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Availability of Diverse Books For Early Elementary Students

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AVAILABILITY OF DIVERSE BOOKS FOR EARLY ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

From a young age, I loved books. Part of my bedtime routine was picking out and reading books with my mom before going to bed. Although I had a large book collection as a child, I would often choose the same books each night. My go-to books were from the *Frog and Toad* (1970) and the *Berenstain Bears* series (1992). I also loved the books *Into My Mother's Arms* (2004) and *Goldfish and Chrysanthemums* (2003). Looking back, I believe I liked the books from the *Frog and Toad* and *Berenstain Bears* series because of the animal characters and the different adventures they went on and I liked the books *Into My Mother's Arms* and *Goldfish and Chrysanthemums* because I could identify with the characters. The characters in the books *Into My Mother's Arms* and *Goldfish and Chrysanthemums* were Asian, just like me. Despite going to a highly diverse public elementary school, the books I had at home were the only ones that were culturally relevant to me. Because of the lack of diverse books I experienced in school growing up, My question for this project is: *How does the availability of diverse books develop students' perspectives of other cultures?*

Chapter One will discuss the diversity in schools today and how it has increased over the past few decades. It will then further discuss the importance of diverse books as it pertains to my education growing up and professional experiences. This chapter will then go on to discuss the four ways I believe books can be diverse. They include diverse characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators. Next, this chapter will highlight the importance of having diverse books available to students as it helps students develop their understanding of culture. Lastly, the chapter will highlight my project as I will be

creating a website with writing, reading, and social-emotional lessons teachers and educators can use with early elementary students.

Background

Today, the student populations within schools are more diverse than ever (Peterson et al., 2000). Many students have step-parents or same-sex parents, and many students come from multiracial or even multigenerational families. The way families look today is quite different from the typical family composition that was common decades ago where students came from opposite-sex, monocultural parents with an average of two and a half children per family. Because students do not all look the same, it is important to have books in a classroom that represent all students. Gomez-Najarro (2020) and Harper and Brand (2010) suggest that it is important and empowering to have books in a classroom where students can see themselves. Being able to connect with book characters, authors, illustrations and illustrators benefits students and is essential for student success. Students are more engaged and are able to make connections to their own lives as they draw in their prior knowledge (Harper & Brand, 2010). They are also able to gain an understanding of new perspectives (Gomez-Najarro, 2020). Forming these connections also allows students to become more engaged and interested in learning.

Studies show that there are many benefits to students being exposed to diverse books in kindergarten. Some of these benefits include student success, positive self-image, and increased student engagement (Henderson et al., 2020). Students need to see characters in books that have the same skin color, celebrate their cultural holidays, and have families that look like theirs. Having characters in books that reflect students in a classroom help students feel like they belong and are not alone. This is crucial when it

comes to social-emotional books, books with a deeper meaning, or books that have a moral to the story. When students are struggling with their feelings, self-identity, self-worth, and difficult home life experiences, they can often feel alone and that no one can relate. However, knowing that even a book character may be experiencing the same thing as them helps them feel validated and that what they are feeling is normal and okay. These diverse books can allow students to feel like they are part of a community. This could then lead students to open up to a teacher and get the potential support they need.

Shaping my interest in this topic is the fact that I was adopted from China when I was fourteen months old and was raised in Minneapolis by a single mother. I went to a Minneapolis public elementary school and a Saint Paul public high School, both highly diverse school districts. Looking back at my elementary and high school years, I do not remember having books in the classroom that had characters with whom I could identify. There were no books with Asian characters let alone any books that had characters who were adopted or who were raised by single parents. Also, I did not identify with the authors, illustrations, or illustrators.

Professional Experience

It was during my student teaching experience in a second-grade classroom in a Minneapolis public school that I discovered the lack of diversity represented in books available to students. During this time I discovered the majority of books and literature students read were written and illustrated by Caucasian authors and illustrators. Also, the characters in the books and literature were Caucasian or the characters in the book were animals. I only read one book to the class with a character of color. The book was *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. I remember there were only two African American

students in the class and when I read the book, one of the two African American students' interests and engagement in the lesson increased dramatically. She was excited to share her culture with the class and have her peers learn from her. It was obvious that this student was proud of her culture.

Once I finished student teaching, I became a substitute teacher in Minneapolis Public Schools, a school district within a state with the highest achievement gap in the United States (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). During my second year as a substitute teacher in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), I found myself teaching fourth grade back to back during the same school year in two different schools. The first school was highly diverse with only one student reading at grade level. This was a slight surprise since roughly 35% of students between grades three and eight are below grade level for reading and/or math (Brandbury & Mecklenburg, 2001). The majority of students were two or three grades behind and some could not read at all. This school was extremely diverse as I had students from all cultural backgrounds. The class consisted of African American, LatinX, Native American, and Caucasian students. The second school had students from much more privileged backgrounds and it was much less diverse. Most of the students were Caucasian. There were only two African American students and one Native American student. At this school, all of the students could read and the majority of the students were at grade level. If they were not at grade level, they were one to two grades behind. Comparing the two classroom's literacy levels was eye-opening and made me think about the literacy curriculum and resources available to teachers, educators, and students. It made me wonder if the curriculum and resources were more diverse if the students from the first school would be as behind in literacy.

A few months later I found my own classroom in Saint Paul Public Schools. One of the first things I did after being hired was to look through my childhood books. I found books with Asian characters and other diverse characters reflective of the students I knew I would have in my classroom. Also, soon after being hired, without even seeing the classroom, I knew I wanted a great book collection. It did not matter to me if there were multiple copies of the same book. One can never have too many books, especially when several students all want to look at the same book. I then made a list of diverse books that I wanted in my classroom. When I made my book wish list I tried to incorporate books that had characters from all different cultural backgrounds. I wanted books to show several different cultures in one book and I wanted to have books that highlighted main characters of color. It was also important to me that the books had illustrations that accurately represented the cultures of others and I prioritized having books written and illustrated by people from all different cultural backgrounds. With the help of my family and friends, I was lucky enough to receive many of the books I picked out. A few weeks after school returned to in-person learning, I got a chance to look through and organize my classroom library. I was shocked and horrified by the book collection. Out of hundreds of books, there were only four books with characters of color. One book was about an African-American girl, one book was about an Asian girl and two were about LatinX children. I also noticed that the classroom library collection was lacking books with diverse authors and illustrators. The lack of diverse rich books available to students saddened me and made me grateful for the books I grew up reading at home. It also made me realize that as a student, I, too, had no exposure to diverse books at school. Reflecting on my childhood experiences, I better understood the impact of not having characters in

books at school that looked like me, and books that were written and illustrated by Asian people at school. As a teacher, it was my mission for students in my classroom to have a different experience. I wanted my students to have opportunities to be exposed to books reflective of their identity and cultural background. This left me curious and wondering how students are impacted when they are only exposed to monocultural books that are not inclusive or representative of the classroom community or society at large. I wanted to discover the significance diverse books have on students because diverse books allow students to gain a better understanding of who they are and who others are.

Rationale

Diverse books are a great way to help students develop an understanding of their culture and others' cultures. When looking at diverse books, I believe that there are four main areas where books can show diversity. They are characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators.

Reading and looking at books with diverse characters allow students to gain new cultural perspectives and help fulfill their curiosity (Harper & Brand, 2010). Also, books with diverse characters help students gain self-confidence, reassure them, and grow their self-worth and self-identity. When books have characters that students can relate to, students feel a sense of comfort (Harper & Brand, 2010). This connection allows students to feel accepted and understand that who they are is okay. Also, books with diverse characters allow students to gain a new perspective of others. This helps to fulfill their curiosity about who others are and how they live their lives (Harper & Brand, 2010).

In addition, it is important that books are diverse with regard to authors. Like students, authors come from all different backgrounds. Authors' race and background

contribute to their writing. Sometimes it is not obvious in their writing, however, who they are and their beliefs come across in their stories. Authors write from varying perspectives. This is especially evident when it comes to books about history. Since there are varying perspectives when it comes to history and different perspectives people have in life in general, it is important that there are diverse authors to represent all perspectives. In addition, it is important to have diverse authors because characters in books need to be portrayed accurately. Many books written about diverse characters are based on stereotypes and generalization (Gomez-Najarro, 2020). This leads the reader to be misinformed and does not give them an accurate perspective. Also, the word choice authors use is very personal and is often cultural. Sometimes authors include a few words in a different language. This then allows students to connect with that book on a greater level.

The final ways books need to be diverse is through illustrations and illustrators. Illustrations in a book allow students to gain a new perspective and understanding of what other cultures look like and act like. This is especially true for students who cannot read yet or are learning to read as they rely heavily on illustrations to tell them the story. Also, the art technique illustrators use can be very cultural and personal. Students may have art in their homes and if it looks similar to something they see at home, it could help draw them into the lesson as they can make connections to the pictures.

Since diverse books are such a powerful tool, my project will focus on creating a website with writing, reading, and social-emotional lessons for early elementary school teachers and educators to use with their students. I will include African American, Asian American, LatinX and, Native American books with read-aloud links teachers and

educators can share with their students if they do not have access to a hard copy of the book. In addition, I will include multicultural social-emotional books teachers and educators can use with their students. On my website, teachers and educators will also be able to find ready-made literacy lesson plans that highlight these diverse books and include an optional visual survey where students can reflect on their culture and the culture depicted in the book. All of the books, lessons, and surveys will be on the website I create so all teachers and educators can easily access them.

