Sixty seconds. That’s how long we’re required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us. Step off before the minute is up, and land mines blow your legs off. Sixty seconds to take in the ring of tributes all equidistant from the Cornucopia, a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high, spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. (Collins, 2008, p. 148)

Inside the mind of Katniss Everdeen, the 16-year-old tribute from District 12, the reader counts down the seconds. The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008) is a young adult novel that places the reader in the arena of a televised battle to the death, fought by tweens and teens for the sadistic pleasure of the tyrannical Capitol that rules their lives. Panem, a futuristic dictatorship in an implied postnuclear North America, is ruled by President Snow, the symbol of the Capitol and its unchecked power.

Twelve districts surround the Capitol and its hedonistic decadence; they exist to provide the Capitol with food and luxury items. In each district, children go to bed hungry and risk their lives to feed their families, for the Hunger Games are held to remind them of their rebellion and its costs. Children are harvested annually in a reaping, one boy and one girl from each district, to compete in the games, where only one tribute survives.

Just as Katniss faces unpredictable challenges as she enters the arena to compete in the Hunger Games, preservice teachers confront unanticipated obstacles as they leave the safety of the college classroom and enter into field-based experiences, where they will hone their skills and capacities as educators. Both are moving from one world to another—Katniss, from teenager to survivor; preservice teachers, from student to educator. Their transitions include vastly different, novel environments that require skills and talents not fully developed prior to entry into their puzzling new world.

And the secrets to entry are often unclear and not taught directly; the term hidden curriculum has been used to describe “those unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and...
classroom life” (Giroux, 1983, p. 47). Others suggest that the hidden curriculum masks threshold “concepts that are central to that discipline’s way of constructing knowledge and viewing the world...and...provide a doorway through which other ways of thinking, understanding, interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (Tsang, 2010, p. 6).

To free students from the bounds of the hidden curriculum, it is necessary to reveal it to them for critique (Giroux, 1982). By incorporating *The Hunger Games* and several related projects into our course requirements, we were able to help preservice teachers engage authentically (O’Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995) with literacy in their disciplines and take part in a sustained dialogue about the dispositions and (often unspoken) expectations required of educators in the *figured world* of schools (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005). While planning ways to employ the novel, we focused on one question: How can we help teachers integrate disciplinary literacy in their instruction and simultaneously develop themselves in a profession that expects community leadership and sustained learning throughout their career?

Our inquiry is framed by the intersection of two areas of research: disciplinary literacy and figured worlds. We present a brief review of the literature and then a description of our *Hunger Games* Achievement project and its outcomes. Finally, we offer recommendations for teacher educators to use *The Hunger Games* (or other YA novels) to support disciplinary literacy.

**Theoretical Grounding**

Research suggests that one of the difficulties we face as teachers and teacher educators is how to blend literacy and discipline-specific instruction seamlessly so that school-age students can begin to read and write like historians, scientists, mathematicians, or writers (Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005; Moje, 2008). Indeed, although content area literacy has (historically) focused on strategy instruction, such emphasis can in fact interfere with the learning of content, and recent research suggests that teachers instead focus on the disciplinary literacies central to their content and its discourse (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Moje, 2008; O’Brien et al., 1995). This disciplinary literacy is “a form of critical literacy because it builds an understanding of how knowledge is produced in the disciplines, rather than just building knowledge in the disciplines” (Moje, 2008, p. 97).

Learning to use the tools of a particular area of work is one of the primary tenets of *figured worlds*—a body of research that has recently been applied to the cultural world of schools. To address the competing realities coexisting within these institutional spaces, the scholarship on figured worlds (Fecho et al., 2005; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Rubin, 2007) offers a meaningful metaphor for viewing schools.

Figured worlds have four characteristics. They are

1. historical worlds where people are recruited for participation (or willingly enter),
2. social realms in which positions of the participants matter,
3. socially organized and reproduced, and
4. peopled by familiar social types developed by the particular worlds’ activity (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41).

Much of the educational research that draws on the figured worlds literature has focused on practicing teachers and their students and how each are positioned in the school environment. However, the impact and hidden nature of figured worlds on preservice teachers as they enter the world of schools has not received much attention. Viewing preservice teachers in this light, we strive to prepare them to enter the complex and challenging arena of public schools.

