

Diversity Content Analysis in Children's Picture Books: Preservice Teachers' Engagement through a Diverse Book Project

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Abstract

Building on insights from a previously conducted, collection-wide diversity analysis of a university's children's literature collection, this study investigated how structured instruction introduced preservice teachers to similar analytic frameworks and supported their critical examination of representation in children's picture books. The study examined how a diverse book analysis of the main and secondary characters in picture books held at a university library influenced how preservice teachers think about and view diversity in children's picture books. Through a literacy course, 27 preservice teachers were introduced to notions of diversity in children's books and learned about how to classify main and secondary characters in children's books according to a pre-determined list of diversity classifications. They also learned how to evaluate these books including the content and illustrations and how to effectively use reliable, professional resources for their teaching. They practiced analyzing picture books while using the classification system they learned, completed a diverse book project, and reflected on their learning experiences. Data collected in this study included their pre- and post-surveys, a diversity project, and a reflection paper. Results showed that toward the end of the semester, preservice teachers broadened their understanding of diversity, realized the important role of diverse books for children, and committed to incorporate high-quality diverse children's books in their teaching.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Preservice Teachers, Diverse Children's Books, Picture Books, Classroom Applications

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1. Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion have become essential elements in education as K-12 schools have been experiencing more diversity in student population (Banks, 2019; Irwin et al., 2024; Lehman, 2024). Multicultural education offers all students opportunities to learn about various ethnic, racial, and cultural values and perspectives (Gay, 2020). Ladson-Billings (2001) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy supports students to achieve their academic goals, to develop their cultural competence, which shapes their ethnic, cultural, and social identities, and to develop students' critical consciousness. The initial-level standards developed by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), an accreditation agency in teacher and educator preparation, (2022) state that the teacher education preparation programs must ensure that preservice teachers reflect on their biases and prejudices "to increase their understanding and practice of equity, diversity, and inclusion" and that the teacher education preparation programs need to strategically develop the curriculum, so the preservice teachers can "effectively work with diverse P-12 students and their families."

Despite the fact that U.S. public schools have become ever-growingly diverse culturally, ethnically, linguistically, religiously, economically, and socially (Horsford, 2011), teacher education preparation programs have not prepared future teachers to respond to this dynamic diversity growth (Im & Martin, 2015). Preservice and inservice teachers feel unprepared to teach diverse students and interact with their families (Brown et al, 2016; Grant et al., 2021; Nutta et al., 2012). Limited knowledge and skills in cultural competency challenge them to implement culturally responsive teaching practices in the classrooms (Idrus et al., 2023; Noguera, 2013). Preservice teachers with limited or lack of diversity experiences face challenges in making informed decisions in their teaching practices and dealing with complex discussions issues around diversity and social justice in the classrooms (Castro, 2010; Haghanikar, 2021; Idrus et al., 2023).

Teacher education preparation programs must continue to make an effort to provide future teachers with opportunities to learn and practice culturally responsive teaching for diverse students (Haghanikar, 2021). One effective strategy is project-based learning, which immerses preservice teachers in authentic, hands-on tasks that connect theory to practice, fostering deeper understanding of diversity in classroom contexts (Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2023; Uyen et al., 2023). An approach to support preservice teachers toward this important initiative—preparing culturally responsive and relevant teaching—is to use diverse children's literature into the curricula. Bishop (1990) states that children's literature serves as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors because it allows readers to reflect on their own identities and lived experiences, offers them insight into someone else's experiences, and engages with the world the authors created through the literature. Botelho and Rudman (2009) also describe that children's picture books offer children opportunities to broaden their understanding of diverse experiences and perspectives and to reflect on their own identities.

It is important for teacher education preparation programs to provide preservice teachers opportunities to engage in children's literature and teach how to use rich, authentic, high-quality children's literature into their future teaching (Haghanikar & Hooper, 2021). Previous literature addresses that both children and preservice teachers develop diversity awareness through engaging in high-quality children's literature (Nganga, 2020; Robinson, 2023). However, limited research on how preservice teachers analyze and classify diverse children's literature and how that experience impacts their development of diversity perceptions exists. Therefore, this study explores this important area. The purpose of this study was to examine how a diverse book analysis of the main and secondary characters in picture books held at a university library influences the way preservice teachers think about and view diversity in children's picture books. The researchers set two research questions to investigate this purpose of the study: "How did the diverse book project impact preservice teachers' understanding of diversity?" and "How did the diverse book project prepare preservice teachers to incorporate diverse books?"