Summary

Having diverse books in a classroom is something that I realized is one of my top priorities as a teacher. Diverse books allow students to develop a better understanding of cultures while gaining confidence in who they are. Because diverse books are such a powerful resource, the main part of my project will be creating a website with writing, reading, and social-emotional lessons based on diverse books for early elementary teachers and educators to use. This project reflects my research question of *How does the availability of diverse books develop students' perspectives of other cultures?* The next chapter will discuss prior research showing the importance of having books with diverse characters, authors, illustrators, and illustrations. It will show the importance of diverse books when it comes to student success, cultural awareness and acceptance, and self-confidence. Chapter Two will also discuss the dangers of basing books on stereotypes and generalizations and the lack of diverse books.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introductions

The purpose of this capstone is to show the importance of having diverse books in a classroom and how it helps students develop their perspectives of cultures. The final product will be a website that will include writing, reading, and social-emotional lessons along with an optional cultural visual survey where students can reflect on their culture and the culture depicted in books. These lessons and materials will then be accessible on a website that I create. Chapter Two analyzes previous research done showing the importance of having diverse books available to early elementary students and the benefits of diverse books as it works towards answering the question: *How does the availability of diverse books develop students' perspectives of other cultures?* The first two sections of this chapter will define the terms student success and diversity. It is important to have a clear understanding of what students' success is as success means something different to everyone and how one becomes successful varies. Also, there is a section that discusses diversity as this term will be used throughout the paper and it is important to understand the importance of diversity in society today. The remaining sections of this chapter will highlight the importance and necessity for books with diverse characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators. It is important to have a section specifically about diverse characters as it is one of the leading ways students can develop an understanding of others' cultures and their own culture. In addition, it is important to have a section devoted to diverse authors and author's word choice and the perspective of

stories allows students to gain insight and a new perspective of other cultures. Lastly, it is significant to have a section focused on diverse illustrations and illustrators and pictures tell the story for students who are not yet reading or beginning to read. Throughout the sections, I will highlight the importance of being culturally accurate as stereotypes and generalizations have negative impacts on students' perspectives.

Student Success

Teachers who have years of experience believe that there is more to success than academic achievement (Schoeffel et al., 2011). Schoeffel et al. (2011) write that teachers' goals are to help students discover, build on their strengths, and learn from their mistakes. Teachers and educators may have varying goals for students, however, all teachers and educators can agree that one of their main goals for students is to be successful. Success allows students and educators to feel good about themselves. Although there are different perspectives to consider when looking at and defining success, no one is able to define success better than students themselves.

Student success is not solely based on academic achievement and scores like many would think. When Schoeffel et al.(2011) surveyed high school students, they suggested that student success is more about a sense of pride and being recognized for their hard work. Of course, students focused on the idea of extrinsic rewards, however, it was more than just materialistic rewards that made them feel successful. These students also discussed the importance of being able to balance everything they needed and wanted to do. They wanted to be able to keep up their academics and athletics along with their personal lives. They did not want to have to make sacrifices. Also, students defined success as being able to overcome and handle challenges and failures. Lastly, when asked

what success meant, students explained the importance of being a good, genuine person; someone who is compassionate and helps others.

Unlike Schoeffel et al. (2011), Collinson (2000) believes student success has to do with student achievement and that students reach academic achievement based on their learning style. Collinson (2000) believes that there is a correlation between student achievement and students' preferred learning styles. There has been a large increase in the number of learning styles created by education researchers over the past several decades. According to Collinson (2000), learning styles are all about personal preference. Where particular teaching or learning strategies may allow some students to learn, it does not allow others to learn. To better understand students' success and its correlation with learning styles, Collinson (2000) looked at third, fourth, and fifth-grade students in a general education classroom. A program called Learning Styles Inventory was used to determine students' learning styles (Collinson, 2000). The Learning Styles Inventory defines learning style in terms of four pervasive learning conditions. These learning conditions include environmental, sociological, emotional, and physical conditions. Students are then given a score between 20 and 80, 80 being the highest. If students score above sixty, it indicates that students have a high preference for that style while if students score below thirty-nine it indicates that it is not their preferred style. Thus, a score between 40 and 59 means that the students do not have a strong or low preference. Before Collinson's (2000) study, students filled out a questionnaire on the Learning Style Inventory in their classrooms. Their academic achievement was then based on Stanford Achievement Test composite scores. The study found that students who were low achieving had a greater preference for a formal learning environment. Collinson (2000)

also found that students had a higher preference to learn with a partner or in a group, unlike the higher achieving group who preferred to learn alone. Students who were low achieving also preferred to learn in the afternoon whereas the middle and high achieving students preferred to learn in the morning. Overall, this study shows that elementary school students have different ways they like to learn, thus different ways they are successful.

Despite Collinson's (2000) definition of student success and pathway to succeed, Schoeffel et al. (2011) argue that student success is more based on extracurriculars and relationships. Schoeffel et al.'s study found that students were successful when they participated in extracurricular activities. They also found that students who took more challenging classes scored better academically. Secondly, it is also important to consider the relationships students' have built when it comes to student success. Students who were seen as socially and emotionally competent by their advisors or deans were more successful according to Schoeffel et al (2011). Also, if students felt like they were well known by at least one adult it helped increase their chances of being successful. It was important for students to feel supported by their teachers. Teachers' actions had a greater impact on students compared to what teachers said. The relationships students had with their parents were significant, too, when it came to their success.

Not only is it important to understand the varying perspectives of what student success means and how to achieve success, but it is also helpful to know what students did not value when it came to succeeding. In Schoeffel et al. (2011), "almost no students spoke about particular academic subjects, classroom, or assignments that engaged them meaningfully enough to foster feelings of success through learning" (Schoeffel et al.,

2011, p.74). Also, it is important to recognize that success for students did not correlate with a love for learning even when they recognized their teachers' kindness. Rather, students focused on getting the assignment done.

By examining these two articles, it is evident that student success is complex and has varying views. Some believe student success is based merely on being a well-rounded person while others believe it is based on academic achievement. Also, how one becomes successful has varying perspectives as some believe it is based on extracurriculars, challenging one's self through classes and strong relationships while the other believes it is based on learning preferences. However, neither side recognizes the importance of culturally relevant teaching and the importance of diverse books. Culturally relevant teaching holds high significance because it helps students become more aware of their peers and helps create a sense of belonging in the classroom (Robinson, 2020). The following section will discuss the term diversity and the importance it plays in education.

Definition and Importance of Diversity

Classrooms have been becoming more diverse over the past several decades and today they are more diverse than ever before. Peterson et al.(2000) recognize that teachers are encountering higher numbers of racially and culturally diverse students today. According to Peterson et al. (2000) in 1995, 35% of public school students between first and twelfth grade were minority students. This was an 11% increase from 1976 and the increase has continued. Because of this increase in diversity, it is important to have a clear understanding of what diversity means.

According to White, diversity is about unity (White, 1995). People need to come together and strengthen their communities. They need to accept others' cultural and racial

backgrounds. As people learn to accept others' cultural and racial backgrounds, they need to recognize the differences and value them. Recognizing one's differences should never lead to unacceptance as that leads to suspicion and hate (White, 1995). White (1995) argues that diversity is created by people being smarter and more courageous. Healy (2019) adds that when it comes to defining diverse books, it is important that "books include protagonists and experiences that feature underrepresented ethnicities, disabilities, cultural or religious backgrounds, gender nonconformity, or LGBTQIA+ orientations" (Healy, 2019, para. 25).

Because students are more diverse than ever before today, Peterson et al. (2000) recognize that teachers and educators need to understand that the education system has flaws when it comes to the needs of racially and culturally diverse students. Foster (2006), too, recognizes this as she explains that one of the first steps in being responsive when teaching is to recognize that there is racism, sexism, classism, religious bigotry, and biases here in the United States. Teachers need to be aware of their biases and stereotypes and how it impacts their teaching. They also need to recognize that what they teach their students when it comes to race and culture impacts their students' views. Foster (2006) adds that teachers believing that diversity is not an issue is dangerous and people becoming complacent leads to inappropriate behaviors. People cannot overcome prejudice and privilege if people are continued to be treated differently because of their race, gender, ethnicity, or anything else that may make them different (Foster, 2006).

Peterson et al. (2000) show how easily persuaded students can be when it comes to learning about race and culture. This study looked to see the extent to which a class could skew students' perspectives on intolerance and multicultural issues. The study

consisted of 26 students; 25 Caucasian and one Hispanic. The question students were to answer was: “to what degree did this class change my views on intolerance and multicultural issues?” (Peterson et al., 2000, para. 5). Students could say they were greatly, somewhat, very little, and not at all impacted. They were also asked “what were the specific modifications in your view and what were the class activities and/or content areas impacting that change” (Peterson et al., 2000, para. 5). Students then participated in several activities in hopes of increasing their attitudes with regard to diversity. Students began by watching a 90-minute video called the Color of Fear followed by a discussion. The video was about “the pain and anguish that racism has caused in the lives of eight North American men of Asian, European, Latino, and African descent” (Peterson et al., 2000, para.7). Participants also worked with a group to research and present on diversity issues. Some of the issues included multicultural education, school funding, tracking, and retention in grades. Also, students worked in groups to apply what they were learning in the class to their life and applied “their understanding of diversity into model lessons” (Peterson et al., 2000, para. 10). In this study students also participated in classroom observation and took an exam as they reflected and thought critically throughout the course. Lastly, students met in small groups and participated in problem-solving activities that allowed them to get to know one another from a different perspective. The results showed how people can easily change their views on intolerance and multicultural issues. After participating 80.7% of the participants said their view changed greatly, 15.3% said somewhat and 3.8% said very little. No one said not at all. Students recognized that learning about other cultures and races expanded their perspective when it comes to different cultures. Through this study, many students did not realize the severity of racism

and the inequalities that occur in schools. This study helped students become more self-aware when it comes to how they view race. Also, this study proves that learning about others' cultures allows students to develop a better understanding of the different cultures and gain new perspectives.