**Methodology and Data Collection**

This research focuses on a semester-long project designed to strengthen the disciplinary literacy practices of middle school (fourth to eighth grades) math, science, social studies, and language arts preservice teachers at a large public university in Texas. We selected *The Hunger Games* because its storyline offered entrée into a variety of disciplinary connections. The activities required for the *Hunger Games* Achievements project were designed to help our students understand and connect the disciplinary literacy practices (both of their disciplines and of the teaching discipline) to their practice in the world of schools. Participation in the project was required; in the research, it was voluntary.

Data collected reflect the artifacts and tools of our profession and the *figured worlds* of schools: documentation of *Hunger Games* “achievements” that students would engage in throughout the
semester; student-generated lesson plans and in-class assignments; e-mails and correspondence about the project; observation notes/journal entries from the researchers; and final reflections from students. Data collection continues; therefore, this article focuses on artifacts from the 2011–2012 academic year.

Throughout the project, we spent time reviewing data and identifying shared themes. We considered the types of activities that students chose, paying close attention to changing positionality (from student to teacher) as preservice teachers developed capability in and beyond their fieldwork classrooms. Data were analyzed inductively using guidelines delineated by Huberman and Miles (1983). We created categories connected to students’ shifting professional identities; for example, students believed that they would need to gain skill in their work as teachers (and alter their positions in the figured world of schools) to begin thinking of themselves as such. Triangulation of multiple data sources became important as particular themes surfaced. This triangulation was built into data collection and analysis for the purposes of achieving trustworthiness. Data were analyzed by both researchers, and conflicts were resolved through consensus.

The Hunger Games Project Defined

For the past three years, we each have taught a six-hour, two-class course; students earn credit for literacy in the content areas as well as reading assessment and complete 40-plus hours in the field. We teach in local schools and maintain ongoing contact with the fourth- to eighth-grade teachers with whom we place students. Although our classes meet in separate schools, we spend considerable time throughout the semester working cooperatively. We also gather both groups of students at different points during the semester to learn from one another.

In addition to textbooks that focus on disciplinary literacy, we include several YA novels for book club activities that incorporate the ideas from the textbooks. (See the Take Action sidebar for examples of YA novels that could be useful in the study of disciplinary literacy.) After reading The Hunger Games ourselves, we began planning an extended project to serve as a framework to support students’ transition into the figured world of a preservice teacher; descriptions of the project follow.

The Hunger Games Achievements

Because our students are new to fieldwork, we meet our two classes jointly at the beginning of the semester to share the course requirements and policies that govern their field placement. We introduce disciplinary literacy and ask students to create presentations about our intern handbook—developed to aid students’ transitions. Essentially, we begin to describe their transition from one figured world (a student) to another (a teacher).

Students read The Hunger Games by the second week of class, and we ask groups of students to consider where each of the 13 districts (the political term for individual areas within Panem) described in the book might be located. For example, students ask themselves, “Where in the United States, as we know it now, is District 4, known for its fisheries, likely to be located, and why do we think so?” Building on their hypotheses, they document their synthesis on a hand-drawn map (see Figures 1 and 2), coding each of the 13 districts with different colored markers and a legend of what each district produces (farming, mining, textiles, etc.).

Applying map skills, using data to support conclusions, and coding are all standards expected of middle school students, and we tie these standards to our consideration of the class-generated map to introduce disciplinary literacy (in this case, for the social studies).

Next, we introduce the Hunger Games Achievements handout, which delineates requirements for both in-class and out-of-class activities that students must complete. (See Figure 3.)
There are 13 achievements in all, reflecting the 13 districts, and each draws directly on course requirements, requirements that make the hidden curriculum visible. The achievements also reflect the skills and tools necessary for Katniss’s survival in the Hunger Games arena. Just as Katniss seeks out a bow and arrow—tools with which she has familiarity and skill—preservice teachers acquire particular tools to enhance their work in schools.

Some achievements reflect required assignments from our course syllabus, such as “Being Tenacious,” which asks students to create a discipline-specific lesson plan that draws on The Hunger Games and is refined several times. Others require students to extend their learning outside class, like “Developing a Professional Identity,” “Mentoring,” or “Sponsoring.” We include the latter types of activities to help preservice teachers understand that educators are expected to engage in work and professional development beyond the school day; in the figured world of public schools, teachers grow in value as they exhibit a sustained commitment to teaching and learning both in and out of schools.
Students also had some choice about the types of activities they might engage in outside class. Students could join organizations connected to their interests, engage in volunteer activities that they value, and participate in after-school events at their campuses that increased their understanding of their disciplines or of the students with whom they work. These activities were particularly fruitful in helping preservice teachers begin to see themselves less as students and more as teachers; they also contributed to understandings that, in the figured world of schools, there is an expectation that teachers continue to grow as professionals and serve their schools beyond the workday. (See Figure 4.)

