were in different book groups. This provided participants with alternate exposure to different authors about the same topic and provided them opportunities to compare their experiences with the information provided in the texts. All of the Book Clubs included virtual discussion boards with the partner universities where the students engaged in authentic written discussions with other preservice educators.

The discussions by students at this university (in class and through discussion boards) included comments like, "how could they allow internment camps here in America?" and "I can't believe there are that many immigration facilities in the world, what made them leave their country" to "I don't remember seeing any books that weren't fiction in my elementary classroom when it comes to African Americans, they were always just biographies about slaves like Tubman or books about Martin Luther King." After the discussions, participants shared comments about advocating for these books to be used in the classrooms. For example, one participant shared, "In contrast to my own experience, I think that students should learn about internment camps at a young age and keep adding more information each year." She further explained, "When a topic is brought up more than once, students will understand how important it is to know about it." The virtual discussions by the EPP's can be summed up by one preservice teacher's comment: "It teaches children that their unique, individual actions and characteristics play a crucial part in the world around us." All of the preservice teachers reported seeing the value of using these diverse texts to help build classrooms that "can be more empathetic to all of the students in class and help us learn from our history."

## **Virginia University 2 (Paige Horst)**

Preservice teachers at this Virginia university were enrolled in a children's literature course required for initial licensure in the state. This course is intended for students planning admittance to the university's teacher education program and is heavily focused on K-12 instructional design and K-12 literacy, with

an emphasis on methods. The students practice using children's literature as a focal point for instruction, using a workshop approach, which builds a thematic unit of instruction, based on a single book or a group of thematically coherent books as a lens through which to explore current events, social issues, or controversial topics in age and developmentally appropriate ways. Demographics for this course are largely reflective of educator demographics within the US public school system; predominately White, female, and cisgender. The learning outcomes for this course created a natural fit with the research questions and study design of the Book Club research project.

The first three semesters (Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Fall 2019), the Book Club occurred during face-to-face class meetings, with the virtual component occurring with the partner universities after our in-person meetings. The first four semesters we maintained the three Book Club activities per semester. In Fall 2020, due to many events including the deaths of Black individuals such as George Floyd at the hands of police and the resulting protests, we chose to add a fourth Book Club activity focused on activism. All Book Club activities are scheduled in advance and included in the syllabus, and students received points toward their final grade for their participation as a part of normal instructional activity. In Fall 2020, due to ongoing COVID restrictions and repeated quarantines of my students, I was unable to continue participation with my preservice teachers and I removed my class from the Virtual Book Club for the remainder of the academic year.

Over the course of each Book Club, participants initially express skepticism about using children's books as instructional tools. When asked to describe a "good" children's book, they typically chose descriptors such as "cute," "easy to read," "beautiful illustrations," or "sweet," and consider books to be entertainment to be consumed by parents and children or teachers and children...used as leisure activity or to build a love of reading and familiarity with printed text in children.

As we begin to address implicit biases in literature, discussion then shifts to emphasize the didactic nature of children's literature. Preservice teachers express their preference, both personal and professional, for books that they perceive to project a "positive" or "moral" message. Often, preservice teachers express resistance to the concept of children's literature as transformative or "deep." At this point, participants have participated in guided classroom discussion, both whole group and in small groups, designed to gradually challenge their understanding of children's literature as disconnected from controversial topics or current events. In our first iteration of the Book Club in this course, one participant remarked, "I just think children's books should be fun and happy." When I pushed back, gently suggesting that "fun and happy" is a descriptor that means something different for each individual encountering the book, our class discussion turned to the transactional nature of reading and the ways in which the experience of a book is individually contextualized through our lived experiences and implicit biases. As participants share their responses to Book Club texts, the individual understanding of content is foregrounded in small group and whole-class discussions.