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *The Cooperative Children's Book Center*

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) is a unique research library on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. The CCBC is part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education and is supported by the Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Together, they represent a valuable resource for public educators in the state, providing opportunities for professional development, resource sharing, promoting diversity in education, and curriculum support (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). The CCBC work aligns with the DPI's educational goals, particularly in promoting literacy and supporting diverse, high-quality children's literature in the classroom (Cooperative Children's Book Center, n.d., Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Since the mid 1980s, the CCBC has been known for their tracking of diversity in children's and teen literature, including characters, authors, and illustrators (Cooperative Children's Book Center, n.d.a.). In 2015 and 2018, the CCBC's website featured two comparative infographics illustrating the distribution of diversity in characters of children's and teen literature (Huyck et al., 2016; Huyck & Dahlen, 2019), as shown in Figures one and two below. The comparison showed that while White characters remained dominant overall from 2015 to 2018, animals and objects rose in percentage. Characters from historically underrepresented groups, on the contrary, stayed well below animals and objects, with little change from 2015 to 2018 (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Percentages of Books Presenting Characters from Diverse Backgrounds in 2015

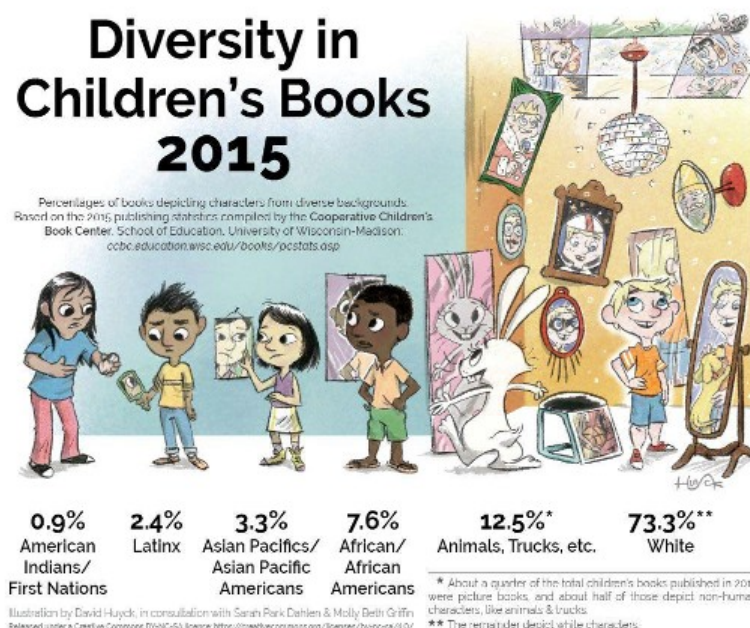
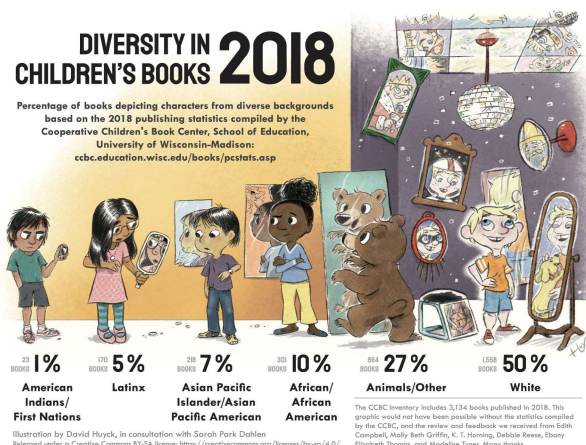


Figure 2

Percentages of Books Presenting Characters from Diverse Backgrounds in 2018



Note. Illustration by David Huyck, in consultation with Sarah Park Dahlen, 2016 [Infographic]. Released under a Creative Commons BY-SA license.

Over the years, the CCBC has expanded what is included as diversity in its tracking of diverse characters. On the CCBC website, users can use the CCBC Recommended Book searchable database to filter and find book titles from all CCBC recommendations going back to 2008. The database was designed using various diversity categories including Arab, Asian, Black/African, Brown Skin Unspecified, Indigenous, Latine, Middle East, Multicultural General, and Pacific Islanders, Cognitive/Neurological Disability/Condition, Christian, Jewish, Muslim or other religion, Gender Nonconformity, LGBTQ Character/Topic, LGBTQ Family LGBTQ Non-

Fiction. Users can also search according to contributor, including Arab, Asian, BIPOC Unspecified, Black/African, Indigenous, Latine, Middle East, Multiracial, Pacific Islander, or White, LGBTQ, Christian, Jewish, Muslim or other religion, and finally Cognitive/Neurological Disability/Condition, Physical Disability/Condition, or Psychiatric Disability/Condition (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, n.d.b.).

The CCBC continues to publish their annual findings. According to its most recent tracking, there has been promising signs of increased diversity coming from the publishing industry for children and teens (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2024). Although the CCBC is cautious with the news, this increase means that more children and teens are able to see themselves represented in the books they read.

2.2 The Alice Hagar Curriculum Center

The Alice Hagar Curriculum Center (AHCC) is a resource center dedicated to supporting future educators at the University of La Crosse, part of the University of Wisconsin (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, n.d.). The AHCC offers educational materials such as children’s and teen fiction and nonfiction books, lesson plans, teaching guides, and other educational resources to help prepare students for teaching careers in K-12 education. Managed by the Education Liaison Librarian, who served on the Advisory Council for the CCBC, it is also a teaching and learning space for preservice teachers.

