

## *Original Paper*

# Pre-service Teacher Candidates Learn the Many Values of Home-School Literacy Bags

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### ***Abstract***

*This article shares an innovative learning assignment that pre-service teacher candidates completed to support early childhood students in the area of emergent literacy. To learn the many values of home-school literacy bags, teacher candidates enrolled in a university teacher preparation course designed homemade literacy bags and brought them into their preschool field classrooms and distributed them to the preschoolers' families. The author shares the rationale behind the assignment, the processes and strategies the students used to create the home-school literacy bags, the results of the parent satisfaction survey that was collected, and the pre-service teacher candidates' reactions and reflections of the learning assignment.*

### ***Keywords***

*literacy bags, emergent literacy education, early childhood, home-school connection, university teacher candidates*

## **1. Introduction**

For the past eighteen years I have served as an education professor in the Department of Early and Middle Grades Education at a large university in the northeast area of the US. I find this work challenging and I enjoy teaching university teacher candidates as they prepare to be primary grade teachers. I have taught the Pre-Kindergarten Methods & Field course for the past eight years. It is a six-credit, field-based course in which university teacher candidates spend upwards of sixty-six hours throughout the semester working directly with preschool aged children. They also attend a weekly university class focused on learning how to plan and implement developmentally effective curriculum for three-to-five-years-olds.

Aside from teaching the ages and stages of child development and the importance of viewing children

in a holistic manner, we spend a large majority of our class time learning, 1) how to create developmentally appropriate teaching activities using hands-on learning manipulatives, 2) the importance of building a strong home-school connection, and 3) how to artfully construct supportive learning centers where children's knowledge and curiosity can flourish. Multiple curriculum learning centers are explicitly described while we explore what hands-on materials are most engaging and appropriate for child development. We have in-depth discussions on how to create strong learning activities in the multiple centers in a preschool classroom, such as in the areas of math, literacy, science, dramatic play, blocks, art, and the importance of integrating these in a cross-curricular manner.

In particular, when we explore the area of preschool literacy we focus on how to create an effective reading and writing center. We discuss what literacy activities best align and support pre-school literacy standards, and what classroom manipulatives enhance preschoolers emerging literacy development. One particular course assignment the teacher candidates completed, and seemed to thoroughly enjoy, received much positive feedback during the Fall 2018 semester. Supporting the area of literacy development, a specific course assignment focused on the creation of a themed literacy bag with cross-curricular activities.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Overview*

This article conveys the story of why and how the university teacher candidates created themed literacy bags to assist early learners in a multitude of ways. It explains the rationale of how literacy bags can help build a literacy partnership through the home and school connection, how they are developmentally appropriate in supporting young learners emerging cross-curricular skills, and why the use of hands-on manipulatives, as extension activities within the literacy bags, are ideal learning tools during the early years. It shares nine examples of themed literacy bags created by the teacher candidates, outlines the contents within the bag, and describes the emergent skills and extension activities the youngsters are asked to complete at home with a family member. Lastly, this article shares data from a small sample of parents who completed the parent satisfaction survey sheet and the teacher candidates' reflections and new guiding questions that were brainstormed after completing this course assignment.

### *2.2 The Benefits of Literacy Bags in the Early Childhood Classroom*

Literacy bags have been a staple in many early childhood classrooms for an assortment of reasons. Variations of literacy bags used with families in the home environment have been well documented in the educational literature. Book Bags (Vukelich et al., 2001), Ladybug Luggage (Grande, 2004), Intergenerational Literacy Bags (Richardson & Sacks, 1993) have all been viewed as successful literacy programs linking the home and school. They are viewed as an appropriate and significant way to increase students' emergent literacy skills all while providing a way for parents or caregivers to read aloud to their child and model strong recreational reading habits. Literacy bags also support students

learning in a hands-on manner as they manipulate materials and props included in the bag when completing the extension activities that accompany the literature selection. Many times, these extension activities can be cross-curricular in nature and help to bridge different areas for more skill building through thematic learning. Lastly, a significant benefit of using literacy bags as part of a well-rounded literacy curriculum is that they assist in building a strong literacy connection between the home and school. For these reasons this assignment was created so university teacher candidates could begin to understand the multi-dimensional role literacy bags can play as part of a strong preschool literacy program.