Our first Book Club focuses on US incarceration camps during WWII, and the experience proves to be illuminating for many students, every year. One student in our first semester with the Book Club project, visibly upset, demanded to know "why didn't I learn this in school? Why is this the first time I've learned about this?" As we have progressed through the iterations of the Book Club, these questions have been a repeated refrain in this course, and participants express frustration in their recollections of their own schooling. Toward the end of each semester, I assign the task of creating a manifesto or an action plan to support the newfound resolution to use picture books as instructional tools. As preservice teachers move out of their teacher education preparation courses and enroll in the Education Preparation Program, they return to the Book Club reading list as a resource for teaching difficult or controversial

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topics in their placements. In area middle schools, for example, eighth grade teachers are required to teach a unit on the Holocaust. As part of the historical background for that unit, several student teachers who participated in Book Club as a part of their children's literature course have used *The Bracelet* and *Baseball Saved Us* (Appendix A) in their unit planning. In addition, discussion points and issues from the virtual discussions provide a platform for students to practice their rationales for teaching controversial topics and/or using picture books as instructional tools for secondary classrooms.

## **ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS**

Following thematic qualitative analysis of student work, online discussion postings, notes from classroom discussions, and descriptive analysis of survey data, the research team settled on the following conclusions, which are broken into two categories (*Preservice Teacher Lessons* and *Teacher Educator Lessons*). Current findings are designed to provide implementation ideas for Book Clubs with or without cross-institutional collaboration. The research team continually gauged preservice teachers' learnings and perceptions of the Book Club procedure through the use of assignments, reflective writing, and surveys. Survey data resulted in mostly positive feedback. However, several preservice teachers shared that they preferred to discuss and collaborate in-person rather than virtually, indicating that the virtual component seemed redundant.

Nonetheless, most preservice teachers reported new learning related to the ethical implications of teaching with diverse books. These ethical implications relate to social justice. For example, after reading about incarceration of Japanese Americans and immigrants during WWII, one group of preservice teachers stated:

*We think it's important for elementary preservice teachers to recognize the ways in which internment [of Japanese Americans and immigrants during WWII] affected families and the lives they had established. We also are reflecting on the ethics behind the decision of the US government: Was this right or wrong and why did they decide to do this? What were the other options?*

This quote demonstrates how the Book Club procedure supported preservice teachers' acquisition of new historical content knowledge for teaching social studies. Additionally, other preservice teachers noted the books made the historical content more understandable and relatable. Furthermore, the books and discussions prompted new ideas for justice-oriented teaching. For example, one preservice teacher said the following in response to another preservice teacher at a different institution:

*I like the word "accepting" you chose since that is exactly what will occur if race is discussed early on. Children will learn to accept others despite their differences--which is crucial to life and their learning.*

Another preservice teacher acknowledged the power of children's books for introducing not only content but ways in which critical social issues can be discussed:

*We should think about where we are living and the community around us, maybe if students who experienced race related trauma we could discuss it in a way that would not trigger them. We should also*

*take into consideration the fact that some students may not know about the experiences of other races and to make sure to educate them on it.*

Similar to the pilot study (Pennington & Tackett, 2020); there were several logistical issues that arose when planning and implementing Book Clubs throughout the semesters. Recommendations from the pilot study included attaching the Book Club to a specific course and including the activity as an assignment within the course to ensure consistent participation from the preservice teachers. While this was beneficial overall and corrected some of the early difficulties of the pilot, mismatched sizes of cohorts created by widely varied class sizes across institutions (see Table 1) posed a continued limitation from the pilot study. Class sizes varied widely and led to uneven groupings for the cross-institutional discussion component. Extremes included one university in Illinois with as few as three students enrolled, while one of the Virginia universities had upwards of 20 students, while the other two universities fell in the middle. This meant that some cross-university groups had participants from only two or three of the universities, rather than all four as hoped. This issue varied from semester to semester depending on class size, and time was spent each semester making sure groups were as varied as possible.

Another recommendation from the pilot study was to improve the effectiveness of the cross-institutional, virtual component by providing opportunities for asynchronous interaction and discussion rather than synchronous meetings, due to differences in time zones (Pennington & Tackett, 2020). As mentioned, the current Book Club iterations include preservice teachers across the four universities, which was a twofold increase since the pilot. Initial feedback from students indicated their preference for virtual discussion via a shared Google doc for each group, where they could post their answers to the discussion questions and respond to their peers on their own schedule, rather than trying to coordinate a group video chat across varying student schedules and time zones. As instructors, we agreed that this was the most convenient method of communication for all students, and organized folders for each student group containing a document for each of the three Book Club activities. Then, we divided the groups so that each instructor was only responsible for checking on 2-4 student groups, depending on semester enrollment levels. While this approach was organized and systematic, we soon realized that we had to set deadlines that accommodated course meetings that met on different days of the week to ensure that all students had an opportunity to post their initial thoughts and respond to their peers in a timely manner.

We also discovered that since our virtual discussion questions were the same as our in-class, whole-group questions, some students simply cut and pasted the same answers, or had one student in each group speak for their university. Our goal initially was to have students discuss the same questions as the whole group in class discussion so they had some preparation for the online discussion and could expand on the class discussion with the virtual groups. However, we began posing different questions for the virtual discussion and clarified that each student within the group should make their own contributions. For example, in the virtual discussion on books discussing race, students addressed the following questions: 1) Are there benefits to discussing race in the elementary classroom? If so, what? If not, why not? 2) Closely analyze your assigned text. Is this text appropriate for teaching race to students? 3) Why or why not? (Give specific examples from the text) 4) What should we as teachers take into consideration when teaching (or planning to teach) about race with students?

A final logistical issue that was not anticipated was communication between instructors within the different EPPs, particularly when it related to answering questions and providing directions. Though we communicated frequently via email, a private Facebook group, and had regular Zoom meetings, when students posed questions about the Book Club during class, it was difficult to give an answer im-

## ***Using Virtual Book Clubs to Elevate Discussion and Diverse Voices***

mediately because we preferred to discuss and make decisions as a group. Since that required at least an email and three separate responses, student questions were often answered later via an email or course announcement. We are sure this delay was frustrating to students, but we preferred to maintain our group decision-making process.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As stated earlier, initial findings from the pilot study identified four key benefits preservice educators may experience through participation in the Book Clubs: 1) *discussion of current or available children's literature and resources*, 2) *active engagement with instructional strategies that they may eventually employ in their classrooms*, 3) *review of social studies topics and content*, and 4) *the ability to share different background experiences and perceptions in relation to the books* (Pennington & Tackett, 2020). After several iterations and revisions, each of these benefits remain, but have changed as further generations of the Book Club enabled new revisions and collaborations. In summary, the four categories have evolved in the following ways.

First, discussion of children's literature and related resources has continued to be a major benefit of the Book Club project. As the collaboration has expanded to include additional institutional partners, the discussions have been richer and more varied. We did find some difficulty in adapting the activities to cross time zones, course schedules, and syllabi. However, these challenges were not beyond the scope of what several Zoom calls and Google documents could handle. The virtual platforms, while simple, were able to facilitate conversation amongst diverse groups of students and even within our courses during the COVID-19 stay-at-home periods.

Second, active engagement with instructional strategies remained a benefit. This benefit was expanded into virtual pedagogy before 2020, and was expanded in light of the pandemic. We learned new methods for engaging large groups virtually. For instance, in one of the author's Fall 2020 classes of 23 students, breakout rooms and Google Docs enabled more intimate discussions of the Book Club books despite the need to stay at home. YouTube read-alouds of the books replaced hard copies or library reserves, and the students were able to share pictures, screenshots, or links of their literature circle illustrations or writings.

Third, application of social studies content was greatly expanded during this time. Regardless of whether courses were taking place face-to-face or virtually, social justice-focused curriculum, critical pedagogies, and anti-racist education have continued to gain prominence. Each author of this chapter was grappling, in real time alongside K-12 students and preservice educators, with the implications of the historic, political, social, economic, and racial events of 2020. The Book Club offered new ways to adapt this long-standing collaboration with more explicit attention to anti-racism, anti-oppression, and social justice.

Finally, the Book Club has maintained its capacity to facilitate relationships and collaboration across distance and differences. As use of the aforementioned platforms was adapted for expanded virtual teaching and learning, our team was pleased to have prior experience facilitating cross-institutional/cross-regional collaborations within a virtual environment.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

In addition to exploring teaching implications for preservice teachers, our research team also examined procedural and logistical successes and shortcomings in order to identify pedagogical implications for future Book Club iterations. In particular, streamlined and accessible online collaboration resulted in more positive feelings from preservice teachers regarding the usefulness and applicability of the activities in relation to their teaching practices. While the use of Google Docs was accessible and easy for most preservice teachers to connect virtually, the process of constructing, sharing, and collecting documents was time consuming. However, because each preservice teacher brought a different level and type of teaching experience to the Book Club discussions, the benefits of exploring diverse books and discussing them across institutional boundaries stimulated preservice teachers' growth and broadened their perspectives. Furthermore, this study sparked numerous new ideas for future iterations of the Book Club procedure. New ideas involve expanding book lists and topics that include disabilities/exceptionalities, gender and sexuality, and civic or social activism. As materials and books continue to expand, we plan to re-evaluate and revise the topics and books offered.

## **CONCLUSION**

Book Clubs provide several instructional takeaways. The hands-on modeling is particularly helpful, as this is an activity that preservice teachers feel confident they can implement into their own classrooms. Providing texts on a range of topics, including historical and current events, and explicitly demonstrating how they connect across topics discussed in class aids not only content knowledge, but makes preservice teachers more comfortable in sharing their own connections. Finally, Book Clubs allow participants to feel comfortable using these books in field placements and course assignments, making them more likely to draw on those particular texts and topics in future classrooms, and to think more critically about texts under consideration for classroom use. The main difficulty was managing time to balance historical content that participants need to better understand the Book Club topics, update participants on current events they may have minimal knowledge about, and allow time for them to practice the strategies in conjunction with the texts.

Book Clubs provide learning opportunities for both preservice teachers and teacher educators, and offer a vehicle for in-class exploration and cross-institutional collaboration. With regard to preservice teacher learning, our research team found that reading diverse children's books provides preservice teachers with exposure to high-quality teaching resources. These diverse children's books provide *sliding glass doors* (Bishop, 1990) which allow preservice teachers to connect to social studies content by forming emotional, empathetic connections to characters and topics (Taylor, 2003). Additionally, high-quality discussion of these books helps preservice teachers deepen their understanding of salient topics and broaden their perspectives. Both in-class and virtual discussions facilitated by discussion prompts and activities provide opportunities for preservice teachers to gain confidence in their teaching abilities (Goldberg, 2020; Leftwich, 2002). They also provide opportunities for preservice teachers to explore ideas and opinions within a safe and supportive learning environment. However, teacher educators must carefully design the virtual component to prevent redundancies in discussion activities and time-consuming, logistical tasks with regard to technology (Karchmer-Klein, 2020). When these issues

are addressed, Book Clubs present an effective and engaging way to teach social studies content and to elevate diverse experiences and discussions through both in-class and virtual collaborative experiences.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Children's Literature:** Picture books, trade books, or other non-chapter books intended for use with children in elementary grades.

**Cross-Institutional Collaboration:** Project that involves more than one institution of higher education.

**Diverse Books:** Books that recognize and represent all groups, including but not limited to LG-BTQIA, Native/Indigenous, people of color, gender diversity, ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities, and disabilities (including but not limited to physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, chronic conditions, and mental illnesses, including addiction, as well as social models of disability including disability created by barriers in the social environment due to lack of equal access, stereotyping, and other forms of marginalization (We Need Diverse Books, n.d.).

**Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs):** Programs for the pre-licensure education of PK-12 teachers, often housed in institutions of higher education.

**Japanese American Incarceration:** A more accurate term referring to WWII-era policy of the U.S. government in which individuals of Japanese descent, including U.S. citizens, were incarcerated in camps; often synonymously called *internment*.

**Literature Circles:** Instructional strategy often used in relation to children's literature intended to build reading comprehension and engagement or motivation to read.

**Preservice Teacher:** Student enrolled in an educator preparation program; pre-licensure.

**Virtual Book Club:** Dialogue-based book discussions utilizing synchronous or asynchronous virtual platforms. Enables book discussions across geographic regions and institutions of higher education.