2.2.1 Conducting a Diversity Analysis of Picture Books

Inspired by the CCBC diversity analysis work, a plan was designed in 2023 to conduct a similar diversity analysis of the picture books in the AHCC. This project, funded by a Faculty Research Grant, was originally developed to enhance and support the mission of the AHCC’s collection “reflect the values of cultural diversity and promote respect and appreciation for all cultures, perspectives, and the global community” (University of Wisconsin, n.d.). Although the analysis was conceived as an independent research project, its design and results directly inspired the case study for this particular article, demonstrating the importance for preservice teachers of actively engaging critically with diverse children’s literature. Before describing the case study with preservice teachers, the researchers will further explore the original AHCC diversity analysis as it served as the original incentive (Holford, in print).

The AHCC collection development practice is very different from that of the CCBC, a reminder that no two library collections are the same. The CCBC collection receives approximately 3,500-4,000 complementary review copies every year from publishers (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, n.d.a), including various formats from nonfiction to picture books and teen literature. In contrast, the AHCC collection decisions are made according to campus curriculum needs, teaching and research needs, and budget limitations. Other factors that are taken into consideration are award winning and honor books, titles from small independent publishers, and faculty requests. The design of the AHCC diversity analysis differed from the design of the CCBC work in two ways. The first was limiting the analysis to the AHCC picture book subcollection because this is the subcollection that is the most used by its users and stakeholders (Holford, in print), and where intentional curation has the biggest impact. The second difference was the choice of classification categories for inclusion.

2.3 Classification Systems

At the beginning of the AHCC project planning phase, the first step was to analyze the categories used in the CCBC searchable database, as cited in Table 1 below (CCBC, n.d.).

Table 1

Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) Diversity Subject Groups

Arab	Indigenous	Pacific Islander	Other Religion	LGBTQ Innuendo
Asian	Latine	Christian	Gender Nonconformity	LGBTQ Nonfiction
Black/African	Middle East	Jewish	LGBTQ Character/Topic	Cognitive/Neurological Disability/Condition
Brown Skin Unspecified	Multicultural General	Muslim	LGBTQ Family	Physical Disability/Condition
				Psychiatric Disability/Condition

Note: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/recommended-books/>

The second step was to consider and examine best practices for using inclusive and unbiased language (Diemer, 2013; Holford, in print). When the original analysis proposal was presented to the reviewing committee, committee members questioned a few classification choices, and how those decisions had been made. One specific question arose from a hypothetical situation they brought up where people may not feel comfortable being classified in a reductive way. Using a personal anecdote, one member suggested that someone originally from Mexico but living in Texas may not necessarily feel part of the Latinx or Latine category, one that is widely used in diversity conversations. This example points to the personal and emotional aspect of identity and belonging, which are often difficult to reconcile. For the AHCC diversity analysis, final classification decisions were made as mindfully as possible in accordance with commonly held semantic understandings in the field (Holford, in print). Because the AHCC study was designed to be as meaningful as possible to its stakeholders, meaning preservice teachers and the faculty of the School of Education, classification categories were also broken down further in anticipation of future teaching and learning activities and assignments. The general term “Latine” was broken down into Mexican, Central American/Caribbean, and South American. The general term “Asian” was broken down into Central Asian, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, n.d.). The general term “African” referred to characters living on the African continent or whose immigrant identity directly belonged to a specific African country or community. The general term “Native American” was used to keep the classification coding report manageable, however individual tribes were noted in additional tables (Holford, in print).

Other groups were also added to the classification system, meaning groups that reflected commonly asked questions from preservice teachers. These categories included LGBTQ characters, religious affiliation, elderly or aging characters, unsheltered or displaced persons, adopted characters, immigrants, incarcerated characters, military families, and characters coming from diverse socio-economic status. It should be noted that the CCBC searchable database includes gender differentiation as a filter. For the AHCC diversity analysis, only gender nonconformity was included. Characters representing as male or female were not included. Classification decisions had been made based on commonly occurring questions and teaching and learning needs of its stakeholders. Gender (male vs. female) had not yet come up in any consistent way from the collection’s users. Nevertheless, the AHCC education liaison librarian who conducted the AHCC diversity analysis would recommend including gender (male or female) in future diversity analyses to make the analysis more inclusive and thorough (Holford, in print).

2.4 Preservice Teachers' Engagement in Diversity in Children's Books

Previous literature examined preservice teachers' learning process and involvement in multicultural and/or diverse children's literature (e.g., Archey, 2022; Dedegolu et al, 2012; Haghnikar & Hooper, 2021; Katz et al., 2023; Ness, 2019; Penrose, 2023; Strickland, 2020; Sun, 2023) as well as inservice teachers' experiences and teaching diversity and social justice topics and issues through multicultural and diverse children's literature in the classrooms (e.g., DePalma, 2016; Hall, 2021; Hayden & Prince, 2024; Jacobson & Ruday, 2021; Wild, 2023). Children's literature serves as a tool to provide readers with opportunities to reflect on their identities and lived experiences as well as to understand other cultures and different perspectives (Bishop, 1990).