### *2.3 Reading Aloud to Young Children*

Dooley (2010) asserts that reading aloud with young children is one of the single most important predictors of success in reading. As youngsters participate in shared reading experiences they enhance their key emergent literacy skills, those being: oral language skills, vocabulary development, phonological and alphabet awareness, comprehension, and awareness of print (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010; Walsh & Blewitt, 2006). Reading with youngsters is considered a social event that provides a predictable routine and format that increases students developing skills in the areas of conversation participation, all while supporting readiness for formal reading instruction (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Yet sadly, in upper grades Reber (2011) notes that recreational reading is at high risk due to the overemphasis on academic reading focused on improving scores on high stakes standardized testing. It makes one question, if young children do not have opportunities to be read to and experience high quality children's literature for enjoyment in school, how will they choose recreational reading as a home activity? Perhaps using literacy bags with youngsters can support an early love of reading while simultaneously helping to develop crucial emergent literacy skill.

### *2.4 Why Hands-On Learning?*

When researching child development, Dewey (1938), Piaget (1954), Bruner (1968), Vygotsky (1978), Kolb (1984), and others are often cited as the founders of active, hands-on learning. These theorists believed that learning is an active, highly-evolving, and complex process. Children need to experience their learning with their mind, heart, and hands simultaneously. They have to (a) become the learning, (b) use all of their senses, and (c) experience first-hand learning for themselves as it is evolving. This is active, experiential learning that is hands-on in nature. It is the manner in which young children acquire their knowledge.

The use of learning manipulatives is highly recommended and is supported by both learning theory and educational research when it comes to youngsters and processing new information. Specifically, when looking at mathematical research, "manipulatives can be important tools in helping students to think and reason in more meaningful ways" (Stein & Bovalino, 2001, p. 356). Manipulatives, such as the ones placed in themed literacy bags, can help students learn by permitting them to move from concrete experiences to abstract reasoning (Heddens, 1986).

Thematic literacy bags that integrate different curriculum areas are considered suitable for developing

preschooler's knowledge and skills in early childhood. Literacy bags are typically anchored with a high-quality piece of children's literature and often times include hands-on extension activities. These extension activities can easily integrate other curriculum areas such as math, science, and art to name a few. Likewise, "when using literacy bags, children and parents can learn how to combine expressive arts and emergent literacy strategies, plus state-of-the-art activities designed for each of the multiple intelligences which can help to meet the needs of diverse students with many different learning styles and interests" (Brand et al., 2014, p. 163). Developmentally appropriate skills such as visual discrimination, matching, and problem solving can also link to the themed literacy bag and be practiced with a family member in the home environment.

### *2.5 Building a Home—School Literacy Connection*

Although many preschool teachers seek to deliver a high-quality literacy curriculum for their students, they can't do it in isolation. Teachers are just one part of the equation. For literacy education to be rich and deep, its lasting success is "dependent upon people and factors outside the classroom and beyond their control" (Hannon, 1998, p.123). Parents, caregivers, and extended family members can all participate and get involved in positively influencing preschooler's literacy learning. According to Taylor (1983), the home environment has a direct influence on children's early literacy development, and "engaging parents and children in mutual activities that include book reading, but are not limited to it, many constitute the richest potential for supporting children's early literacy development" (Neuman, 1997, p. 119). Therefore, it is imperative for early childhood educators to include a home-school connection as part of a well-rounded literacy curriculum.