Those who actively engaged in the achievements were held in higher esteem by the school community (for example, they received handwritten notes of praise from their cooperating teachers). These notes echoed notes and gifts given to Katniss by her sponsors in the novel.

**The Hunger Games Book Club**

While both classes were combined at the beginning of the semester, we blended a discussion of the *Hunger Games* Achievements project with the plot of the novel. The students analyzed the achievements and considered how Katniss develops each one during the course of the book. Field notes generated from this discussion focused on Katniss’s bravery and capacity as a problem solver in difficult circumstances. For example, Katniss is tenacious; she doesn’t just try something once. Preservice teachers were to demonstrate their tenacity through the ongoing revision of their lessons. Our students also noted how willingly Katniss shared her provisions and knowledge—a skill they decided was important in the world of teachers, but dangerous inside the arena.

A second book club occurred later in the semester; we created several learning centers for *The Hunger Games*. One center employed a discussion web (Alvermann, 1991), analyzing the appropriateness of Katniss joining forces with Peeta. We often incorporate strategies such as the discussion web into our own work with the preservice teachers, for such integration reflects the disciplinary literacy of our profession and models how to recognize methods of generating and evaluating disciplinary knowledge. All strategies used by the students were introduced through this method of modeling and guided practice. (See Figure 5.)

Another center asked students to make connections between themselves and *The Hunger Games*, the novel and other texts (songs, stories, films, etc.), and the novel and current or world events (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). The discussions in this center were particularly interesting because students made connections to reality television, such as *American Idol* and the presidential primaries, and actively engaged in critical analyses of the role of these competitions in their lives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE 4 Examples of Student-Selected <em>Hunger Games</em> Achievements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Achievement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Professional Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing Your Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because our students have minimal experience in lesson design, the Hunger Games project allows them initial opportunities to apply disciplinary literacy practices. After taking part in the learning centers, students were asked to create a lesson plan that used one of their disciplinary literacy practices and was connected to state standards and to an event or concept in The Hunger Games.

The Hunger Games Lesson Plans

The Hunger Games offers disparate concepts for preservice teachers to explore: probability in mathematics (the reaping that selects tributes), ecology in science (the environment constructed inside the arena), character development in language arts (throughout the novel), or governmental systems in social studies (the transition of Panem from a republic to a dictatorship). What follows are examples of four lesson plans developed by students.

Math—Battleship, Coordinate Planes, and The Hunger Games

One of the persistent frustrations we hear from preservice math teachers is, “Why do I need to worry about reading in the math classroom? I’m supposed to teach students how to solve problems, not read!” (observation journal, 2/8/12). After reading The Hunger Games, we ask students to examine the state standards for their discipline. Our math students often make the connection between the tesserae drawing in the novel and probability. In the spring of 2012, Jennifer and Sara (all names used are pseudonyms) challenged themselves to draw instead on geometry and spatial reasoning standards for seventh-grade mathematics and help students “locate and name points on a coordinate plane using ordered pairs of integers” (Texas Education Agency, 2012). They also wanted students to be able to use mathematical language and representations in their communications with one another. This focus on the understanding of how mathematical knowledge is

FIGURE 5 Discussion Web

1. After reading a selection, form groups of three to five students each.
2. Discuss the focus question with your group and come up with evidence to support both a yes position and a no position.
3. Analyze the question and record information and the group’s responses. Jot down only key words and phrases and try to use an equal number of reasons for pros and cons.
4. Work together to come to a consensus by stating your conclusion and reason(s) for your conclusion.
5. Finally, choose a spokesperson to share your group’s point of view with the entire class.

produced and communicated is central to disciplinary literacy.

Using the “visualizing” technique they had learned in class (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007), Jennifer and Sara asked students to draw a rendering of the arena, including the Cornucopia, the lake, the piney woods, and the podiums the tributes are standing on as they enter the arena. Students add three additional objects to their drawings (e.g., a backpack, bows and arrows, a loaf of bread). Then students construct a coordinate grid to place over their drawings and label each object.