Since learning about race and culture can help develop students' understanding of cultures, it is important that teachers and educators recognize these flaws in the education system when it comes to the lack of cultural diversity in the curriculum. It is their duty to improve their teaching to accommodate these diverse students. Classrooms should feel welcoming and safe for all students. Teachers and educators should encourage all students to achieve. One way teachers and educators can help students achieve is through culturally responsive teaching. According to Vavrus (2008), the goal of culturally responsive teaching is to increase students of color's engagement and motivation. Historically, students of color have been less successful academically and socially isolated in public schools. Culturally responsive teaching incorporates students' cultures and the school's curriculum. "If our current study body does not reflect the total community make-up, it is our job to find how to reach out to the missing groups and make them feel welcomed" (Foster, 2006, p.4). How to reach and connect with students of color and make them feel welcomed when one identifies differently is the challenging part.

Foster (2006), White (1995), and Healy (2019) recognize different ways one can connect and help students of color feel welcome. Foster (2006) is well aware of diversity training, field experiences and instructional methodologies teachers and educators go through in hopes of being more culturally responsive in the classroom. Being aware of

the need for culturally responsive lessons is the start; however, White (1995) and Healy (2019) take it one step further as they explain exactly how to make one's lessons culturally responsive through the use of books. Gomez-Najarro (2020) agrees with White and Healy as she recognizes that books are an essential resource in classrooms. With the idea that diversity is unity, White (1995) explains that libraries are significant when discussing the importance of unity. Healy's (2019) report shows that based on the School Library Journal's 2018 Diverse Collections Survey of 22,000 people, 81 percent of people believed it was very important for children and teens to have a diverse book collection. Healy poses the question of "What does it mean if you never see yourself in a story?" (Healy, 2019, para. 27). She then goes on to say that it is dehumanizing and invalidates who you are as a person. Not only is it important to have a diverse book collection, but it is also crucial that the books represent race and culture in an appropriate manner. White (1995) recognizes that libraries can be harmful when talking about diversity as books do not always accurately portray race but rather emphasize U.S. nationality. Books are often told from one perspective. That perspective also often only portrays a positive perspective and shines a light on the topic rather than giving the reader a full perspective.

Overall, it is important to recognize that the term diversity goes beyond just race and culture. It is all about learning about others, accepting others for who they are, and unity. Diversity is focused on recognizing the underrecognized. What teachers and educators teach their students is powerful and greatly impacts their thinking. Because of this, teachers need to recognize the flaws the education system has with regard to diversity and adapt their lessons to be culturally responsive. Teachers and educators can

do this by attending workshops but more importantly, teachers and educators can make their lessons more culturally responsive by having diverse books available to students.

The following section will discuss the importance of having diverse book characters.

Diverse Characters

As discussed in the previous section, diverse books impact students greatly and lead to student success. Today, many teachers and educators recognize the benefits of having diverse books available to students. This section will focus on the advantages of having diverse book characters. However, when choosing diverse book characters it is crucial that the book characters are racially and culturally sensitive (Harper & Brand, 2010).

The first benefit of having books with diverse characters available to students is that seeing and reading about diverse characters allows students to gain a positive self-identity. Henderson et al. (2020) argue that a diverse book collection can support readers' identities. They go on to say that books allow students to understand why they matter and why they are significant. Harper and Brand (2010) also agree that it is important that students see themselves in books and are able to connect with the characters. Reading books and looking at the illustrations allow children to create a greater understanding of themselves and others. "A child may see his or her own characteristics, idiosyncrasies, interaction, and feelings reflected and affirmed in a character" (Harper & Brand, 2010, p.224). Since students gain a sense of self-identity, it is important that teachers and educators think about who their students are and who the characters in the book are.

Also, Gomez-Najarro (2020) highlights that studies have shown that diverse books increase students' motivation to read as they are able to draw connections to their personal lives, give them a voice, and affirm their culture and identities. When teachers are culturally responsive in their teaching, academic achievement increases. However, it is also important to recognize that academic success is not met by recognizing a single aspect of how a student identifies but rather the “dynamic intersections of multiple social identity markers and the complex historical, social and political conditions that help shape those constructions of intersectional identity” (Gomez-Najarro, 2020, pp. 394).

Thirdly, having books with diverse characters allows students to be accepting of different people as they learn perspectives other than their own. Henderson et al. (2020) and Gomez-Najarro (2020) both recognize the importance of having diverse books as it allows students to consider the perspectives of others around the world and develop cultural awareness. According to Harper and Brand (2010), students are curious about others and how their lives may be similar or different. One way teachers can help students fulfill their curiosity is by giving students opportunities to see the different ways people around the world live and the experiences of others. Seeing these similarities and differences creates acceptance as they not only value who they are but who others are, too. Stories allow people to gain a full perspective of who someone is and the ups and downs that occur. Books allow students to gain a new perspective as they gain an appreciation for new ideas and experiences. Instead of focusing on the differences in what could be a negative manner, books allow students to see the differences in a unifying manner and accept people for who they are. Diverse books help create unity, and they can also spark a great discussion.

Continuing with the idea of diverse book characters unifying students, Harper and Brand (2010) explain that beginning from a young age, students need to recognize people of color, religious minorities, regional cultures, the disabled, and the aged as this understanding helps build cross-cultural understanding. Because there is a higher number of multiracial and multicultural people today, it is important that students from a young age begin to be aware and sensitive to the different needs people have. One way to help students become aware and sensitive to people's needs is through books. "High-quality multicultural literature has the capacity to foster children's understanding of and respect for their own cultures, as well as the cultures of others" (Harper & Brand, p.224, 2010). When books accurately represent different races and cultures, it helps students understand more. Books can help get rid of preconceived ideas and build community.

Since books with diverse characters are so powerful when it comes to student success, it is important to consider different aspects when choosing these books. According to Harper and Brand (2010), teachers and educators should examine the books' plot, characterization, setting, theme, and point of view. When looking at a books' plot, it is important that the books seem realistic because students can better comprehend what is happening, and more importantly, they can make meaningful connections to the story. Also, teachers and educators need to examine a book's characters. It is important that they think about if the characters are believable and if universal human emotions, attitudes, needs, and experiences are reflected. Also, teachers and educators need to ask themselves if the characters represent people from a variety of cultural groups and if the characters' lifestyles are realistic (Harper & Brand, 2010). Lastly, Harper and Brand (2010) argue that when looking at the characters in a book, it is important to consider if

both female and male characters are shown in leadership roles. Ultimately, there needs to be a variety of genres that accurately portray cultures and races. The more diverse books are, the better understanding students will have of different settings, themes, values, and perspectives. Books are most beneficial when they surprise students and change their perspectives on who they are. This is especially important for younger students (Harper & Brand, 2010). Harper and Brand (2010) continue to explain that students who can believe change their perspective themselves show signs of being able to embrace multiculturalism. It is extremely important to recognize that the message teachers emphasize through books needs to show respect for diverse cultures.

To restate, when choosing diverse books based on character, it is important to consider who one's students are and who the characters in the book are. It is also important to have books with diverse characters as students can feel accepted and part of a community when they see themselves in books. Lastly, it is important to consider the book's plot, setting, theme, and point of view as it has a significant impact on how students view themselves and others' cultures.

Underrepresentation and Misrepresentation of Diverse Characters

Although books with diverse characters show many positive recognizable effects on student success, there is still a lack of books with diverse characters available to students. According to Gomez-Najarro (2020) when looking at books in the 21 century, it was evident the disparity books have when it comes to representing people of color. Out of 3,500 books published in 2014, only 11% were about characters of color or included characters of colors. In 2017 the numbers were not better. Out of 3,700 books published in 2017, 336 had African or African American characters of color and even fewer books

represented American Indians/First Nation, Asian/Pacific, or Asain/Pacific American or Latinx characters. Not only were characters of color underrepresented, but they were also represented based on negative stereotypes. This misrepresentation of characters will be addressed later in this section. Gomez-Najarro (2020) also found a lack in character diversity when it came to the Common Core State Standard books known as text exemplars. These books did not reflect the diversity in schools despite schools being more diverse than ever before. This lack of diversity within books may have a negative impact on children across the United States. In her study, she examined the diversity of 20 fictional books that were recommended and considered exemplars for second and third-grade students. Out of these 20 fictional books that were recommended to read out loud to students or have students read independently, only a few had characters from minoritized social groups, communities, and experiences. In fact, out of these books, it was more common to have characters that were animals than characters of color. To be exact, 10 books had animals as characters compared to three books that had characters of color. Also, it is important to note that the majority of these books had White and/or male characters. There were nine books with White main characters and seventeen books with male characters. This is significantly more than the number of books with females. Out of the 20 books, only three had female characters. These female characters rarely had a main role in the story, too. According to Gomez-Najarro (2020), Children's Book Center Director Kathreeln Horning believes that the number of books that have diverse characters could rise one year, but then decrease the following year. Kathleen Horning argues that if schools are not actively seeking diverse books, publishers do not feel the need and urgency to publish and print diverse books (Gomez-Najarro, 2020). That being

said, not only do schools need to add more diverse books into their curriculum, they need to be wise when selecting the books.