Family literacy has been a topic of national attention for decades (Purcell-Gates, 2000) and parents have been continually asked to join teachers in partnership to support literacy development. Yet, teachers need to keep in mind that not all parents or caregivers are readily available to visit the school during the day. Due to high numbers of parents with full-time employment, expecting parents to be a supporting partner in classroom literacy is quite challenging and limiting due to logistics. Hannon (1998) takes the stance that parents can best focus on literacy that takes place in the home rather than the classroom, and that it is the teachers responsibility to actively attempt to get parents involved to fully embrace the true nature of early literacy learning. Many studies have suggested the important role parents and family literacy hold for early literacy success. Steward and Goff (2005) assert that literacy activities at home can positively influence development in multiple early literacy areas including oral language, print awareness, vocabulary and comprehension. Koskinen et al. (2000) believes that home-based reading of books increased student's motivation to read and prompted parent involvement levels, while Morrow and Young (1997) found that when parent involvement programs involved re-reading and included enjoyable and easy-to-use activities that provided a connection between school and home, children reported reading more often at home in their free time with adults.

Grande (2004) views benefits of literacy bags as enjoyable involvement for families and a means for providing parents with awareness of the literacy skills their children are learning in school. Paired

literacy interactions with family members may help connect school with much needed parent involvement (Compton, 2009; Compton et al., 2012; Topping, 1987). By learning the rationale as to why literacy bags should be part of a developmentally appropriate preschool literacy program, university teacher candidates can begin to comprehend the many benefits using these teaching tools bring to children and their families.

### *2.6 The Assignment*

During the Fall 2018 semester eighteen university teacher candidates were enrolled in the Pre-Kindergarten Method and Field course. Each of the teacher candidates spent sixty-six hours in a preschool classroom during the morning hours throughout the semester, and additionally attended a weekly three-hour night class on campus to learn the methods and theory behind teaching children in early childhood. About halfway into the semester in October, we focused on the topic of emergent literacy and spent an entire evening discussing the best ways to support developmentally appropriate early literacy skills. This was the evening the themed literacy bag assignment was presented.

Teacher candidates were first shown an example literacy bag in class as a model and then received a rubric outlining the criteria necessary to create their literacy bag and the grading expectations. Bags were to be of canvas or cotton with a type of closure at the top, and colorfully decorated with pictures and/or words describing their chosen theme. Each of the literacy bags were required to include the following supplies: two children's picture books related to the chosen theme that would be appropriate for parents to read aloud to their preschooler, clearly typed and laminated directions for the parents that were highly understandable, two different, hands-on games or learning activities related to the literature books and in support of preschool standards from any curriculum area (all game pieces needed to be provided), and a parent satisfaction survey sheet.

Students created their literacy bags at home and brought them to class to share with the other university teacher candidates two weeks later. The following week the students brought them to their preschools and shared them with their cooperating teachers and, with the help of the cooperating teachers, set up an organizational system to start sending the literacy bags home with the preschoolers to share with their families. Different cooperating teachers set different time limits families had to read the books, complete the activities, and return the materials. The preschool teachers and university students then rotated the literacy bags through different families for approximately five weeks before the semester came to a close. In December 2018, we spent time reviewing the collected parent satisfaction surveys and dedicated time in class to discussing the creation and use of the literacy bags as a course assignment.

## **3. Results**

To determine how the literacy bags were received by the families a parent satisfaction survey sheet was sent home in each bag. Although the bags were created about half-way through the semester and only rotated for a few weeks before the semester ended, we collected and collated forty-two family

responses. It was evident that overall responses were upbeat, optimistic and positive. Results revealed that the home-school literacy bags provided the youngsters with positive experiences with children's literature at home, high-quality parent-child interaction with books in the home environment, early literacy skills, increased motivation to read and share books, and a positive attitude toward school in general. Below are some direct quotes taken directly from collected parent surveys.