Engaging preservice teachers in hands-on, structured analysis of diverse picture books reflects the principles of project-based learning, in which learners actively explore real-world problems, apply disciplinary knowledge, and engage in reflective practice. Through this approach, preservice teachers not only classify and critically examine textual and visual representations of identity and culture, but also develop professional judgment, collaborative skills, and pedagogical reasoning, mirroring the types of authentic inquiry and decision-making they will encounter in classrooms (Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2023). Additionally, systematic reviews of project based learning in teacher education indicate that it contributes positively to preservice teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and learning attitudes, reinforcing its value as an active, inquiry-oriented instructional strategy. (Uyen et al., 2023).

Archey (2022) conducted a study to examine how preservice teachers analyzed children's literature including various topics, such as disabilities and slavery, for hidden messages. In this study, 97 preservice teachers in four teacher education program cohorts engaged in the literature analysis activity. They selected children's literature - some selected award-winning books (e.g., *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney, 1985), and others selected content-based literature (e.g., *Sir Cumference and the Great Knight of Angleland* by Cindy Neuschwander, 1997). They analyzed the literature with two guided questions: "How and where will students in your class find themselves in the texts you select?" and "How and where will they learn about cultures, experiences, and identities different from their own?" (Archey, 2022, p.18). With their guided and dialogical discussions to analyze various perspectives in the literature, preservice teachers in this study identified inequities, including trivializing others and imbalances of power, and developed their understandings of equity.

Ness (2019) explored the experiences of preservice teachers and novice teachers (fewer than two years of

teaching experience) in the graduate teacher education program searching for their selves and identities in children's literature. Of 57 invited preservice teachers enrolled in children's literature courses at a university in a major metropolitan area of the United States, 43 agreed to participate in the study. They engaged in two assignments. The first one was a group assignment to present various sources including websites, publishers, organizations, children's literature awards, and other useful resources related to diverse children's literature. The second assignment was to engage in reading logs for at least three children's high-quality, award books. This assignment supported them to reflect on their lives and selves and explore an element that they felt to be underrepresented (e.g., non-traditional family structure) and connect that element with children's literature. Collected data consisted of a bio poem written by the preservice teachers in the beginning of the semester, small-group discussions about their poems, their reflective journal logs, and a semi-structured interview at the end of the academic year. From the results of the study emerged three themes. First, they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on themselves through various activities in the children's literature course. Second, they developed knowledge of diverse children's literature and expanded their understanding of such literature. Third, they gained more empathy toward their students who may not find their representations in children's literature.

In the study of Haghanikar and Hooper (2021), 46 preservice teachers learned about social justice, diversity, and poverty with a focus on homelessness in a framework of cultural competence theory. In their enrolled course on children's literature covering ten diversity and social justice topics, they completed two major assignments. The first assignment required them to read one children's book on homelessness, *The Can Man* (2013) by Laura Williams, outside of class. The second assignment was to participate in a Virtual Reality (VR) application experience, *Becoming Homeness* developed by the Stanford University Virtual Human Interaction Lab. This VR experience allowed the preservice teachers to experience digital, simulated, real or computer-based scenarios about homelessness. One class discussion about homelessness followed after the VR experience. While the authors of this study did not measure the effectiveness of these assignments on preservice teachers' cultural competence or increase of their knowledge about homelessness, they described that the preservice teachers reported the value and benefits of their learning experience about homelessness. Haghanikar and Hooper (2021) call for teacher educators to include, develop, and sustain the curriculum for preservice teachers so they can learn about cultural competency, and gain knowledge and improve teaching practices related to diversity and social justice.

Marks and McCormick (2024) explored 24 preservice teachers' learning experiences about diversity in two courses in two consecutive semesters: an English Language Arts (ELA) and reading at the elementary school level course and a social studies methods course. They took the pre- and post-surveys about their knowledge and comfort levels and experiences with diverse children's books. They engaged in a unit of study focusing on diversity in children's literature. In the first ELA and reading course, they selected one children's book that represented themselves and completed a few assignments, including developing a lesson plan, conducting a read-aloud session, with that book. In the following semester, they engaged in a social studies unit. They also selected a social studies, diverse children's book and critically evaluated whether they would recommend their selected book for classroom implementation. Results of this study indicated that at the end of two courses, preservice teachers reported that they would be open to use newer, diverse books instead of using classic books. Preservice teachers planned to incorporate more diverse books, but some expressed their hesitation or discomfort to discuss challenging issues and topics with children. They also gained an understanding of the importance of using diverse books that represent various identities and experiences for children.

3. Method

3.1 Context

This study took place in a university located in the Midwestern area of the United States. The university offers teacher education programs from birth - 12 for a wide range of teacher certifications including early childhood, elementary education, middle school education, and secondary teacher education. According to the university's report in the school year this study took place, the university is a predominantly White institution with 88 percent of White students followed by four percent of Hispanic students and three percent of students with two or more races. Participants in this study took an introductory literacy course, which was required for their teacher education programs.

In a literacy course, they learned about general information about multicultural and diverse books and how books should represent diversity in various topics in class. They also engaged in two library sessions with a librarian. In the first session, they learned about a wide range of multicultural and diverse children's books, how to evaluate these books, book awards, and teaching resources. In the second session, they learned about diversity statistics in children's books and the classification system of diverse books for primary and secondary characters. They also

reviewed how the librarian analyzed picture books held in the AHCC at the university library using the same classification system.

After these library sessions, they completed two exercises. In the first exercise, they practiced classifying two picture books using the same classification system the librarian used for her picture book analysis (Holford, in print). In the second exercise, preservice teachers practiced classifying primary and secondary characters using two sample diverse books. They had opportunities to retake these two exercises until they could reach 100% accuracy.

After completing two exercises, they engaged in a diverse book project. For this project, they classified seven children's picture books that were held in the AHCC and one picture book that had been withdrawn from the curriculum center due to its old publication and on-going shelf space management. They presented their diverse book project with peers in class. They took pre- and post-surveys about diverse books in the beginning and at the end of the course. Finally, after they completed their diverse book project, they wrote a reflection paper regarding their experience of learning diverse books and a diverse book project at the end of the semester.

3.2 Participants

This study involved 27 preservice teachers at a Midwestern university in the United States. Their majors consisted of four early childhood majors, seven elementary/middle school majors, and 16 elementary/middle and special education double majors. Their academic levels varied from one freshman, 19 sophomores, six juniors, and one senior.

3.3 Instruments

This study involved three instruments: pre- and post-surveys, diversity book project, and a reflection paper.

3.3.1 Pre- and Post-Surveys

Preservice teachers took pre- and post-surveys about diversity books in the beginning and at the end of the semester. In the pre-survey, they had two tasks. First, they ranked different groups (i.e., animals, Asian, Hmong, Latine, Middle East, Indigenous people, objects, White Caucasian) according to how they thought they would compare to the picture books in the AHCC using the five-point scale (1=the most common, 5=least common). Second, they responded to an open-ended question: "Why do you think researchers are interested in spending time counting and comparing the diversity of main characters in picture books? Why do you think it would matter to school teachers, children, or another group affected by picture books?"

In the post-survey, preservice teachers had the same two questions. An additional question, "After completing the assignments for this project now (at the end of the semester), you have seen that there are many more categories that were used to classify picture book characters. Which categories surprised you? Why?"

3.3.2 A Diverse Book Project

Preservice teachers completed a diverse book project. Among their assigned seven picture books currently held in the AHCC, they selected five of them and analyzed them in depth. For each book, they included book information, such as a title, an author, an illustrator, a publication year, a publisher, classifications of a main character and of a secondary character with evidence from the books, and a summary of the book. Classifications are shown in Table 2 and Table 3 below.

Table 2

Alice Hagar Curriculum Collection (AHCC) Human Diversity Subject Groups

African	Black American	African	“Brown” Skin	Central American Caribbean	Central Asia*
East Asian*	Hawai’i & Pacific Islands*	Mexican American	Mexican-American	Multicultural Mix	Native American Indigenous
South America	Southeast Asia*	South Asia*	West Asia* (Middle East)	White	

Note. Groups with * are group definitions provided by the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-based Violence. <https://api-gbv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/API-identities-definitions-groupings-2011.pdf>

Table 3

Alice Hagar Curriculum Collection (AHCC) Additional Diversity Subject Groups

Adoption	Animals or Objects	Disability: Cognitive Intellectual Developmental	Disability: Physical	Disability: Neurological, Psychiatric
Displaced People Refugees	Domestic violence	Elders, Aging	Gender Nonconformity	Immigration
Incarceration	LGBTQ Families	LGBTQ Characters	Main Military Families	Religion: Christian
Religion: Jewish	Religion: Muslim	Religion: Other	Socio-economic Unsheltered Displaced	

Preservice teachers responded to the evaluation criteria they learned from the library session in the following areas: author and illustrator, award information, text and language, illustrations, integration of text and illustrations together. They included their response to whether they would recommend their assigned book to K-12 schools. Finally, they developed plans on how they would use their assigned book in the classroom.

3.3.3 Reflection Paper

After completing the diversity book project, they wrote a reflection paper with a few prompts. Sample prompts included "What surprised you? Is there anything that stood out to you? Please describe and why you think so?" and "How has your learning experience influenced the way you think about or view diversity in picture books going forward as a future teacher?"

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers used the content analysis approach. It is "a conceptual approach to understanding what a text is about, considering this from a particular theoretical perspective, such as sociohistorical, gender, cultural, or thematic studies" (Beach et al., 2009, p.130). In particular, qualitative content analysis involves researchers to closely read the texts, interpret and contextualize them in new narratives (Krippendorff, 2003). The researchers in this study read the data and coded them based on similar concepts. They read the data multiple times and narrowed down the codes. They compared their coding results, discussed, clarified, and modified their coding results, and reached the 100% agreement of coding.

4. Findings

The researchers will present the findings of the study in the following order: pre- and post-surveys, a diverse book project, and a reflection paper.