In a modified form of the game Battleship, a group of students with a blank grid attempts to re-create another group’s drawing of the arena, based on guesses of coordinate pairs. Next, Jennifer and Sara envision a whole-class discussion in which students compare and contrast how they chose to depict the arena, drawing on textual evidence present in The Hunger Games; here they will critique each other’s assumptions about both the text and their interpretation of the text.

Social Studies—Panem’s Bill of Rights
Using eighth-grade social studies standards, including the “rights and responsibilities of citizens of the United States” and examples of “unalienable rights and the rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights” (Texas Education Agency, 2012), Felicia used a quick-write in her lesson plan to gauge what students understand about inalienable rights after a brief study of the Bill of Rights in class (Baxter, Bass, & Glaser, 2001).

After sharing these understandings with the class, the students are tasked to create a Panem Bill of Rights, based on evidence or clues from The Hunger Games, and compare and contrast these to the rights of citizens of the United States. Felicia then asked students to give minipresentations of their work in front of the class, culminating in a large-class discussion of the differences and an analysis of how each bill of rights reflected the differing values of both communities.

Language Arts—Lifesize Drawings of Peeta and Gale
Recognizing that students often grapple with drawing conclusions and making inferences on standardized tests, Derek and Carin set out to investigate the “similarities and differences in the setting, characters, and plot” of a text and those in a film based on the same story line (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Their lesson begins with a Venn diagram (Camp, 2000) that fifth-grade language arts students use to compare qualities and characteristics of Peeta and Gale (the two primary male protagonists).

They then use these individual Venn diagrams to construct a class diagram, to discuss each of the characters, and to consider their similarities and differences. Students divide into small groups to create lifesize drawings of Peeta or Gale, including salient details, such as hair color and physical features, and quotes from The Hunger Games said by or about the character. Students present their life-size drawings to the class to look for similarities and differences in how they and their peers rendered their drawings.

Next Derek and Carin have students complete a writing activity in which “students are given preselected scenes from the book that involve Gale or Peeta. The students are asked to rewrite the scene, putting Gale in Peeta’s place, or vice versa.” This exploration allows students to investigate the qualities of each character and to critique the characters’ presumed strengths and weaknesses. After this writing activity, Derek and Carin plan to show students selections from the film version of The Hunger Games, having students analyze the differences in their interpretations of Gale and Peeta as characters and how they are depicted in the film.

Ecosystems and Biodiversity Present in The Hunger Games
Jenny had a personal interest in ecology and set out to write a lesson focused on seventh-grade science standards that dealt with “the relationship between organisms and environments” and to teach “how biodiversity contributes to the sustainability of an ecosystem” (Texas Education Agency, 2012). She begins her lesson by asking students to go home and collect five unique things they can find in their local community and then bring them to school. Students classify and categorize these as plant, animal, or material and create clusters around the room to showcase their local environment.

Next, students read passages from The Hunger Games that offer clues about the different environments of Panem’s districts. Students focus on how Katniss was able to navigate her environment in and around District 12 to help sustain her family.

Teaching is a lot more than just showing up to class and grading assignments.
They then investigate passages that show Katniss using these same skills inside the arena ecosystem.

Students conduct research into different biomes present in the United States and draw conclusions about how the ecology varies, depending on climate, weather, and general conditions. Jenny then asks students to draw conclusions about where the different districts of Panem are compared to regions of the United States, using evidence from the novel. Throughout her lesson plan, students are documenting unfamiliar vocabulary words, relying on generative vocabulary strategies, and employing the Frayer (four-square) concept map to better understand and use content-specific words (Anthony, Tippett, & Yore, 2010).

What We Learned From Reading The Hunger Games With Preservice Teachers
Teaching is challenging work that requires both pedagogical and discipline-specific knowledge. Students were eager to use their projects in their now-visible transformation into the figured world of teachers: “If we could find a job in the same school, we could totally do this lesson!” (observation journal, 3/7/12). In final reflections, our students pointed out the benefits of reading The Hunger Games and participating in the achievements as a semester-long project and articulated why they thought the project supported their entry into the teaching arena. Other YA books could easily function as different metaphors in the same manner (as discussed in Take Action and More to Explore).

