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## More Than White Boys And Their Dogs: Diversity In Children's Literature Professional Development

Britt Johnson

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MORE THAN WHITE BOYS AND THEIR DOGS: DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May, 2021

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

I have always been a voracious reader, but as a queer teen in the mid-2000's I struggled finding books that I felt represented myself. I read everything I could get my hands on as a child and teen, and when I became an educator, it became my passion to teach children to love books and reading. As I have brainstormed ways to get students even more excited about reading, I reflected on my own reading past. I realized that I still search for books that I see myself reflected in, and thus spawned my research question: *What is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?*

When I was a young child, I had no concept of poverty or wealth. I knew that my brother and I lived with my dad during the week and saw my mom on weekends. I knew that my brother and I were the only kids that lived in apartments where everyone else was elderly, and I knew that we had cereal and frozen tv dinners for food a lot. I also knew that because we didn't have television, we would go to the library. I had my choice of the books that I could check out, as long as I chose less than twenty-five. In the beginning, I read everything I could get my hands on, but as I aged, I became very picky about the books that I chose, more often choosing large fantasy tomes instead of the typical Roald Dahl or RL Stine book. Unable to explain why, I was unsatisfied with the characters, or the relationships between them, or even their relationships to themselves. It didn't stop

me from reading, but it ignited a fire to read more, to find that missing piece, to discover what I felt was missing.

I began the arduous and lifelong task of coming out when I was thirteen. I told my best friend, but in 2004, I didn't feel safe in a small rural town. As I grew into my adolescence, I was able to realize that I was searching for books where I felt that I was reflected. As a white person, almost all books I had access to were about white children and teens. However, as a queer person, who had yet to start coming out as transgender, I wasn't able to find any books aimed at children or young adults that had queer characters. Even fifteen years later, it is difficult to find quality books with queer characters, let alone characters that are transgender.

Growing up in a small, rural, poverty stricken area, I knew that the only way out of the 650 person town where we had quarterly assemblies about the risks of meth was through college. I had always been "gifted" in regards to reading, after teaching myself to read and becoming a voracious reader at the age of five. With my love of reading, it made sense that I would study English literature and Women and Gender Studies in my undergraduate program at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. In my mind, I was going to become a professor that specialized in early 20th century British literature. I would examine texts for those who weren't there, for the voices that were silenced.

It was in my sophomore year of college that I was granted the immense privilege of being able to attend the Student Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI). This opportunity allowed me to examine my whiteness and anti-racism in a way that I never had before. I was aware of power, privilege, and oppression, but I hadn't had the

opportunity to examine how they interact on an individual, societal, and systematic basis. Even eight years later, I would put this event down to one of the most important events in my life. It helped shape me into someone who constantly works towards anti-racism, who is more aware of my systemic privilege, as well as empowering me to work towards change from inside the system.

I had never planned on going into elementary education. I was going to be a professor, a scholar. However, after reaching burnout my senior year, I realized I need to take a year off. I am not the sort of person that does well with copious amounts of free time, so I signed up for a year of service through MNReadingCorps. In a surprising turn of events (surprising to no one but myself) I fell in love with education. Working with students who struggled with reading and being able to see them improve was something that felt like it just fit. Asking around, I heard that Hamline University had a well regarded education program, and my decision was made.

Having lived in St. Paul and having been a substitute teacher in the St. Paul Public School district, I came to realize my passion for urban education. I performed my student teaching in the Minneapolis school district, and began my first year teaching in North Minneapolis. I learned and grew so much during that year, but I had been hit with the thought that almost none of the books that I managed to pick up secondhand for my classroom library contained characters of color. I set out to change that.

My second year teaching, I began teaching at a charter school on the edge of North Minneapolis, Brooklyn Park, and Brooklyn Center. With a year of knowledge under my belt, I began searching for books that represented my students in earnest. It

started small. It became difficult when I noticed that books that had characters of color on the cover often had them portrayed as the “sidekick,” or the book was historical fiction. Oftentimes these characters weren’t second generation immigrants, the characters only spoke English at home, were affluent, lived with both parents, and were often boys.

During my third and fourth years in the classroom, the conversation around diversity in children’s literature became more wide-spread, and it seemed like the publishers were finally listening. The quality of books that I was able to find in 2020 was by far the highest quality that I’ve found in the past five years. Despite this increase in diversity in books that are available, I’ve yet to find a curriculum that embraces the importance of diversity, or acknowledges this need. Best practice tells us that students succeed when they feel reflected in the curriculum. Curriculum is expensive and many schools would be unable to change. This prompted me to consider, *what is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?* As an educator, I know what the problem is, so perhaps it’s time to find a solution by working within the system.

This capstone project is far from perfect, simply due to the fact that I am creating this resource through a lens of whiteness, standing on the shoulders of many researchers of color who, since the 1930s, have had similar observations. I can do my best to decenter it, but there is still the possibility that there will be something I miss. I have intentionally sought academic research from researchers of color in an effort to raise their voices to the forefront, as well as to ensure that my work is as comprehensive as possible. It is my hope that the benefits of supplemental material and professional development will



outweigh these imperfections. Educators, particularly white educators, must educate themselves on these issues. It is a necessary step towards furthering justice in education.

Through my own personal journey of coming out as queer and constantly looking to find myself reflected in books, to teaching in urban schools with books that didn't reflect the readers, it seems natural to have developed a passion for diverse books. I will work towards answering this question: *what is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?* In the next chapter, I will review the literature around diversity in children's books, social justice, and student engagement. In chapter 3, I will lay out the plan for the professional development design and the rationale.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### INTRODUCTION

As an educator who has spent the majority of my teaching experience in Title 1 urban schools, the vast majority of my students have been students of color and first or second generation immigrants. The diversity of backgrounds, cultures, and home languages in my classroom led me to the question: *What is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?*

I have been a 4th grade reading and writing teacher for the past four years, so this project will entail exploring diverse children's literature and social justice education through an ELA lens. This chapter will be a review of the literature and research surrounding the topic. I will review the current and previous state of diversity in children's literature, as well as the importance of diverse books, decolonization, and indigenization. I will examine identities in the classroom, including strategies to choose quality texts, and bring cultures into the present day. I will also examine social justice through literature, particularly how educators can intertwine it into lesson planning, in analyzing books in their classroom library, and how to use it to teach acts of resistance. I will examine student engagement and how it connects to representation in literature.

Finally, I will review the achievement gap and student engagement in the achievement gap.