It is crucial that books accurately portray the race and culture of the characters. Gomez-Najarro (2020) explains that books and children's literature that are based on biases and do not accurately represent race and culture are problematic and lead to learning implications. When students continue to see themselves in learning resources such as books, they assume they are entitled to privilege, while students who are not represented begin to isolate themselves, begin to detach from the world and begin to feel like they do not matter. By having curriculum and school resources that are monocultural and have simplistic representations of self-identity, K-12 students who identify with the monoculture being shown repeatedly will begin to develop social hierarchies. By not including diverse books, teachers and educators are also missing an opportunity to engage diverse learners. Gomez-Najarro (2020) explains that books where students can see themselves have proven to increase their desire to read as they can make important connections to their lives, give them a voice, and affirm their culture and identity.

Also, it is important to think about whether or not the book challenges stereotypes and biases. Teachers and educators need to understand that when books and other learning resources teachers use are biased and disproportional, teachers are missing a chance to engage diverse students in meaningful learning (Gomez-Najarro, 2020). Not only should the book challenge stereotypes and biases, but it should also provide insight into the lives of diverse people. As mentioned earlier, this insight allows students to gain an understanding of what is unfair and think about the perspectives and values of others. Although young students would not necessarily recognize that they are reflecting on

unfairness and the perspective of others, they are challenging the inequalities that many faces. Older students, on the other hand, are able to recognize the inequalities some characters face. Leland et al. (2013) did a study where five middle school classrooms examined picture books for stereotypes. They looked to see how male characters were depicted compared to female characters. In this study, teachers chose what they refer to as “edgy” picture books. After reading the book the class discussed social issues they saw within the book. The book they read in this study was called *Just Like Josh Gibson*. It was about a grandmother who was reminiscing about her love for baseball. The grandmother could play better than any of the boys; however, she was not allowed to play simply because she was a girl. However, she was then allowed to play because one of the boys got injured and she filled in for him. In the end, she was the star of the game. After reading the book, students were put into small groups to discuss the stereotypes they saw in the book and the book’s ending. All of the groups recognized the sexism that occurred as only boys could play sports. Most of the groups thought the story had a happy ending, too. However, one student expressed her anger with how the books ended. She did not understand why the grandmother was happy in the end as she only got to play that one game. None of her classmates saw her point of view as they described the story taking place a long time ago and said that it was irrelevant because girls can do whatever they want now. On the contrary, one student did not recognize the sexism in the book and thought it was a good story for children and the fact that there was sexism in the book was not an issue. Leland et al. (2013) believe that reading critically leads to questioning and challenging assumptions that many people take for granted in the world. There is more to critical reading than reading a text and thinking about what is said. Critical

literacy has “focused on identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place” (Leland et al., 2013, p.6). The goal of critical thinking is to think about what one reads and create a more mature and wholesome perspective.

Cortes (2001), like Gomez-Najarro (2020) and Leland et al. (2013), recognizes the harm in stereotypes and generalizations; however, Cortes (2001) tries to distinguish between the two. He begins by saying that stereotypes and generalizations both have negative effects on students, however, Cortes (2001) believes that schools need to help students learn to develop and sensitively use group generalizations while mitigating the possibility that these generalizations will harden into stereotypes. One way this can be done through literature is by teaching students the nature, similarities, and subtle distinctions between generalizations and stereotypes. Cortes (2001) recognizes that differentiating between generalizations and stereotypes is not easy, however, he believes that “group generalization must be flexible and permeable” (Cortes, 2001, p. 5, 2001). He believes that groups' knowledge can change as new information is found along with the development of new ideas and interpretations that could change current beliefs. Stereotypes, on the other hand, are fixed, rigid, and resistant to new findings, especially if they contradict or question beliefs. Although Cortes (2001) makes a distinction between the two, others would believe that books that make generalizations and use stereotypes are equally harmful.

Despite the recognition and harm that stereotypes and generalizations have on students, there are still several popular pieces of literature today that show diverse characters based on stereotypes and generalizations. One of these pieces of literature is

Bless Me, Ultima. This book has harmful stereotypes when it comes to Latino male characters. *Bless Me, Ultima* portrays the main character's brothers as worthless as they do not help out their mother and abandon their father (Hasse, 2002). Hasse (2002) also recognizes that the plotline includes LatinX characters making poor decisions as they visit a local brothel, drink, and party and have sexual exploits. Another example of a popular book that does not accurately portray Latino males is *Chato & the Party Animals*. Although these male LatinX cats are loved by many, they represent gang culture (Hasse, 2002). Also, the main character Chato does not have a family and does not know when his birthday is. *Chato & the Party Animals'* theme is offensive to LatinX families who have personally witnessed this type of gang mentality while other middle-class LatinX families cannot relate to gang life at all (Hasse, 2002). The last piece of literature that Hasse (2002) examines that is offensive and is based on stereotypes is the poem *Vatos*. Although this poem shows a real photograph of LatinX people, it highlights lower-class Hispanic, migrant workers, and gang members. Out of the 49 pictures taken in the poem, only three showed middle-class LatinX people (Hasse, 2002).

Overall, it is important that books represent the cultures of others accurately. It is important to examine potential stereotypes and biases the characters in the book may carry and have students reflect, discuss and challenge these inequalities. Like having diverse characters in books, it is also important to consider who is writing the books and include diverse authors in a classroom library. The following section will examine the importance of diverse authors.

Diverse Authors

Having books available to students that are written by diverse authors is essential when it comes to students' success because these books build students' vocabulary, perspectives, and help them view themselves as writers Wissman (2010). Wissman (2010) explains that resources not only need to be continuous and culturally accurate, but they also need to recognize the faults in the monolingual white-middle class standards.

Harper and Brand (2010) argue that like choosing books with diverse book characters' it is important to consider a few things. The first thing teachers and educators need to think about is if the author is qualified to write the book about the topic at hand Harper and Brand (2010). This is especially important when the topic focuses on race and culture Harper and Brand (2010). If teachers and educators believe that the author is qualified, it is then important to think about what makes the author qualified Harper and Brand (2010). One way an author can be qualified is if they have lived with the racial or cultural group they are writing about Harper and Brand (2010).

There is a lack of books written by people of color (Buescher et. al, 2016). Because of this, it is crucial that when books are written about race and culture that they accurately tell the story and history behind the events. Gardner (2020) explains that according to the Cooperative Children's Books Center there is a lack of books written by Black authors. In 2018, out of 340 books featuring Black characters, only 100 of them were written or illustrated by Black people. Gardner argues that:

The absence of Black authors diminishes opportunities for children's literature to serve as a site of fugitivity. Fugitive literacies provide readers with opportunities

to engage with literacies and literature that center black experiential (embodied) knowledge and resist assimilationist literacies and literature, which are those valued and validated by white supremacy. (Gardner, 2020, p.9)

Gardner (2020) believes that even if the disproportion in Black authors is unintentional, it is an act of anti-Blackness and shows white privilege and power. Instead, teachers and educators must participate in critical racial literacy practices and have their students do the same. Gardner (2020) believes that Black people need to write about their own stories to avoid White imagery. It is the job of Black authors “to shape an aesthetic resistance that countered the normalized ideologies of white innocence and beauty the social hierarchies that were precipitated through the proliferation of racial ephemera, toys, games, songs language, and literature” (Garndner, 2020, p.1). Between 1920 and 1922 a magazine called *The Brownies' Book* was published. The magazine was written by Black authors, one of which was Langston Hughes. This magazine focused on normalizing being a person of color and recognizing it as something beautiful. Some of the themes included the importance of African and having books (Gardner, 2020). The goal of the magazine was to “inform, affirm and empower black children” (Garder, 2020, p.11). Also, this magazine helped pave a way for African American artists and writers (Gardner, 2020).

In the 1960s there was a Black liberation movement and the Black Arts Movement. These movements helped books written by Black authors gain recognition. Their stories “reflected bolder articulations of Black consciousness, cultural sovereignty, and beauty (Gardner, p. 11, 2020). These authors took pride as they wrote about their everyday lives as Black children. In 1965, the book *All-White World of Children's Books*

by Nancy Larricks came out that increased awareness of what Black parents, educators, clergy, and librarians' lives were like. This then allowed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to be passed. With help from the Johnson administration, this bill gave schools money to buy books that represented Black students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act gave money to help schools buy books with Black authors and illustrators (Gardner, 2020, p. 11). A few years later the book *Zeely* was published and recognized as an important turning point for African American children's literature (Gardner, 2020). *Zeely* "showcased Black creativity and aesthetic values through a multilayered fictional story told with folkloric references, magical realism, and diaspora references to Blackness" (Gardner, 2020, p. 11). This then helped pave a path for young authors of color such as Ibi Zoboi and Tomi Adeyemi.

In all, it is important to have books written by diverse authors. It is important to consider if authors are qualified to write about race and cultural topics and what makes them qualified. When students read books written by diverse authors, they gain a new perspective of the world and they learn to accept all cultures including their own. Reading literature by diverse authors also allows students to feel inspired to write and share their own stories.

Word Choice

Also, word choice is significant in books therefore it is important to have books written by diverse authors. However, it is important to make sure the language the author uses is authentic. Wissman (2010) recognizes that to truly value diversity, people have to be aware of curriculum and assessments that include multiple languages. Sometimes, authors will include vocabulary words or phrases that are significant and unique to their

culture. Some authors will write a full book in their native language. Since different languages are being included in authors' writing, it is important that these books are culturally aware and accurate. One of Wissman's (2020) goals was to find books written in Spanish, Arabic, and Korean; however, that was a challenge. Wissman says:

Nevertheless, engaging in conversation about the multiple languages in the books that we could provide, having communications translated into families' home languages, and requesting that caregivers write in the language they felt most comfortable with reflected the kind of cultures we endeavored to cultivate; one that was welcoming and honored the rich linguistic traditions of families and that communicated to students the existence of multiple languages in our shared world. (Wissman, 2020, para.11)

Through the use of vocabulary words, students will learn to comprehend, infer, analyze, image, and create. Books written by diverse authors available to students will also allow students to build their vocabulary. According to Harper and Brand, "when children listen to multicultural literature they are exposed to new vocabulary-general words and high-frequency words, in addition to more challenging vocabulary and unfamiliar concepts" (Harper & Brand, 2010, pp. 225). Oftentimes these challenging vocabulary words and new concepts are used when talking about geography, ethnicity, customs, and vocabulary connected with the different traditions practiced around the world.

Like having books available with diverse characters, books written by diverse authors allow students to accept different cultures including their own while gaining new perspectives. According to Wissman (2020), when students hear these cultural

vocabulary words, it helps them understand and respect their culture or the culture of that group. Harper and Brand (2020) found similar findings when students discussed books with diverse characters. “These discussions and use of vocabulary and understanding allow students to understand the cultural heritage, gain respect and value groups of people of color, develop empathy and help students become more aware and appreciative of others’ opinions, perspectives, and experiences” (Harper & Brand, 2010, pp. 225). These cultural vocabulary words also allow students to make connections to their lives as they draw in their prior knowledge. Lastly, it is important for teachers and educators to have books written by diverse authors because it allows students’ view themselves as authors (Wissman, 2020). Wissman wants students to recognize that their words are powerful and important (Wissman, 2020).

It is evident the impact diverse authors have on students; however, like the lack of books with diverse characters, there are also not enough books written by diverse authors according to Buescher et. al (2016). Since there is a lack of books written by diverse authors, it is important that teachers do their part by recognizing how they teach the book. Books are a guide for teachers. Berchini (2016) and Gomex-Najarro both recognize the flaws with the Common Core’s book recommendations. Berchini (2016) writes “books seem to represent traditional English language arts curriculum, which historically excluded literacy contributors by authors of color” (Berchini, 2016, p.55). Because of the lack of books written by diverse authors, students and readers are not gaining a full perspective. This lack of diversity in authors also leads to exclusion of racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students as White students are able to make meaningful connections to books while students of color cannot.

To summarize, it is important to have books written by diverse authors because of authors' word choices. Ultimately, it is best for authors to write about their own history, race, and culture. Lastly, diverse authors can tie in their cultural language, which can allow students of color to make more meaningful connections. The next section will discuss the importance of having diverse illustrations and illustrators.

Diverse Illustrations and Illustrators

Diverse illustrations and diverse illustrators are equally important as having books with diverse characters and books written by diverse authors. Picture books are a significant resource in classrooms. Creany (1993), believes that the illustrations are just as significant as the words in books as pictures help the story have meaning. "By definition, the picture storybook is a picture book in which words and illustrations have equal responsibility for telling the story" (Creany et. al, 1993, pp. 3-4). Mendoza & Reese (2001) explain how there are three different types of picture books. The first type of picture book does not have words. Instead, they rely on illustrations to tell the story. The second type of picture book is what Mendoza and Reese (2001) refer to as picture storybooks, where the words and illustrations in a book work together to tell a story. The final type of picture book is illustrated books where the words in a book tell most of the story while the illustrations help add to the story and can be viewed as decoration. Words and illustrations cannot tell a story alone, however, illustrations can "create potentially powerful images of human beings" (Mendoza & Reese, 2001, p. 5).

While Mendoza and Reese (2001) share the three different types of picture books, Wissman (2020) explains the importance of the illustrations in books as she recommends four different ways to incorporate picture books when reading with diverse learners. They

include entering the story world together, allow families to be part of students' learning, value multiple languages, and celebrate students as authors. Wissman highlights the importance of including families. Doing these things will allow students to become more aware of who they are and their identity (Wissman, 2020).

The pictures in books allow students to learn and gain a greater understanding of a story. Mendoza & Reese (2001) recognize that all picture books with people can have an educational impact even if teaching was not the goal of reading the book. "For the child, illustrations and text combine and create a particular view of individuals as well as groups of people-complete with messages about what those people are like" (Mendoza & Reese, 2001, p. 5). Koltz and Kersten-Parrish (2020) also recognize that learning can be developed through illustrations. They believe that the pictures in books can help students learn visually, all while having students work on analyzing stories and improving their literacy skills (Koltz & Kersten-Parrish, 2020). Wissman (2020), too, sees the impact illustrations have on students. She argues that pictures allow students to be inspired. Teachers and educators will often overlook picture books when teaching reading interventions to students who are struggling to read and bilingual students (Wissman, 2020). Instead, teachers and educators will turn to reading programs or teaching specific literacy skills (Wissman, 2020). However, Wissman (2020) argues that accessing diverse books that highlight diverse characters and settings is even more challenging. Wissman (2020) recognizes how pictures can be transformative as they allow students to understand on a deeper level (Wissman, 2020). The pictures help students understand what they are reading and comprehend the storyline. Also, the pictures in books help students feel supported. They are especially important when it comes to social and

emotional learning. Koltz & Kersten-Parrish (2020) argue that hands-on learning allows students to grow their academic and social-emotional learning skills. These pictures help students' engage as they share their thoughts on the pictures found in the story. Lastly, picture books can help teachers and educators, too, as they allow students to have hands-on learning while interpreting stories and making connections to the stories along the way (Koltz & Kersten-Parrish, 2020).

It is clear that many believe in the great importance of diverse illustrations. Because of this, it is crucial that the people and cultures in the book are depicted accurately. When choosing a book and looking at the illustrator, teachers and educators can ask themselves if diverse characters are represented. Harper and Brand (2010) then go on to argue that if there is diversity represented within cultural groups, characters need to be realistically portrayed. Illustrations need to be authentic and demonstrate respect for all cultures and avoid stereotypes. Lastly, when considering an illustrator, it is important to think about if they are qualified to make the pictures and if so, what makes them qualified.

Like the lack of diverse book characters and diverse authors, there is also a lack of diverse illustrations and illustrators. It is clear that diverse illustrations in a book are necessary, however, they, too, are hard to come by. According to Creany (1993), there are few children's books that reflect children of color and that are written and illustrated by authors and illustrators of color. In the 1990s it was estimated that only two percent of books reflected the experiences of African American people and even fewer reflected other people of color. According to Mendoza and Reese (2001), before the 1960s people of color were not seen in children's books and if they were depicted, they were depicted

based on stereotypes and/or from a negative point of view. Creany (1993) recognizes the flaws in illustrations, too, as she says that illustrations in books are sometimes inaccurate, watered-down, or even stereotypical. When illustrations based on stereotypes are found in books, it is often older books. One book that shows illustrations based on stereotypes is the book *The Five Chinese Brothers*. The illustrations in this book show the characters with yellow skin, wearing collie hats, with a long cue hanging down their backs. Newer books sometimes show illustrations based on stereotypes, too. This can be seen in the book *Alligators All Around*. *Alligators All Around* is an alphabet book. For the letter “I” the author writes “imitating Indians” and the illustrations show feather headdresses and tomahawks. Mendoz and Reese (2001) also write about a book written and illustrated by Caucasian people where there are Native American people who are not accurately represented. They recognize that the words and illustrations in this book are based on a certain perspective that is not accurate and misleading. Misleading illustrations can also be seen in the award-winning book *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*. This book, too, is written and illustrated by Caucasian people. However, when it was reviewed by Native Americans, they pointed out serious problems with the text and illustrations. “Several illustrations, including the cover, show Native people as partially transparent, ghost-like figures” (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Also, the Native American people are illustrated wearing historical traditional clothing rather than contemporary clothing. By doing this, it “suggests that Native Americans, in contrast to European Americans, no longer exist as viable people. They have vanished and are only memories or spirits” (Mendoza & Reese, 2001, p.8). It is also important to recognize how Caucasian people are depicted in these illustrations. In contrast, the Caucasian people on the front cover look like people rather

than ghosts. Esquivel (2019) did a study examining two different cultural Cinderella stories. In each book, the illustrator does not accurately portray each culture as all the characters in Cinderella have one skin color (Esquivel, 2019). This then gives the reader the perspective that all Caucasian people have the same color which is not true (Esquivel, 2019). This misrepresentation can also be seen in *Estrellita de Oro/Little Golden Star* as all of those characters have the same skin color (Esquivel, 2019). Again, this gives the reader the false impression that all LatinX people have the same skin color (Esquivel, 2019). Finally, Mendoza and Reese also write about the inaccurate representation in the books *Arrow to the Sun and Knots on Counting Rope*. In *Arrow to the Sun and Knots on Counting Rope* the author and illustrator Gerald McDermott does not accurately represent Pueblo life, beliefs, and religious practices (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Mendoza and Reese (2001) recognize that Pueblo people use kivas as ceremonial and instructional places rather than a place for trials. This then misinforms the reader. Misleading information based on illustrations can be seen in the story *Knots on a Counting Rope*. The illustrator sets the story in the Navajo nation, however, the illustrator's work shows a combination of cultures from other nations (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). One example of how the illustrations are inaccurate is through the drawing of the Navajo men's hairstyles (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). These men are depicted as having traditional Atsina, Blackfeet, Mandan, and Piegna hairstyles (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Also, in the story Native Americans are illustrated at a horse race wearing traditional ceremonial clothing that would not be the appropriate attire for the occasion (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

Although there are still not enough illustrations showing characters of color or diverse illustrators, Mendoza & Reese (2001) argue that accurate representations of race

and culture through illustrations is crucial as multicultural picture books showing various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups help young children understand others' perspectives and affirm children from diverse backgrounds. Five years later this became clear when a librarian named Nancy Larrick wrote an article called *The All-White World of Children's Books*. However, after this article was published and between the 1960s and 1970s, books for children and adults began to be more culturally aware as they showed diverse lifestyles, world views, perspectives of all cultural groups, and highlighted cultural traditions and values (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). In the decades to follow, people were able to find picture books written and illustrated by African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans. Also, there was an increase in books that accurately portrayed gay and lesbian people, people with disabilities, and religions besides Christianity (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Also, Creany et al. (1993) found that even if an illustrator was not from that race or culture it is still possible for them to create accurate illustrations representing different cultures and races. They write about "the Native American folktales retold and illustrated by Goble reflect the Plains Indians belief in the interrelatedness of nature and respect for all living creatures" (Creany et. al, 1993, p.6). It is evident from the illustrations that Globe took his time to research symbols and motifs that are significant to Plain Indians.

Overall, it is important to have illustrations that accurately represent different races and cultures. Inaccurate pictures lead to misinformation. Because of this, it is important to consider who is doing the illustrations, what makes the illustrator qualified, and if the illustrations accurately represent race and culture. It is important to have illustrations that are accurate depictions of people of color because it leads to

empowerment. Students are able to connect on a deeper level which is especially important when it comes to social and emotional learning.

Summary

This chapter discussed the importance of having diverse books available to students. It began by discussing the terms student success and diversity. Chapter Two then went into depth about the importance of having books with diverse characters. Some of the benefits of having books with diverse characters are that students gain confidence in who they are, they gain a new perspective and acceptance of others' culture, and their curiosity of how others live is fulfilled. However, there is a great need for more books that have diverse characters as students are more diverse today than ever before. This chapter then went onto discuss the importance of diverse authors. When stories are told by authors from different cultural backgrounds, it allows readers to gain another perspective and it allows readers to build on their vocabulary. Also, it is important to recognize the significance of diverse illustrations and illustrators. Students who are not yet reading or are beginning to read rely heavily on the pictures. Because of this, it is important that illustrators accurately represent illustrations in books, so the reader is given an accurate representation of different cultures.

The next chapter will discuss how I came to my research question. I will also explain my project of creating a website with a collection of diverse books and ready-made literacy and social-emotional lessons. In my project, I will also include optional visual surveys teachers and educators can use with their students to help their students reflect on their cultural views.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

This project focused on the significance of diverse books for early elementary school students. The question this project answered was: *How does the availability of diverse books develop students' perspectives of other cultures?* The previous chapter discussed prior research showing the importance of having books with diverse characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators. It also discussed the lack of books showing diverse characters and the need for books written and illustrated by people of color.

Chapter Three will discuss how I created my website with writing, reading, and social-emotional lessons based on diverse books that early elementary teachers and educators can use with their students. This chapter will then include previous research that supports my project. I will then go on to discuss the setting of my project and who the project is intended for. Lastly, Chapter Three will discuss the timeline of the project.

Project Overview

The goal of this capstone was to show the significant role diverse books play in elementary classrooms. In this study, it was important to recognize that the increase in diversity among students has increased over the past several decades (Peterson et al., 2000). Also, it was important to understand the power that having diverse books has on students' success. Gomez-Najarro (2020) emphasized the importance of having children's books in classrooms as books allow children to be culturally aware and gain new perspectives. Henderson et al. (2020) also recognized the importance of diverse books as they believed diverse books help students develop positive self-identities. However, it

was crucial that these diverse books portray cultures and races accurately as stereotypes and generalizations can be harmful (Gomez-Najarro, 2020). Because diverse books have such a significant impact on students, I created a website that has ready-made lesson plans for teachers and educators to use with their diverse early elementary students. These lessons are based on diverse books and focus on writing, reading, and social-emotional learning. Teachers and educators can incorporate these lessons into their everyday lessons with students. Also, I created a cultural visual survey teachers and educators can use with their students to help their students reflect on their race and culture and the race and culture of others.

To summarize, several prior studies have shown the importance of having diverse books in classrooms. Because diverse books are so essential, I created ready-made lessons for teachers to use with their students along with an optional visual survey where students can reflect on race and culture.

Research Framework

Teachers and educators are often given a curriculum that is not culturally relevant. The books that are suggested in lessons do not represent the students in their classrooms. In some cases, these books are offensive and are based on stereotypes and generalizations (Cortes, 2001; Gomez-Najarro, 2020; Leland et al., 2013). Since students are very diverse today, it is important to be culturally aware when teaching and incorporate diverse books into daily lessons. Having diverse books available to students is important to me because I was a substitute teacher for a year and a half in the school district with the highest achievement gap. I now have my own classroom in a highly diverse school district and

one of the main goals for the school district is to close the achievement gap. One way to close the achievement gap is through the use of diverse books.

Books are a necessary resource for students. Henderson et al. (2020) recognized that diverse books allow students to gain a better understanding of their self-identity and Gomez-Najarro (2020) explained how diverse books affirm students' cultures and races. Diverse books also allow students to learn the perspectives of others according to Henderson et al. (2020) and Gomez-Najarro (2020). Diverse books help students of color become more engaged in their learning (Vavrus, 2008). Healy (2019) posed a great question for readers to consider. She asked, what does it mean if readers never see themselves in books? She goes on to explain that it dehumanizes a person and shows them that they do not matter. Also, it is important that books are accurate and do not portray races and cultures based on stereotypes as this is harmful to one's self-identity and gives others the wrong perspective (Harper & Brand, 2010). Because of this, it was important for me to consider the different ways books can be diverse. When looking at books I believe there are four main aspects to consider. These main aspects include characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators.

This project is important as teachers and educators need to recognize the importance of having diverse books available to young children. It is necessary for teachers and educators to value diverse books as books are a great resource for learning. Books allow children to gain new perspectives, develop awareness for their culture and identities, and become accepting of the other cultures around them. The authors' word choice in books helps build students' vocabulary while illustrations help tell the story and allow young readers to comprehend what is happening. However, having diverse books

available and sharing them with children is not enough. It is important that teachers and educators of young readers consider whether or not the diversity represented in books is appropriate and accurate (Wissman, 2010). Having diverse books available to students and children is crucial, however, books cannot be based on stereotypes and generalizations and have a positive impact. Books that are available to students that are based on stereotypes and generalizations are harmful to students' identities who identify the same way that the books are not correctly portraying. Also, it does not give students and young children an accurate perspective of other cultures. Because diverse books do not always represent race and culture accurately, when reading diverse books, it is important for teachers, educators, and parents to be aware of how they are sharing the books with their students or children. Leland et. al (2013) explained that it is important to have conversations and discussions following diverse books. For young readers, some things to think about are what they noticed about the book, how the book made them feel and what they learned from the book (Leland et. al., 2013). This will then allow them to reflect on what the book was conveying. These conversations will also allow teachers, educators, and parents to build on students' understanding of what they already know but also correct misconceptions books may have.

Overall, this project was personal to me as I have worked with diverse students for a few years. Through my work with these diverse students, I have worked towards closing the achievement gap through diverse books. Not only have I recognized the importance of diverse books, but many researchers before me have, too.

Audience and Setting

Audience

The intended audience for this project is early elementary school teachers and educators of diverse students. Their students are the ones who will look like the characters in the books and who will be able to identify with the author and illustrator. Also, the intended audience is early elementary teachers and educators because the books I used are picture books. Lastly, the intended audience is early elementary teachers and educators because the topics in the books and storylines in the books are geared towards younger students.

Through this study, I hope early elementary teachers and educators gain a greater and possibly new understanding of the importance of diverse books and how they can be incorporated into their classrooms. I wanted these teachers and educators to recognize that even if the curriculum does not offer culturally relevant lessons, they can use the lessons I created with their students to make their teaching more culturally relevant. My ultimate goal was to have teachers and educators find diverse books of their own and incorporate them into their daily lessons. I would love for this study to have encouraged them to think about what books they are sharing with their students and why they chose those books. I wanted teachers and educators to consider if their books were accurately representing the different cultures and races and if books were not portraying race and culture accurately how they can correct that perception with their students.

