

# You Can be the Hero of Your Own Story: Preservice Teachers and Quality Books Representing Diverse Identities and Experiences

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**Abstract:** Using only monocultural books create problems of invisibility, ethnocentrism, and systemic privilege. For this study, undergraduate preservice teachers (PSTs) delved into books representing diverse identities and experiences over two subsequent semesters. Using surveys, reflections, and lesson plans, the knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives of PSTs changed as a result of the exposure and use within classroom assignments. PSTs responses indicated a stronger desire to include a broader range of books and to promote representation within the curriculum.

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## Introduction

In the United States, the demographics of school-aged children have become more diverse over the past 20 years. However, picture books in early childhood classrooms remain mainly monocultural (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020). This overrepresentation of the cultural majority (white, middle class, heteronormative) in picture books conflicts with recommendations by current research which indicates that quality picture books integrating diversity impact children in many positive ways (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2021). This needed diversity includes not only race, ethnicity, gender (including across the spectrum), and religion, but also family structure (including sexual orientation), socio-economic backgrounds, (dis)abilities, and region/location. High-quality picture books include diverse characters, accurate details, and culturally authentic stories while avoiding stereotypes or single-story representations (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Delgado, 2021). These stories need to not only focus on examples of greatness past and present, but also on everyday diversity representing diverse people in everyday situations through stories that are culturally affirming, representative, and celebratory (Davis et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2021). Additionally, using books that represent diverse experiences and identities means reading them aloud and having them available in the classroom consistently.

A plethora of research indicates that using books that represent diverse experiences and identities positively affects students, including influencing children's self-images and lessening systemic racism. When students only see themselves in one way (e.g., with negative qualities), they may internalize that view as societally expected. Likewise, when students from non-dominant

groups see only culturally dominant groups represented in picture books, they may feel invisible, unimportant, or second rate (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020). In Bishop's (1990) oft-quoted analogy of windows, mirrors, and sliding doors, she states, "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part" (p. ix). This "omission of equitable representation and affirmation" indicates clearly to students who is valued and who is not (Pratt et al., 2021, p. 49). Seeing themselves in books affirms children's worthiness, allowing them to view themselves as part of the bigger world (Davis et al., 2021).

Using monocultural books promotes systemic privilege to the culturally dominant group, suggesting that they are more important, worthy, or the norm (Adam, 2021). Research suggests that children may recognize race as early as three months and that preschool children exhibit racial bias, making the need to show quality books representing diverse identities and experiences even more important in early childhood (Adams & Kaczmarczyk, 2021; Caple & Tian, 2021). Although written over 30 years ago, Bishop's (1990) statement that "books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves" remains true today as does her warning that if groups of children only see themselves in books, "they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world – a dangerous ethnocentrism" (p. x).

While the number of books representing diverse identities and experiences has increased dramatically, the use of books representing diverse identities and experiences in classrooms remains low

(Adams, 2021; Garard, 2021). This may be because books representing diverse identities and experiences are still less available, because university preparation programs do not focus on recognizing quality books representing diverse identities and experiences, and/or because so many teachers' unconscious biases obstruct their recognition of the systemic racism, sexism, ableism, etc. that is promoted in their classrooms (Adam, 2021; Adams & Kaczmarczyk, 2021; Garard, 2021; Hall, 2021).

Using books representing diverse identities and experiences can improve learning, including in the areas of reading and social learning (Adams & Kaczmarczyk, 2021; Davis et al., 2021; Delago, 2021; Brown-Wood & Solari, 2021). As children begin reading, stories that align with children's background and experiences can increase their comprehension skills (Brown-Wood & Solari, 2021; Davis et al., 2021). Specifically, if the book shows family structure, language, housing situations, storylines, and character personalities that resonate with the student's prior knowledge, the student will connect words more easily and show greater interest in reading (Brown-Wood & Solari, 2021; Davis et al., 2021). In addition to building comprehension and vocabulary, reading also builds social understanding, developing students' abilities to empathize and sympathize with others (Adams & Kaczmarczyk, 2021, par. 6). However, a lack of books representing diverse identities and experiences in schools means fewer mirrors and sliding doors for children from diverse backgrounds, decreasing engagement, reading skills, and social skills.

While the research illustrates the need for quality books representing diverse identities and experiences in classrooms, many researchers also agree that not nearly enough is being done to correct the situation

(Adams, & Kaczmarczyk, 2021; Garad, 2021; Hall, 2021). The missing piece is how to get teachers to analyze and implement books representing diverse identities and experiences. To that end, we implemented a two-semester program focused on guiding early childhood education majors to choosing, analyzing, and using books representing diverse identities and experiences in their classrooms.

Our guiding question was "how do the ways in which learning the research/theory and having exposure and in-depth investigations of children's books representing diverse identities and experiences impact elementary preservice teachers' perspectives and inclusion of children's books representing diverse identities and experiences?"

## Methods

Participants were 24 elementary preservice teachers (PSTs) enrolled in two junior-level courses: English Language Arts and Reading in the Primary Years. Our early childhood PSTs included 23 students who were white and three of the 24 students were male. Further, most went to schools within a small regional area where racial and religious diversity was low. The schools in which they complete their field experiences are socioeconomically diverse and often have greater diversity (race, religion, ethnicity) than the schools they attended, but are still not very diverse racially, religiously, or socioeconomically. Additionally, many of the areas in which they complete their field experiences lean towards more conservative political viewpoints.

The PSTs initially completed pre-surveys, indicating their knowledge of, comfort with, and experience regarding books representing diverse identities and experiences on 6-point Likert Scales and through open-ended questions in which

PSTs could not choose a middle score; they had to show preference on one side or the other. Additionally, some of the questions used “1” to indicate a strong affinity for using diverse books and some used a “6”; in this way, PSTs had to read and respond to each question without merely circling the same number without thought.

Questions on the pre-survey asked PSTs about their beliefs about classic books versus newer diversity-focused books, and what types of books they would use in their PK-2 classrooms if they had full control. For example, PSTs were asked how likely they were to buy and use books for their classrooms that had diverse (e.g., children of color, female, students with disabilities, students with same sex parent or transgender sibling) protagonists, and whether having students representing those groups impacted that answer.

Following this survey, PSTs completed a unit of study focused on diversity within literature. For this unit, PSTs each chose a book they deemed to represent diversity (however they defined it) and completed a variety of assignments using their books, including a recorded read-aloud, a full lesson plan (including both state standards and diversity standards from *Learning for Justice*), two pre/post reading activities, and two short reflective paragraphs. Within class, they each presented an aspect of their books, allowing other PSTs to be exposed to additional books. At the end of the unit, PSTs took a post-survey, asking similar questions. They also responded to short answer prompts about their thoughts and experiences about the project as well as reflecting on any disconnects between what they saw in the schools and what the research says about using diverse representation/diverse books.

The following fall, the same cohort of PSTs enrolled in a social studies methods course wherein they discussed issues of

democracy, including inclusion, diversity, and equity. PSTs then completed a reading-in-social studies unit that included biographies and read-alouds. PSTs then chose a social studies-themed diversity-related book to evaluate, including how the book fit with *Learning for Justice’s* Diversity Standards (2022), and responding to how and whether they would use the book in their own classroom. The PSTs then took a final post survey.

Pre- and post-survey results were compared, focusing on changes in attitudes and perceptions. Quantitative scores from the Likert Scales were analyzed by calculating the amount of change that occurred from the very beginning to the middle to the end. Qualitative responses were coded using pre-assigned codes (e.g., what groups protagonists fell into, or which groups students wrote about) and inductive coding, allowing us to see the patterns that emerged from our students’ answers. The data from the surveys was triangulated by further coding their class assignments, allowing patterns of beliefs-in-action to emerge.

## Findings

### **Books Representing Diverse Identities and Experience Exist.**

On the pre-survey, many PSTs mentioned that they saw themselves in children’s books, especially in terms of race and gender. Common statements included, “Most books I have read or seen have somebody like me (white female with parents who are still married) within them, even if it’s not the protagonist within the story” and “I always remember reading the Junie B. Jones books when I was younger. I always loved those books because each book was based on a different setting and challenge that she was faced with. Those books definitely show how a young girl can

overcome difficulties and any obstacles thrown her way. I think those books relate to many middle school-aged girls.” These statements indicated that PSTs did not even think about other females who would not have related to the books due to many real-life obstacles. The concept that everyone felt represented in books was obvious in their answers.

Based on the above worldview, one of the first organic themes to arise was the PSTs’ surprise in being exposed to children’s books representing diverse identities and experiences. Many wrote about growing up in an overwhelmingly homogenous White/Christian school and being secluded with no discussion or exposure to anything diverse – and not thinking it was odd because it was their norm. However, once exposed to the project and the books, it was as if a whole world was opened. Comments encapsulating their responses include, “Before this project I would have just assumed that there were no diverse books. Now I can see that there are so many different options I can use in my future classroom” and “While trying to pick a book for this project, I realized just how many books there are about diversity for children. It made me start to think ‘Why have I never seen these books in the classrooms?’” Like with any educational resource, knowing about it is the first step to using it in one’s classroom.

In the post survey, participants were asked what books they saw in their field placements classrooms in terms of diversity. Using a yes or no rating, 76% of students responded they saw books with racial diversity and 52% saw diverse family structures included. Less often was the inclusion of religious diversity (32%) and varying socioeconomic statuses (22%). These responses indicate that many practicing teachers did not necessarily have

books representing diverse identities and experiences in the classrooms.

### **Change in Desired Books**

One of the questions posed in the survey was whether PSTs preferred to use classic, well-known books, such as *Winnie the Pooh* or *Dr. Seuss*, or newer, less used books; they were also asked to share their reasoning. While some students initially said they would want to use both, most relied on their own experiences as the right way of teaching. Reflecting this, approximately 45% said they would prefer classic books while the remaining students were evenly split between wanting to use both or preferring to use newer books. Students wrote: “I would prefer classic books because children may have heard about [these] books ... and anticipate reading them” and “Classics. I am in love with old nursery rhymes and classic books. I loved them as a kid and love them now! Since the books are ‘classics’, I feel that you tend to remember the themes of the stories more, rather than a newer, less used book.” In other words, their experiences as young children were positive and they liked these books so they are appropriate/beneficial/the best for current children.

The post-survey responses revealed a very different, more definite and passionate position across their responses. PSTs who solidly recommended using the classics now wrote, “I think that books about diversity are extremely important to have in your classroom or to use in lessons. Students have to see themselves in the literature they are reading. It is the only way for them to know that they can be themselves and still be successful” and “I will also make it a point to have books that show characters of different backgrounds, disabilities, family structures and experiences. I believe that the more kids are exposed to different situations than their own, the more they will be

accepting of everybody around them.” The quantitative data mirrored this shift as 60% wanted to use the newer books, 16% wanted to use both, and only 16% still wanted to mainly use classic books.

### **Books are Powerful Representation for Children**

As PSTs explored the books, were introduced to the research, and completed assignments in both courses, they recognized the power of books for children. Similar to Bishop’s (1990) analogy, PSTs understood that books are needed as mirrors, doors, and windows. One PST, echoing the need for mirrors, wrote, “A child between the ages of birth to second grade needs to see themselves in the books that they read. If you never see a hero that looks like you, will you ever think that you can be the hero of your own story?” Another PST wrote, “When children are able to see themselves in stories, I believe it makes them feel like they belong and have a spot in my classroom.” The need for books representing diverse identities and experiences as doors and windows was apparent in comments by PSTs like, “Many housing communities are arranged by socioeconomic status, unfortunately relating this also to race [leading to segregation] .... Including books of diversity into the students’ lessons within school will expose them to the different people in the world that they may encounter in their future.” One PST, whose father is gay, wrote, “I chose a book about a little girl who has two dads. Even though I don’t have two dads, I still have that aspect in my family. This within itself, taught me that I, as an adult, am not alone. If I feel as if I am not alone, I can only imagine how incorporating a diversity book in an elementary classroom would make children feel.” Overall, the PSTs came to new realizations regarding the power books representing diverse identities and

experiences could have on children’s psyches and their understanding of the world.

PSTs proposed that books could remove stereotypes and promote acceptance. One PST wrote about using *Hidden Figures* (the elementary version), “[Students] may misconstrue that women experienced fairness because they still got to do the job they wanted. They may not see or understand that barriers the women faced that made the tasks harder for them because of their race and gender.” Based on *Let the Children March*, another PST shared, “I don’t believe a lot of people knew about the children’s marches. We always think we know all about the people that helped stop unfairness, but we don’t. One misconception would be that students probably think it was all adults that participated, when really the children were involved and were a big part of it, too. Another misconception is that I don’t think a lot of students know about slavery and segregation laws until they get into middle school.”

Other PSTs recorded more general statements like, “Students may not know that other families do things differently than theirs” and “Students may believe that diversity revolves around one thing and one thing only (e.g. race); they may not understand that diversity goes far beyond the surface of a person.”

The quantitative data also revealed changes in participants’ perspectives about the need for representation. Asked about the importance of seeing oneself and seeing others in books, participants’ responses moved slightly upward from 5.82 and 5.67, respectively, to 5.88 and 5.80. Asked whether they would buy books representing diverse identities and experiences (specifically racial diversity, female protagonists, same sex parent/trans child, and disability) if they had complete control, participants’ responses were generally

positive from the beginning, but had mixed results on the post-survey. For example, buying books with a racial-minority protagonist moved from 1.27 to 1.19 on a scale where “1” represented “definitely yes” and “4” was “definitely not”. However, buying books about same sex parents or trans siblings moved from a 1.63 to a 1.8 and buying books about people with disabilities moved from 1.18 to 1.27; both of these scores indicate a slightly less willingness to buy books for one’s classroom about these subjects. Buying books with female protagonists remained steady at 1.2.

### **Discomfort of Diversity**

Schools are microcosms of society and, as such, some of the PSTs had notions of diversity that did not correlate with our desired outcomes. For example, instead of wanting to incorporate books representing diverse identities and experiences as often and in the same way as non-diverse books, thereby normalizing all people’s experiences, PSTs narrowed when they would use them. One PST said, “After this project, I can confidently say, I would use multiple diversity books in my classroom at least a few times each school year. I also think these books are great for students who feel left out due to skin color, ethnicity, family makeup, etc.,” indicating that the main purpose was to make students feel included but not for non-othered students. Other PSTs showed their personal prejudices. After reading *Down Home with Daddy*, one stated, “I never realized the celebrations, the traditions, and the work that they put in every year and that they value them so much. I know that they (Blacks) are just as hard working, and they do most of the same things as everyone else does.”

Although using a diverse book, some PSTs were reluctant to focus on diversity,

especially difficult conversations about race, religion, or gender. For instance, in one project, applying Bloom’s Taxonomy to their chosen book, most PSTs did not directly discuss issues of diversity. Instead, they discussed what happened to the characters or actions within the book, but not the fact that the characters were impacted by their diversity. For the book *If I Ran for President*, the PST posed questions like, “What kind of person is a president? What things would happen in real life?”, ignoring the fact that the protagonist is a Black girl and her rival for class president is a White boy. Using *Henry’s Freedom Box*, another PST asked, “Tell me in your own words what it means to be a slave. How would you escape slavery?” The first question is appropriate, but the last question assumes that escape was just a matter of choice. Two PSTs believed that using books representing diverse identities and experiences were mainly appropriate for Black History Month. Of these two, one wanted students to “draw what the Underground Railroad would look like for them...and write/describe what freedom means to them” and the other wanted to use *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* for students to write “Which women inspired you the most? What do leaders do to make the world a better place? What traits of a leader do you have already? What are you inspired to do?” Both students ignored the racism, discrimination, and obstacles portrayed in both books.

### **Changes in Understanding**

One of the most powerful themes, shown in the surveys and short-answer responses, was the immense change in understanding about why books representing diverse identities and experiences were needed. PSTs wrote, “I did not realize how uneducated I was on the subject,” and “This lesson has single-handedly opened my mind up to how I can

incorporate diversity into my classroom’s environment.” Another student wrote, “I now know that fantastic literature having to do with diversity exists that works on the same points of story elements better or as good as other books so the only question I have is why should I not use diversity/culturally inclusive books in my classroom?” One PST, reflecting on the negative biases and stereotypes picked up from their homogenous hometown, commented that, “I am responsible for the construction and sometimes reconstruction of their thinking on all things. I am a vessel of information.... I need to be an informed one of culture, discrimination, adversity, but most importantly of how information is moved from generation to generation.” On a scale of one to six (with six being “extremely knowledgeable”), students on the pre-survey averaged a 3.45 with no one marking six. On the post-survey, students felt more knowledgeable, with the average moving up to a 4.35 with only one respondent responding with a two; the rest of the responses were three to six. PSTs also indicated a lessened reluctance to discuss diversity in classrooms: “I was a little hesitant with how to go about teaching diversity without exposing too much or a student’s parents getting mad. However, I’ve realized that building that diversity foundation at a young age is imperative to a young student’s mind developing” and “I learned that it is okay to talk about these things.” This does not mean that they did not recognize the political implications or the backlash they could face, as a few mentioned a fear of offending or getting into trouble; however, an evident consensus on the need for diverse books in the classrooms existed.

### **Conclusion**

Comparable to elementary students, many of our preservice teachers were unaware of the expanse of books available to them despite exposure to some books representing diverse identities and experiences in a children’s literature class the year before. Their experiences both as school children and within many of their field experiences had mainly exposed them to picture and chapter books that depicted characters who were white, Christian, and lived in nuclear families with heterosexual, married parents. Without this project, the trend of only having these books in one’s classroom may have continued in our PSTs’ classrooms due to a lack of awareness of the books coupled with the ignorance about the power of representation within schools.

While the concern about school boards and pushback was mentioned, most PSTs indicated a strong commitment to using books representing diverse identities and experiences. However, their focus on diversity was often just to discuss differences without mention of systems (e.g. racism, sexism) or even using terms (like race or gender) that would allow for more in-depth understandings. Likewise, many PSTs’ definition of diverse when choosing books was shown to be relatively narrow, focusing mainly on race. Their questions to ask students about books often focused on character actions, not issues of diversity; this included not discussing pressing issues of enslavement or racism, but rather asking general “What would you have done?” questions. Nonetheless, the PSTs’ desire to read books representing diverse identities and experiences to the class during morning circle or to have in their classroom library for the purpose of representation is a significant step towards making their classrooms more inclusive and equitable. The methods employed in our study could easily be used in other education programs to promote greater understanding, use, and



implementation of quality books representing diverse identities and experiences by early childhood educators. We would like to continue our research, amending the assignments to additionally focus on helping PSTs be more comfortable discussing the underlying issues within the books they choose, helping them to show every child that they can be the hero of their own story.

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