## **DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Diversity is often defined as “the condition of having or being composed of different elements,” (Merriam-Webster), however, when diversity is used in this paper, it is meant to refer to non-majority narratives; non-white, non-european centric, non-English centric, non-disabled, non-middle class centric, etc. Due to the focus of this resource, I need to focus on the state of diversity in children's literature. This portion of the review will focus on current and past trends of diversity in children's literature, the importance of diverse books, and examining the reflection of diverse books in mainstream curriculum.

**DEFINING DIVERSITY.** With the ever evolving student body within the United States, diversity has become a hot topic in education. However, despite the changes in school demographic, children's books have not shifted to reflect that increase of diversity. Many children's books still focus on the worlds of white children, and in particular, cis-gender boys (Crispin et al., 2016). Cis-gender refers to someone who identifies with the gender that they were assigned at birth. Jacqueline Woodson referred to diversity as “Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together,” (2015). This idea of diversity as something we must constantly work towards was expounded upon by Nemec-Loise (2015) and by Dahlen and Pelayo-Lozada (2015) in their calls to action in expanding the accessibility of diverse

books. These calls to action are direct reflections of the trends of publishing and availability of books with non-majority narratives at the center.

**TRENDS IN PUBLISHING AND ACCESSIBILITY.** The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) from the University of Wisconsin's School of Education conducts a yearly analysis of all children's and young adult books published, and examines the racial makeup of authors, as well as looking at how many books were published about them. Their study each year focuses on the following demographics: African/African Americans, American Indians/First Nations, Asian Pacifics/Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinx. In 2018, the most recent data available, there were 3,653 children's and YA books published. Out of the 3,653, only 202 were written by African/African American authors while 405 were written about African/African Americans. That means that in 2018, only 5.5% of all children's and YA books were written by African/African Americans. The statistics do not improve as focus shifts to other racial groups. American Indians/First Nations authors only had 38 books published, but 55 books published about them. That means that 1% of all children's and YA books were written by American Indians/First Nations authors. There were 351 books written by Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific American authors, with 314 about them. That brings that statistic up to 9.6% of all published children's and YA books written by Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific Americans. Lastly, the study examines Latinx authors, finding that they published 197 books in 2018, but had 249 books published about them, which translates to 5.4% of children's and YA books published by Latinx authors. In the year 2018, there were a total of 788 children's and YA books published by BIPOC authors, yet

3653 children's and YA books published. That is a staggering 21.6% of all children's and YA books in the year 2018. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 51% of students in public K-12 schools identified as non-white (2017). It must be mentioned that animals/other make up 27% of the characters in children's book (Hyuck & Dahlen, 2019), which is 5.4% more than books that feature BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) characters.

It is not simply a lack of diversity in racial identities, but a distinct lack of diversity in all non-majority, or subordinated, identity groups. The CCBC began gather data on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) children's and YA books for the first time in 2017. The data that was gathered was not particularly promising. With 3,700 books in 2017, 136 (3.68%) were about "significant LGBTQ+ content" (Tyner), while 56 books were written by an LGBTQ+ author (Tyner, 2018). Of the 136, 63 books had a main character who was LGBTQ, but the vast majority of these books are YA. According to Tyner (2018), there were very few middle grade novels, and only 13 picture books, most often with secondary or tertiary LGBTQ families or parents. It is estimated that 7.7% of all children are LGBTQ+, so the small handful of books aren't allowing all children to be reflected, as well as build empathy towards others who are different from themselves. According to the *School Library Journal*, 62% of schools and libraries polled stated that books that had characters with disabilities is a priority, but the same 62% stated that these books are difficult to come by (2018). Results are similar when looking for books that have neurodiverse, English Language Learner, or non-christian characters.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSE BOOKS.** Diverse books are so important because as Miller and Sharp (2018) state:

[t]he absence of a voice is judgment against it...we communicate that their stories don't matter, or worse, warrant shame. The lack of relevant, positive, affirming books for every child often perpetuates stereotypes, children's self-perceptions of 'otherness' and institutional and social constructs that marginalize and oppress many people. (p. 60)

When we cover the metaphorical mirror, children do not see themselves reflected. At best, we offer a one way window, children can look out and see the world through dominant lenses (white, able-bodied, cisgender, straight, male, Christian, etc.), yet do not see their own experiences and lives reflected in a meaningful way (Crisp et al., 2016).

The previously mentioned lack of authentic books written by BIPOC authors that focus on BIPOC experiences, creates what Christopher Myles refers to as "The Aparthied of Children's Literature," (2014). Myles states that:

characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth. (2014)

He asserts that this lack of imagination limits where children of color, particularly black and brown children, see their future. The schemas that surround these children focus on professional sports and hip hop, they are not given schemas of magical adventure, imagination, mystery, or superhero. Miller and Sharp (2018) discuss a student who said

she hated historical fiction because all of the characters that looked like her were depressing (p. 63). Many books that focus on characters of color are still written by white, male authors and oftentimes take place in turbulent times: involving slavery, the civil war, the civil rights movement, street violence, etc. (p. 62). There are not as many books that focus on the authentic day to day life of characters of color, or even the imaginative worlds of fantasy and science fiction.

Exposure to diverse books positively impacts both students who have marginalized identities as well as those who hold dominant identities. Diverse texts give students the ability to increase empathy and understanding towards others who share different identities from themselves, and that “people are more than stereotypes,” (Miller & Sharp, p. 37; Johnson & Koss, 2015). These diverse books also give all children the opportunity to see that people share more similarities and feelings than differences (Mabbot, 2017). The view through the window allows children to learn about people who are different from them, in authentic ways. In addition, the increase in school based hate incidences has substantially increased since the 2016 election, so the importance of building empathy and understanding with white students is crucial (Ishizuka, 2018).

Now, it is easy to fall into the trap of using diverse books as a way to check a box for a history month, and not teaching diverse books for the rest of the semester or school year (Miller & Sharp, 2018). Many teachers who teach majority white children don't always see the benefit of using diverse texts regularly, despite the fact that their students will be entering a diverse and non-homogenous world. Masko and Bloem assert that preservice teachers also benefit from reading diverse books, as it builds in empathy and

understanding for students who have subordinated identities, particularly identities that around race and poverty (2017). If this is true for pre-service teachers, then it must also be true of white students, as it gives them a safe space to explore their own dominant identities and allows space to examine privilege (Masko & Bloem, 2017). This is important as many preservice teachers, and many educators in general, are white, and many come from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. Educators must be cautious however that they aren't simply using texts that only rely on traumatic historical instances or inaccurate descriptions of enslaved peoples.

**CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND COMPETENCE.** May, Bingham, and Pendergast define cultural competency as “an understanding on the part of teachers that they have been socialized into understanding the surrounding world within a particular set of norms that may or may not mirror those into which the students were socialized,” (2015, p. 212). May, Bingham, and Pendergast go on to explain that central to cultural relevancy is the idea of systemic oppression, systems like education, have given privilege to some groups at the expense of others (2014). They challenge the educators to read from a “critical stance,” which includes “acknowledging inequity and addressing it, enacted through text selection and the talk used throughout,” (May, et al. 2015, p. 215). May, Bingham, and Pendergast acknowledge that using books about social issues doesn't mean that teachers are using the book to critically examine the social issues, but it teaches students “that adults do not want to talk about these topics,” (2015, p. 215). This avoidance of topics or discomfort from the adults, limits the depth and complexity of the



conversation and lesson and reinforces the dominant narrative. They continue by stating that:

Though we think we are protecting the children from threatening subjects or that they are not developmentally ready for the topics, subjects such as race, sexual orientation, or religion, are already present, brought in by the previous experience of everyone in the room (May, et al., 2015, p. 215).

This statement emphasizes the importance of understanding that teachers and students carry their identities with them, and none of us are in hermetically sealed boxes.

**SUMMARY.** The lack of diversity, and even more so, the lack of authentically diverse texts has been an issue in the publishing industry and education field since the 1930s. The widespread discussion of the lack of diversity, and the injustice that it brings on our students of color is a serious issue that many are fighting back against today. Diverse books are important, not just for our students of color, but also for students who are white (or hold any other dominant identity). Reading about others, and not just in traumatic historical fiction, can increase empathy and understanding in those with dominant identities. It also prepares students for how diverse the world is. However, the lack of diverse, authentic texts within mainstream curriculum can make it feel as though an educator is attempting to swim upstream, especially if they are only able to work with the trade books that accompany their curriculum.

Next, I will examine the opportunity that diverse books give educators to use them to teach Social Justice and resistance. I will examine ways in which this can be implemented into lesson planning, as well as things that should be avoided. I will dig

deeper into how to use historical fiction and problematic texts. I will then look at ways that quality books featuring diverse characters, written by diverse authors can be found. Finally, this section will examine ways in which educators can examine both themselves and their classroom library for bias, as well as to evaluate whose voices are missing.

### **SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH LITERATURE**

**SOCIAL JUSTICE.** For the uses of this paper, social justice will be defined as a goal and process that works towards equitable participation in a society where everyone is safe and their needs are met (Adams, et al., 2007). Focusing on social justice as a piece of authentic diverse books has two main points: firstly, that quality, authentic books are accurately representative of their readers and secondly, to move beyond empathy into action for white students and students with other dominant identity groups. With a focus on social justice, educators are able to examine implicit bias, unconscious attitude and schemas that favor our own ingroups (Kirwan Institute, 2015) and work to overcome them. Boyd, Causey, and Galda state that “the implementation of culturally diverse literature in the classroom only occurs when teachers are willing to make change happen,” (2015, p. 380).

**IDENTITIES.** Identities are something very personal, and depending on the identities that one holds, oftentimes unseen. Adams, Bell, and Griffin state that Social Identity groups are groups that we place ourselves in to find commonality (2007, p. 8). There is nothing inherently wrong with identities, but what becomes problematic is some groups holding power over and oppressing other groups (2007, p. 9). These groups holding power over others will be discussed as dominant identity groups. Dominant

identity groups include white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied, middle-upper class, native English speaker, Christian, etc. Subordinated group on the other hand are groups that have been systemically oppressed, such as black/brown/indigenous peoples, females, queer/bisexual/gay people, transgender and gender nonbinary individuals, working class and working poor people, disabled people, immigrants and non-native English speakers, practitioners who are Jewish/Muslim/Hindu/Atheist/other religion (2007, p. 11-13).

Being aware of identities is highly important because it is how we show up in the world, and how we show up in our classrooms. By the vast majority, educators and administration tend to be white, middle class-upper middle individuals, but the majority of students are black and black. Many are coming from low income households, and an increasing number speak a language other than English at home. May, Bingham, and Pendergast (2015) state that “Though we may think we are protecting children from threatening subjects or that they are not developmentally ready for the topics, subjects such as race, sexual orientation, and religion are already present, brought in by the previous experiences of everyone in the room,” (p. 215). They continue to state that as educators “self-censor,” oftentimes choosing topics they are comfortable with, which indirectly usually reflects their own identities. Boyd, Causey, and Galda (2015) remind the reader that these identities are not separate, and do not exist in a vacuum, they are intertwined, interconnected, and complex.

**IMPLICIT BIAS AND PRIVILEGE.** Implicit bias can be interrupted in four steps: reassociation, refuting, perspective taking, and increasing opportunity for positive

contact (Hammond, 2015). To apply this interruption strategy to children's literature would be to reacquaint, or reassociate, yourself with not only diverse authors but children's literature as a whole. Being aware of recent texts is important, if only because it is so easy to fall into routine and teach the same problematic or outdated text year after year. Refuting or "counter-stereotyping" (Hammond, 2015) is done once you've recognized stereotyping, and you come up with as many ways as possible that you can prove that stereotyping incorrect. Perspective taking is "stepping into the shoes of the stereotyped person," (Hammond, 2015). When looking through literature, put yourself in the shoes of your students. Question whether or not the portrayals in the book are accurate or if they are stereotypes. Finally, increasing opportunity for positive contact, and in the context of literature, that would translate into reading books by authors of color and Native/First Nations authors. The more books that you read by authors who are Native/First Nation or other people of color, the better you become at spotting stereotypical portrayals in children's literature. If this portion is not resonating with you, the Implicit Association Test (IAT) created at Harvard University is a great place to begin this self work.

Another area of necessary self-examination that is necessary is examining privilege and being aware of voices that are not present. Without this self-examination, our privilege blinds us to areas of inequity, and when looking at children's literature that may mean absent or stereotypical/harmful representation. It becomes even more problematic when authors with dominant identities are writing stories with characters

who have subordinated identities. One way to examine your privilege and identities is through the “Social Identity Wheel.”

The Social Identity Wheel was first created by the Intergroup Relations Center at Arizona State University, as part of their “Discovery of Voices Program,” (The University of Arizona, 2020). The “Social Identity Wheel” is an “activity that encourages students to identify and reflect on the various ways they identify socially, how those identities become visible or more keenly felt at different times, and how those identities impact the ways others perceive or treat them,” (The University of Michigan, 2020). The wheel is a circle that is divided into eleven segments, and each segment is labeled with a social identity: race, gender, sexual orientation, sex, socio-economic status, etc. Inside the circle are questions that prompt reflection such as “What are identities you think about the most?” and “What identities do you think about the least?” (University of Michigan, 2020). Oftentimes, dominant identities are the identities that are thought of the least (such as whiteness) and subordinated identities are thought of more often (identifying as a women, queer, disabled, etc).