Setting

The setting of this project included all elementary schools. The lessons I created are intended for students in kindergarten to third grade. These lessons are intended for schools that have a highly diverse student population. However, these lessons would also benefit early elementary school students who do not come from diverse backgrounds. All early elementary students would benefit from these lessons as the goal of diverse books is to allow all students to gain a perspective of other cultures and help them become accepting of others who are different than themselves (Harper & Brand, 2010).

In conclusion, my lessons are intended for early elementary school teachers and educators. The lessons can be used for any early elementary school student; however, the lessons I created were created with diverse students in mind. My goal was to have teachers and educators feel comfortable finding their own diverse books, creating their own lessons, and sharing these lessons with their students.

Project Description

For my project, I created lessons for early elementary school teachers and educators to use with their students. The first step in doing so was collecting diverse books that represent African American, Asian American, LatinX, and Native American culture. I also looked for multicultural social-emotional books. I made sure my collection of books were diverse based on characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators. Also, I made sure that the diverse book characters and illustrations accurately represented different races and cultures and were not based on stereotypes. It was also important that I included books that incorporated other languages. This will help students connect to the book if that is their native language or if they are familiar with that language. It was also

important that I selected books with a wide range of vocabulary words. This, too, will help build students' vocabulary.

After I collected diverse books, I found read-aloud links that teachers and educators can use if they do not have a hard copy of the book. I then created one ready-made lesson plan for each culture and two ready-made lesson plans for the multicultural social-emotional books. Each ready-made lesson plan focused on writing, reading, and social-emotional learning. This allows teachers and educators to tie the book into their day in various ways and it allows teachers and educators to have their students become very familiar with the book. I also included an optional visual survey teachers and educators can use with their students to have their students reflect on race and culture. This visual survey asked students about their culture and race, if they are familiar with the culture and race depicted in the books, and if they learned something new about the culture and race depicted in the book after reading the book. This visual survey consists of a thumbs-up, to the side, and down. The thumbs-up represents yes, thumbs to the side represents that they are unsure, and a thumbs down represents a no. After I created my lesson plans, I made a website for teachers and educators to access these lessons. This allows teachers and educators to use these lessons when it is most convenient.

Overall, my project consisted of collecting culturally relevant books and creating lessons for early elementary teachers and educators to use. The lessons focused on writing, reading, and social-emotional learning. I also included an optional cultural visual survey teachers and educators can use with their students as they reflect on race and

culture. These lessons and visual surveys are posted online for all teachers and educators to use.

Assessment

Before teachers and educators share my lessons with their students, teachers and educators can give their students an optional cultural visual survey. I wanted to give them a visual survey as many early elementary students cannot read yet or are just beginning to read. The survey showed people of different cultures and races and asked students how they identify with regard to race. On the survey, students were also asked how familiar they are with other cultures. They could then give this feedback by circling a thumbs up showing they are familiar with that culture, thumbs to the side showing they have some understanding of the culture, or a thumbs down showing they have never seen that culture before and have no understanding. Finally, the visual survey asked students if they learned something new about the culture depicted in the book. This was also shown by a thumbs up showing yes they learned something new, thumbs to the side showing they are unsure, or a thumbs down showing they did not learn anything new about the culture depicted in the book. The visual survey can then be analyzed to show whether or not students learned something new about others' cultures.

In conclusion, teachers and educators have the option to give their students a visual survey that has them reflect on their race, if they are familiar with the race depicted in the book and if they learned something new about the race depicted in the book.

Timeline

The anticipated timeline for this project is approximately eight weeks. My first step was to find culturally diverse books. I researched lists of diverse books and compared them to find the most popular ones. As I created my list, I needed to make sure my collection of books showed characters from many different cultures and had illustrations that accurately represented these cultures. Also, it was important that I find books that are written and illustrated by people from all cultures. Once I had my collection of diverse books, I created lessons for each book. My lessons focus on reading, writing, and social-emotional learning. The goal was to create lessons out of each book that focused on reading, writing, and social-emotional learning. I also made visual surveys teachers can give to their students that allow students to reflect on their culture and the cultures represented in the books. Once I had my lessons created, I created a website where early elementary teachers can easily find literacy and social-emotional lesson that incorporates a diverse book. Also available on the website is a cultural visual survey teachers and educators can use with their students to gain an understanding of the cultural knowledge their students are gaining out of each lesson.

Summary

In conclusion, there was a significant amount of previous research that showed the importance of diverse books. Since diverse books are so essential to student success and students come from highly diverse backgrounds today, I collected diverse books that show diverse characters, authors, illustrations, and illustrators. In addition, I created a cultural visual survey for students to reflect on their culture and the cultures of others. I also created lesson plans for any early elementary teacher or educator to use.

Chapter Four will discuss the outcome and creation of my project. I will reflect on what I learned through the process of creating culturally relevant lessons that are based on my diverse book collection. I will also think about how these lessons can benefit teachers and educators and how they can use them moving forward.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

Since returning to finish my master's, I always knew I wanted my capstone project to highlight the importance of diverse books. My passion for having diverse books available to students began while I was student teaching in a highly diverse urban public school district. The classroom I was in lacked diverse books, however, there were only two students of color in that classroom. I then realized there was a greater issue within the district as I later became a substitute teacher in the same district for a year and a half. As a substitute teacher, I saw many classes where the majority of the students were students of color, however, the books available to them did not reflect their identities. Because of this, one of the goals I made to myself when I found my own classroom was to make sure I had books available to my students where they could see themselves. This then led to the development of my research questions: *How does the availability of diverse books develop students' perspectives of other cultures?* I decided I wanted to create ready-made lesson plans for early elementary teachers and educators who had diverse students. Part of this included having diverse books with read-aloud links and optional cultural visual survey teachers and educators could use with their students. Another goal of mine was to make these ready-made lesson plans, read-aloud links, and cultural visual surveys easily accessible for all, leading to the creation of my website, Cultural Curiosity. I will begin this chapter by discussing major learnings and revisiting significant studies discussed in my literature review. It will then go on to discuss implications, limitations, and future research and projects.

Major Learnings

Through my capstone project, I have learned a lot as a researcher, writer, and learner. One of the most challenging parts of my capstone project for me was researching. Prior to working on my master's, I had some experience with researching, however, not as much as I would have liked to make this process feel easier and less foreign. I occasionally needed to find my own articles for psychology classes I took during my undergraduate degree, however, it was never more than a few articles. Needless to say, finding a significant amount was intimidating. I was not sure where to start. The hardest part about researching was knowing where to look to find articles. Because I did not know where to start, I made an appointment with the librarian. Meeting with the librarian gave me the confidence I needed to get started. She showed me how to find articles using the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) through the Bush Memorial Library. The librarian I met with then gave me ideas for keywords I could search and showed me how to order articles if they were not available through the Bush Memorial Library. We did several practice searches together which was extremely helpful. Also, through my meeting with the librarian, I was able to learn about RefWorks, an online citing machine. This was extremely helpful as I could find an article I thought I may use and then cite it immediately. If I had not met with the librarian, I believe I would have had a much harder time finding articles. Also, she was able to give me the confidence for potential future research.

Through my capstone project, I was also able to learn about myself as a writer. I had more confidence in my writing abilities than my research abilities, however, I had never written something so long before. As I wrote I found myself having trouble finding

the balance between telling my personal story and writing in a formal manner. Also, as I wrote I was surprised by how many times I would have to edit. I have always known that writing was a process, however, I had never worked on a piece of writing for several months and made numerous edits. Each time I edited a section or a chapter I thought that it would be the final version, however, I was incredibly wrong. Instead, I would edit a chapter and then realize that I needed to fix another chapter because it referred to the part I had last edited. Also, as I proofread each chapter, I realized there were certain parts that I wanted to expand on more or make clearer. Through the writing process, the hardest chapter to write was chapter two, the literature review. I originally organized the chapter based on the article rather than the topic within the article. Because of this, I had to dramatically change it during the first edit. Although it was frustrating at the time, I am happy and proud of how it turned out.

I also learned a lot about myself as a learner through my capstone project. One of the greatest learning that sticks out to me is the importance of culturally relevant teaching. I have always known and valued the importance of culturally relevant teaching, however, I did not understand the extent to which it benefits all students. As I read the different articles I included in my literature review, I learned that culturally relevant teaching is so much more than a way to engage students and have students draw on their prior knowledge. Culturally relevant teaching allows students to gain a new perspective on other cultures and helps answer questions students may have on how others live their lives. As I read previous studies, it made me reflect on my own teaching and biases I may have and how they affect my students. Also, these articles made me think about the books I have in my classroom and why I chose them. They made me think about whether

or not they are appropriate and if the authors and illustrators were qualified people while creating the book. Luckily, after some reflection, I am confident that the diverse books I have in my classroom are appropriate and accurately portray the different cultures, however, I need more diverse books available to my students.

