JoLLE@UGA®

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Teacher Candidates, Persona Dolls, and Class Libraries

Chloe Morris

Abstract: Diverse books are needed in the classroom so that all children feel valued, but to what extent will teacher candidates include children's literature with diverse representations in their class libraries? A teacher educator uses stories with persona dolls to provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to practice culturally responsive pedagogy in their class library literature selections. After 10 weeks of listening to diverse stories and creating bibliographies that provide the persona dolls with "mirrors," teacher candidates reflected on their level of comfort and plans to include diverse representations in their future class libraries. All teacher candidate participants claimed to plan to include diverse representations related to race and ethnicity and abilities. An overwhelming majority claimed to plan including diverse representations related to religion, language, and family structure. Yet, barely half claimed to plan to include diverse representations of gender in their future class libraries. Reasons teacher candidates provided for not including diverse representations of gender include (a) that children are too young, (b) fear related to parental and administrative response, (c) feeling uneducated about gender diversity, and (d) religious beliefs.

Keywords: persona dolls, representation in literature, teacher education

Chloe Morris (they/she) is a teaching instructor in Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University where they teach Early Childhood Education courses. They are also a doctoral candidate at Texas Tech University, where they study Curriculum and Instruction: Language, Diversity, and Literacy Studies. Their research focuses on teacher preparation with an emphasis on culturally responsive teaching and the family-school relationship.

I t was election week 2020. I rocked my newborn daughter to sleep while reading a family favorite, *I Like Myself* (Beaumont, 2004), and listening to Isolde's rendition of Hillary Rodham Clinton: "Never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world" (Fair, 2017). I had first heard those words during the last election. Clinton spoke them during her concession speech, and I cried in pain and anger that I needed to hear them. I cried again as I heard them tonight, but this time I cried with a mix of desperation and hope that my daughter would never need to hear those words. As I was putting her down in her crib, I hoped my daughter would never doubt that she is valued by society the way that I have doubted my own worth.

It is my hope that all our children, all our students, feel valued in society and in their classrooms. I believe in the strength of diverse, inclusive communities, and recognize that people receive messages about their worth from infancy through their interactions with others and from various forms of media, including children's literature. In her now foundational work, Bishop (1990) stated the importance of representation in books:

> Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (para. 1)

Teachers have a unique opportunity to ensure that all students are represented. Students can be represented in the classroom through symbolic curricula, class libraries, and academic curricula. Yet, as a parent and early childhood teacher educator, I am concerned that early childhood students continue to lack ample representation of various intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and family structure in their classrooms. Teachers are powerful agents, and I

hope they think critically about the environments they create, the books they select, and the messages they send to ensure that all children, regardless of gender, feel safe and welcome in the classroom. My work is with teacher candidates, and it falls to me to get them to consider their own responsibilities to diversity and representation in their own future classrooms, so that they become culturally responsive teachers.

Within this manuscript, I provide a brief review of literature to lay out a rationale for the use of persona dolls as an activity for preparing teacher candidates to provide diverse representations in their class libraries. Next, I produce a detailed description of how I implemented persona dolls into a Literature for Young Children course with elementary teacher candidates through storytelling, the identification of diverse picture books, and reflection. Then, I identify and discuss key findings derived from teacher candidate reflections, which include: (a) most teacher candidates plan to provide diverse representations of race and ethnicity, ability, religion, family structure, and language, but not gender; (b) among other reasons, teacher candidates do not plan to provide diverse representation for gender because they fear the parental and administrative response; and (c) imagined contact through persona dolls appeared to yield a greater willingness to include diverse representations in class libraries.

Literature Review

Culturally responsive teaching is a strengths-based approach to teaching that uses students' cultures and experiences to improve academic instruction and outcomes while also creating caring, inclusive class communities (Gay, 2015). It is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive (Gay, 2002). Starker and Fitchett (2013) identified teacher candidate dispositions as a potential obstacle for preparing

teacher candidates to be culturally responsive teachers. The persona doll activity used in this study was framed by the need for teacher candidates to become culturally responsive teachers and encompasses the belief that creating intergroup connections through imagined contact will reduce dispositional concerns related to prejudice and bias demonstrated by teacher candidates. Contact theory is the theoretical framework that guided the persona doll activity used to prepare teacher candidates to select children's literature with diverse representations.

Contact Theory

Positive contact between members of different cultural groups can have significant effects on reducing prejudice and discrimination (Pettigrew, 2021). Extensive and numerous studies have been conducted to better understand contact theory. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of over 500 studies on contact theory and concluded that intergroup contact consistently reduces intergroup prejudice. In one international study, Gardner and Evans (2018) asked citizens of 15 Western European countries to respond to the statement: "In their hearts, Muslims want to impose their religious law on everyone else in this country" (para.3). In all 15 countries, a contact difference was found in the results. The individuals in the Western European countries who personally knew Muslims disagreed with the statement at a significantly higher rate than those who did not personally know a Muslim.

Since the origination of contact theory, many extensions and variations have been tested. For example, imagined contact occurs through the use of a script to facilitate a mental simulation of a social interaction with someone from a different cultural group and has demonstrated the power to decrease intergroup prejudice (Crisp & Turner, 2009). A meta-analysis of 70 studies using imagined contact found it is an effective intervention for reducing intergroup bias and may be more effective when coupled with direct contact or interventions focused on perspective-taking (Miles & Crisp, 2014).

Persona dolls used in early childhood classrooms are not dolls for a play center, but dolls that become integrated as members of the class with their own stories and unique intersection of kinds of diversity (Whitney, 2002). The persona doll will frequently join a preschool class during circle time and share stories, some stories filled with joy and other stories with a problem. With guidance from the teacher, students have the opportunity to interact with the persona doll and offer suggestions to solve the problem and to celebrate moments of joy. This provides an opportunity for young children to develop empathy and tackle issues related to bias and prejudice in a safe environment with the guidance of their classroom teacher (Whitney, 2002). Persona dolls often have life-like features and are often life-size. AmazeWorks (2015) persona dolls include authentic stories that were collaboratively written with input from members of the communities each persona doll represents.

Persona dolls have been used to provide imagined contact for children to imagine friendships, learn empathy, and decrease prejudice. One study used a persona doll intervention that created positive interactions between Jewish-Israeli kindergarteners and persona dolls representing four primary sociocultural groups in Israel (Nasie et al., 2022). The

> **"Positive contact between members of different cultural groups can have significant effects on reducing prejudice and discrimination"**

persona dolls represented an Ethiopian-descendant Jewish girl, a secular Jewish boy, a Muslim Arab girl, and a religious Jewish boy and at the end of the intervention, Jewish-Israeli kindergarteners demonstrated more positive attitudes towards Arabs and an increased willingness to sit near children of Ethiopian descent (Nasie et al., 2022). Synthesizing the research that suggests imagined contact successfully decreases bias for adults and persona dolls help children decrease bias served as my rationale for using persona dolls with adult teacher candidates as a strategy to decrease bias in the classroom. The imagined contact in the persona doll activity in this study was achieved through the use of stories connected to the persona dolls from AmazeWorks (2015) pictured in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Picture of AmazeWorks Persona Dolls

Persona dolls have effectively been used with early childhood students to develop empathy and embrace diversity and inclusion (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020) in the United States, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Overwhelmingly, the research conducted on the effectiveness of persona doll interventions has been with preschool participants. Logue et al. (2011) used persona dolls in an undergraduate social studies methods course where teacher candidates were required to learn about and advocate for their persona dolls. One such way teachers may advocate

for their students is by providing diverse representation within the class library.

Representation Matters

Over three decades have passed since Bishop (1990) introduced her three-part metaphor that within books, children need mirrors to see themselves reflected, windows through which to see others, and sliding glass doors for new experiences. Educators and school librarians have a responsibility to ensure inclusion of diverse representations of students and their families in literature (Gartley, 2015). When students do not see themselves reflected in class libraries or in books in school libraries, "they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued by the society in which they are a part" (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). No mirror, no reflection. No reflection, no representation. No representation, no child.

Children deepen their understanding of cultural norms and societal values through children's literature (Bishop, 1990). As teachers identify literature for their class libraries, they should consider for whom the stories provide mirrors and windows, and they should provide a variety of stories (Tschida et al., 2014). The books selected for school and class libraries should empower students by providing LGBTQ-inclusive, equitable literature experiences that include representation of all children and their families (Gartley, 2015). The problem is that while there is a long-standing call from the research community for increased access to literature that reflects diversity in class libraries, there continues to be a large discrepancy in authentic representation in gender, racial, and ethnic makeup of picture book characters available for children in class libraries (Crisp et al., 2016). In practice, class libraries continue to privilege heteronormative, cisgender, middle-class whites [1](Crisp et al., 2016).

---

[1] The use of a lowercase "w" at the front of the word "whites" implies white is the normative race (Mack & Palfrey, 2020) and was an intentional choice by the author to emphasize privilege.

This critical problem needs to be addressed so that teachers create class libraries that reflect diversity and are prepared to disrupt stereotypes and affirm the value of all students through literature.

Teachers must first know their readers to carefully select literature for them (Johnson et al., 2017). While diverse books are becoming more available in print, it does not follow that they are more available in class libraries. There are potential obstacles, such as financial restraints (Johnson et al., 2017), lack of teacher knowledge, negative teacher attitudes towards diversity, or newly proposed/passed legislation (Woo et al., 2023). Diverse books are needed in the classroom so that all children feel valued (Bishop, 1990), but to what extent will teacher candidates include children's literature with diverse representations in their class libraries? The intent of this study was to share the role I have embraced as a teacher educator to prepare teacher candidates in selecting high-quality picture books that provide representation for all students and the obstacles identified that are preventing teacher candidates from providing representation for all students.

> **"Diverse books are needed in the classroom so that all children feel valued."**

Method

One of the stated goals for the course, Teaching Literature to Young Children, is that teacher candidates will "explain the importance of using multicultural literature in a literature-based program" (Study Institution, 2020, para. 15). To help students achieve this goal, the course began with a discussion of Bishop's (1990) article, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." I followed the protocols set forth by Tschida et al. (2014), and teacher candidates were asked to reflect on how "race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class,

religion, geography, language, age, family structure and so on" (p. 30) have shaped who they are.

Tschida et al. (2014) approached preparing teacher candidates to select high quality, multicultural literature through two lenses. They began with a group discussion on culture and how our unique cultural characteristics impact who we are as people then created a list of books they read as children. The first lens that was utilized was Bishop's (1990) metaphor of windows and mirrors, which was applied through an analysis of the books where teacher candidates identified potential windows and mirrors. Teacher candidates then reflected on their childhood memories and identified mirrors that were missing. The second lens that was utilized was Adichie's (2009) Danger of the Single Story, in which she proposed that if only one story is repeatedly told, it becomes the only story. Tschida et al. (2014) intentionally helped teacher candidates identify their own single stories to disrupt these stereotypes. They identified that the combination of the two strategies created a less threatening learning environment, which promoted critical thinking and engagement among teacher candidates (Tschida et al., 2014).

Throughout the semester, teacher candidates were introduced to 10 persona dolls with various intersections of diversity (Table 1). The AmazeWorks (2015) persona dolls, modeled after real children, were created by members of the communities they represent to ensure authenticity and accuracy. Persona dolls are marketed for preschool teachers to use in the classroom to create inclusive, welcoming classroom environments. In a social studies early childhood education methods course, Logue and Kim (2011) employed a strategy using persona dolls—each teacher candidate was paired with a persona doll who had a different cultural background than their own.

Table 1

Video Stories and Synopses for Leela From AmazeWorks

Title/Sequence Order	Synopsis
All About Leela Video 1	Leela shares that she loves to make cards. She lives in a house with her mom, dad, and baby sister. They take annual trips to India, and she loves Sesame Street and that there is a character on the show who is Hindi like her. Leela does not eat meat.
Feeling Regretful Video 2	This video involves three of the persona dolls: Leela, Sam, and Antonio. They are all playing on the climber on the playground, and Leela falls and is hurt.
Making Friends Video 2	Going to kindergarten is a big transition for Leela who has spent most of her life around adults and has a new baby sister. She is trying to make friends with kids her age.
Sharing Video 4	Leela and Antonio both want to play at the art center, but Antonio will not share the colored pencils. They fight over the colored pencils, and the teacher suggests playing at a new center.
Diwali Video 5	Leela shares about her favorite celebrations. She loves Holi and birthdays, but Diwali is her favorite. She loves the candles and sharing treats with other families.
New Family Member Video 6	Leela feels frustrated, because her parents have to spend a lot of time helping her new baby sister and wants her parents to spend more time with her.
Feeling Mad Video 7	Leela's baby sister's crying kept her up last night, and Leela came to school feeling cranky. She wants to make her aunt a card with a stamp that her friend is using.
A Family Member Forgets Video 8	Leela's aunt comes to visit from India and does something that hurts her feelings. When Leela was born, the doctors thought she was a boy, but Leela knows she is a girl. Last time her aunt saw her, everyone thought Leela was a boy, and her aunt keeps referring to her as "he" and "him," and this hurts Leela's feelings.
Bedtime Rituals Video 9	Simon and Leela talk about similarities and differences in what they do at home before bed.

The teacher candidates were expected to share news about their persona dolls, advocate for them, and identify teaching strategies that may be helpful to use in the classroom. They hosted guest speakers who shared characteristics with the persona dolls to act as additional resources of information. Students became more aware of their personal biases and reported feeling more confident and prepared to work with a diverse student population (Logue & Kim, 2011).

I blended the ideas from Logue and Kim (2011) and AmazeWorks (2015) by using the persona dolls as case studies and tasking teacher candidates to learn about each persona doll and identify high-quality picture books that would serve as mirrors. The innovative strategy in this study combines the approaches of imagined contact, advocacy, and identifying positive representation in high-quality, multicultural children's literature.

I created and published videos to the course website to share the stories of the persona dolls to help teacher candidates create connections with the dolls, similar to connections cultivated by hearing a kindergarten student tell stories to their teacher or friend at school. By presenting the persona dolls in a way that made them like real children and real students in the classroom, it was my hope that teacher candidates would form an emotional connection that would force them to let go of any biases they might hold. With this in mind, I was intentional in the way I presented the video stories to teacher candidates. I did this with all 10 persona dolls and will share the video stories and synopses for Leela as an example. I selected to share Leela's story because she is transgender, and in the findings, I report that teacher candidates are less likely to provide diverse representations of gender. Table 1 depicts the title, order, and synopses of the video stories presented for Leela.

Video 1 introduces my friend, Leela, to my class of teacher candidates. Videos 2, 3, and 4 depict things that happen every day in their kindergarten classes and are placed near the beginning of the sequence to create a connection with Leela the same way a teacher candidate would cultivate a connection with any student in their class. Video 5 introduces teacher candidates to the kinds of diversity with which they may or may not be familiar, and Videos 6 and 7 again highlight common experiences for young children.

My goal in creating these videos was to ensure teacher candidates had the opportunity to form a connection and see Leela as a kindergarten student in their future class. Then in Video 8, teacher candidates learn that Leela is transgender. I assumed this video might receive mixed responses due to the outrage expressed by parents on several occasions in response to teachers supporting children who are transgender in the classroom (CBS News, 2017; Melville-Smith, 2015). I placed this video second to last in the series to ensure teacher candidates first had an opportunity to form a positive connection with Leela. I created one video featuring everyday life and had it follow Video 8 to remind teacher candidates that this could be any child in their class.

After introducing videos for the persona doll, teacher candidates were tasked to identify five high-quality picture books that would provide mirrors for each of the persona dolls. Teacher candidates were given the instructional prompt to guide them in writing a rationale for each book selection, "I selected (this book) for this (persona doll/student) because of (this mirror)." This step of watching videos to learn about the persona doll/student and identifying picture books with mirrors was repeated for all 10 persona dolls. Leela was the fifth of 10 persona dolls to be introduced to the class.

At the end of the semester, teacher candidates reflected on their experience with the persona dolls throughout the term and indicated their level of willingness to include diverse representations in their future class libraries accompanied with rationales. To ensure teacher candidates felt comfortable to answer questions honestly, I assured them they would be graded only on their responses to reflection prompts and not on their plan to include (or not include) mirrors in their future classrooms. The data for this study were collected during the semester and analyzed after final grades were assigned.

Participants

The participants in this study included 17 students who completed the course Teaching Literature to Young Children at a college in the Southeastern United States during the Fall 2020 semester, before the recent uptick in proposed legislation targeting discussion and instruction related to gender. This course was fully online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and documents used in this study were

Table 2
Participant Demographics

| Kind of Diversity	Teacher Candidates
Race and Ethnicity	5 Black/African American 1 White 1 Mexican 1 Half-Boliviana 9 Did not mention
Ability	1 "Challenging health issues" 1 Anxiety 15 Did not mention
Religion	12 Christian 1 Very religious (religion not specified) 2 Raised Christian, no longer affiliated 2 Did not mention
Family Structure (Childhood)	3 Divorced parents 2 Fathers passed away 1 Father in prison 1 Raised by grandmother 10 Did not mention
Language	4 Speak English only 1 Speaks English and Spanish 12 Did not mention
Gender	6 Female 1 Male 10 Did not mention

submitted electronically through D2L, an online learning platform. As part of the reflection, teacher candidates identified diverse characteristics that impacted who they were as a person and a learner. Teacher candidates self-selected several characteristics, and only the demographics with respect to the six kinds of diversity addressed in this article are presented in Table 2.

Data Collection and Analysis

As a grandchild of immigrants from Greece, a demi-girl (they/she), and a parent of children with special needs, I intimately understand the impact of (in)visible differences on classroom experiences and the positive, powerful impact made by teachers who build respectful relationships with students, listen to and partner with families, and employ culturally responsive teaching principles. As a teacher educator, I prioritize strategies that aim to reduce bias and increase both relationship-building and perspective-taking skills among teacher candidates. For this reason, the persona doll activity was initially designed for instructional purposes and embedded as assignments within the course, including an extensive personal reflection as the final project.

Figure 3
Plan for Including Gender Diverse Mirrors
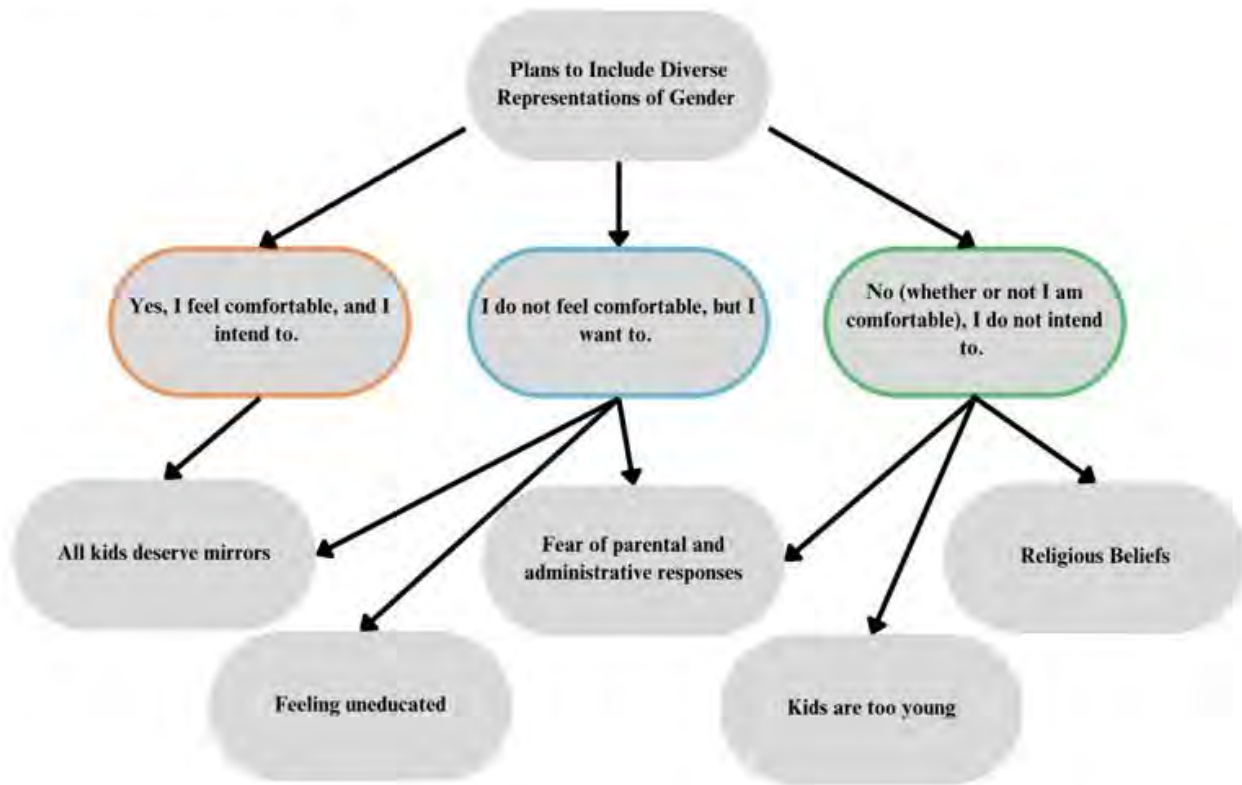
After the semester ended and grades were submitted, I read, reread, and analyzed their written responses to the following six questions that were included with other reflection questions as part of the final project to identify and analyze the extent to which they planned to include representations of diversity in their future class libraries:

1. Do you feel comfortable including mirrors for students of various races and ethnicities? Why or why not? Will you include these mirrors?

2. Do you feel comfortable including mirrors for students of various genders (transgender, cisgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, etc.)? Why or why not? Will you include these mirrors?

3. Do you feel comfortable including mirrors for students of various religious affiliations? Why or why not? Will you include these mirrors?

4. Do you feel comfortable including mirrors for students with various family structures (foster families, adoptive families, heterosexual parents, homosexual parents, grandparents, etc.)? Why or why not? Will you include these mirrors?

5. Do you feel comfortable including mirrors for students with various abilities (learning differences, physical differences, etc.)? Why or why not? Will you include these mirrors?

6. Do you feel comfortable including mirrors for students who speak other languages in the home environment? Will you include these mirrors?

I utilized a template analysis approach to thematically analyze the responses provided by teacher candidates and began with a deductive coding system. Teacher candidates were asked to identify if they felt comfortable including mirrors for a kind of diversity in their class libraries and if they intended to include these mirrors, and their answers were organized into three distinct categories forming the initial template.

1. Yes, I feel comfortable, and I intend to include these mirrors in my class library.
2. I do not feel comfortable, but I want to include these mirrors in my class library.
3. No (whether or not I feel comfortable), I do not intend to include these mirrors in my class library.

After organizing the data into the three predetermined categories, I then used inductive coding to identify themes within the open-ended rationales provided by teacher candidates explaining why they would or would not include the mirrors in their future class libraries. Overlap among themes between the predetermined template categories exists and demonstrates the complexity of the teacher candidate reflections.

Findings

The findings of this study are broken into two sections. First, I present teacher candidates plans to include the six kinds of diversity addressed during the class, which illuminates the way teacher candidates think differently about gender as a kind of diversity compared to the other five kinds of diversity included in this study. I then provide additional insight into the way teacher candidates think about gender diversity in class libraries. Figure 2 depicts the teacher candidates' intentions to include each category of mirrors in their future elementary school classrooms.

Figure 2
Intend to Include Representations of Diversity
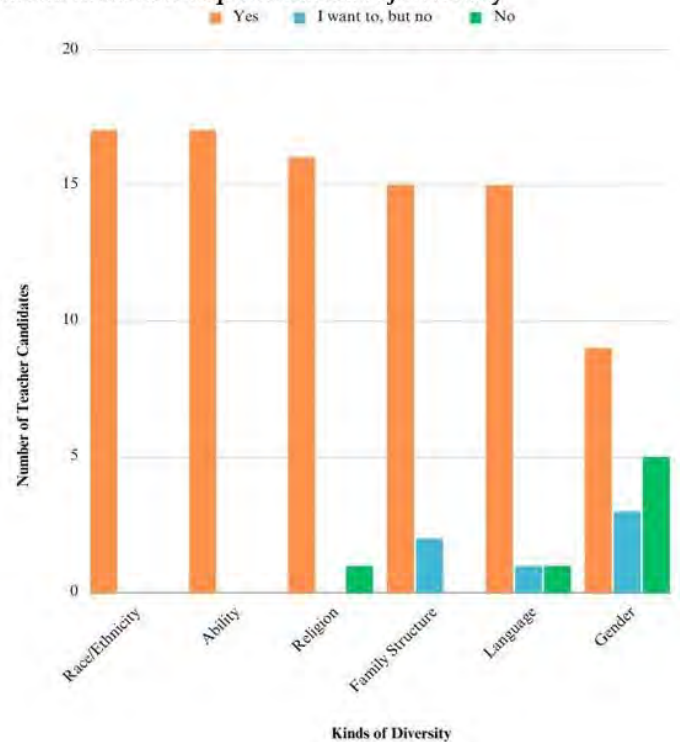
All (17/17) teacher candidates reported that they feel comfortable and intend to provide diverse representation of races and ethnicities. All teacher candidates reported that they feel comfortable and intend to provide diverse representations of abilities. Almost all (16/17) of the teacher candidates reported that they feel comfortable and intend to provide diverse representations of religion. The only teacher candidate who stated they did not feel comfortable providing diverse mirrors for religion, explained in their rationale that they were not religiously affiliated and would feel uncomfortable with any books that included mirrors for religion.

An overwhelming majority (15/17) of the teacher candidates stated they intend to provide diverse representation of family structures, and the two who stated they would not, stated they wanted to but did not feel comfortable doing so. One teacher candidate shared that she did not feel comfortable because she feared potential pushback, and the other teacher candidate stated she desired more education on

Table 3

Side-By-Side Comparisons of Teacher Candidate Rationales

Pseudonym	Rationale: Gender Diversity	Rationale: Other Kinds of Diversity
Stacey	...I plan on only teaching pre-k or kindergarten. With this being said, I do not feel that having books on the subject to benefit my students...If there are parents that express to me these mirrors need to be provided, then yes, I will provide them...	... The reason these must be included in all classrooms is because there will be children who will have special needs in our class... Plus, there are most likely going to be children with special needs who will need to see themselves in the books... Category: Ability
Kelly	This is a little hard for me to answer. I do have religious beliefs, but as an educator, I don't share my religious beliefs with my students. This is so new to society.	... I may not completely agree with homosexuality but as a teacher it is not my place to judge. Everyone needs to feel accepted and not like an outcast. Category: Family Structure
Taylor	...I think they have many more years to come to figure out if that's who they truly want to be, and in my honest opinion, they're too young to be worrying about that...	... I know how important that part of my life is, and if a student is passionate about their religion, I believe they should have the opportunity to learn as much about it as they'd like.... Category: Religion
Riley	...I would never EVER treat them differently. I would feel a tad bit uncomfortable having books in my classroom that talked about various genders. This is my opinion, but I do not believe that these things should be introduced to children at a young age...	...While we are all different in a unique way, those differences are what needs to be celebrated and honored!...I want my students to feel welcomed, included, and loved for who they are. Category: Ethnicity and Race
Alex	..it is too young of an age, period, to be introduced to this. And in my opinion, I do not think students truly know who they are yet..	..This can give students a chance to understand something different from another culture. Category: Language

various family structures before she would feel ready to include these mirrors in her class library. Likewise, all but two (15/17) teacher candidates stated they intend to provide diverse representations of language in the class library. One of the two teacher candidates expressed a desire to include diverse language mirrors but with discomfort, while the other teacher candidate did not express a desire to include diverse language mirrors.

Mirrors for Gender Diversity

My heart sank when I found that only 53% (9/17), just barely over half of the surveyed teacher candidates, would include diverse mirrors for gender. This result

is alarming, because 75% of transgender or nonbinary students reported feeling unsafe at school as a result of bias-based bullying (Kosciw et al., 2016); however, the inclusion of positive transgender and gender nonconforming representation within the curriculum correlates with a decrease in bias-based bullying related to gender expression and an increase in students feeling safe at school (Kosciw et al., 2016). There was a stark contrast in teacher candidates' intent to provide diverse mirrors for gender compared to those for other kinds of diversity.

Why is gender approached differently? Table 3 illustrates a side-by-side comparison of responses from five teacher candidates who stated they will not provide representations of diversity in gender within their class libraries, which demonstrates the inconsistency in thought on the topic of gender diversity compared to diversity in race and ethnicity, ability, religion, family structure, and language. How is it that the teacher candidates who demonstrated care when they stated, "It is not my place to judge," "Everyone needs to feel accepted," and "I want my students to feel welcomed, included, and loved for who they are" are not willing to apply these principles to one of our most vulnerable populations—children who are transgender or gender nonconforming?

The five teacher candidates who said they would not include books with gender diverse characters in their class libraries used a few keywords that demonstrate why they believe gender should be approached differently than other categories of diversity. "Too young to be making these choices already" and "figure out if that's truly who they are" are two phrases from the rationales that suggest they believe gender is a choice. Figure 4 depicts the reasons teacher candidates provided to justify their intent to exclude diverse gender mirrors in their class libraries. Two teacher candidates provided more than one reason. Two themes were predominant in the teacher candidate rationales for excluding the representation

of diverse genders in class libraries: (a) age of the children, and (b) fear of parental and administrative responses.

Even though Stacey (pseudonym) does not plan to include diverse mirrors for gender, when asked to identify books that could be mirrors for Leela, a transgender persona doll, she stated:

> I selected My Princess Boy for Leela because it provides a mirror by that she is not the only one out there that is born one way and feels another way, and their families accept and love them the way they are, too. Maybe she could read this book with her aunt who keeps calling her a little boy and upsetting her to help her aunt understand that she is a little girl.

This demonstrates that the imagined contact with the persona doll representing a student has the potential power to influence teacher candidates' decisions related to which books they will include in their future classrooms.

Figure 4
Reasons Against Including Gender Diverse Mirror
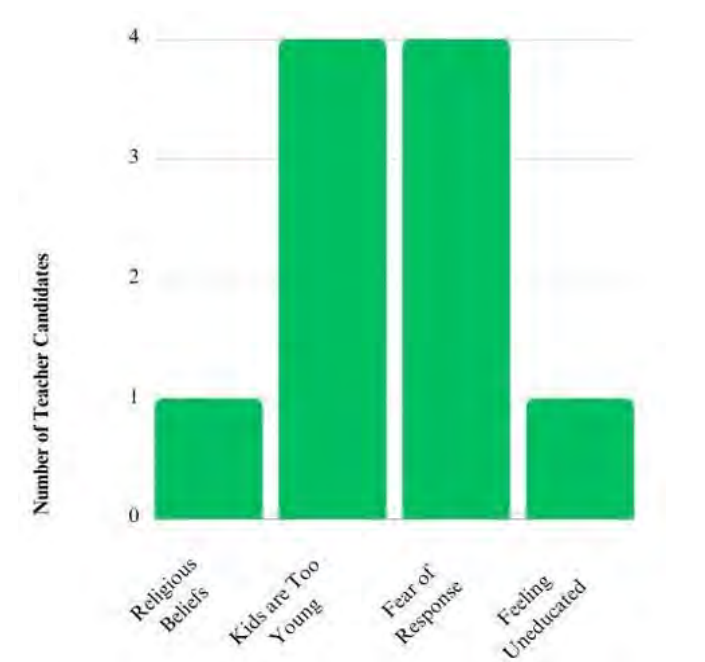
Discussion

It is important to note that Stacey selected *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis 2009) as a mirror for a transgender girl, yet *My Princess Boy* is about a boy who wears dresses not about a transgender girl. While Stacey demonstrated progress in their thinking, there was much work left to be done. Teacher candidates were required to assess the quality of the literature they selected, which included an audit to determine authenticity. The book *My Princess Boy* was written by a mother for her son and is an authentic portrayal of the experience of one boy who likes to wear dresses. I required the teacher candidates to analyze the books they selected for potential bias, but we must go a step further and analyze the potential bias in how books are selected, not just written. The teacher candidate's decision to identify this book as a mirror, suggests the possibility that the teacher candidate holds the bias that only girls wear dresses.

This is one example of how a teacher candidate could unintentionally perpetuate a stereotype within their book selection and demonstrates a need for continued discussion and reflection related to the various intersections of kinds of diversity and the uniqueness of each student. Lexi, a pseudonym for a teacher candidate who planned to include all kinds of diversity in their future class library, offered their personal connection with a teacher who misunderstood and misrepresented one of her cultural identities:

> The only mirrors that I can remember are the usual Spanish books and also the Cinco de Mayo books (which I do not celebrate). I wish there were more mirrors for me in picture books in elementary school. There were many mirrors missing, for example, things like, like my religion, I am Catholic, Mexican pastries like the famous Pan Dulce, books with characters that look like me.

As teacher educators preparing teachers to become culturally responsive and inclusive, we must emphasize the importance of learning the uniqueness of each student by building relationships, listening to and learning from our students and their families, so that their efforts result in inclusive, positive class environments and not environments that unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes and potentially isolate students.

"We must emphasize the importance of learning the uniqueness of each student by building relationships, listening to and learning from our students and their families, so that their efforts result in inclusive, positive class environments."

The results of this study reflect a small sample of 17 teacher candidates from one course, and while these results may not be reflective of the mindsets of all teacher candidates, the results indicate a potential and dangerous discrepancy of which teacher educators should be aware. While teacher candidates feel comfortable with incorporating literature that represents diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, religion, ability, language, and family structure, they are not comfortable with including books that represent diversity in gender. The results of this study raise the following questions: How can a teacher ensure a gender nonconforming student feels safe and valued if the teacher is too afraid of the potential backlash from parents and administrators should they feature books with characters who are gender nonconforming? In what ways does the newly proposed and passed legislation targeting gender identity discussion in elementary schools impact teacher candidates' plans to include representations of gender diversity in class libraries? If it were true that children are too young

Table 4
Picture Books and Synopses

Title/Author	Synopsis	Year on Rainbow Book List
BunnyBear By Andrea J. Loney	A bear who feels like a bunny inside becomes friends with a bunny who feels like a bear inside.	2018
Red: A Crayon's Story By Michael Hall	Red, a blue crayon stuck in a red crayon wrapper, feels like he can't color correctly until his friend helps him realize he is meant to color blue.	2016

to learn about genders, why are children's books flooded with gender stereotypes? If it were true that children are too young to learn about genders, would teachers present books without gender if they were more easily available? And, as a teacher educator, what do I do next?

Implications for Practice

A plethora of picture books featuring inanimate objects exists. Inanimate objects do not have genders; yet they are often gendered in picture books (Berry & Wilkins, 2017). In the New York Times bestseller, *Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site,* Sherri Duskey Rinker (2011) used masculine pronouns for every construction vehicle. When I read this book to my own children, I alternate between "he," "she," and "they" for the pronouns of the various construction vehicles. However, I suspect most teachers read the words on the page: "he," "he," and "he." Regardless of intention, educators are already teaching students about gender through the books they select.

I encourage teacher candidates who want to incorporate diverse gender mirrors, yet are too afraid of parental and administrative pushback, to consider books that provide more subtle mirrors as a first step. I recommend books like *BunnyBear* (Loney, 2017) and *Red: A Crayon's Story* (Hall, 2015). Unfortunately, there are a dearth of books that mirror gender diversity without explicitly mentioning gender. There is a need for authors and publishers to make these books more available and the need is rapidly increasing due to the surplus of inequitable legislation attacking gender discussion and instruction in the classroom being proposed across the country. Table 4 summarizes these books that may provide diverse gender mirrors without formally broaching the subject. It is my hope that teacher candidates may find these books to be a helpful stepping stone as they gain the education and confidence to incorporate additional mirrors that represent gender diversity.

Another strategy for teachers to include diverse representations in gender is providing books that omit gendered terms, which allows more people to relate to the characters. A book is different to every reader, because a reader's perspective and life experiences shape their perception of the book and what they gain from reading it (Johnson et al., 2017). Without gendered pronouns and other gendered

terms, the characters can become relatable to more readers. The *Unicorn and Yeti* series by Heather Ayris Burnell (2019-2022) includes seven books featuring the adventures of two friends, and gender is not specified for these two friends. In older copies of the text, *I Like Myself*, by Karen Beaumont (2004) the main character's gender is not identified, and the character is described as a "kid," but more recent copies reference the main character as a "girl." Books featuring characters whose gender is left undefined by the author are also rare to find.

Conclusion

Data derived from this class assignment indicate that some teacher candidates are unwilling to include diverse representations of gender within their class libraries and others who want to are afraid of parental and administrative responses. These data were collected during the fall of 2020 before the recent uptick in inequitable legislation targeting the discussion and instruction of gender in the classroom and increase of book bans. As these societal changes impact classroom practices and teacher autonomy, we may observe a shift in teacher candidates from planning to include these mirrors to wanting to include them but not feeling comfortable due to an increased fear of potential parental and administrative responses.

I will continue to use persona dolls in my classroom instruction, as data from teacher candidate declaration statements and course evaluations suggest the interaction with persona dolls had a positive impact on several students' approaches to finding children's literature. I will continue searching for ways to create emotional connections for teacher candidates to enhance positive attitudes, decrease bias, and increase teacher candidate willingness to advocate for students and provide mirrors for all.

References

Adichie, C. N. (2009). *Danger of a single story* [Video]. TED.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story_
transcript

AmazeWorks. (2015). *Everyone matters: Persona doll guide*. Quercus Press.

Beaumont, K. (2004). *I like myself*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Berry, T., & Wilkins, J. (2017). The gendered portrayal of inanimate characters in children's books. *Journal of Children's Literature, 43*(2), 4–15.

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom, 6*(3), ix–xi. https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf

Burnell, H. (2019-2022). *Unicorn and Yeti Series.* Scholastic.

CBS News. (2017, August 22). *Transgender reveal in kindergarten class leaves parents feeling "betrayed."* https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-reveal-kindergarten-class-rocklin-academy-parents-upset/

Clinton, H. (2016, November 9). *Hillary Clinton's concession speech*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/hillary-clinton-concession-speech/index.html

Crisp, R. J., & Turner, R. N. (2009). Can imagined interactions produce positive perceptions?: Reducing prejudice through simulated social contact. *American Psychologist, 64*(4), 231–240. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014718

Crisp, T., Knezek, S. M., Quinn, M., Bingham, G. E., Girardeau, K., & Starks, F. (2016). What's on our bookshelves? The diversity of children's literature in early childhood classroom libraries. *Journal of Children's Literature, 42*(2), 29–42.

Derman-Sparks, L., Edwards, J., & Goins, C. (2020). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves* (2nd ed.). National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Gardner, S. & Evans, J. (2018). *Western Europeans who know a Muslim see Muslims, Islam more favorably*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/07/24/in-western-europe-familiarity-with-muslims-is-linked-to-positive-views-of-muslims-and-islam/

Gartley, E. (2015, June). *LGBTQ curriculum inclusion: The role of the school library* [Paper presentation]. International Association of School Librarianship, Maastricht, The Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl7494

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 106–116. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003

Gay, G. (2015). The what, why, and how of culturally responsive teaching: International mandates, challenges, and opportunities. *Multicultural Education Review, 7*(3), 123–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2015.1072079

Hall, M. (2015). *Red: A crayon's story*. Greenwillow Books.

Fair, I. (2017). *To all the little girls* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/XkS2Sl1klXQ

Johnson, N. J., Koss, M. D., & Martinez, M. (2017). Through the sliding glass door: #Empowerthereader. *The Reading Teacher*, *71*(5), 569–577. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1659

Kilodavis, C. (2009). *My princess boy.* Simon & Schuster.

Kosciw, J., Greytak, E., Giga, N., Villenas, C., & Danischewski, D. (2016). *The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools.* GLSEN. https://assets2.hrc.org/welcoming-schools/documents/WS_School_Climate_for_Transgender_Students_Data.pdf

Logue, M., & Kim, S. (2011). The Persona Doll Project: Promoting diversity awareness among preservice teachers through storytelling. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, *6*(2), 60-80. https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-02-2011-B0006

Loney, A. (2017). *Bunnybear*. Albert Whitman & Company.

Mack, K., & Paulfrey, J. (2020). *Capitalizing black and white: Grammatical justice and equity*. MacArthur Foundation. https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/ capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity

Melville-Smith, A. (2015, November 29). *A 6-year-old was stopped from reading a book about being transgender*. BuzzFeed News. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/aliciamelvillesmith/school-cancels-reading-of-transgender-book

Miles, E. & Crisp, R. J. (2014). A meta-analytic test of the imagined contact hypothesis. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *17*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430213510573.

Nasie, M., Ziv, M., & Diesendruck, G. (2022). Promoting positive intergroup attitudes using persona dolls: A vicarious contact intervention program in Israeli kindergartens. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *25*(5), 1269–1294. https://doi-org.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/10.1177/13684302211005837

Pettigrew, T. (2021). Advancing intergroup contact theory: Comments on the issue's articles. *Journal of Social Issues,* *77*(1), 258-273.

Pettigrew, T. & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(5), 751–783. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751

Rinker, S. (2011). *Goodnight Goodnight Construction Site.* Scholastic.

Starker, T. V., & Fitchett, P. G. (2013). Assisting preservice teachers toward becoming culturally responsive. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, *8*(1), 27–46. https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2012-0002

Study institution. (2020). *Syllabus for EDRG 2156: Literature for young children.* Study Institution.

Tschida, C., Ryan, C., & Ticknor, A. (2014). Building on windows and mirrors: Encouraging the disruption of "single stories" through children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, *40*(1), 28–39.

Woo, A., Lee, S., Tuma, A. P., Kaufman, J. H., Lawrence, R. A, & Reed, N. (2023). Walking on eggshells: Teachers' responses to classroom limitations on race- or gender- related topics. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA100/RRA134-16/RAND_RRA134-16.pdf

Whitney, S. (2002). *Kids like us: Using persona dolls in the classroom.* Redleaf Press.