## APPENDIX A

### Children's Books for Book Clubs

Japanese American Incarceration:

*Dust of Eden* by Mariko Nagai

*So far from the sea* by Eve Bunting

*A place where sunflowers grow* by Amy Lee-Tai

*The bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida

*Flowers from Mariko* by Rick Noguchi

*Baseball saved us* by Ken Mochizuki

*The no no boys* by Teresa Funke

Refugees and Immigration:

*Lost and found cat: The true story of Kunkush's incredible adventure* by Doug Kuntz

*Four feet, two sandals* by Karen Lynn Williams

*Brothers in hope* by Mary Williams

*My beautiful birds* by Suzanne Del Rizzo

*The colour of home* by Mary Hoffman

*The treasure box* by Margaret Wild

*The island* by Armin Greder

Race:

*Brown girl dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson

*Thunder boy junior* by Sherman Alexie

*Chocolate me* by Taye Diggs

*Grandpa, is everything black bad?* By Sandy Lynn Holman

*Let's talk about race* by Julius Lester

*The other side* by Jacqueline Woodson

*The colors of us* by Karen Katz

Activism:

*We are water protectors* by Carole Lindstrom

*Something happened in our town* by Donald Moses and Marianne Celano

*Pride: The story of Harvey Milk and the rainbow flag* by Rob Sanders

*A kids book about racism* by Jelani Memory

**Miscellaneous:** (from pilot study, not used since then)

*Candy pink* by Adela Turin

*Hairs/Pelitos* by Sandra Cisneros

*I love my hair* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley

*Mama Panya's pancakes: A village tale from Kenya* by Mary and Rich Chamberlin

*Whose lovely child can you be* by Shobba Viswanath and Christine Tappin

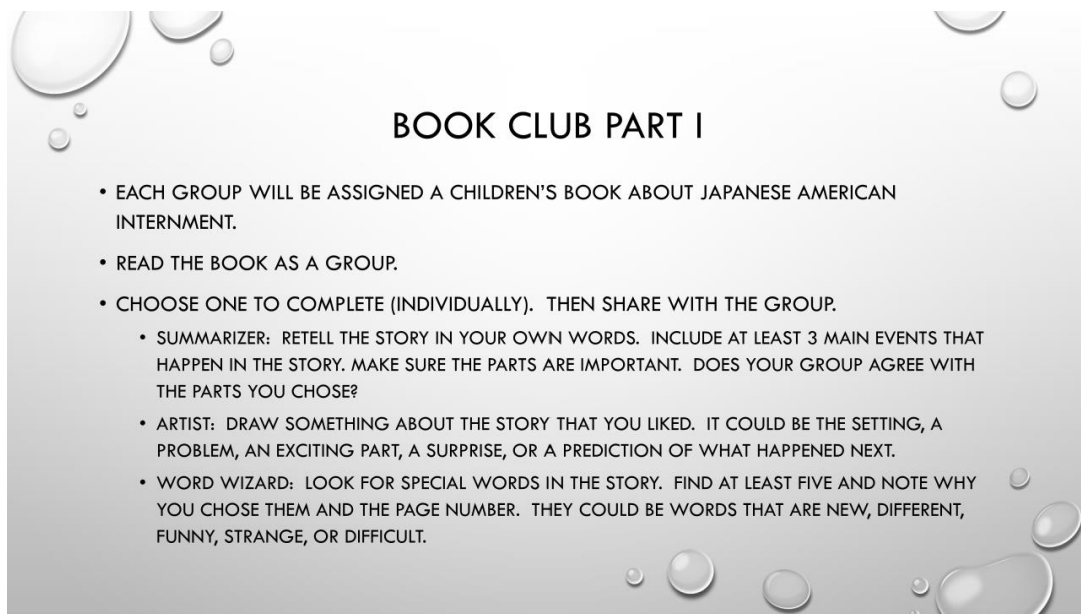
*Yo soy Muslim* by Mark Gonzales

*As good as anybody* by Richard Michels

## APPENDIX B

### Instructions for Small Group Discussions

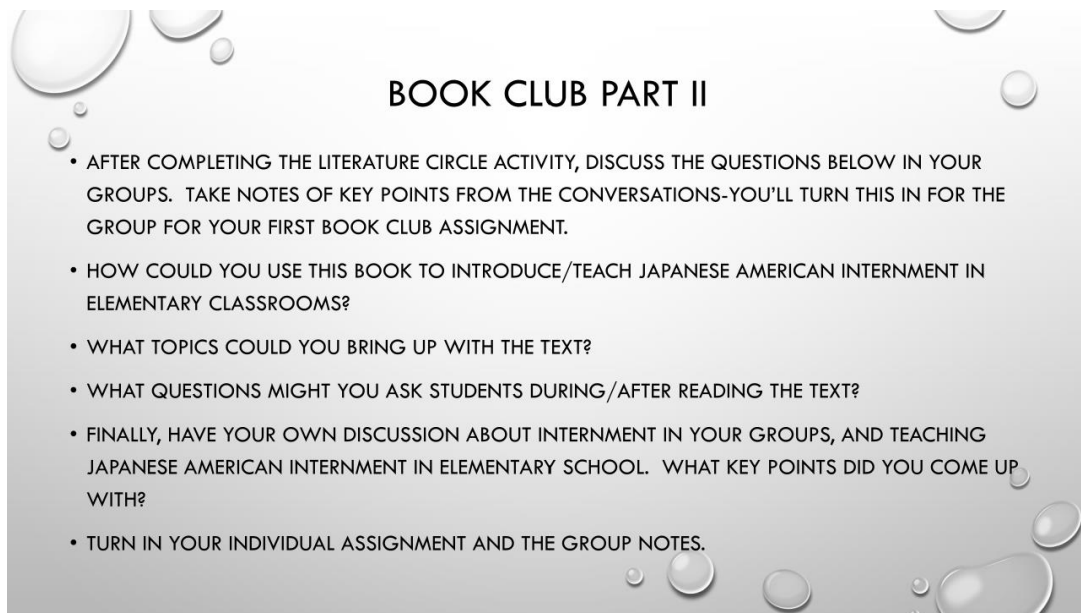
*Figure 1.*