Revisit Literature Review

There are several parts of the literature review that were important for my capstone project. The first study that was significant to my capstone project was the study done by Peterson et al., 2000. This study was significant because it examined “to what degree did this class change my views on intolerance and multicultural issues?” (Peterson et al., 2000, para 5). The study found that the majority of students said they were greatly changed after participating in activities that pushed them to look at cultural issues from a different perspective. This study was crucial to my capstone project as I was essentially trying to do the same thing, but with younger students. My goal was to expose students to new cultures and have them reflect on different cultures in hopes of giving them a new perspective. Peterson et al., 2000 gave me the confidence that students can be accepting of others’ cultures and have a desire to learn about how others live their lives.

Another study that was significant to my capstone project was the one done by Gomez-Najarro, 2020. She gave lots of good insight on the importance of diverse books. Gomez-Najarro, 2020, emphasizes how empowering books can be when students can see themselves and how it motivates students to read. Her study also discusses how diverse books can lead students to new perspectives, grow students’ self-confidence, and allow students to be more engaged in lessons. This study was significant because it helped show the importance of having diverse books available to students. In addition, this study

was crucial to my capstone project as it justifies my website as there is a great need for culturally relevant lessons available to teachers and educators or diverse students.

The third study that was important to my capstone project was Harper and Brand, 2010. Harper and Brand, 2010 pose lots of good questions when choosing diverse books. They propose that teachers and educators ask themselves what makes diverse books qualified when looking for an accurate representation of culture. For example, they pose the questions of who is the author and illustrator and what makes each of them qualified. This was significant because it helped me consider what books I chose to include on my website and brought up the issue of books being based on stereotypes and not being culturally accurate.

Because Harper and Brand, 2010, brought up the issue of books being based on stereotypes and not being culturally accurate, Hasse, 2002, was another important study to my capstone project. Hasse, 2002 revealed several popular diverse books that are based on stereotypes and are culturally offensive. Two books were *Bless Me, Ultima*, and *Chato & the Party Animals*. This study was significant because it showed that even if books depict characters of color and are well-known, they are not necessarily appropriate and can be hurtful to the culture that is being misrepresented.

That being said, Cortes, 2001, was a new perspective. Cortes, 2001, tried to differentiate between stereotypes and generalizations. He recognizes that both have negative effects, however, he believes that generalizations are flexible and permeable while stereotypes are fixed, rigid, and resistant to new findings (Cortes, 2001). Although I am not sure if I agree, this study was interesting as it offered a new perspective.

Implications

One possible policy implication is the need for more diverse books incorporated into districts' curriculum. Districts need to make it a priority to have diverse books more greatly available to students. It is not solely the responsibility of teachers and educators to find and purchase culturally accurate books. Because students learn best when they can draw from prior knowledge, it is essential that the curriculum created by districts is culturally relevant. This will then allow students to be more engaged in their learning thus become successful.

Also, it is important that teachers and educators not only recognize the importance of being culturally responsive in their teaching, but it is crucial that they implement culturally responsive teaching in their daily lessons. It is not solely the job of teachers and educators to find different ways to be culturally responsive in their teaching as the district is also responsible, however, it is the responsibility of teachers and educators to make their teaching culturally responsive if they are not given culturally responsive resources. It is the job of teachers and educators to learn about their students' cultures so they can implement who their students are into daily lessons. Also, it is important that even if cultures are not represented within a student body that teachers and educators expose their students to that culture. It is most likely that students will encounter that culture one day and be curious about that culture.

Limitations

As I created my capstone project I only ran into a few limitations. The first limitation was finding diverse books that had males and females as main characters. Not only is it important that there are books available to students that depict different cultures, but it is also crucial that there are books that have males and females as main characters. Since it is important that there are males and females as main characters in books I made it a priority to try and find books that have males and females. As I found diverse books that accurately represented different cultures, I had an easier time finding books that had females as main characters and more difficulty finding diverse books where males were the main characters. This was a limitation as it was important to me that I include books that represent all different races but also males and females as main characters. I wanted to make sure I included books that everyone could see themselves in.

The second limitation I encountered was with regards to Native American books. Out of African American, Asian American, LatinX, and Native American, I had the hardest time finding Native American books that had Native Americans as main characters and books written and illustrated by Native American people. Also, when choosing books that highlight the Native American culture for my collection, I wanted to make sure the books were age-appropriate and would be engaging for early elementary students. I found that many books were either intended for older students or were nonfiction books about the Native American culture. Finding fiction age-appropriate Native American books was a limitation for my project because there was less to choose from. I wanted to make sure the books I included would be engaging for early elementary students and accurately represented the Native American culture.

The final limitation to my capstone project was finding a prerecorded read-aloud for each book. When choosing the read-aloud video for teachers and educators who may not have the diverse book, it was important to me that the person reading the story read in an engaging way and was qualified to read. This was significant because the tone that a book is read in can either increase students' engagement where students are excited to listen to the book or the reader can read the book in a manner where students are not as engaged thus do not connect with the book. Also, when finding read-aloud videos, it was important to me that the person reading the book was either part of the culture represented in the book or was diverse. This was important to me because just like how authors write a story using cultural words, it was essential that the person reading the book pronounced all the words correctly. This was a limitation because sometimes I found a book that I liked and represented a culture accurately, however, there would not be a read-aloud video, the person reading the book was not engaging, or the person reading did not accurately pronounce the words.

Future Research and Projects

When I think about potential future research that I would like to do that connects to my capstone there are two things that come to mind. The first one focuses on students' families and home lives. I would love to learn more about students who come from same-sex parents, students who are raised by single parents, students who grow up in blended families, and ultimately students who do not grow up with two opposite-sex parents. I believe that part of having diverse books in a classroom includes having books where students can identify on all different levels, not just cultural. Because students come from all different families and home lives, I believe it is important for all students

to understand and accept that some families and home lives are very different from theirs and one is not better than the other. It would be great to create a similar project or include a families and home lives section on my website. Like my Cultural Curiosity website, I would like to include books with read-aloud videos, have ready-made lesson plans that highlight how different families look today and have a visual survey similar to the cultural visual survey that has students reflect on their families and home lives and the families and home lives of characters in books.

The second related research I would like to do is with regards to students' sexual identity. Like I have stated several times through this project, students are more diverse today than ever before. Part of this entails having students who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Students need to be affirmed that who they are is okay and acceptable. This is especially important when it comes to sexuality. Just like being culturally reaffirmed through books, students can be reaffirmed with regards to their sexuality through books. Also, books are a great way for students who are not familiar with the LGBTQ+ community to learn about others. With LGBTQ+ books as the topic, I would like to create a website or have a section dedicated to LGBTQ+ books on my Cultural Curiosity website that has read-aloud videos, ready-made lesson plans, and a visual survey for students to reflect on their sexual identity along with what they may have learned about others sexual identity through books.

Based on my research and creating my project, I would greatly encourage all teachers and educators to expose their students to the cultures represented in and outside of the classroom. It is crucial for diverse students to see themselves in literature and see themselves in daily lessons, however, it is also important to expose students to others'

cultures. Also, I would recommend to everyone who works with students to reflect on what they are teaching their students, what cultures are represented and what cultures are missing, and potential biases they have when teaching their students. Then, if teachers and educators realize that they have cultures that are not represented or possible biases, I would recommend that they figure out how they can incorporate those cultures into their classroom and consider why they may have those biases and what they can do to overturn those biases.

Communicating Results

I will share my project with others through networking. The first group of teachers I would like to share my project with are teachers and educators at the school where I teach and then my friends and family members who are teachers. I want to share my website with teachers and educators at my school first because as I selected diverse books and created the ready-made lessons, I had the students at my school in mind. Once the teachers and educators at my school see my website, I would then encourage them to pass it along to other teachers and educators they know. Secondly, I would like to share my website with friends and family members who are teachers because most of them work in diverse school districts and I believe it could be a valuable resource for them. These teachers and educators, too, can then share with the people they know. Lastly, I would like to include the link to my website on my teacher's home page. Although the website I created is intended for teachers and educators of diverse early elementary school students, I think it would be beneficial for parents and guardians of my students to also have this as a resource when looking for books that represent their child.

Benefits of the Profession

There are several benefits my project has for the teaching profession. The first benefit is that this website will allow teachers to be more culturally aware and relevant in their teaching. There are several different ways teachers and educators can use my website. First, teachers and educators can learn the “why” when it comes to diverse books. They can learn the positive impact it has on students who can identify with the book, but also the new perspectives students who are from different cultures will gain. Secondly, the website I created can benefit teachers and educators because they can select books from my website to share with their students throughout the day. Teachers and educators could share hard copies of the books with their students or the read-aloud link during morning meetings, during literacy, or during any part of their day. However, the most beneficial and impactful way teachers and educators can use this website with their students is by following one of the ready-made lesson plans and having students complete the cultural survey that goes along with it. This will allow students to reflect on themselves, learn about a different culture, and then reflect on the culture represented in the book.

Conclusion

In Chapter Four, I discussed some of my learnings as a researcher, writer, and learner. It explained my struggles as a researcher as I looked for articles, the surprise of how many edits I would make as a writer, and the benefits culturally responsive teaching has for all students. In Chapter Four, I also highlighted several important studies such as Peterson et al., 2000 and Gomez-Najarro, 2020 which helped me create my project. Next, this chapter discussed the implication of districts needing to create a more culturally

responsive curriculum, the limitations I had of finding read-aloud videos and age-appropriate Native American books, and future research focusing on books showing diverse families, home lives, and the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, this chapter explained my plans of sharing my project with teachers and educators through networking and how it will benefit teachers and educators by allowing them to be more culturally aware in their teaching.

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