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## Books That Tell My Story: Transforming the Attitudes of Australian Preservice Teachers Towards Children's Diverse and Multicultural Literature.

Kym M. Simoncini  
*Queensland University of Technology*

Hilary Smith  
*Australian National University*

Lara Cain-Gray  
*Library For All*

Darlene Sebalj  
*University of Canberra*

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## **Books That Tell My Story: Transforming the Attitudes of Australian Preservice Teachers Towards Children's Diverse and Multicultural Literature**

Kym Simoncini

Queensland University of Technology

Hilary A Smith

Australian National University, Massey

University and Systemetrics Research, New Zealand

Lara Cain-Gray

Library For All

Darlene Sebalj

University of Canberra

*Abstract: Children's literature is ubiquitous in Australian classrooms with picture books playing a particularly important role in early childhood classrooms. Teachers use children's literature to teach early literacy concepts including vocabulary and to help children learn about the world and their identity. Historically, the majority of children's literature has featured White characters and perspectives, excluding many children from seeing themselves and their lives reflected in books. The aim of this study was to explore how an assessment task that asked preservice teachers (PSTs) to select an underrepresented aspect of children's literature, locate books on that topic, and reflect upon their own reading experiences as a child, could change their attitudes towards future classroom practice. Reflections from 40 PSTs revealed that many PSTs had not previously considered the experiences of children whose lives were not mirrored in books, the need for authentic texts written by people who identified as members of diverse groups, or the importance of diversity in children's literature. Recommendations for teacher education programs in increasingly multicultural Australia are discussed.*

### **Introduction**

Reading children's literature aloud to children is a core activity for early childhood and primary school teachers. It introduces children to new concepts, ideas, perspectives and vocabulary. Teachers read to children for many different purposes including enjoyment, wonder and instruction; their choices can include or exclude children. Bishop argued more than 30 years ago that "when children cannot find themselves reflected in 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" (1990, p. ix). Being excluded from teachers' book choices is unlikely to bring about children who can read, who do read and who love to read (Dwyer, 2015). All children need books that are both mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990), that is books where they see their own lives and experiences mirrored and books where they see other's lives and experiences. Therefore, it is vital that

teachers choose and read books that represent the diversity found in their classrooms and in society. In this paper we use diversity to encompass gender, race, ethnicity in addition to dis/ability, religion, family structures, socio-economic status and class and sexual identity as espoused by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). This paper explores how an assessment task in an Australian final year initial teacher education course promotes understanding among preservice teachers (PSTs) of the importance of diversity in children's literature in order to transform their future practice.

### **The Australian Context**

The demographic profile of primary school teachers in Australia is mostly female, White middle-class and English monolingual (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). In contrast, the student population these teachers teach is increasingly diverse. The 2016 census shows that Australia is a culturally diverse nation with nearly half (49%) of Australians having been born overseas or having one or both of their parents who were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The census also revealed there were more than 300 languages spoken in Australian homes with more than 20% of Australians speaking another language than English at home. Results from the latest Teaching and Learning International Survey found that schools and classrooms in Australia are more diverse than the average across the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (Vukovic, 2019).

### **Diversity in Children's Literature**

Across the English-speaking world, children's publishing has long been described as the "All white world of books" (Larrick, 1965). Examining 5,206 children's books published in the US between 1962 and 1965, Larrick found less than seven percent included African American characters or illustrations. Bishop's seminal research found that while there was increasing representation of African American characters in US books, their portrayals were often negative and/or stereotypical (Bishop, 1992). More recently Koss (2015) found White was still privileged in the creation and publication of books with more than two thirds of books published in 2012 having White characters. Koss additionally examined gender and disability and found that female main characters were still underrepresented, that female characters continued to be portrayed in traditional gender roles, and that children's books mostly depicted able-bodied characters. Crisp and colleagues (2016) similarly reported disparities in books about religion, socio-economic status and class, developmental differences and sexual identity.

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's latest diversity statistics the proportion of children's books by or about people in their categories of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour accounted for 30% of all US children's books published in 2020, up from only 13% in 2002 when they first started collecting data (2022). Infographics produced by David Huyck (Dahlen & Huyck, 2019) based on the CCBC statistics in 2015 and 2018 show that the largest changes were for non-human characters and White characters. Percentages of White characters fell from 73.3% to 50%, while non-human characters grew from 12.5% to 27%. In the Australian context, Adam et al (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020) make the point that the inclusion of non-human characters is sometimes assumed to neutralise issues of monoculturalism, whereas in fact non-human

characters continue to espouse culturally-loaded or gender normative perspectives, for example through their clothing or family relationships.

Children's literature in Australia has historically been dominated by Anglo-European characters and perspectives. Built on a foundation of colonial storytelling, Australia's Indigenous stories did not feature prominently in children's publishing until the 1970s and, even then, books often depicted Dreamtime stories appropriated by non-Indigenous writers (Pierce, 2009). Beyond the 1970s, a well-documented quest to define the Australian identity led to a simultaneous rise in nationalist and internationalist tendencies in children's publishing; for example stories about Australian animals, and children's stories from beyond the Commonwealth, particularly the United States (Kiernan, 1997). Whilst examples of diverse characters exist throughout the history of Australian children's literature, it took until the 2000s for these characters to be centred in narratives, and for diverse authors and illustrators to begin appearing in mainstream and traditionally published picture books (Reeder, 2019). There was a gradual increase in representation of marginalised voices, including those of First Nations and migrant communities, from the 1980s onwards. Yet research in 2020 revealed only 4% of picture books published in Australia were written or illustrated by people from these communities (Booth et al., 2021).

### Children's Literature in Classrooms

In the US, Crisp and colleagues (2016) investigated books in 21 preschool classrooms (ages 3 – 5), to find that only 5.7% percent of books depicted at least one leading character from a non-dominant cultural group; they argue that the world of books beyond being overwhelmingly White is primarily upper-middle-class, heterosexual, non-disabled, English-speaking, and male. Australian studies have found similar trends, with one study examining the book collections in five long daycare centres finding only 3% contained racial diversity (Adam et al., 2017). A more recent study that investigated the book composition and shared book reading choices from four kindergarten classrooms in long daycare centres found the majority of the total books (82%) and books shared during "read alouds" (80%) did not show cultural diversity (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020). Books that did contain cultural diversity "reflected stereotypical, superficial or out-dated views of minority cultures presented from a dominant culture viewpoint" (pp. 13–14). Another Australian study investigating 82 Australian PSTs' book preferences found that they preferred older books published during their own childhood or earlier and that representation of people of colour was limited to only eight of the 177 titles listed (Adam et al., 2021).

### Importance of Diversity in Children's Literature

Children must be able to see themselves in children's literature to ensure they develop a strong sense of identity and belonging in the society in which they live (Adam & Harper, 2016; Booth et al., 2021; Feger, 2006). In 2018 the International Literacy Association launched the Children's Rights to Read. The fourth right states "Children have the right to read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world" (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 10), reflecting Bishop's (1990) idea of "mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors". She asserted that books are *mirrors* when we see our own lives and experiences. In contrast, books can be *windows* into other worlds. And when we use our imagination and enter those worlds the books become *sliding doors*. Children need a mixture of books that are windows

and mirrors to realise their place in the world and to better understand others. Koss later argued (2015, p. 38) that: “(a) truly multicultural curriculum reflects the range of diversity found in society, including ethnicity, gender, and disability. Exploring and exposing children to a range of diverse populations will increase awareness and understanding of our pluralistic society”.

Unfortunately, children’s literature has a long history of including slurs, stereotypes and assumptions (Rodriguez & Kim, 2018). Often multicultural texts used in classrooms perpetuate “tourist-multiculturalism” where other cultures are treated as quaint or exotic, cultural activities are trivialised through focusing on holidays or special days rather than daily life and images, and activities depict traditional, past practices of a cultural group rather than fostering “children’s understanding and empathy for our common humanity” (Derman-Sparks, 1993, p. 113).

Teachers have great potential for influence through the books they choose to share and discuss with children in their class. Nearly 50 years ago Shavelson (1973) argued that the most basic teaching skill is decision-making. Teachers’ book choices for read-alouds have great impact on children’s attitudes towards reading, their feelings of belonging in addition to their empathy towards, and understanding of, others. Sharing books with children can be a powerful and effective method in exploring “difficult” topics (Wiseman et al., 2019). Bacon and Lalvani (2019) point out that when adults fail to observe or have a conversation about topics surrounding race, gender, and disabilities they are teaching children that these differences are less desirable. The way books are shared may expand or limit children’s learning opportunities (Lennox, 2013). Research has shown the importance of children responding to the text during the read-aloud to make sense of what they are reading and the world around them (Barrentine, 1996; Hoffman, 2011; Wiseman, 2011). Teachers can share books that celebrate diversity, but to do this they must first recognise the importance and place of books that celebrate diversity and be skilled in selecting appropriate books.

### **Teacher Education and Children’s Literature**

Based on their review of cultural authenticity in children’s literature and discussions with researchers at the 2003 National Reading Conference, Short and Fox (2004, p. 383) recommended that future research should examine PSTs’ responses to cultural theory and multicultural issues and literature, and to identify knowledge and engagements that influence transformations in how preservice teachers think about culturally authentic literature and its use with children. Since then, numerous teacher educators have asked their students to engage with books showing diversity as part of their teacher preparation. Casto (2020) identified three main ways multicultural literature was embedded in teacher education programs to target racism and xenophobia: “reading and responding to multicultural children’s and young adult’s literature”, “including multicultural literature in clinical assignments and service learning projects” and “writing multicultural texts”. Other studies have used children’s literature to interrogate disability (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019; Pennell et al., 2018) and socio-economic status (Quast & Bazemore-Bertrand, 2019).

### **The Current Study**

The impetus for this paper came from the first author’s experience working in Papua New Guinea where children have limited access to children’s books and when they do, the books are often donated books from international publishers and charity groups (Hopkins et al., 2005). The books typically contain stories of white children or animals engaging in

culturally irrelevant activities. While writing journal articles about the creation of two dual-language, culturally relevant books, the first author came across Bishop's (1990) mirrors and windows analogy and was confronted by the quote in the introduction realising that all of the children she had seen in PNG had never seen themselves in books. Working together with Library For All in a large consortium project to improve children's access to elementary education further cemented the need for culturally relevant books for all children. When the opportunity arose to teach a final year literacy unit, the first author was determined to help preservice teachers ensure all students in their classroom have access to books that are both mirrors and windows and realise the importance of diversity in children's literature. This study was inspired by Ness' (2019) publication *Looking for "A kid like me": Teacher candidates search for selves in Children's Literature*. In her study preservice and early inservice teachers identified an element of their personal lives that is underrepresented in children's literature, searched for texts related to that topic and reflected on ways their personal story is reflected in children's literature, what elements of their story is missing from children's literature and what stories/voices need to be added to children's literature.

Due to the heavy content load within the unit, only one week of teaching focused on children's literature. Preservice teachers were tasked with reading Bishop's (1990) *Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors* article, a preprint of Adams, Hays and Urquhart (2021) article *The Exclusive White World of Preservice Teachers' Book Selection for the Classroom: Influences and Implications for Practice* and Crisp and colleagues (2016) *What's on our bookshelves? The diversity of children's literature in early childhood classroom libraries* and watching Adichie's (2009) TED Talk *The danger of a single story* as preparation. In the lecture and tutorial preservice teachers learned about research related to culturally relevant books in general and Bishops' (1990) mirrors and windows analogy and her (1992) categories of culturally specific, generic and neutral books specifically.

To our knowledge this is the first Australian study to explore PSTs engagement with diverse and multicultural children's literature. Our study aimed to explore whether a similar assessment task could encourage Australian PSTs to include more culturally diverse books in their future teaching practice.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The research was conducted at a metropolitan Australian university. The cohort who completed this assessment task comprised 75 PSTs enrolled in an Initial Teacher Education Primary or Early Childhood and Primary degree and undertaking a fourth/final year literacy unit in 2021 taught by the first author. A total of 40 PSTs participated in the study (53% of the cohort) by giving consent for their reflective assignments to be analysed by the authors (University's Human Research Ethics Committee approval 6931). Thirty-five participants were female, five were male.

### **Procedure**

During tutorials, the researcher told the PSTs about the study. An online consent form was created and the link was sent through announcements on the online Learning Management System after the assignment had been graded and released back to the students. One of the three assessment tasks in the subject asked students to consider diversity in children's books by choosing an aspect of children's lives that is typically under-represented.

They were asked to create an annotated list of books that focus on that topic and to describe how they found the books. Additionally, they were required to submit a 1200-word reflection that answered the following questions using a “describe, analyse and transform framework” adapted from Hegarty (2011):

- (1) How is your chosen aspect of children's lives reflected and missing in children's literature? How does this compare to your own experience as a child reading books? (*describe*)
- (2) What did you learn from this experience? What did you learn from the unit and readings on this topic? Why was this assignment set? (*analyse*)
- (3) How will you use that learning in your future practice? What needs to change in children's literature and the books we share with children? (*transform*)

The assignments comprised: (1) A description of their exhaustive search for books on the topic focus; (2) a list of books with author, illustrator, publisher, year of publication and story blurb and a copy of their poster and any other advertising material; and (3) the reflection. The focus of this paper is the reflections, which were downloaded, collated and shared among the authors after the semester ended. Preservice teachers were given a list of suggested online websites where they could begin searching for books. The PSTs were able to select any diversity topic of their choice.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken applying Creswell's (2009) six generic strategies: (1) organise data for analysis; (2) read through data; (3) begin coding; (4) generate categories and/or themes based on coding; (5) decide how themes will be presented; and (6) interpret the data. The data were organised, read and coded by the fourth author in order to generate categories, and then jointly coded by both authors. A useful framework for analysing the responses of the students came from classical attitude theory, based on Plato's tripartite structure of the soul divided into 'reason, energy, and animal instincts' (Popper, 1945, p. 68). This has developed into the 'ABC model' of attitudes divided into three dimensions: affective (feelings and emotions), behavioural (actions), and cognitive (knowledge and beliefs). These dimensions were formalised and validated in mid-twentieth century experimental psychology (Breckler, 1984), and have continued in twenty-first century theoretical and experimental research (Haddock & Maio, 2019).

The use of this model to frame the discussion of PSTs' reflections on diverse and multicultural children's literature enables wide-ranging consideration of their attitudes. It allows for a comparison of findings with previous research of pre-service teachers and multicultural literature reported using terms such as *attitudes* (Iwai, 2013), *perceptions* (Ness, 2019), *awareness* (Casto, 2020; Haghanikar & Hooper, 2021), *knowledge* (Johnston et al., 2007) or *preferences* (Adam et al., 2021). The framework is particularly useful in that it goes beyond the students' internal thought processes (the affective and cognitive dimensions), to include their intended classroom practices (the behavioural dimension).

### Results

The following section presents analyses of PST reflections using the ABC model. Codes are used when presenting excerpts from participant reflections, e.g. P-05 is fifth participant. Findings related to PSTs' books choices are discussed first, followed by affective and cognitive attitude findings and finally behavioural findings.

### Book Choices

Preservice teachers had free choice in their book topic selection. The book topics of PSTs in this study were categorised under five broad themes: cultural diversity, disability and illness, family or caregiver type, refugeeism and immigration, and gender diversity. Cultural diversity was the most popular theme with 18 PSTs choosing a topic under this theme, followed by family and caregiver type (n=8), disability/illness (n=6), refugeeism and illness (n=5) and gender diversity (n=3). Within each theme there were multiple topics: Islamic culture, Pacific Islander culture, biracial identity, children with mental illness, children with autism, same sex families, single father families, kinship care, Sudanese refugee children, family immigration, transgender and non-binary identity.

One quarter of the PSTs (n=10) in the study chose books that were mirrors of some aspect of their life. Seven selected books that reflected their culture, while the other three selected books on divorce, single father parenting and immigration.

According to the reflections the other 30 PST students selected books that interested them rather than having a personal link.

### Affective Attitudes – Feelings About Early Literature Experiences

More than half the PSTs (n=21) wrote about seeing themselves and their lives reflected in the books they read as a child:

*As a child born and raised as a white female in Australia, I always had opportunities to see myself in children's literature. I cannot relate to the feeling of being devalued in society because I always found mirrors in books. (P-24)*

*During my time in school; while I was reading, surrounding myself and engaging with literature, I never thought about the diversity in its content. What was there to think about? I found it easy to connect with what I was reading and place myself into the 'Hero' role of the main protagonist of the story I was so enveloped in. How could I not? That 'Hero' was me, a young, English speaking, western male. (P-31)*

Many of the PSTs commented on how they had never considered that their experience was not every child's experience:

*I have not experienced the frustration of feeling underrepresented. Nor has the lack of representation negatively impacted my self-image. This privilege made me ignorant to the under representation of my peers. I was blissfully unaware of the blatant exclusion of many of the students in childhood classroom as we read another book with a white protagonist. (P-07)*

However, other PSTs (n=14) had only experienced books as windows and had not seen themselves or their lives mirrored in books:

*As a biracial child, Aboriginal and Caucasian, I was never represented in literature and could never find perspectives matching my own. I felt isolated, but this was not obvious socially, and I was confused about my identity and place in the world. (P-22)*

*Growing up in an Australian context while identifying with a different culture has allowed me to gain insights to the effects of books missing in children's classrooms. Not being able to see myself through characters in children's books impacted my feelings of belonging and the idea of 'normal' growing up. This often impacted my ability to make friends and my interest level in reading. (P-33)*



*My family immigrated from Thailand in 1986 and at the time, there were not many children like me in my primary schools. As a 'half caste', as I would be called, I was neither white nor Asian. The books I read were Enid Blyton, Rohl Dahl and The Babysitters Club Series (which there was at least a Japanese American character), which left me mostly wishing that I was a white girl instead of caramel and that my life would be easier if I could just fit in... I cannot help but think if my peers in my schooling days had more empathy to my particular situation, I would have not been as bullied and ridiculed for mine and my siblings' differences in appearance, lifestyle and food choices. (P- 35)*

Interestingly, one PST recounted how she had grown up in Sri Lanka and had seen her life mirrored in books there, but then reflected on her nephew's experience who came to Australia when he was three and was initially unable to see his life in books:

*All his imagination talks, play and artworks represented white Australian culture and characters. But when his favourite picture books arrived from Sri Lanka, it unlocked a new door to his life as he could mirror himself and parents' culture. His understanding is evident in his expressions such as, "Mum, this family looks like us, this is our story." (P-28)*

#### **Cognitive Attitudes – Knowledge of Authenticity of Books**

Just over half of the PSTs (n=21) made mention of whether the books they located were culturally specific, neutral or generic according to Bishop's (1992) categorisations, even when their book topic was not related to cultural diversity. They wrote about whether the books were written by people who identify as members of the group that is being written about (culturally specific) or if diverse representation in the books was incidental (culturally generic) or whether the books were fundamentally about something else and just happened to include a character with some element of diversity (culturally neutral). Of the 21 PSTs who categorised the books they found, only eight reported finding culturally specific books.

*The most powerful texts that I want to include in my future practice are 'Culturally Specific Books'. They are literature written by members of the featured culture and topics that are lived experiences from the author. They are highly valuable. (P-05)*

The other 16 PSTs were critical of the books they found being culturally generic or neutral:

*(Topic: Single Parent Families) I was able to locate quite a number of books, most of which however were culturally generic, meaning that they only contained single parent families as a subtopic and did not clearly define single parent families culturally. (P-10)*

*(Topic: Samoan culture) ...aside from skin colour and hair texture in the illustrations of the books I found, there was nothing else to signify the characters were any different from the dominant cultural group, defining them as 'culturally neutral' texts (P-13)*

#### **Behavioural Attitudes - Transformations and Commitment to Future Practice**

While the assignment required PSTs to consider implications for their future practice, all PSTs noted that they would endeavour to include more diverse books in their future teaching:

*In the future, ensuring that the young minds I teach can see themselves, their lives and experiences in the literature I share with them will be a priority. Not only to support people of diverse cultures, but to support others to understand these cultures and celebrate the multi-culturalism of our society. (P-30)*

*Moving forward, I will make conscious decisions to ensure that my teaching practice includes inclusive literature to address diversity within the classroom. Doing this will allow students to see a much broader range of ideas and viewpoints. I will also encourage students to think critically about the literature they encounter by questioning them about some of the differences they noticed within stories and how they compare to their own lives to raise awareness of society's cultural differences... I will encourage students to bring in any books they feel represent them and their diverse home lives. (P-12)*

*This research has demonstrated to me that the books I grew up reading and loving can still be in my classroom, but if all of my book choices reflect dominant cultures and outdated viewpoints, I could be inadvertently impacting the equitable educational and social outcomes of my students. (P-37)*

Several students suggested sharing diverse books as regular practice rather than just for special occasions:

*I will endeavour to include a diverse range of authors and narratives which are focused on characters from minority groups such as trans males and trans females, not just during pride month. (P-16)*

*Being an inclusive educator should be a daily practice that eventually is just a part of classroom culture, rather than something that is only spoken about at diversity events such as NAIDOC [National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee] week. (P-29)*

Finally, the reflections showed that the assignment ultimately empowered PSTs:

*I also discovered from this assignment that there are more underrepresented groups than I realised in children's literature, but fortunately, there are ways to address this trend and improve these outcomes. As a result, this grants me a sense of empowerment in knowing that an educator can support transformation of these attitudes and beliefs. (P-20)*

*Before starting this assignment, I assumed there were next to no children's picture books with transgender or non-binary characters as I had never come across any during my six years working in early childhood. In searching for and finding over 20 books on transgender and non-binary characters, I have come to realise that the books do exist, and I just need to look for them. This has encouraged me to look for more diverse literature that will better reflect all students I may have in my classes and provide windows into the different lives that people live. (P-23)*

*I as a PST, have a responsibility as I enter the workforce to transform my practice and act conscientiously in choosing picture books. To not fall into the trap of only sharing books that reinforce one societal viewpoint and dominant culture... By sharing and purchasing books that focus on under-represented personal narratives, I will be more equipped to teach the next generation to celebrate humankind's differences and similarities (P-36)*

## Discussion

The assignment clearly helped PSTs who participated in this research recognise the need for diversity in children's literature in their future classrooms. It compelled them to reflect on their own experiences with children's literature, whether the books they had read were mirrors or windows and how that had impacted them. The assignment allowed PSTs to select a topic that interested them or was of personal significance. As the majority of PSTs in the course were White, English speaking, and non-disabled, many aspects of their lives were mirrored in the "all-white world of children's books"; it is not surprising that they chose books that presented windows into other lives.

The findings from this study align with previous research done in other contexts. In one of the first studies, Colby and Lyon (2004) examined changes in 100 preservice teacher's beliefs and proposed practices based on new understandings regarding the importance of using diverse literature. The following five categories emerged from the reflections: "It opened my eyes", "finding yourself", "opening their minds", "not just African American", and "it's my responsibility". These categories coincide with our findings where some PSTs had never considered that not everyone experienced seeing themselves in the books they read as children, while others who came from non-White backgrounds could now see themselves in books. All PSTs were committed to sharing more diverse children's book in their future practice as a result of being more aware of the importance of and need for diversity in books and their position of power as the classroom teacher in selecting books. Like Colby and Lyon, we too conclude that tasks that ask preservice teachers to reflect on their learning of using diverse children's books help PSTs realise the power of literature to counter or maintain cultural stereotypes and help students become more tolerant and understanding of diversity and how important their role is in using diverse texts in their classrooms.

However, our findings diverged from a more recent study (Christ & Sharma, 2018) that explored PSTs challenges and successes with culturally relevant text selection and pedagogy where they found a small proportion (less than 20%) of students who did not value culturally relevant text pedagogy. We found no evidence of this in our PSTs reflections. The PSTs once aware of the issue wanted to change their practice. Obviously, some PSTs may have written their reflections with the aim of passing the assessment task and have no intentions of changing their practice. However as evidenced by the quotes in the results section, the PSTs appeared genuine in their new found awareness and commitment to including more diverse books in their future practice.

A pleasing finding was that some PSTs chose to analyse the books according to levels of authenticity. They spontaneously broadened Bishops' culturally generic, neutral and specific categories beyond culture to whatever topic they have chosen e.g. family type. There were no instructions to do this in the task requirements, suggesting that they had transferred the importance of this from their learning in class. It was not feasible for us to examine the books located by PSTs for their authenticity. It is possible that PSTs found books that in fact depicted limited views of diversity as was reported by Christ and Sharma (2018).

The process of selecting a topic, searching for books and reflecting on their own experiences and future practice helped PSTs realise how important their role is as a teacher in ensuring children are exposed to and enjoy books that are mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors and creating a more tolerant and empathetic society. Teachers have enormous power in their selection of books they share with children. Teachers can ensure that children's rights to read are upheld in their classrooms, including the right to "read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, open doors into our diverse world" (ILA, 2018, p. 10).

As noted previously, due to the crowded curriculum in the unit where the study was situated, children's literature was the focus of study for only one week. Despite the limited teaching time the findings of this study suggest that the assessment task was sufficient to bring about PSTs awareness of diversity in children's literature and its importance. The assessment task went a long way in ensuring that "graduate teachers leave their teacher education courses fully prepared and ready to select and implement diverse children's literature in their classroom practice" (Adam, Hays & Urquhart, 2021, p. 63).

There are a small number of changes to the assessment task and teaching that we would suggest to colleagues considering implementing this task or similar. These include orienting students towards the many excellent guidelines for selecting texts (for example Louie, 2006; Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazza & Leboeuf, 2015; Sharma & Christ, 2017) and alerting PSTs to possible challenges and constraints in book choice so they are better prepared to deal with the challenges as suggested by Watkins and Ostenson (2015). We would encourage giving PSTs freedom in choice of topic and requiring them to locate books and reflecting on both their own reading experiences as a child and learning from the task. We also recommend that assessment tasks such as this be incorporated earlier into the degree rather than in final year subjects allowing PSTs to use their learning during practicums and make connections to other course work learning (for example creative and visual arts and Humanities and Social Sciences).

### **Future Directions**

One area which could be included in background readings for future studies is material with a stronger emphasis on books from Indigenous Australia. Books from Indigenous Australia have benefits both as a way of increasing the understanding of non-Indigenous children, and also provide Indigenous children with mirrors (Collins-Gearing, 2006).

Future studies could also encourage the PSTs to focus on the language used in books. Through considering the increasing variety of linguistic approaches used in bilingual and multilingual picture books (Daly, 2021), PSTs could consider how children's literature reflects the diverse linguistic realities of multilingual children's lives, such as those from migrant or refugee backgrounds (Vehabovic, 2021) or participating in language revitalisation programs (Seals & Olsen-Reeder, 2020). It would also provide 'windows' for other children into the lives of their classmates (Kelly, 2021), and function as a starting point for exploration of languages (McGilp, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Given Australia's increasingly multicultural classrooms, it is critical that children have access to books that are both mirrors and windows. Teachers have great power to change the "all white world of children's literature" in their classrooms by selecting, sharing and valuing books from the increasingly available publications that celebrate diversity. In order to meet the ILA's Fundamental Rights of Children's Rights to Read where children have the right to read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world, teachers must be aware of the importance of diverse children's literature, the current status of children's literature, their own potential biases and how to locate and use diverse children's literature. Assignments such as the one described in this article can help change the attitudes of PSTs achieve these

aims. This is particularly important given that Australian teacher demographics do not match the student population. We encourage other literacy educators to consider utilising similar assignments to transform PSTs' attitudes to diverse and multicultural children's literature. Assessment tasks such as these should feature throughout initial teacher education courses enabling PSTs to select and use books both depicting and celebrating diversity during their professional experience placements and university learning. Ultimately teachers' book selections can bring about children's respect and understanding of others and a strong sense of identity and belonging, essential components of a pluralistic society.

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