*"Thank you for providing these materials to share at home. We loved the literacy bags!"*

*"We enjoyed the time reading together and working on the crafts. The activities were fun and everything we needed was included in the bag."*

*"I ended up reading the books multiple times as per my son's request! He really seemed to enjoy the bag."*

*"We would like more of these bags please!"*

*"This makes us want to share reading more in our home. My son didn't know the bags were going to be that much fun."*

After collating the responses and sharing them with the university teacher candidates they realized that the parent surveys confirmed that households that used the home-school literacy bags experienced increased engagement in home literacy activities and had a stronger understanding of the importance of reading together at home with their children. According to Routman (2003), "children read more when they have easy access to books" (p. 64). Home-school literacy bags can help promote parents' knowledge of children's literature and extend their knowledge about how to acquire books (Richardson et al., 2008). For these reasons and more having pre-service, teacher candidates create and bring literacy bags into the preschool classrooms and homes teaches a very valuable lesson on how to support and nurture emergent literacy skills in the early years.

**Table 1. The Following Chart Outlines the Themes, Books, Emergent Skills & Activities, and Contents of Literacy Bags Created by the University Teacher Candidates**

<i>Book Titles</i>	<i>Emergent Skills &amp; Activities</i>	<i>Home-school Literacy Bag Contents</i>
Theme: Dinosaurs	Math – shape recognition	Two theme-based picture books
Usborne Touchy-Feely	Dancing/movement- following directions	Laminated parental instruction sheet
Dinosaurs by Fiona Watt & Rachel Wells	Art/creativity – fine motor development	Small, plush stuffed dinosaur
Rumble with the Dinosaurs (Sound Book) by Parragon		Multiple shapes of green construction paper pre-cut Dino-bones container with Q-tips Dinosaur cut outs Spinner Decorated bag
Theme: Flowers	Science – planting seedling	Two theme-based picture books

	Math – measurement	Laminated parental instructions sheet
I Can Grow a Flower by Dawn Sirett for DK	Sunflower art - literacy & writing words on petals	Small cups Large tongue depressors Seeds
The Amazing Life Cycle of Plants by Kay Barnham		Measuring cup & dirt Glue, scissors, marker, construction paper Decorated bag
Theme: Dogs	Matching memory game – visual discrimination, critical viewing, attention to detail	Two theme-based picture books Laminated parental instructions sheet Memory cards with matching pictures
If You Give a Dog a Donut by Laura Numeroff	Math – counting and representing. Roll the die, count the number of	Steel dog bowl Dice
Biscuit Goes to School by Alyssa Satin Capucilli	dots, place that many dogs in the dog bowl	Small, plush stuffed dog Cut out, laminated dog bones Decorated bag
Theme: Under the Sea	Literacy – upper/lower case letter match and visual discrimination with matching half pictures together	Two theme-based picture books Laminated parental instructions sheet Laminated Half fish cards with upper or lower-case letters in corners
Rainbow Fish: The Dangerous Deep by Marcus Pfister	Math - grouping fish by colors, color recognition and counting	Laminated Fish bowls
Wacky Fish by Fay Robinson	similar colored fish	Laminated fish in different colors, multiples Decorated bag
Theme: Food	Math – adding, subtracting counting money	Two theme-based picture books Laminated parental instructions sheet
Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs by Ron Barrett	Math – counting, representing, following multiple step directions	Laminated fake foods & plate Laminated menu Laminated pictures of grocery items with prices on back
Who Put the Cookies in the Cookie Jar by George Shannon		Fake money Whole Foods hat (prop) Decorated bag
Theme: Monsters	Math – patterning, counting, matching, and number recognition	Two theme-based picture books Laminated parental instructions
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak		Laminated crowns with numbers or dots Love monster pomp oms with heart feet