The Hunger Games Engages
Our students consistently ranked The Hunger Games as enjoyable and connected to their discipline. Sandra, who acknowledged she could “shamelessly admit that I will be standing outside, in line, at the midnight showing of the movie” on opening night, echoed what many of our students wrote in their reflections:

I honestly can’t remember the last time I actually finished a book for one of my college classes, let alone enjoyed it so much that I read the other two in the trilogy. I think one of the perks of this book was that it gave us something we could relate to our students with. (final reflection, 12/2/11)

Mary Jane concurred: “The book was so good I’ve told over five people to check it out. That’s pretty impressive considering I never read, and when I do I never tell other people about the book” (final reflection, 12/2/11).

The Hunger Games Connects Easily to Disciplinary Literacy
Our students were able to connect The Hunger Games to their discipline. As Marisol notes in her final reflection, “Reading this has opened my eyes as to how reading a book isn’t just for language arts, but can be tied into any content area.” Some of our math and science preservice teachers were initially perplexed and wondered, “How in the world will I ever connect this to teaching math or science?” (Lauren, reflection, 12/2/12). After working with a partner to engage in lesson planning and experiencing book clubs, however, they were able to blend the disciplinary literacy we were studying in class with The Hunger Games and develop engaging classroom activities.

As noted earlier, many of our students read the entire trilogy during our semester and were pleased to discover that Catching Fire and Mockingjay were equally adaptable to teaching disciplinary literacy. Gertrude acknowledged,

I could have used any chapter from any book in the series to formulate a lesson plan. When starting the field block I didn’t even think about using a book to aid in the understanding of a concept, but now I have been proved it can work and there are many interesting and creative options when using a book. In the future I hope to get an English teacher that is willing to cooperate with me in incorporating a book into both subjects. (final reflection, 12/2/11)

We spend time asking students to read widely from print, online, and multimedia texts in our classes and to begin thinking about how they might draw on these to enliven their disciplinary instruction. When they do so, they have entered the arena, the figured world of a teacher.

The Hunger Games Suggests a Transition to Capability
Our classes are the gateway to the arena. Although some of our students have spent time parenting, tutoring, or participating in after-school programs, many are still naive about the responsibilities and hidden duties teachers face that are often expected but undesignated by their administration (Giroux, 1982). It is important that our students apprentice

497
to these to flourish in the figured worlds of schools. The Hunger Games achievements have aided us in surfacing this hidden curriculum and helping preservice teachers understand that their jobs would likely not end when the bell rings. There was some resistance toward a required list of duties, most of which would need to be performed outside our class time:

At first I will admit I was not all that excited about having to do all the extra activities...I didn’t have a lot of extra time, so trying to figure out events to fulfill all the requirements wasn’t all that easy. I was a little overwhelmed.

Lauren discovered that many of the things she took for granted in schools required planning and time:

Claudia and I got together and created a bulletin board for Mrs. Edwards. As you walk around the campus, you see many decorations and boards. You never think twice about the time that is spent creating them. You become appreciative of what teachers do. (final reflection, 12/2/11)

Sandra confessed,

I have learned that I have to keep a planner with me at all times and stay extremely organized. If I don’t, I make commitments I can’t keep, spread myself too thin, or spend my time inadequately. In all of this I have learned balance, it takes balance. (final reflection, 12/2/11)

Perhaps the most telling admission that our project was a success came from Shane, who wrote,

The idea of having a semester long project scared me at first...the one thing I really took away from it was the general idea of "teaching is a lot more than just showing up to class and grading assignments. (final reflection, 12/211)

Not all of our students were as pleased with the Hunger Games book or the coordinating projects. Although Mary Jane enjoyed the book, she mused,

I didn’t think this book was too useful for me to create a lesson just because my content is math. I did find some useful math concepts that I used to create a lesson plan, but I think this book focused more on other content areas. (final reflection, 12/2/11)

In spite of such critiques, we are still heartened by the overall outcomes in student learning.

In The Hunger Games, Katniss must draw on the resources she brings to the arena and use the tools she is given or discovers in the environment. Omitting a fight to the death, her experience is not all that dissimilar from fledgling teachers entering
an occupation that expects full and professional participation from day one, regardless of the tools available in any particular school. It is our hope that through reading The Hunger Games and requiring extensive out-of-class achievements, we are preparing our preservice teachers to meet the challenges of their chosen profession and to help develop their own students’ disciplinary literacy. When the gong sounds, they will be ready to enter the arena.

References

Literature Cited

More to Explore
CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES