

Chapter 25

Embedding Diverse Children's Literature Throughout a Teacher Preparation Program

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the incorporation of diverse children's literature into a teacher preparation program, both in and beyond a required Literature for Children course. With the aim of cultivating positive reading identities for pre-service teachers, the authors focus on the process for implementing changes to build a culture of reading, so that pre-service teachers identify as life-long readers, and specifically readers who understand the importance of diverse texts. Changes to curriculum in writing, social studies, and special education methods courses are described, as is the creation of a college-wide book club. The goal of embedding children's literature in and across teacher preparation programs is for pre-service teachers to feel prepared to bring these texts into their own classrooms and to facilitate discussions on the topics that these texts raise with their students, administrative team, and parents. In order to do this, teacher educators need to provide ample opportunities for students to practice selecting, analyzing, and discussing diverse children's literature.

INTRODUCTION

As teacher educators, both authors teach a section of *Literature for Children*, a required course for future early childhood, elementary, and special education teachers. Our work in this course serves several aims: to cultivate genre knowledge and understanding of literary conventions, to familiarize students with current diverse children's books, and to develop our students' identities as readers. Building a reader's

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identity is an important process for teachers and school librarians. However, building preservice teachers' (PSTs) identities as readers is challenging when many young adults join us out of high school with a negative perception of reading. According to the 2020 National Assessment for Educational Progress, 26% of high school seniors report never reading stories or novels outside of school. Another 24% report only reading outside of school once or twice a year. While it could be assumed that these numbers would differ among teachers and teacher candidates, that's not the case (Granado & Puig, 2015; Nathanson et al., 2008; Valencia, 2017). When Nathanson and colleagues (2008) asked over 700 teachers about their reading habits, they found that there was "a high prevalence of aliteracy, the ability to read but a disinterest in personal reading." The authors suggested that education professors need to incorporate strategies to cultivate the reading lives of teacher candidates.

Our experiences with students in our own courses reinforced these findings. Across the semesters, as we engaged in conversations with our students, we realized that many of them did not see themselves as readers. In an assignment at the beginning of each semester, students are asked to share a multimedia timeline of their reading life, and we heard similar patterns repeating. Our PSTs shared with us past struggles with reading, quoting the negative feedback their teachers had given them years ago. They recounted the moments in middle and high school when the texts became too challenging, or simply irrelevant, so they stopped reading and started skimming SparkNotes. Some PSTs questioned if the reading they engaged with, such as fanfiction on WattPad, comic books, or romance novels, "counted" after years of being told that what they read wasn't academic enough. We found ourselves wondering about the implications of these patterns; if teachers are not readers, how could they effectively model reading strategies and behaviors? How could they increase student interest and engagement with texts? And how would they, in turn, foster positive reading identities for their own students?

This chapter will explore our work to address these questions through revision of our teacher preparation courses to incorporate diverse children's literature in and beyond the *Literature for Children* course, with the aim of cultivating positive reading identities for our PSTs. We will focus on our process for implementing changes in our courses and beyond, so that building readers, and specifically readers who understand the importance of diverse texts, is a practice that is embedded in and across our pre-service programs. Our goal is for our PSTs to feel prepared to bring these texts into their own classrooms and to facilitate discussions on the topics that these texts raise with their students, administrative team, and parents. We argue that in order to do this, we need to provide ample opportunities for students to practice and engage with diverse children's literature and the concepts these texts center throughout their coursework.

In the following sections, we describe our efforts to embed diverse children's and young adult literature across our teacher preparation program. First, we provide a description of the context of our teacher preparation program and our own positionalities. Next, we describe the changes made to our shared course, *Literature for Children*, with the goal of fostering positive reading experiences. Then, we discuss the ways that we built on our children's literature course by incorporating diverse texts into four additional courses: writing methods, social studies methods, methods for inclusion, and a mild to moderate disabilities course. We then share our experiences in establishing a College of Education Book Club to offer opportunities to read diverse literature outside of our courses. Finally, we draw on what we have learned throughout the process of making these changes in our own program to offer a "road map" of suggestions for others hoping to embed children's literature throughout their own teacher preparation programs.

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