		and either letters A, B, C, or D on bottom
Love Monster by Rachel Bright		Decorated bag
Theme: Monkeys	Feed the Monkey – Math: number recognition and counting	Two theme-based picture books
Curious George Visits the Zoo by Margret & H.A. Rey		Laminated parental instructions sheet
	Monkey Memory – Matching	Laminated number spinner with brad
Five Little Monkeys with Nothing to Do by Eileen Christelow	pictures – critical viewing, visual discrimination, attention to detail	Laminated monkey cards (multiples in pairs)
		Large, laminated monkey face
		Laminated banana cards
		Decorated bag
Theme: Colors	Scavenger Hunt – visual discrimination, color recognition	Two theme-based picture books
The Crayon Coloring Book by pam Munzo Ryan & Jerry Pallotta	Math- sorting by color and counting	Laminated parental instructions sheet
	Literacy – math language/vocabulary	Laminated colored cards with color written on it
Of Colors and Things by Tana Hoban		Pom-pom balls (multiple colors)
		Decorated bag
Theme: Monsters	Math – number recognition, matching, number representation	Two theme-based picture books
The Monster Bed by Jeanne Willis		Laminated parental instructions
	Matching – visual discrimination, critical viewing, attention to detail	Laminated monster picture matching cards
Monster Math by Anne Miranda		Bottle caps with numbers
		Laminated monster cards
		Decorated bag

#### 4. Discussion

Considering the results of the parent survey, the in-class discussion centering on what we learned by creating and disseminating literacy bags to the preschool families was enlightening. Teacher candidates discussed what factors they thought led to the success of the literacy bags and what changes we could make to the assignment. An important factor to consider is how well does the classroom teachers know her students and their families? The university students realized that this is imperative when creating literacy experiences for youngsters and their families. Together the class brainstormed that it would be helpful to teachers if these following questions could be answered when designing literacy bags:

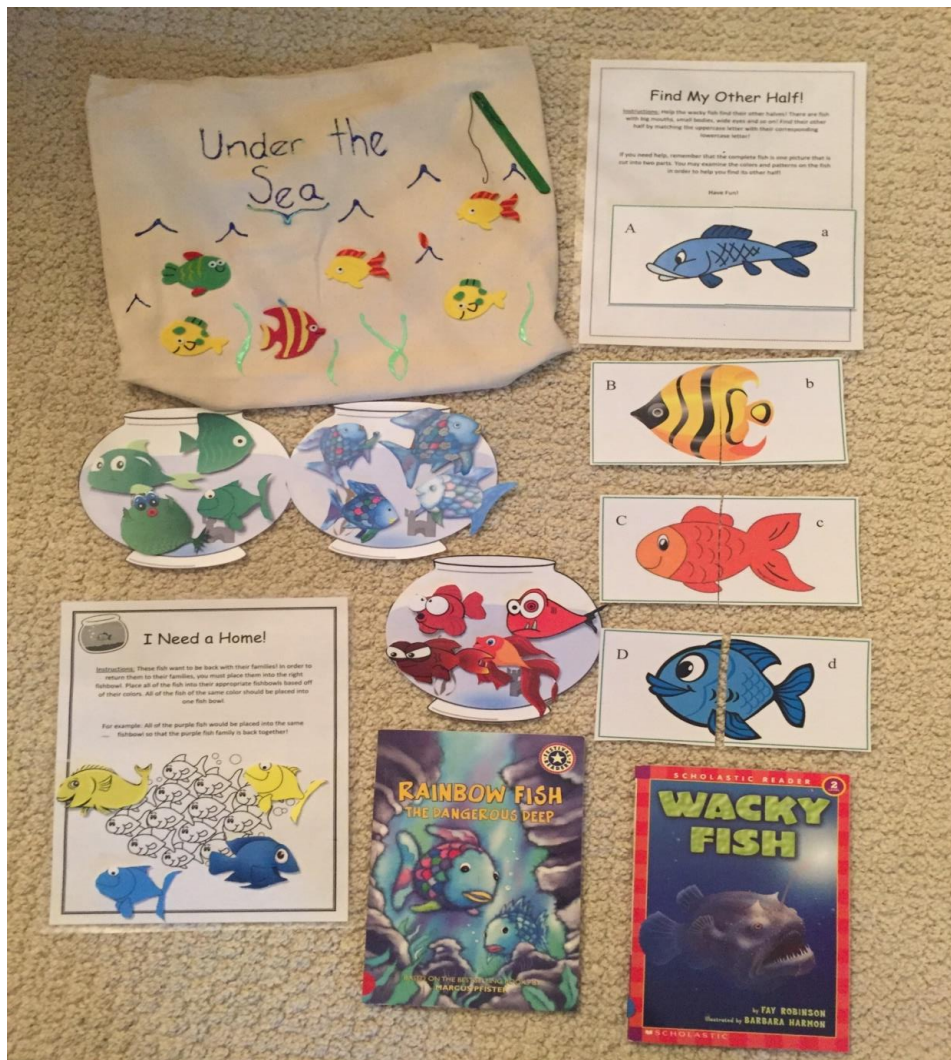
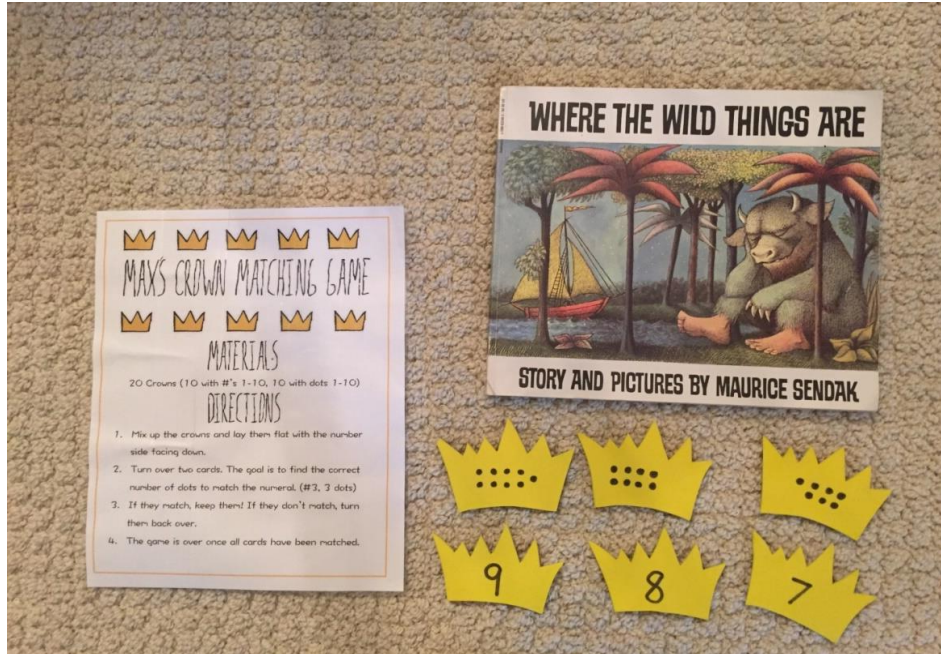
- What are the literacy levels of the family? Are they on par with the literacy bags?



