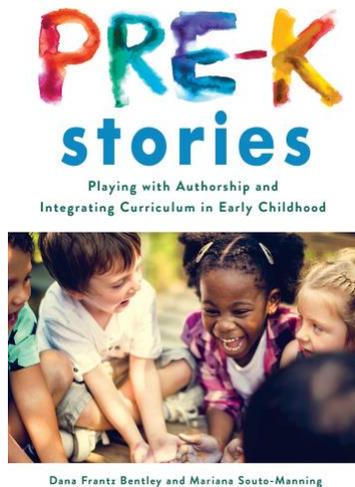


JoLLE@UGA®

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

*Review of Pre-K Stories: Playing with Authorship and
Integrating Curriculum in Early Childhood*
By Dana Frantz Bentley and Mariana Souto-Manning

Reviewer: Peijuan Cao
The University of Florida, Gainesville, FL



Bentley, D. F. & Souto-Manning, M. (2019). *Pre-K stories: Playing with authorship and integrating curriculum in early childhood*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

ISBN: 978-0-8077-6131-1

Overview

What is authoring? What is the purpose of publishing a book? How do stories come into a pre-K class? How does one turn stories into a book? Following the experiences of a pre-K class, Bentley and Souto-Manning (2019) invite readers to look at the way young children perceive themselves as authors and engage in play-based authorship; explore how stories come into language arts, social studies, science and mathematics curricula; and to witness the collaborative process of planning and making an integrated book project within the pre-K classroom community. Recognizing the outside pressure from the testing culture which emphasizes score and skill acquisition, the authors are seeking to “defend child-centered early childhood education; explain how children’s meaning-making process correspond to adult notions of literacy; and offer insights into the expansive capacity of young children” (p. 6) in this book. The *Pre-K Stories* can thus provide broad implications for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and administrators who are interested in early childhood literacy development and integrative curriculum practices.

Bentley and Souto-Manning (2019) begin their book with an introductory section and then organize the main contents into three parts. The three chapters in the first part are laying theoretical foundations on classroom community and practices that help to cultivate and nurture young children’s authorship. There are five chapters in the second part, through which the authors detail the process of turning the Pre-K East classroom children’s stories into a book project. The last two chapters in part III describe the Pre-K East class teacher’s and former students’ reflections of The Book Project. Part III also provides the authors’ theoretical discussions of the classroom practices. I will unpack each part in greater detail and conclude this review with my own evaluation of this book.

Introduction

In the Introduction, Bentley and Souto-Manning (2019) present a snapshot of the book contents and provide a clear positional statement of their perspectives as co-authors. Dana Bentley is both a co-author of the book and a co-teacher of the Pre-K East class. Readers may find her voice coming throughout the text, including the narratives of the classroom practices, reflections of The Book Project, and the theoretical discussions. Mariana Souto-Manning, a pronounced professor as well as a prolific author on early childhood education, joins Bentley to co-author this book by providing a broader theoretical perspective on early childhood literacy theories and practices. In this book, the notion of authoring is broadly defined as “children’s voices and actions” (p. 3) through the pre-K classroom communication and interactions instead of being restrictively taken as a synonym for writing. After all, the authors focus on exploring children’s language and literacy development through the play-based authorship.

Part I: “How Do Stories Come into Our Class?”: Laying the Foundations

In Part I, the authors closely examine the classroom environment, organization, the community communication, and interactions that “support teachers in creating a play-based, child-centered language arts curriculum” (p. 11).

Chapter 1 addresses the critical role of the three building blocks in constructing an early childhood literacy curriculum that allows teachers to “think about children’s thinking and work” (p.17). The three building blocks that are identified by Bentley and Souto-Manning are: “emergent curriculum, culture circles, and project work” (p. 11). In addition to elaborating on the terms, the authors use Dana Bentley’s classroom practices to illustrate how each

building block can be embedded into a pre-K classroom.

Chapter 2 mainly investigates the purpose of authoring through play-based stories. In this chapter, shedding light on the play-based authorship theory, the authors unveil the myth that preschoolers are usually wrongly viewed as being incapable of authoring or writing. Inspired by the idea that young children are already ready (Ray & Glover, 2008), the authors of this book start to position preschoolers “as capable communicators and as apt authors” (p. 25). They found that the young children were surprisingly good at constructing meaning and telling stories through playing. From a sociocultural view of authorship, the authors underscore that “the role of the teacher is not to tell children how to play, but to record, and (at times) help children extend their play. It is through play and through community that children develop the basics of authoring” (p. 27). Embracing this idea, Bentley enters her pre-K class as a facilitator, listening closely to her students, documenting children’s stories carefully, and asking questions that promote meaningful discussions. Furthermore, Bentley and Souto-Manning propose that teachers can be described as “sponsors of literacy” (Brandt, 1998, as cited in Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019, p. 27), who “enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). The authors stress such sponsorship is vital to children’s literacy development, just as Vygotsky (1978) once wrote, “what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87). The authors conclude this chapter by emphasizing the importance of play, which they consider “a powerful site for children to develop as capable authors — at first using oral language, objects, and/or other symbols, and eventually bringing such expertise to the development of written stories” (p.31).

