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TIFFANY A. FLOWERS & ALICIA LEGGETT, CO-EDITORS
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Co-Editor Introduction

by

Dr. Tiffany A. Flowers & Dr. Alicia Leggett

When we conceptualized this special theme issue within the field of literacy several years ago, we did not anticipate that issues related to diverse books would impact children's ability to check out books from media centers and libraries. At the time, we just wanted a place where tenure track scholars, teachers, graduate students, and adjuncts who work in the field of literacy could publish their work. After watching the controversies during the pandemic, we were pretty sure there were a good number of scholars who were still writing and using non-traditional forms of scholarship to document their work in this area. Hence, our theme focuses on children's and young adult literature in urban schools.

In 1990, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop coined the term, *Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass doors* in reference to exploring diversity in children's and young adult literature. Dr. Sims provided a compass for the field about how diverse books in the fields of education, library science, and English should be read, critically analyzed, and explored. This concept has been explored over the past 30 years within the literacy research literature in hundreds of studies. However, there have been few pieces which focus on this concept as mirrors for children in urban schools. Based on the work by Dr. Sims, the focus of this special theme issue focused specifically on looking at diverse texts as mirrors for diverse populations within urban settings.

In the research article titled, *"Selecting and Using Culturally Relevant Books to Counter Educational Inequality for BIPOC Students* by Emma McNamara and Andrea Jamison the authors focus on countering inequities in classroom books. Dr. Daris McInnis published a best practice article titled, *"Empowering Urban Educators"* explore and a teacher education program teaching preservice teacher the literature in meeting the needs of diverse learners. Finally, the journal includes an Interview with Debbie Reese by Carrie Anne

Thomas about her work in the area of Indigenous children's books. Finally, the published review of the children's book *titled, "I'm From" explores family and the cultural values through the migrant experience* by LaToya Tingle is the final installment in this journal issue.

Research Article: Selecting and Using Culturally Relevant Books to Counter Educational Inequality for BIPOC Students

Dr. Andrea Jamison, Illinois State University and Dr. Emma McNamara

Abstract

Norms of Whiteness impact every area of education from textbook selection to teachers' instructional practices. Recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that Black, Latine, and Indigenous students across the U.S. consistently score lower in reading than their White counterparts (NAEP, 2025). These types of discrepancies continue to spur national discourse about the need to close achievement gaps among students from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. In this article, the authors provide recommendations for both the selection and use of culturally relevant books (CRBs) as a means to counter classroom-based inequities created by Norms of Whiteness.

Keywords: BIPOC, Children's Books, Culturally Relevant Books (CRBs), Norms of Whiteness, and Urban Schools

Introduction

Education in the US has been dominated by norms of Whiteness (Castagno, 2014; Hytten & Adkins, 2001; Yoon, 2012). Norms of Whiteness are socially and historically constructed practices that create systems of inequality for marginalized communities (Howard, 2019; Molder, 2023). These practices exist due, in part, to systems of oppression stemming from unjust laws, racial imbalances of power, and inaccurate narratives about people and their respective histories (Lynch, 2018). Norms of Whiteness are at play in every aspect of education including textbook selections, curricula, policy, and pedagogy (Bickford & Clabough, 2022; Burrow, 2017; Chikkatur, 2024; Rigell et al., 2022). Norms of Whiteness are also at play through the implementation of monolingual language practices that understand the world through White English speakers (Hinton, 2016; Lee, 2022).

Norms of Whiteness can create inequitable learning environments that do not support the success of BIPOC students (Fallon et al, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Jefferis, 2023). Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that reading scores for African American, Latine, and Native students are consistently lower than White students across grades 4, 8, and 12 (NAEP, 2025). These types of academic discrepancies are even more pronounced in urban schools. According to Talbert-Johnson (2004), poor academic performance among BIPOC students in urban school has been a pervasive problem due to systemic inequities. BIPOC students in urban schools must contend with both structural and pedagogical inequities that include (but is not limited to) large class sizes, limited funding, inadequate access to resources, and teachers who do not employ culturally relevant teaching practices (Sandy & Duncan 2010). These conversations continue to spur national discourse about the need to systematically address the educational inequalities that continue to widen achievement gaps. However, despite an increasingly diverse student population, BIPOC students across the United States continue to be educated in environments that privilege Whiteness (Bailey & Zita, 2007; Rigell, 2022).

Given that norms of Whiteness influence many facets of education, there is an increased need for equitable educational practices that reflect the identities, histories, and epistemologies of BIPOC students (Bailey & Zita, 2007; Rigell, 2022). In this article, we draw from our experiences as librarians and instructors of children's literature to discuss how norms of Whiteness saturate the landscapes of children's books. We broadly define children's books as books written for the consumption of children from ages of birth to young adulthood. We argue that the intentional selection and use of culturally relevant books (CRBs) in classrooms can counter norms of Whiteness and foster equitable learning environments. We frame this conversation around urban schools because these types of schools have higher concentrations of BIPOC students; thus, the benefits of using CRBs are especially significant in these environments. We provide strategies to help educators identify and select CRBs. Lastly, we offer recommendations for using CRBs within the classroom, premised on culturally relevant teaching tenets (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). To develop

these recommendations, we engaged in an iterative process where we utilized qualitative, collaborative, and consensus building approaches commonly found in participatory action research methods (McTaggart, 1994). We sought to answer the following question: How can educators identify and select books that are culturally relevant? The authors met regularly to reach consensus on the key characteristics of CRBs. We also discussed the practices that we regularly use to select and incorporate CRBs within classroom settings.

Positionality Statement

The authors recognize that our unique life experiences and personal identities not only influence our work but also our interpretation of the world (Takacs, 2003). We recognize that personal experiences can be a valuable lens through which we see and understand the world, but it can also lead to biases and can create blind spots within our work. While some degree of bias is inherent to all work (Secules et al., 2021), we worked to mitigate these biases through reflexivity (Ladson-Billings, 1995), open discussions, and consensus building. We share our positionality to increase transparency regarding the unique identities that influence this work.

Author 1

I am an African American, cisgender female educator whose research examines race and power in children's books, policies, and curricula. I grew up in an urban community with limited access to diverse books, and I attended an urban school. This experience fueled my commitment to critically analyzing and advocating for equitable representation in children's literature to ensure that all young readers, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, see themselves positively reflected in the stories they read. I have worked in schools and libraries for over 17 years. This work coupled with my lived experiences informs my understanding of both the textual and visual representation of BIPOC characters in children's books.

Author 2

I am a cis, straight, white woman who grew up in a major American city. My parents have each earned doctorates and I was raised in a home that had an abundance of books. I never had to search to see myself represented in books, nor did I have to search beyond my own bookshelves to find representations of dissimilar experiences because my parents prioritized access to quality literature that is diverse in both character and genre. When I became an educator, I wanted to ensure that I employed culturally relevant pedagogy to my teaching practice. My research involves examining race and gender equities in children's literature. This work informs my understanding of how BIPOC characters are presented in youth literature across various genres.

Norms of Whiteness in Children's Books

In 1965, the seminal work of Dr. Nancy Larrick illuminated the pervasive Whiteness of characters found in children's books. Larrick, who was the founder of the International Reading Association, published an essay in the *Saturday Review* titled "The All-White World of Children's Books." Focused on the absence of African Americans in children's books, Larrick examined approximately 5,206 children's books published between 1962 and 1964. Larrick estimated that an average of 6.7 percent of the books sampled included images of "Negroes" (Larrick, 1965). Based on these findings, Larrick concluded that children's books overwhelmingly reflected Whiteness (Jamison, 2021).