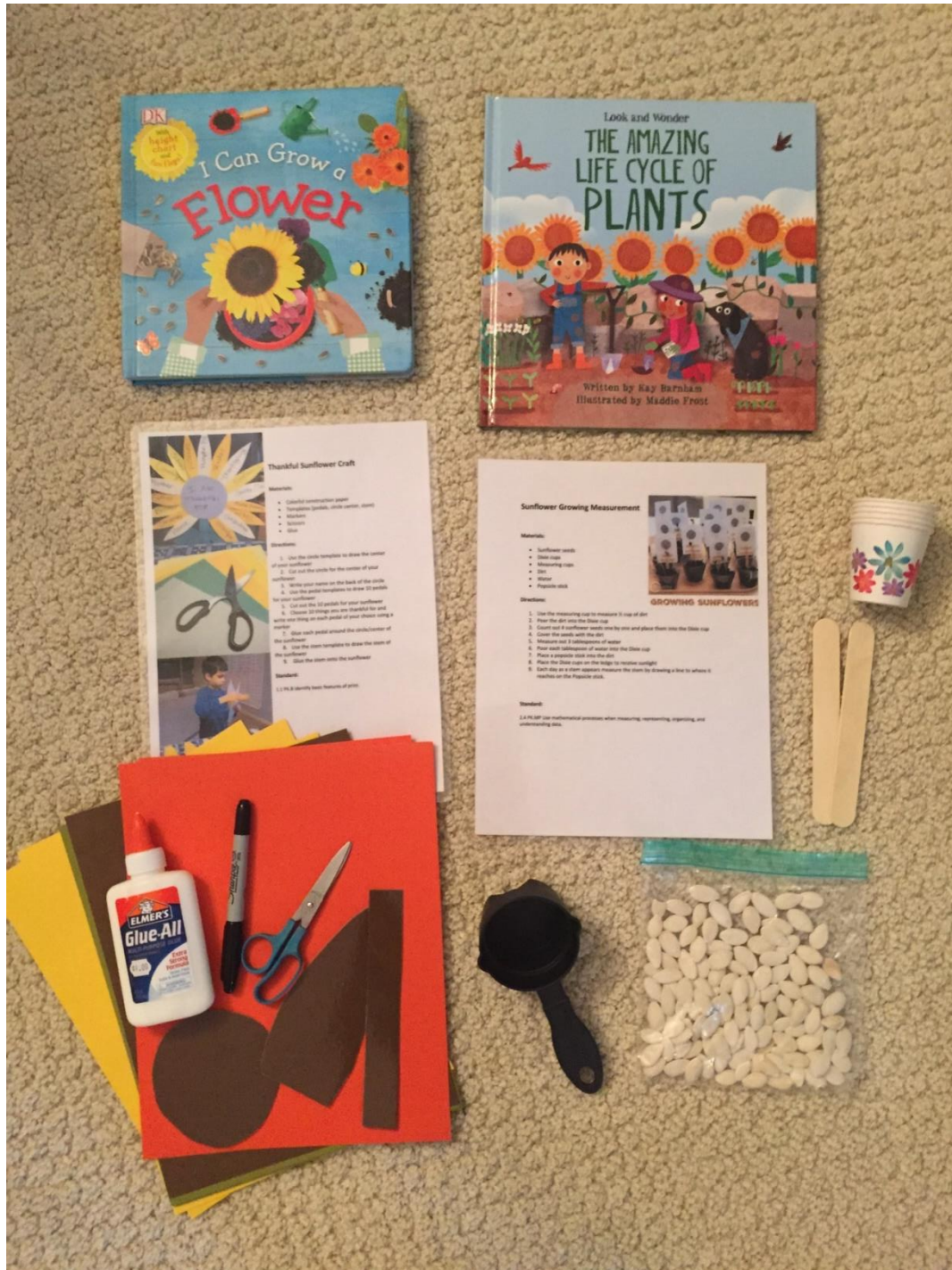
- Do the literacy bags incorporate the family's home language?
- Are the books motivating and interesting to the students?
- Who is at home to help the child by reading aloud and completing the literacy bag activities?
- Does the family have time throughout the week to complete the literacy bag activities?
- How can you gather suggestions from families for different themed bags they would be interested in?