Part II “But How Can Our Stories Turn into a Book?”: Planning and Making

In the five chapters (chapter 4-8) of Part II, the authors look closely at the collaborative authoring, book writing, and bookmaking process that evolved in the Pre-K East class. According to Bentley and Souto-Manning (2019), “Using the children’s words and the books they coauthored as our framework, we look at the children’s ideas and the moves Dana made as a teacher, as well as the details and ideas behind the work” (p. 43). In this part, the authors seek to offer a map for readers to understand the process of the Pre-K East class completing The Book Project — “a child-centered, semester-long integrated project” (p.7).

Chapter 4 mainly examines the evolution of The Book Project in the Pre-K East classroom. The Book Project was originally born in a pre-K classroom community that values multiple interests, voices, and experiences of the young children. Dana created a safe space for her students to engage in risk-taking, wondering, and inquiring. It was through a simple conversation that the idea of writing a book together occurred to the Pre-K East class. The class agreed that the children can include their own stories in this book and call this first published book *The Whole Pre-K East Book*, which also became part of what they came to call The Book Project. After several authentic conversations, Bentley surprisingly found that her students had obtained a sufficient amount of knowledge about the relationship between books and stories. Then, she encouraged each child to compose the draft of a story, illustrate and share it with the class, receive feedback, and revise it. This process was just like how older students or adults write, except sometimes teachers working collaboratively with their children, scribing the stories either on paper or on the computer, as most of them were unfamiliar with word spellings yet. Bentley and Souto-Manning (2019) indicate that

“through this collaborative process, teachers were able to support the children in thinking through the dynamics of their stories while always honoring the children as the authors who knew how to make the story ‘right’” (p. 49). In all, a variety of stories that were captured, documented, and read in Pre-K East over a year led to the development and completion of The Book Project.

Chapter 5 focuses on exploring the body of the book and unveiling children’s existing knowledge about books and their concepts about print. This chapter includes several narratives about children’s discussions and teachers’ reflections on how to make their stories into a real book. It was evident from those conversations that the children in the Pre-K East class were knowledgeable about the idea of making a book. We can also see from the narratives that the teachers were honoring their children’s conceptualization of publishing. More importantly, during this book-making process, Bentley kept rethinking the curriculum and her role as a teacher. Readers will find that Bentley embraced a fluid role of both a responsible teacher and an inquisitive learner. She removed herself from a position of holding all the knowledge that needed to be imparted to her students. Alternatively, she modeled what an active learner looks like, such as listening attentively to learn new knowledge and asking questions to seek clarification. It is worth noting that in some traditional child-centered curriculum, the teachers’ thinking is not usually visible while teachers prioritize children’s voices (Baumann, Jones, & Seifert, 1993). However, in the Pre-K East classroom, Bentley made her think-aloud visible to her students as her goal was to co-construct the project with the children.

Through chapters 6-8, readers will find multiple disciplines are woven together into this child-centered project in order to address the wide range

of learning standards of the pre-K curriculum. “Specifically, the books address mathematics and science (Chapter 6), language arts (Chapter 7), and social studies (Chapter 8) in ways that genuinely represent the interests and passions of this unique class” (p. 44).

In Chapter 6, Bentley and Souto-Manning present us with the development of *The Book of Paper Airplane Experts*, a collective authored book from the Pre-K East class that integrates science and mathematics with language and literacy. It emerged from the children’s investigation of making paper airplanes and documented their exploration of knowledge about dynamics, physics, design thinking, and mathematical measurements. In addition, the children were exploring a less familiar genre when authoring this book and managed to turn it into an informational text. As it can be seen in this chapter, the children also developed their mathematical and scientific literacies by working as real mathematicians and scientists. The book is a great success as it can deliberately teach a novice to make paper planes.