4.1 Pre- and Post-Surveys

Before and after learning about diverse books, diverse representations in children's picture books, how to classify primary and secondary characters, and completing a diverse book project including book analyses in children's picture books housed in the AHCC at their university library, preservice teachers took the pre- and post-surveys about their perceptions of diversity books. Two themes emerged from the survey results. First, preservice teachers realized that authors and illustrators of children's books must portray diversity in picture books so they could represent children's identities, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. One preservice teacher shared that:

I think that it is important for students to see themselves represented in books and the media to know that they are seen and beautiful the way they are and they do not need to change and be the same as everyone else.

Another preservice teacher wrote: "Because children like to affiliate themselves with characters, and more diverse characters means that they can see characters similar to them and give them confidence about themselves and their culture."

Another theme from the surveys indicated that throughout their learning experiences about diversity in picture books in a literacy course, preservice teachers realized children's picture books are an important means to learn about different cultures and people. One preservice teacher reported: "There are often many experiences talked about in books from people of minority races, people of varying abilities, and people of varying family status that we wouldn't know about, unless it was written because we ourselves don't experience that."

Another preservice teacher reflected that she realized that a lot of libraries carry books that revolve around the main character being White Caucasian and she learned this trend should change "because children need to become aware of diversity" and having it involved by including more diverse books in schools is a great start.

4.2 A Diverse Book Project

Two main themes emerged within the preservice teachers' diverse book projects. The first theme was that they appropriately classified primary and secondary characters in picture books using evidence from the books. The second theme was that when they planned how to use their assigned picture books in the classroom, they integrated various disciplines into classroom applications.

4.2.1 Classifications of Primary and Secondary Characters

In a diverse book project, preservice teachers classified their assigned picture books appropriately based on evidence from the texts and/or illustrations. For example, one preservice teacher analyzed a picture book, *Alma and how she got her name* by Juana Martinez-Neal (2018). It is a story about a young child named Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela. She had thought her name was too long and asked her father about her name. He shared stories of each of the relatives that she inherited her name from. Each story included positive traits of each relative and emphasized how Alma connected to each of them. After learning about the origin of her name, Alma became very appreciative of her name.

For this story, a preservice teacher classified Alma as "Latine-South American" because of her Spanish name and dark hair in the illustrations. She analyzed that it was not clear what exact country Alma was from, but he pointed out that the author noted at the end of the story that she was from Peru and was writing a story like her own experiences with her name. Thus, the preservice teacher inferred that Alma is from Peru. She also noted that on an illustration on the first page of the book, there is a book labeled Perú. Like this example. Preservice teachers used specific texts and illustrations to classify primary and secondary characters in their assigned

picture books.

4.2.2 Interdisciplinary Integration into Classroom Applications

In a diverse book project, preservice teachers developed plans on how to use their assigned picture books into classrooms. The most popular interdisciplinary approach they developed in their lesson plans was to connect their assigned picture books with social studies content. For example, one preservice teacher used the book, *"Bowwow powwow"* by Brenda J. Child (2018) for her lesson. The story is translated into Ojibwe by Gordon Jourdain. It is a story about Windy Girl with her dog Itchy Boy learning about her uncle's stories on Ojibwe traditions, including dancing and singing and great food at the powwows. The story ends with everyone having a great time dancing and singing at the powwow. Her lesson started with one partner reading the story with one fluent and another less fluent reader so they could work on their fluency skills together. She would invite someone from the Ojibwe culture and learn about their culture and students could learn traditional Ojibwe dances and music while they could practice drumming with their hands and a container.

Many preservice teachers also developed English Language Arts (ELA) lessons using their picture books. Examples included writing activities, such as rewriting the end of the story, putting information from the picture books into poems, and writing book reports. A preservice teacher developed a lesson for students to write a book report after they read the picture book, *Tia Fortuna's new home: A Jewish Cuban journey* by Ruth Behar (2022). It is a story about a girl named Estrella and her aunt, Tia Fortuna, as she moves from her long-time amazing apartment in Miami to an assisted living home. As Tia packs up her belongings, she shares her memories she had in her old home and becomes happy with her new home. A preservice teacher pointed out the importance of introducing Spanish words from this book and having students write a book report.

Preservice teachers planned to apply their picture books to real-life situations for students. One example is from a picture book, *Dancing with daddy* by Anitra Rowe Schulte (2021). This book is about a girl named Elsie. Elsie is nonverbal and in a wheelchair. She portrays her emotions of excitement for an upcoming father-daughter dance. For this book, a preservice teacher suggested that students benefit from experiencing various disabilities and how their experience can affect themselves or someone surrounding them. They could experience loss of hearing (with noise cancelling headphones that affect their hearing), loss of sight (with glasses that affect their sight), and physical disabilities, which allows them to reflect on their own perspectives on the world.

4.3 Reflection Paper

Toward the end of the semester, preservice teachers wrote their reflection paper about their experiences of learning and classifying diverse books. Six themes emerged through this artifact.

4.3.1 In-Depth Analyses of Diverse Books

Preservice teachers included their in-depth analyses of their assigned books. One preservice teacher analyzed a children's book, *Mama's nightingale: A story of immigration and separation* by Edwige Danticat (2015). It is a story about a Haitian immigrant family in the U.S. A girl, Saya, experiences a struggle with separation from her mother because her mother was sent to an immigration correction center. The story describes how Saya overcomes challenges. A preservice teacher wrote: This book "portrays the emotions behind what's going on in the family...and how they work together as a family. It also expresses the importance of using their voice and how it can help people in tough circumstances."

