Chapter 1

Why Can't I Just Use the Classics?
Bringing Diverse Books to Teachers and Librarians

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an overview of the development of an asynchronous online graduate-level course on diverse literature for P-12 students as an elective for literacy teachers and pre-service librarians. The review of literature focuses on the use of classic texts and the canon in education, the importance of authentic literature, and the content of classroom and school libraries, providing evidence for the necessity of this class as a way to support culturally relevant teaching. This is followed by descriptions of the content and structure of the course as well as the activities and assessments used. The current instructor provides perspectives on teaching this course as a member of underrepresented faculty and discusses special factors in online teaching. Student feedback from the course is included as well as samples of materials.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the development and teaching of the asynchronous online special topics course Gender and Diversity in Children's and YA Literature offered as a graduate elective in a College of Education. The course was developed partly in response to an observation that current education professionals depend heavily on classic children's texts from their own childhood, or texts that are suggested

as part of lesson plans acquired from other sources. Both of these avenues tend to lead to a dependence on texts that reflect only the dominant culture.

Students in the survey literature course for pre-service librarians expressed concern about how to find and evaluate diverse books during a unit on the subject, indicating a need for additional exposure. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) noted, children need books in their classrooms and libraries to provide them with mirrors to see themselves in, and windows to learn about other cultures. This course exposes pre-service librarians and teachers to material they can use for culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and provide their students with the windows and mirrors they need. While diverse books have always been needed, the shift in the demographics of the student population in P-12 schools over the past few decades increases its importance. By giving teachers and pre-service librarians an opportunity to discuss new perspectives and books in this course, they are more prepared to connect with their students in a way that advances their educational goals and achievements.

This online course was developed to immerse teachers and pre-service librarians in reading multicultural literature and develop critical reading skills. In the *Position Statement on Indigenous Peoples and People of Color (IPOC) in English and Language Arts Materials,* the National Council of Teachers of English (2020) noted the "inadequate inclusion of and teaching on IPOC literature and communities in English departments and library and teacher education programs" (para. 4). Both the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Literacy Association promote the inclusion of diverse literature in library collections. Cai (2008) noted that "in the study of multicultural literature, it is imperative for us to teach students a critical perspective that encourages self-change and social transformation" (p. 9). The course was developed to address these issues.

This chapter will provide readers with ideas to incorporate into their own development of courses or strengthen multicultural units in other courses. It begins with a literature review, then it describes how and why the course was originally conceived and developed and which students the course targets. In addition, the authors will discuss decisions that were made about books to include and assessments within the course, with examples. The current instructor will provide perspectives of teaching the course as a member of underrepresented faculty, as well as experiences teaching the topic in an asynchronous online course.

BACKGROUND

Educational standards, curricula, and some reading programs still recommend literature that has become dated as the years and demographics of the county have changed. Children's literature classics—older books determined to be high-quality literature with universal themes–are also represented in lesson plans acquired from the Internet or shared among teachers. However, many classic texts such as *Little House on the Prairie* (2008) (originally published in 1935) are fondly remembered, but problematic in their depiction of marginalized groups. Classic literature does not always reflect the cultural dynamics of current classrooms.

Organizations that support reading and literacy have called for adding diversity to the classroom and libraries. The 2017-2018 Literacy Research Panel of the International Literacy Association (2018) called for expanding the use of children's literature beyond the classics by adding diverse literature to "amplify and enrich students' literary experiences" (p.3). Perhaps in an effort to forestall criticism, they noted that "extending our reach for literature beyond the classics does not weaken the quality of literature

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