

## Chapter 5

# Seeking Diversity in Children's Literature Utilized in Elementary Classrooms

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### ABSTRACT

*Utilizing literature in classrooms that is representative of all provides opportunities for students to find within a book the truth of their own experiences. Literature provides the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors that afford opportunities to consider multiple perspectives and lenses in life. This chapter discusses different representations of diverse literature in classrooms and explores what educators might consider for their teaching and learning. Specifically, the chapter describes books student teachers identify using in their classrooms and considers how the books aligned with the different categories of a rubric used to assess them. Of the 113 books sampled, only nine books distinctly represented diversity. Implications of these findings and how they can support and challenge the children's literature utilized in today's classrooms are discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

The need for diverse literature in classrooms and libraries is paramount. Further, this literature needs to be not only included in classroom and library collections but shared widely and intentionally with children. Teachers and librarians must see the use of this literature modeled and discussed in their preservice coursework before they can share it effectively in their classrooms and libraries. The reality exists, however, that the diversity we seek in literature is not always reflected in our workforce or university contexts.

As coauthors of this chapter, we have long recognized the realities of our teaching situations. We are white, female professors who look out each semester into the eager and committed faces of our col-

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lege students and see mostly a classroom full of “us”: White, female preservice teachers. It comes as no surprise. Research clearly identifies that 79% of teachers are white and 76% of teachers are female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). And yet, statistics also clearly indicate that the children whom these teachers meet in their elementary classrooms are likely to be very different from them. The National Center for Education Statistics in 2016 reported that less than 49% of U.S. students in public schools were white, and that this figure is projected to decline by another 5% in the next seven years. In contrast, the proportion of Hispanic students is projected to increase by 28% over that same time period (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). Thus, university educators are tasked with sharing literature with preservice professionals whose backgrounds do not often match those of the students and patrons they are preparing to work with in their jobs.

This juxtaposition presents a problematic situation for both pre- and in-service teachers and librarians. More than two and a half decades ago, Nel (1992) stated, “Considering that 90% of the teacher corps is White and that cultural sensitivity, empathy, and commitment are crucial to successful teaching in pluralistic classrooms, this phenomenon could have serious implications for the effective education of minority students” (p. 23). Fast-forward to now and, as teacher educators dedicated to helping our preservice teachers understand the importance of teaching within a culturally relevant framework, we consistently ask ourselves what we can do to prepare them to be culturally sensitive, empathetic, and committed to embracing diversity in their lives and in their classrooms.

We posit that one dependable way to instill the philosophy behind diversity is to position and feature everywhere the use of diverse literature in elementary classrooms and libraries. Make such literature ubiquitous as an integral component of instruction across the day, giving students windows and mirrors at every turn. Utilizing literature that is respectful and representative of all provides opportunities for students to “find within a book the truth of their own experiences instead of stereotypes and misrepresentations” (Short & Fox, 2003, p. 21). As many researchers (Bishop, 1990; Crisp et al., 2016; Johnson & Koss, 2016; Thomas, 2016) have demonstrated, such literature provides everyone the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors needed for considering multiple perspectives and lenses in life. Therefore, our intent in this chapter is to identify and discuss the different representations of diverse literature that might be (or might not be) present in elementary classrooms and to suggest what teacher educators might consider for their own teaching and learning contexts. Though we bring a lens as teacher educators, the rubric used as a tool in this study can apply equally to evaluating diverse literature in libraries and librarian education.

## **BACKGROUND**

Historically, the importance of multicultural education and diversity in literature is well established (Bishop, 1992; Henderson et al., 2020; Johnson & Koss, 2016; Kelly et al., 2020; Willett, 1995). In 1992, for example, Nieto stated:

*Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers represent. Multicultural education permeates the curriculum*

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