Another preservice teacher analyzed two books on the holiday, *Grumpy new year* by Katrina Moore (2022) and *Playing with lanterns* by Wang Yage (2021). She described that it was interesting to learn about two different experiences and traditions of the same holiday.

4.3.2 Surprised by a Variety of Diverse Children's Books

Another theme appearing in preservice teachers' reflection papers was that they did not realize that a variety of diverse children's picture books existed. Before they took this literacy course and learned about diverse picture books, they did not think about what kind diversity represents in children's books, and they did not have an opportunity to learn about different topics of diversity. However, with this study, they learned about a wide range of diversity topics (gender, race and ethnicity, religion, disabilities, etc.) and that opened their eyes. One preservice teacher responded:

There were many short, light-hearted books featuring diverse characters, but there were also much longer and more serious books. I was surprised when I went from reading about a bear eating a sandwich, to reading a historical fiction story of a Chinese boy immigrating to America. This really opened my eyes to how much variety is out there, and how you can pick a diverse book for both the age range you are targeting and the seriousness of the topic you want to teach on.

4.3.3 Shaped Diversity Perspectives

Preservice teachers engaged in the diverse book project and learned how to classify primary and secondary characters in children's books as well as strategies and resources to utilize these books in a literacy course. Through these experiences, they shaped diverse perspectives. One preservice teacher reported that these experiences significantly shaped his perspective on diversity in picture books. He realized that it "has underscored the importance of representation and inclusivity in educational materials" that "literature serves as a powerful tool for shaping children's understanding of the world." He reflected that "Diverse books not only reflect the rich tapestry of cultures but also challenge stereotypes, fostering empathy and promoting a more inclusive learning environment."

Another preservice teacher reflected that her learning experience in this study impacted the way she thinks about diversity in children's picture books because she learned that diversity is not just about race but about all other factors of minority groups, including race, gender identity, religious, sex, sexual identity, disabilities, and interracial relationships. She wrote that interracial relationships really stood out to her because this particular classification "is not often talked about as being one of the main minorities that needs representation."

4.3.4 Learned Different Classroom Applications to Teach Diversity

At the end of the semester, preservice teachers reported that they learned different pedagogical approaches to teach diversity using children's picture books. With the library session and a diverse book project, they gained knowledge and resources on how to plan and promote children's diversity awareness while implementing high-quality children's picture books. One preservice teacher commented that through her own project and learning about peers' diversity book projects in class, she learned about many great classroom applications that "could be used to help teach students about acceptance and appreciation for other cultures." Another preservice teacher also reflected that learning experiences in this study offered her new strategies and methods that she would use for her future students.

4.3.5 Planning to Promote Diversity Awareness

Toward the end of the semester, the preservice teachers reflected what the impact of this course may be for them as future teachers. They shared that they plan to use high-quality children's books in their teaching to promote cultural and diversity awareness among children. For example, one preservice teacher wrote: "I would integrate diverse books seamlessly into the curriculum across subjects by carefully selecting literature that represents different races, ethnicities, genders, abilities, and family structures." Another preservice teacher planned to implement in her future classroom was to organize children's books into different categories so her students would know a wide range of categories and read books in various categories. Another common comment from preservice teachers was that they realized that they must include diversity of their future students from their own future classroom. One approach for that to happen is to search for and include children's books their students can relate to. This will help their future students feel represented in the books.

4.3.6 Planning to Create Inclusive Learning Environments

By the end of the semester, preservice teachers did not only gain knowledge and skills to incorporate children's picture books into their future teaching, but they also realized the importance of creating inclusive learning environments for their future students. They described that it would be important for all students to learn, develop diversity awareness, empathy toward, and respect for all. For example, a preservice teacher realized that diverse children's picture books teach "inclusion and diversity, but they also make students feel more included in the classroom." She described that many of her future students will have different backgrounds and cultures. She planned to intentionally and carefully include a variety of books in her future classroom that they may relate to because that will make them feel connected and included in the classroom. Another preservice teacher aims to create a classroom environment "where every student feels seen and valued." She thinks children's books would serve "as springboards for discussions on cultural differences, promoting respect and understanding."

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine how a book analysis of the main and secondary characters in picture books at a university library influences the way preservice teachers think about and view diversity in picture books. The researchers established two research questions.

RQ#1: How did the diverse book project impact preservice teachers' understanding of diversity?

The researchers collected two main responses to this research question. First, after the diverse book project as well as learning experiences on children's book resources and classification systems and practices, preservice teachers saw the depth and broadness of diversity in picture books. Before they took a literacy course, they did

not know much about what diversity could mean from various points of views. However, with their learning experiences in the literacy course, they learned that diversity is more than race and ethnicity. It is much broader than they thought as it would include many other important factors, such as religion, disabilities, family structure, immigration, aging, homeless, violence, social-economically disadvantaged, and interracial families. Toward the end of the semester, preservice teachers reported that their views of diversity were broadened and became much more in-depth. They felt more confident in analyzing children's books.