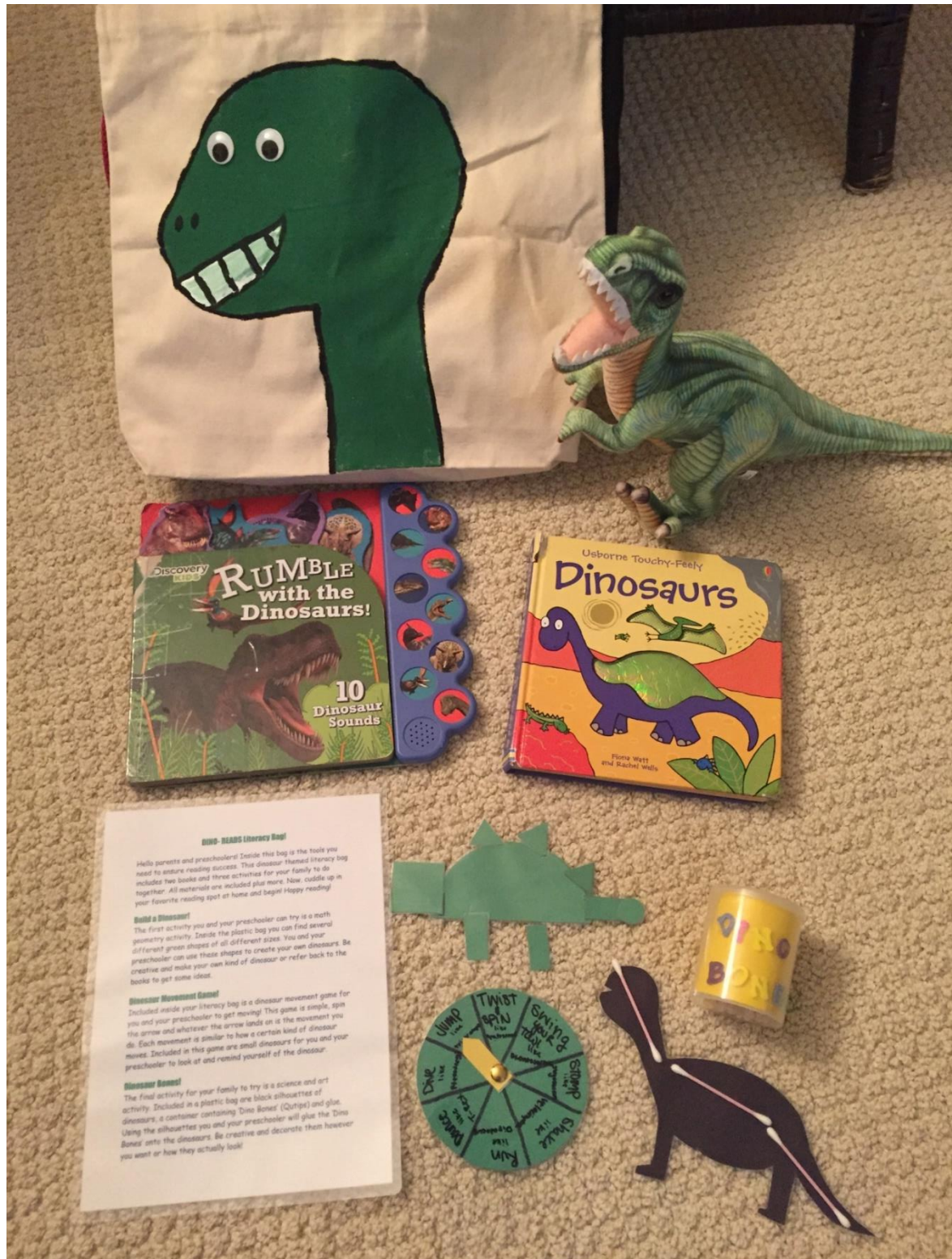
As a professor of early grades education, I am constantly looking to include thoughtful and meaningful class assignment into my university teaching. Having my university students learn the many values of literacy bags and then create and implement the developmentally appropriate bags into the preschool classroom and home environment truly brought a higher level of learning to this college course. The practice of using literacy bags allowed the teacher candidates to witness the preschoolers engaging in multiple literacy tasks with the support of family members, plus, it demonstrated how the use of literacy bags in the early childhood classroom supports and aligns with standards set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Specifically, literacy bags help to promote child development and learning, build family and community relationships, connect with children and families, while using developmentally appropriate approaches (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Although the use of literacy bags is not a new concept, to embed this practice in a university class shows teacher candidates first-hand the many values of the bags by validating their usefulness in promoting emergent literacy for youngsters while also supporting and guiding children and their families towards success in literacy.











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