**DECOLONIZATION AND INDIGENIZATION.** Decolonization and Indigenization exist as two sides of the same coin. Indigenous Corporate Trainings Inc. defines decolonization as “shifting the way that Indigenous Peoples view themselves and the way non-Indigenous people view Indigenous Peoples” (2017). Decolonization deals with reclaiming of Indigenous heritage and traditions, worldviews, and replacing Western perspectives with Indigenous Perspectives (Indigenous Corporate Trainings Inc., 2017). While decolonization deals with the breaking down of Western perspectives and

worldviews, indigenization focuses on non-Indigenous people being aware of and respecting “Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and perspectives” (Indigenous Corporate Trainings Inc., 2017). It is important to remember, however, that not every Indigenous author speaks for every tribe.

This topic of decolonization and Indigenization is highly relevant in the field of children’s literature as, previously mentioned, only 1% of children’s and young adult books are written by Indigenous/First Nations authors (CCBC, 2019). Many children’s books that feature Indigenous/First Nations people focus on the “First Thanksgiving,” and are a detriment to children’s perceptions of First Nations and reinforces the “master narrative” (Adare-Tasiwoopa a’pi & Adams-Campbell, 2016). Adare-Tasiwoopa a’pi and Adams-Cambell assert that the “master narrative” is a myth about the origin of the United States, that emphasizes Eurocentric ideals and culture, erases diversity and conflict with Indigenous peoples, while reinforcing “Manifest Destiny mentality,” (2016). Many children’s and young adult books that focus on Indigenous Peoples, legitimizes the colonizers and their actions, and “erases Indigenous peoples, cultures, and contribution while endorsing American nationalistic identity, principles, and symbols,” (Adare-Tasiwoopa a’pi & Adams-Campbell, 2016, p. 657). These are books that are not written by First Nation/Indigenous Peoples. Being aware of this while teaching history and Westward Expansion is especially important.

There are ways that books that are written by Indigenous Peoples challenge the “master narrative,” and one way in particular is by using Indigenous languages, whether

the words are defined or not. Adare-Tasiwoopa a'pi and Adams-Campbell (2016) elaborate on four steps originally put forth by D. Reese:

- (1) eliminating dehumanizing stereotypes and making Indigenous Peoples visible in the history
  - (2) discarding the master narrative
  - (3) critical analysis of children's literature and disrupting the inherent dominant narratives
  - (4) supporting Indigenous authors who write stories with Indigenous themes
- (p. 662)

Indigenous Peoples and their culture needs to be brought into the present day, and not simply relegated to the genre of historical fiction, and Indigenization brings Indigenous people to the forefront. These actions support not only the decolonization of children's literature, but the indigenization of it.

### **BOOKS WITH DIVERSE CHARACTERS.**

Having access to authentic diverse characters is one way to allow children to see themselves reflected in books. In 2009, MacArthur Award winning novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) cautions viewers in her TEDTalk about the "danger of the single story." Adichie asserts that "just reading one book about *any* particular culture or group of people is also dangerous. No group or individual has a single story, and knowing only one story leads to the creation of assumptions and stereotypes," (Boyd et al., 2015, p. 378). These statements by Adichie are connected to writings by Nancy Larrick, who in

1965 wrote an article called “The All White World of Children’s Books,” by Boyd, Causey, and Galda (2015) who sum up the article by stating:

Larrick insisted that if children never see themselves in books, they receive the subtle messages that they are not important enough to appear in books and that books are not for them. Conversely, if children see *only* themselves in the books they read, they come to the conclusion that those who are different from them are not worthy of appearing in books. (p. 379)

Accurate representation and under representation are still issues in 2020. Boyd, Causey, and Galda (2015) offer three suggestions on how to assess and chose quality children’s books with quality representation:

(a) study the work of the authors and illustrators to determine the quality of culturally rich books, including style, topic, themes, and perspectives; (b) draw from award categories of non-white cultural groups as well as various resources; and (c) learn to determine the authenticity of the author’s work. (p. 381)

Tischida, Ryan, and Ticknor (2014) examine ways to disrupt the single story in the classroom, as it promotes “a dangerous ethnocentrism,” (p. 29). They bring up the point that many books that do focus on culturally diverse characters are often told from the outsiders perspective and “therefore do not always represent a reality of those groups’ lived experiences,” (Reese, 2007; Tischida et al, 2014, p. 29). While working with preservice teachers, Tischida, Ryan, and Ticknor (2014) examined the single story, and saw that students who were able to identify the single story narrative were able to identify



the gaps and importance of multiple experiences and viewpoints, and that “by focusing on multiplicity, all students’ stories are allowed to be layers within a larger, more complete narrative, not given primacy but still valued as real and important,” (p. 31).

They use the example of Christopher Columbus and his “discovery” of the Americas as a reason for why examining multiple perspectives is important, which connects with the earlier discussion of decolonization and Indigenization.

To integrate culturally relevant pedagogy and to select culturally relevant texts for read-aloud and library books, Sue Ann Sharma and Tanya Christ (2017) recommend five steps to assist the decision making process:

1. Recognize the need for culturally responsive instruction.
2. Get to know more about your students’ lives.
3. Search for culturally relevant texts.
4. Select culturally relevant texts for instruction. [And]
5. Identify critical and personal response opportunities for instruction. (p. 295)

Step 1, recognizing the need for culturally responsive instruction touches on mirrors and windows, do students see themselves in the book and do students with majority identities see others different from themselves. Culturally relevant texts ground students’ identities and experiences in the content, which increases literacy outcomes (Sharma & Christ, 2017). Sharma and Christ created a rubric to assess if a text is culturally relevant, using seven points to address the complexities of students’ identities:

**Table 1**

**Cultural Relevance Text Evaluation Rubric**

<b>Book title and author:</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
How the book portrays culture, part 1 (Sims, 1983; Sims Bishop, 1991)	<i>Culturally conscious</i> books validate a culture through accurately portraying language and experiences in their illustrations and words.	<i>Socially conscious</i> books perpetuate stereotypes. <i>Melting pot</i> books ignore cultural differences (e.g., <i>The Snowy Day</i> by Ezra Jack Keats).
How the book portrays culture, part 2 (Ebe, 2010; Walters, 1998)	The author or illustrator are of the background being portrayed in the book.	The author or illustrator are not of the background being portrayed in the book.
Analyzing cultural relevance, part 1 (Ebe, 2010)	The main characters are the same race/ethnicity/religion as the reader. (Characters' cultural markers are relevant.)	The main characters are <i>not</i> the same race/ethnicity/religion (or other cultural marker) as the reader.
Analyzing cultural relevance, part 2 (Ebe, 2010)	The main characters are the same age/gender as the reader. (Characters' cultural markers are relevant.)	The main characters are <i>not</i> the same age/gender as the reader.
Analyzing cultural relevance, part 3 (Ebe, 2010)	The main characters talk like the reader. (Characters' cultural markers are relevant.)	The main characters <i>do not</i> talk like the reader.
Analyzing cultural relevance, part 4 (Ebe, 2010)	The reader has probably lived in or visited places like those in the story (relevant place), and the story could take place this year (relevant time period). (Settings are culturally relevant.)	The reader has probably <i>not</i> lived or visited places like those in the story, or the story could <i>not</i> take place this year.
Analyzing cultural relevance, part 5 (Ebe, 2010)	The reader has probably had an experience similar to one in the story. (Events are culturally relevant.)	The reader has probably <i>not</i> had an experience similar to one in the story.

(Sharma & Christ, 2017, p. 303).

Sharma and Christ acknowledge that inaccessibility to diverse texts is an injustice to nonwhite, non-majority students and the majority of published booklists used by schools and teachers focus on white characters or animals (2017). They recommend checking book lists that are less mainstream such as: The Coretta Scott King Book Awards, The Tomás Rivera Mexican American' Children's Book Award, The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award, The Skipping Stones Honor Award, The Pura Belpre Award, and The Jane Addams Children's Book Award, however there are many more online, including the We Need Diverse Books website.

If you are uncertain if your classroom library is diverse enough, Miller and Sharp recommend assessing your classroom library yearly. Lynsey Burkins, a contributor in

Miller and Sharp's book *Game Changer!*, recommends using a Social Identity Wheel to assess your classroom library books. The visual of the wheel will allow you to see who is missing from your classroom library (2019). If the budget is tight and you don't have access to updating your classroom library, using diverse texts as read-alouds or mentor texts is a great strategy. May and Bingham (2014) state that texts that focus on diverse characters and experiences can be used as a springboard for important dialogue and discussion (racism, immigration, abilities, etc).

What happens when a classroom library is assessed and there is a distinct lack of diverse books, or of the diverse books there are simply not enough? Ebony Elizabeth Thomas examines this question in her article "Critical Engagement with Middle Grade Reads: Who Lives? Who Dies? Who Tells Your Story?" She posits that in order to make up for the lack of diverse literature, students need to be given the chance to reframe the story on their own. Thomas states that "In the past, it was necessary for people from the margins to identify with and comprehend these officially sanctioned stories just to be educated," (2018, p. 15). Thomas places an emphasis on critically engaging with the text, reimagining it, and participating in "restorying." She describes restorying as "a process by which narratives are reshaped to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse," (2018, p.15). One way that Thomas suggests this "restorying" is by encouraging students to retell the story through the perspective of a character who is not the protagonist, ideally from someone of a non-dominant point of view.

## **TEACHING ACTS OF RESISTANCE AND ACTION**

When using the concept of windows and mirrors, educators give all students views towards worlds and experiences that are different from their own. Students are able to build empathy with characters that are different from themselves. Using literature to teach about challenging times in history or difficult events in the present day is an accessible way to bridge that gap. Most importantly, when teaching social justice, self-education and awareness are highly important. Yuko Iwai writes that preparing questions before reading is helpful. Questions such as

‘How would you react if you were a character in the story? Why?’ ‘How would you compare a character’s life to yours? Are they different or similar? How?’ and ‘Are there any real social issues or historical event that are similar to a social issue or historical event a character faced and dealt with in the story?’ (Iwai, 2015, p.84)

This combination of restorying and challenging students to expand critical thinking and develop empathy is a great way to initiate difficult conversations centering on social justice. Once students have discussed a similar event or social issue, encourage them to brainstorm ways that they can take action. Teaching students accurate history will further expand their knowledge and schemas, and will be less resistant later on when interacting with challenging or difficult topics.

## **SUMMARY**

Working towards social justice through children’s literature is a multifaceted undertaking that starts with self-education and examination of implicit biases. Then a thorough assessment of your classroom library is necessary, using a modified social

identity wheel. Becoming familiar with diverse authors will allow you background to be able to assess whether the text is authentic or is focusing on traumatic historical events. Decolonizing literature focuses on decentering the Western perception of history and literature, while indigenization focuses on recentering indigenous experiences, perspectives, and cultures. Keeping in mind the concept of mirrors and windows, accessing or restorying books to ensure that all children are reflected and seen in the literature is of the utmost importance. Implementing these pieces will make work towards social justice and change easier, as children will already have a base knowledge of accurate history and injustice.

### **ACHIEVEMENT GAP/(OPPORTUNITY GAP) AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

**Student Engagement.** The Glossary of Education Reform defines student engagement as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education,” (2020). This definition connects easily to the importance of diverse texts, because with text that students can connect with and is culturally relevant, students “are better able to monitor comprehension, make connections, and interpret what they read...as a result of these literacy outcomes, students motivation is improved” (Sharma & Christ, 2017, p. 296). Ford, Walters, Bird, and Harris expand upon the importance of diverse texts and engagement as they write “[s]imilar to the impact on student achievement when Black students have Black teachers and culturally competent teachers...cultural connections helps students remain academically engaged and boosts achievement,” (Ladson-Billings,

1996; Ford et. al, 2019, p. 55). When students feel connected to a text, they are more likely to be engaged and interested in it.

**ACHIEVEMENT GAP/OPPORTUNITY GAP.** The achievement gap is often defined as when any group of students (whether race, gender, etc) outperforms another group of students, and the differences in scores are “statistically significant” (Flores, 2018). Flores continues by stating that this gap has become associated with students who have subordinated identities (racial, gender, etc) and has become so widespread, that some believe the disparities are inherent in students from subordinated groups (2018). Many scholars have begun to reframe the term achievement gap into other terms, such as “opportunity gap,” “educational debt,” “receivment gap,” and “knowledge gap” (Flores, 2018). Flores states that it is important to focus on “(re)framing the language away from the deficit perspective associated with the use of the term achievement gap can shift educators toward recognizing institutional school cultures and practices that influence disparities,” (2018, p. 345). Working towards closing this “gap” involves institutional level changes, institutional shortcomings must be recognized by educators and informed by the experiences of people of color. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is one way that change is being enacted at a school and district level. By using literature that reflects students from marginalized communities, they are more engaged with the text and teachers themselves have opened themselves up to new worlds and different cultures.

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter examined the research question: *what is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students*

*to use literature as a tool for social justice?* The statistics behind diverse literature were examined, as well as the statistics behind the racial and ethnic backgrounds of students and educators. The importance of diverse literature as a tool for representation and exploration of other identities was expanded through the idea of windows and mirrors. An examination of how diverse literature can be used for social justice education, as well as decolonization and indigenization lead back to self-education of the educator. Having an understanding of social identities, both of the educator's self and those of their students, will allow for a more critical examination of literature before and during lessons. Culturally relevant pedagogy as well as representational authentic literature can increase student engagement and work towards lessening the opportunity gap. With a more thorough knowledge of social justice and identity, educators can work towards institutional change for the betterment of their students and ultimately themselves.

The next chapter will examine how this information will be used to create a professional development focused on social identity development, social justice, and increasing diversity in their classroom libraries, as well as giving space to practice self-reflection and create accountability plans. The next chapter will also dig deeper into the framework and theory behind the professional development.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As I've mentioned previously, as a queer teen in the mid-2000's there was a distinct lack of literature that I felt represented this aspect of my identity. As a white person, I had plenty of options, but as a queer person, I had stumbled across one or two books that focused on cisgendered, young, gay men. This awareness of not feeling represented in literature, copious anti-racism training, and teaching in urban schools with students of color representing at least 95% of the population led me to the research question *what is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?*

In this chapter, I will further explain the professional development plan I am creating. I will also be delving further into the design theory of Andragogy and my reasoning for this choice. I will further describe the audience that I am designing this professional development for, as well as how to tweak it depending on whom my audience may be. This professional development should work with any literacy curriculum, as well as school librarians and those in charge of purchasing books for students. This professional development was designed using backwards planning based on the research question: *what is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?*



## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION/OVERVIEW**

Through research, I will develop a professional development plan that engages staff in social justice work and reflection. With a basis of social justice education, they will move onto changes they can make in their classrooms in regards to their class libraries. Finally we will use a choice of books featuring diverse characters and authors and practice writing lesson plans that engage students in being changemakers, critical thinkers, and working towards social justice.

The professional development will be presented in a GoogleSlides document. There will be a range of activities for participants, including article jigsaws, social identity wheels, group book sorting, and lesson planning. The structure follows Malcom Knowles' theory of Andragogy, taking into account the "Five Assumptions of the Adult Learner" and "The Four Principles of Andragogy". Through the lens of Andragogy, this professional development will be problem centered, focused on experiential learning, and have an immediate relevance and impact (Knowles, 1980). These hands-on activities will be used to encourage engagement from a variety of learners, even those who are reluctant to discuss topics like diversity and social justice.

## **RATIONALE**

I originally landed on my research question as I was looking up activities to accompany Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999). As I was looking, I found

many ill-conceived, but well intentioned, activities created by white educators. I have always been interested in social justice and representation, and in the past few years decolonization and indigenization. For the past few years, there has been a lot of discussion around diverse books, with the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign leading the way. I've been frustrated in the difficulty it is to find books that are authentically representative and high quality. As a field, we know this is an issue, so I thought what better way to add to the conversation than offer a way for educators to use what diverse books they have access to, find ways to examine their own biases, and create a library that is full of windows and mirrors.

The framework I chose to base my professional development on mirrors the GRR model, Gradual Release of Responsibility. The GRR framework, when used with children, focuses on the "I Do" portion, the "We Do" portion, and the "You Do" portion. I will structure the scaffolding of the training around this framework. I have also placed an emphasis on the adult learning theory of Andragogy. I chose Andragogy because it states that experiential learning around a topic that has relevance, and that has a problem/solution approach that adults can take part in planning and implement (Colman, 2019). Conversations and discussions that focus around equity and social justice can get charged easily, so a structured framework that views the lack of diversity as a problem, and educators as the ones working towards the solution will hopefully allow discomfort with topic and privilege to be worked through. The last portion of the professional development will look at lesson planning and implementation of diverse books in

curriculum, and staff will feel empowered by the freedom to explore topics they are passionate about within the parameter.

## **AUDIENCE & SETTING**

The intended audience for my professional development is the staff at my school. I am a teacher leader in a K-12 public charter school in the Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, and North Minneapolis area. I decided on this audience for my project because I believe that it will have the most impact on educators and students. The make up of staff is between 80% white, 15% Asian American Pacific Islander, 5% Black and African American, and less than 5% representing Hispanic/Latinx and Middle Eastern. Student make up, however, is drastically different. 73% of our students are Asian American Pacific Islander, 13% are Black and African American, 10% Hispanic and Latinx, 2% identify as two or more races, and 1% of the student body is white. 48.2% of students are English Language Learners and 65% qualify for the free/reduced lunch program (MDE). With the high percentage of staff that do not share the same racial identity of their students, work around equity and representation is important.

This professional development would easily be adapted to any school site and demographics. Especially schools that have a very high percentage of students who are white and hold a majority of dominant identities, as this allows staff to critically think about and engage with representation and who is in the room, whether their class or books. The ideal timing for this professional development would take place in a workshop week style format in August, with a check in and refresher during a

professional development day in October. If that format is not available, it would work well as three session series, with training days spaced out between September and December.

## **PROJECT OUTLINE & TIMELINE**

### A. Session 1

#### 1. Introduction

##### a) Land Acknowledgement

(1) Including criticisms of it

##### b) Introduction of myself as presenter

##### c) Overview of the session

(1) Examine the “why” of the training

(2) Learning Objectives

##### d) Andragogy and Malcolm Knowles Overview

##### e) Participants introduce themselves at their table spots

##### f) Boundary Setting based on Singleton’s *Courageous*

*Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving*

*Equity in Schools*

- g) Interactive Reflection
2. Windows and Mirrors activity/article jigsaw
    - a) Chapter 1 of *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo
      - (1) Interactive Virtual Poll
  3. The Danger of Single Story
    - a) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TED Talk (first 6:26 minutes)
  4. Break Time
  5. Diversity Definition Interactive Virtual Word Cloud
  6. Shared Definition of “Diversity”
  7. State of Children’s Literature (2019 Data)
  8. Zero Draft about Diversity in Children’s Literature
    - a) Share Out
  9. Identity work
    - a) Social Identity Wheel activity
  10. Session 1 Reflection

- a) Virtual reflection “What is one thing you will take with you from our session?”