The way children developed their language and literacy skills through poetry is explicitly illustrated in Chapter 7. As noted in their process and products of making poems, the children “honed their observation and documentation skills as they recorded their observations with rich descriptions, which use figurative language, engaging with poetry as verbal art” (p. 96). Furthermore, the children built their vocabulary knowledge in meaningful and authentic ways as they played with words and experienced the aesthetic features of poetry. The final product emerged from the language arts curriculum was “a collective authored work of verbal and visual art” (p. 97) — *All of the Seasons Square: A Season World*. Although it was not a formal book, it became an important part of The Book Project.

Chapter 8 provides detailed descriptions of the Pre-K East class' authoring and publishing process of the two books that were situated in the social studies context. The first book, *A Book of Family Shares*, was made when putting the concept of families at the heart of the social studies curriculum. To complete this project, the children not only explored the family cultural practices that shaped their identities in a family community from a historical and anthropological perspective, but also their family members were invited to share stories, photos, and other memories about their children. *The Pre-K East Life Book* is the other product of the social studies project, which "captured the pre-K class' social memory, developed within the context of the classroom community" (p. 112), including the children's stories, voices, hobbies, drawings, images, and other formats that the children used to remember themselves individually and collectively. Bentley recalled this book was an essential part of The Book Project.

Part III: Reflecting on The Book Project in the Larger Context of Teaching and Learning

In Part III, Bentley and Souto-Manning (2019) seek to explore the "perspectives, impacts, and implications" (p. 117) of the co-constructed curriculum developed in the Pre-K East class by reflecting on The Book Project.

In Chapter 9, the authors intend to provide multiple perspectives and insights on authorship in a larger context of teaching and learning. We first see a pre-K teacher's initial nervousness and concerns about co-constructing such a challenging project with her children through Bentley's narrative. Eventually, Bentley overcame those fears and insecurity as she learned how to let go of some control and saw the potentials of her students. As the project went on, she built faith for this project. According to Bentley's

retrospect, as a teacher, "you really have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable" (p. 121). Bentley reminds us of the importance of creating space for the children to develop the curriculum. Bentley's story is inspirational, not only because it shows us that it is entirely normal for the teachers to be nervous when starting this kind of work, but also tells us the project would be a successful turnout if we allow things to be unpredictable and have faith in our children. This is the essence of an emergent curriculum.

Then, Chapter 9 discusses the two influential gains the children received from this child-centered integrated literacy curriculum. On the one hand, the authors intended to examine children's development of traditional literacy skills and found the literacy practices in the Pre-K East changed "children's perspectives on language arts, writing, publishing, and expression" (p. 123). By reviewing the affordances of problem-posing education (Freire, 1970), a theory that underscores teachers posing questions to help children build problem-solving skills instead of teachers rushing to solve them, Bentley and Souto-Manning indicate that the children managed to obtain many required traditional literacy skills through the problem-solving process. More importantly, the children acquired those skills (e.g., orthographic and graphophonic knowledge, phonics, word spelling, punctuations, etc.) through "authentic language experiences, including reading and writing" (p. 126). The teachers made real problems visible to the children during the book making process, so the children recognized the need to expand their linguistic repertoire in order to solve the problems. For instance, they needed to know when to use an exclamation point or a question mark when writing down their stories; they also saw the need to learn word spelling because the teachers did not have time to do all the writings.

The second gain is that the concept of community has been cultivated and ingrained in the children's heads. To understand the children's development of a learning community, Bentley and Souto-Manning shed light on the relational literacies which "imply the labor of making meaning, of shared knowledge, or of producing and developing knowledge together" (Licona & Chaves, 2015, p. 96). There are many "wes" being created in the Pre-K East class, like using "we" when sharing family stories, "we" for expert group project, "we" for co-authoring stories, and "we" for the entire classroom community to make The Book Project. It was through the children's constant use of "we" that the teachers came to understand that the children were conceptualizing themselves as a community and fostering the shared learning in this community. Within the context of wholeness, the children developed a new understanding of learning and growing, and also made better meaning of the world with shared actions.

In the last chapter, the authors show us the shared memories that the Pre-K East teachers and former students have kept for The Book Project. Bentley conducted interviews with two former students three years later after completing The Book Project. Bentley invited these young coauthors to revisit the books, reflecting on the collaborative process and sharing memorable moments. In addition to looking for what the children have gained through the experience, Bentley wants to explore "what the children carry with them as they move forward through their schooling experience" (p. 118). It was through those reflections that the children found the growth of their learning abilities and their bodies. These two alumni were also invited to Bentley's current pre-K class. Through the conversations between Bentley and her current students as well as her former students, we can find the older alumni were empowered with leadership and teaching skills as they led discussions and taught the younger students how to make a book

project. It is inspirational to see the way these two quickly took charge of the space and established their identity as experienced elders in Bentley's present classroom community.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The *Pre-K Stories: Playing with Authorship and Integrating Curriculum in Early Childhood* is a highly readable and insightful book that presents a lively exploration of the co-constructing process of an integrated, children-centered early literacy curriculum. Through the rich descriptions of the young children's authoring and meaning-making process, Bentley and Souto-Manning prove that teachers cogenerating such an integrated curriculum with young children is feasible when the children's interests, experiences, inquiries, and priorities are honored in the classroom community. Specifically, the authors provide us a list of the foundational commitments that this kind of classroom practice should be based on:

- *Listen to and value children's questions.*
- *Create space for children to develop as critical questioners.*
- *Document the work, making clear connections between children's priorities and questions and curricular mandates.* (pp. 22-23)

As can be seen in this book, the authors encourage readers to let go of the restrictive notion of authoring and literacy, and reconceptualize them from a broader perspective. They suggest that "children's repertoire of human voices, their multiple symbolic tools, and their guiding communicative practices" (Dyson, 2008, p.15) can all be viewed as means of authoring. Bentley and Souto-Manning underscore that it is through play and shared learning that the children develop this kind of authorship. This book is undoubtedly an eye

opener for me to view authorship from this perspective. In addition, we can see from the Pre-K East class that the children's language and literacy development were woven into multiple disciplines, such as language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics. This aligns very well with the notion of disciplinary literacy, which "refers to the idea that we should teach the specialized ways of reading, writing, understanding, and thinking used in each academic discipline, such as science, history, or literature" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014, p. 636). Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have established specific disciplinary literacy goals for secondary grades and many research topics have centered around those grades. However, very limited studies have addressed the disciplinary learning standards for primary grades, let alone preschoolers. The integrated book project shown in this book is an example of addressing a wide range of learning standards at the pre-K level.

Despite the merits, I would have liked to see the authors address the disciplinary literacy topic in this book, especially while laying the theoretical foundations in Part II. The children's content knowledge and disciplinary literacy skills made great contributions to their book projects, but the book fell short of citing relevant literature in this book project. Besides, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 seem somewhat repetitive in terms of exploring "what the children already knew about books and stories" (Chapter 4) and "unveiling children's knowledge about books and about print" (Chapter 5). These two subtopics could have merged into one chapter. In addition, the demographic information of the Pre-K East class was sort of missing, including race, gender, socio-economic status (SES), and language

ability. Given this information, practitioners may have a better idea of how to selectively replicate those practices to accommodate their own classes. This book might have not provided explicit and commonly used approaches to deal with each individual class in the last section, but the purpose of this book is to "help readers envision ways they may engage in the process of co-constructing such a curriculum with their students" (p.7). This intention has already been realized as the book presents us a variety of ideas for engaging our students in coauthoring books and constructing an integrated curriculum with teachers. Through the book, Dana Bentley showed us real examples of posing questions to engage students into communicating, thinking, and authoring. She also perceived her children as the producers of knowledge and herself as a learner and cultural worker, learning from her students and documenting their cultural practices. Embracing such a perspective afforded Bentley the possibility of co-constructing curriculum with her students. Throughout the text, we can see that Bentley always made sure that multiple voices were heard and valued in her class. This thought and action should not only be applied to classroom community but should also be advocated in a society that promotes democracy.

Overall, this book opens a window for us to understand the ways young children make meaning through play and to envision different ways we can construct the literacy curriculum. I would strongly recommend this book to readers who are interested in exploring the expansive compacity of young children and improving early childhood literacy education.

References

- Brandt, D. (1998). Sponsors of literacy. *College Composition and Communication*, 49 (2), 165-185.
- Baumann, J. F., Jones, L. A., & Seifert-Kessell, N. (1993). Using think alouds to enhance children's comprehension monitoring abilities. *The Reading Teacher*, 47 (3), 184-193.
- Dyson, A. H. (2008). On listening to child composers: Beyond "fix-its". In C. Genishi & A. Goodwin (Eds.), *Diversities in early childhood education: Rethinking and doing* (pp. 13-27). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Licona, A. C., & Chaves, K. R. (2015). Relational literacies and their coalitional possibilities. *Peitho, Journal of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric & Composition*, 18 (1), 96-107.
- Ray, K. W., & Glover, M. (2008). *Already ready: Nurturing writers in preschool and kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shanahan, C., & Shanahan, T. (2014). Does disciplinary literacy have a place in elementary school? *The Reading Teacher*, 67(8), 636-639.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.