The results of this study align with the findings by Marks and McCormick (2024), in which preservice teachers gained knowledge of diversity and culturally inclusive books after they engaged in two major unit studies on diversity and children's literature in two consecutive semesters. Hogue and Wessel-Powell (2024) also yielded similar, positive findings. They stated that teaching and discussing a diverse children's book critically with preservice teachers resulted in expanding their in-depth knowledge on diversity.

Second, preservice teachers in this study expanded and shaped their diversity perspectives. They learned about the children's picture book collection at the university library. They also learned how to analyze characters in the picture books and how to evaluate the books critically using the classification system and information from the literacy course. As part of the diverse book project, they also wrote their opinions on whether or not they would recommend their assigned books to K-12 schools and why. With these experiences, they learned what factors they should look for when they evaluate children's picture books and how to professionally evaluate them by the end of the semester. These experiences provided them with an opportunity to shape their diversity perspectives. They realized that children should see their representation in picture books, which helps develop self-esteem and who they are as future citizens. Bishop (1990) addresses that children's books should serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors because they help children transform their experiences and give them opportunities to see themselves in the larger human experiences. Children's books should offer all children's representations as children can develop self-affirmation and identity (McNair & Edwards, 2021).

RQ#2 How did the diverse book project prepare preservice teachers to incorporate diverse books?

The researchers in this study collected two main responses to this research question. First, preservice teachers increased their knowledge of children's book resources and how to incorporate high quality children's books in their teaching so they could promote diversity awareness among children. At the end of the semester, preservice teachers reported that they felt prepared to use diverse books in their future teaching because they gained a lot of information, pedagogical ideas, and resources about them. When they worked on their diverse book project, they developed creative, interdisciplinary lessons for their assigned children's picture books. Not only did they develop lessons focusing on ELA such as rewriting an ending of the story and making the story into a poem, but they also developed lessons incorporating social studies, music, and social and application skills.

Teacher educators must prepare preservice teachers to teach all students in diverse and multicultural classrooms (Alismail, 2016). Through this study, preservice teachers developed their skills to develop lessons while using high-quality children's books. This will positively impact future students as they are likely to have opportunities to learn about diversity through their learning from these future teachers. Sharma (2005) also states that teachers who use culturally responsive practices support all students for their academic success.

Second, preservice teachers became more sensitive about diversity and planned to include diversity and children's diverse representations in their teaching. Toward the end of the semester, preservice teachers gained confidence in using diverse children's books through their book project. They were able to creatively and appropriately plan how they could use their assigned book and how they could promote diversity and cultural awareness. They committed themselves to use rich diverse children's books in their future teaching because they understood the positive impact of these books on their future students. The study by Simoncini et al. (2022) supported the results of this study; preservice teachers became committed to include diverse children's books in their future teaching after experiencing a critical analysis of diverse books. It is also essential for pre- and in-service teachers to include children's books that represent children with a wide range of backgrounds and cultures because they bring a variety of assets to their classroom. This study reiterates the importance of using diverse books that represent children with various backgrounds/cultures (Barry, 1998; Leung & Adams-Whittaker, 2022). Children will develop their self-affirmation and identity by engaging in high-quality diverse books. This will also support all students to learn about different perspectives, cultures, values, as well as respect and celebrate diversity.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how a diverse book analysis of the main and secondary characters in picture books

held at a university library influenced the way preservice teachers think about and view diversity in children's picture books. Through a literacy course, 27 preservice teachers learned about how to classify characters in children's books, how to evaluate these books, and where they can find reliable, professional resources for their teaching. They completed a project-based learning experience in the form of a diverse book project, which allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge in a hands-on, authentic task. They also completed a diverse book project. Toward the end of the semester, they broadened their understanding of diversity, realized the important role of diverse books for children, and committed to incorporate high-quality diverse children's books in their teaching. As a limitation, this study took place in one course during a semester with a small population of participants. While the results of the study show a positive impact of preservice teachers committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion on their future students, teaching this diversity topic to preservice teachers should happen in other teacher education courses. Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2005) suggest that teacher education preparation programs include opportunities for preservice teachers to learn about diversity and related issues and pedagogical applications throughout the entire teacher education programs. In the content and pedagogical knowledge standard for initial licenses, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) states teacher education preparation programs must ensure that they provide "equitable and inclusive learning experiences for diverse P-12 students" (CAEP, 2022). By framing the diverse book project as a project-based learning activity, this study demonstrates how hands-on, applied experiences can support preservice teachers in developing the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide equitable and culturally responsive learning experiences for all students.

Future research could examine how preservice teachers apply diversity analysis skills by creating annotated bibliographies or curated classroom libraries, documenting their selection and justification of diverse books. Studies could also explore how these curated collections influence classroom discussions, student engagement, and inclusive teaching practices over time. By linking preservice teachers' engagement with diverse texts to their future classroom practices, such research could help ensure that inclusive, culturally responsive literature is thoughtfully integrated into K-12 education.

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