## B. Session 2

### 1. Introduction

- a) Land Acknowledgement
  - (1) Including criticisms of it
- b) Overview of the session
  - (1) Examine the “why” of the training
  - (2) Learning Objectives
- c) Participants introduce themselves at their table spots
- d) Boundary Setting based on Singleton’s *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*
- e) Session 1 Review
  - (1) Windows and Mirrors
  - (2) Danger of the Single Story
  - (3) Diversity in Children’s Literature

(4) Social Identity

f) Social Identity Wheel Review

(1) Identity Groups

2. Flower of Power Activity

a) Boundary Review

b) Flower of Power

(1) petal by petal

c) What is privilege?

(1) How does that affect you?

(2) How does that affect your students?

3. Break 10 Minutes

4. Reflection: Why is it important to know how you show up in the classroom?

5. What does this mean for literature, representation, and our students?

a) examination of books

(1) Illustrations

(2) Dialogue

(3) Point of View

(4) Author

*b) A Birthday Cake for George Washington*

(1) Thoughts and Observations

(2) Why it is problematic and important

6. Assessing your classroom library

a) When

b) How

c) What if budget doesn't allow for it

(1) Importance of Read Alouds

d) Book Social Identity Wheel

e) Classroom library Assessment Practice

(1) Book Social Identity Wheel

(2) Examine

(3) Eliminate



#### (4) Evaluate

#### 7. Action Plan

- a) Self Assessment
- b) Challenge: Social Identity Wheel for Classroom
- c) Three steps to take in the following month
- d) share with each other, brief share out

#### C. Measuring Effectiveness

1. anonymous google form exit ticket

### **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter focused on how I used my research question: *what is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?* to create a professional development that will take place during workshop week. I explained that I will use the GRR framework as well as Andragogy as my adult learning theory to present the information in my professional development. I created a project outline and decided on an anonymous assessment format. The next chapter will focus on my reflection of the experience of creating my capstone project.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

#### PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to use a professional development series to allow educators to answer the question: *What is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?* Chapters 1-3 gave an introduction to the topic of decentering whiteness in children's literature, examined the existing research and literature, as well as described the professional development project. Chapter 4 will focus on my major learnings and discoveries, a description of the finished project, revisit the literature review, dig deeper into my personal plans regarding the topic, examine limitations of the project as well as elucidating possible future research.

I chose to focus on the topic of diversity in children's literature because not only do I see a great need for it at my school, but I believe that when we know more, we do better. This project will be delivered during workshop week of 2021, as I see this project important to shifting mindsets and opinions of staff. I also plan on submitting this professional development project to conferences (both local and national). I believe that this topic is so important and relevant, especially right now. Currently, education is a profession that is more or less homogenous. Many educators are white women, yet our student population is becoming more diverse. Diverse representation is something that

has always been important to me, so I wanted to create a professional development that gives educators the tools necessary to assess their classroom library.

While I was creating this professional development, I focused mainly on the idea of “How can I make something relevant and accessible to my peers?” I found that using Malcom Knowles’ (1980) “Five Assumptions of the Adult Learner” and “The Four Principles of Andragogy” allowed me to narrow down what the professional development should look like. I knew that focusing on the problem of the lack of diverse books would be the way to approach this topic. My end goal became focused on guiding participants to reflect on their own personal social identities and how that has impacted their classroom library, as well as empowering participants to examine their own classroom library through a new lens. With the “Library Evaluation Tool” and their own “Social Identity Wheels” and “Flower of Power,” participants have the tools to continue the work towards decentering whiteness in children’s literature by the process of examination, elimination, and evaluation.

Participants will, ideally, take the hand outs and tools provided and be able to make changes in their classroom libraries, school libraries, and fund allocation. Using this training and the tools provided, educators will have bookshelves and classroom libraries that reflect their students. The next section will review the important literature that impacted my thought process during the creation of this project.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY**

There is a plethora of research on the importance of diversity in children’s literature. In my review of the literature, I found that most of my research fell within

three themes: the current and previous state of diversity in children's literature; social justice through literature; and the achievement gap and student engagement as it relates to reading. Within these themes, there were several authors that had the largest impact on my capstone project.

One of the most influential discoveries that I came across was The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin School of Education. The CCBC's work truly cemented the importance and how much farther we have to go when considering diversity in children's literature. It documents diversity statistics of books that are published every year. Their yearly statistics show the startling disparity between books about and by white authors and books about and by BIPOC authors. The statistics produced by the CCBC (2019) were a major part of my research and emphasized to me the importance of authentic voices of BIPOC authors writing about their experiences and identities.

Many of the articles that I read about the representation of Indigenous/Native Peoples referred to and quoted Dr. Debbie Reese. Dr. Reese is one of the leading scholars on Indigenous Representation in children's literature. Authors such as Adare-Tasiwoopa a'pi and Adams-Campbell (2016) recommend Dr. Reese's four steps to indigenization and decolonization of literature:

- (1) eliminating dehumanizing stereotypes and making Indigenous Peoples visible in the history
- (2) discarding the master narrative

(3) critical analysis of children's literature and disrupting the inherent dominant narratives

(4) supporting Indigenous authors who write stories with Indigenous themes

(p. 662)

These steps focusing on authentic narratives of Indigenous Peoples impacted how I saw indigenization. Critical analysis of text written about Indigenous Peoples must be done to ensure that Native/First Nations peoples are accurately represented when discussing the sociologically complex history of the United States and Native Peoples. Indigenization would suggest that only Native/First Nations authors be taught when learning about tribal history and events.

Reese's work alongside Ebony Elizabeth Thomas on the article "Re-envisioning and (Re)reading: Examining Problematic Texts," (2015) impacted my process of creating the "Library Evaluation Tool." The creation of the "Library Evaluation Tool" was inspired by Lynsey Burkins, a contributor in Miller and Sharp's book *Game Changer!* (2019) when she suggested using a social identity wheel for a classroom library.

Another author that greatly influenced my project is Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, specifically her concept of "restorying." This is "a process by which narratives are reshaped to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse." (Thomas, 2018, p.15). Restorying provides a path for educators to follow to make use of books and curriculum that do not represent the identities of their students.

Thomas also examined the importance of accurate, age appropriate, representations of slavery and racism in her article “Much Ado About A Fine Dessert: The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children’s Literature” that was co-written by Reese. In this article, Thomas and Reese (2016) discussed the concept of a “smiling enslaved person,” (p. 7) and the issues that arise when history in literature supports the master narrative, rather than the perspectives of subordinated peoples.

While researching the topics of diverse text and engagement, I found that when students had teachers that were culturally competent and had access to books that represented them, they were more likely to be engaged in learning and have higher achievement. (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Ford et. al, 2019). Simply stated, students are more likely to be interested in and engaged with a book that reflects themselves and their experiences.