### BOOK CLUB PART I

- EACH GROUP WILL BE ASSIGNED A CHILDREN'S BOOK ABOUT JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT.
- READ THE BOOK AS A GROUP.
- CHOOSE ONE TO COMPLETE (INDIVIDUALLY). THEN SHARE WITH THE GROUP.
  - SUMMARIZER: RETELL THE STORY IN YOUR OWN WORDS. INCLUDE AT LEAST 3 MAIN EVENTS THAT HAPPEN IN THE STORY. MAKE SURE THE PARTS ARE IMPORTANT. DOES YOUR GROUP AGREE WITH THE PARTS YOU CHOSE?
  - ARTIST: DRAW SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY THAT YOU LIKED. IT COULD BE THE SETTING, A PROBLEM, AN EXCITING PART, A SURPRISE, OR A PREDICTION OF WHAT HAPPENED NEXT.
  - WORD WIZARD: LOOK FOR SPECIAL WORDS IN THE STORY. FIND AT LEAST FIVE AND NOTE WHY YOU CHOSE THEM AND THE PAGE NUMBER. THEY COULD BE WORDS THAT ARE NEW, DIFFERENT, FUNNY, STRANGE, OR DIFFICULT.

*Figure 2.*



### BOOK CLUB PART II

- AFTER COMPLETING THE LITERATURE CIRCLE ACTIVITY, DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS BELOW IN YOUR GROUPS. TAKE NOTES OF KEY POINTS FROM THE CONVERSATIONS-YOU'LL TURN THIS IN FOR THE GROUP FOR YOUR FIRST BOOK CLUB ASSIGNMENT.
- HOW COULD YOU USE THIS BOOK TO INTRODUCE/TEACH JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS?
- WHAT TOPICS COULD YOU BRING UP WITH THE TEXT?
- WHAT QUESTIONS MIGHT YOU ASK STUDENTS DURING/AFTER READING THE TEXT?
- FINALLY, HAVE YOUR OWN DISCUSSION ABOUT INTERNMENT IN YOUR GROUPS, AND TEACHING JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. WHAT KEY POINTS DID YOU COME UP WITH?
- TURN IN YOUR INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT AND THE GROUP NOTES.

## APPENDIX C

### Student Demographic Information

Table 2.

Site	Illinois University 1			Illinois University 2			Virginia University 1			Virginia University 2		
Year	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Black	2	1	2	1			1					
Hispanic/Latinx		5	6	3			1	1		2		
Arabic Muslim	1	2	3									
White/Caucasian	15	15	12	18	3	23	30	22	25	38	15	
Black Muslim	1	1										

Demographics by Year