There is substantial research on the current and previous state of diversity in children’s literature, social justice through literature, and the achievement gap and student engagement as it relates to reading. The evidence clearly suggests that providing students with diverse literature improves educational outcomes. The next section examines the potential policy implications that may arise from my project.

## **PROJECT IMPLICATIONS**

My research question was *What is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?* My original plan was to create a website; however, I realized that this information would be much more impactful through an in-person

professional development. Many aspects of social justice and anti-racism are deeply uncomfortable, but an in-person training allows participants space to process and dialogue, while simultaneously offering fewer chances for participants to simply disengage when the conversation becomes challenging.

One implication of my project is that educators at my school will gain the tools to assess their classroom library critically. They will hopefully use some of their classroom to purchase more diverse books that represent our students, and we will see higher engagement and achievement due to this. Each year, classroom libraries could be reassessed to ensure that they are representative of our students, and each year our classroom libraries will become more and more diverse.

Another implication of my project is that we could assess our curriculum resources to judge whether or not our curriculum represents our students. This is something that can be assessed as we look at new curriculum or ways to supplement the old curriculum.

A more widespread implication of my project is that school districts can use this professional development to begin to make policy changes. One policy change that districts would need to make would be to allocate more money in the budget to purchase diverse books. If schools are unable to locate the money in their budget, bringing the issue to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) would be the next step. With the new emphasis on racial equity, a budget for diverse books would be well-aligned with MDE's mission. With MDE making changes and supporting diverse books in all schools,

they will need to place an emphasis on supporting BIPOC and other diverse authors to write and be published.

One potential issue to this, however, is that this emphasis on diverse representation in books could be seen as political. This perception could result in major pushback, especially considering our current political climate and the contentious arguments that exist around budget allocation. The next section will explain possible future research avenues that connect with this project.

### **POSSIBLE FUTURE RESEARCH**

From this point forward, I would be interested in creating a social justice training for educators that touches on how to decenter the whiteness of our own experiences and instead center the experiences of our students. Delving deeper into decolonization and indigenization is also an interesting area of study that this could lead more into. Based on my findings, I would recommend that others interested in this area to research focus on ways to make widespread systematic change. My research narrows in on the individual teacher, but we, as a collective, need to continue bringing back our research to system-wide change. We begin at the classroom level, then shift our focus to school building/district, then focus our attention on national/policy level change.

I've mentioned a few ideas on areas of continued research based off of this capstone, however there are multiple areas on which further research could be conducted to make our schools a more just place. The next section examines limitations that I encountered while completing my capstone.

### **LIMITATIONS**



The most predominant limitation that I encountered while creating my project was that my original topic was too big to be covered in a short professional development series. To cover everything, I would need to create an entire course that has a major focus on social justice education for educators allowing for self reflection and growth. Within this course, intense anti-racism training would also be needed. I had to narrow in my project to focus on something that teachers could directly impact: their own classroom libraries. I also made sure to include a social justice and self-reflective piece in the project, as long term change will not occur without self-work.

Another limitation that I encountered related to the creation of this project and empowering educators was emotional in nature. Social justice work can be very disheartening and exhausting. It often feels as though you are constantly working uphill, and the institutional and systemic changes may seem impossible. I needed to come up with a way that kept educators engaged and hopeful, rather than disenchanted. My strategy was to encourage educators to start small, with a project that they could directly impact. After that, they could continue their work by applying pressure to publishers and policymakers.

The next section will explore my personal learning as it connects to this project.

### **PERSONAL LEARNING**

The first major learning that I came across is that this is an issue that many know about, yet there is no centralized way to solve this problem. One way that this problem could be solved would be an established nationwide policy that emphasizes the importance and need for diverse books. This policy would allow schools to allocate more

funds for diverse student libraries. This, in turn, will apply pressure on publishers to increase the number of authors of color signed and diverse books published.

The second major learning I experienced was that there has been a push for diversity in children's literature in the recent years; however, publishing companies are made up of mainly white cisgender men. This results in more books being published about BIPOC characters than are written by BIPOC authors. This brings in the issues of inauthenticity of narratives and othering, for example, depictions of smiling enslaved peoples.

The third major learning that I became aware of is that there must be a larger emphasis placed on social justice during teacher-training programs. Preservice teachers must be taught how to examine whether something is an authentic representation or whether it is inaccurate and harmful. There must also be a greater understanding and more self reflection of social identities for both preservice and licensed teachers. Discussing race critically is often uncomfortable, especially as a white person. We must build this cultural competency and self-knowledge within teachers, including those educators who do not work with diverse populations. The current political climate and rampant xenophobia, as well as the recent grassroots activism against institutionalized racism make these learnings more pressing.

As I was researching, I was disheartened to see the publishing statistics. Within the past few years, there has been such a push for diverse books with the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign and the #OwnVoices movement. As an optimist, I had expected the numbers of books published by BIPOC authors to have increased

substantially in response to these campaigns. However, rather than seeing the representation gap close, I noticed only a slight increase in publications by BIPOC authors. As a society, we must do better. We must invest in BIPOC and diverse authors and allow them to share their perspectives with readers. Without this, we will not truly reach justice.

The next section will focus on my concluding thoughts on my capstone project.

## **CONCLUSION**

This capstone project focused on my research question of *What is the best way to decenter whiteness and decolonize elementary literature, while empowering teachers and students to use literature as a tool for social justice?* Throughout this capstone, I attempted to answer this question in Chapters 1-3. In Chapter 1, I introduced myself as a reader, learner, and educator. I expanded upon my passion for social justice and my own personal anti-racism journey. I explained how I found myself researching ways to decenter whiteness and empower educators to use literature for social justice. In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature that prevalently features diverse authors, publishing trends and statistics, social justice, and student engagement and the achievement/opportunity gap. The three major themes that I molded my research and creation of my capstone project around are the current and previous state of diversity in children's literature, social justice through literature, and the achievement gap and student engagement, as it relates to reading. Chapter 3 explores in depth Knowles' Theory of Andragogy and the Adult learner and an outline of the structure of the project itself. Chapter 4 summarizes

Chapters 1-3 and reflects up on my project purpose, the literature review, possible future research, project implications, limitations of the project, and personal learning.

Throughout the creation of this capstone project, I've had to constantly reexamine my work, reflect upon my practices and beliefs, and reconnect with my reasoning behind my project. As someone who is constantly working towards social justice, I knew that this project could be the first step towards helping create a more just world. I hope that my work on this project and towards diverse representation allows other voracious readers to see themselves reflected in books they read.

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