Larrick's work not only brought to light the dearth of African Americans in children's books, but it also sparked conversations about how images of non-White characters reinforced stereotypes (Morgan, 2011). For instance, African Americans have been stereotyped in children's books as extremely dark caricatures whose existence in books was for the amusement of White humor (Forster, 1989). Their visibility was often relegated to the backdrop of a White world (Larrick, 1965). Latine characters have been stereotyped as impoverished and relegated to menial jobs (Gomez, 2003). Indigenous/First Nation characters have been stereotyped as savages who are recognized by their feathered headdresses or by women who only wear long black braids (Sabis-Burns, 2011). Asian Americans have been treated as a monolith with characters stereotyped as model minorities, passive, docile, unassertive, or as forever immigrants (Loh, 2006).

In 1965, the Council of Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) began criticizing books that used stereotypes or biases to portray minoritized groups (Banfield, 1998; Moore & Burrell, 1981). In 1966, the CIBC published a newsletter aimed at promoting cultural pluralism in children's books (Banfield, 1998; Horning, 2015). The newsletter not only brought awareness to issues of biases and stereotypes, but it highlighted how stereotypes reinforced racial hierarchies and systems of discrimination (Banfield, 1998).

In 1990, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop published what would become her lasting legacy in the field of children's literature: the idea that readers need windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for critical engagement with texts (Bishop, 1990; McNair & Edwards, 2021). According to Bishop, mirrors occur when literature reflects the reader's life back to them. Window books extend beyond reflection by offering readers a glimpse into a new world where they can learn about experiences dissimilar to their own. Sliding glass door books invite readers to explore another way of living. At first, they might seem like an introduction to a new experience. However, readers quickly realize that sliding glass door books are, in fact, relatable and can foster cross cultural competence.

In 2014, discussions about multicultural books grew into a social media movement. A hashtag was created called #WeNeedDiverseBooks and a subsequent nonprofit was launched to create programming that would encourage the support and use of diverse books. In March of the same year, Walter Dean Myers and his son, Christopher, wrote articles for the *New York Times* discussing the ever-present apartheid in children's literature and the need for more books by and about people of color (Mabbott, 2017). In 2015, author Corrine Duyvis highlighted the need for books written by authors who share the same identity as the characters in their stories. Referred to as "own voices," these types of books center the voices of diverse groups and can ensure accuracy of cultural experiences (Jimenez, 2018).

In 2018, Sarah Park Dahlen and David Huyck published an infographic for the Cooperative Children's Books Center at the University of Wisconsin (CCBC) depicting character representation in children's books. Books by and about White people accounted for fifty percent of the books published that year. This number

shows a modest decrease from Dahlen's and Huyck's 2015 infographic, which shows that books by and about White people accounted for approximately 73.3% of the books published for the same year (*SLJ*, 2019). Additionally, the infographic shows that animals and other objects were centered within children's books at a higher rate than BIPOC characters.

In 2024, CCBC updated their annual statistics on diversity in children's books. In 2023, the center received 3,491 books from US publishers. 524 (15%) books were about African Americans, 86 (2.5%) were about Indigenous communities, 410 (11.7%) were about Asians, 300 (8.6%) were about Latines, 6 (.17%) were about Pacific Islanders, and 32 (.92%) were about Arabs (*CCBC*, 2024). While data here shows that some degree of diversity is present in children's books, BIPOC communities represent approximately 1358 (38%) of the books received by the CCBC. The rest of the books featured White only characters.

These movements, in part, created a wave of criticism for the publishing industry, encouraging publishers to make better efforts at soliciting manuscripts by and about marginalized peoples. However, several baseline surveys conducted by Lee and Low Books show that while progress has been made, the publishing industry continues to be dominated by Whiteness (*Lee and Low*, n.d.). We believe this saturation necessitates a need for educators to be intentional in their efforts to select and use CRBs.

A Case for Culturally Relevant Books

Culturally relevant books are books where a character's cultural identity is an important part of a narrative (Rodriguez, 2014; Sharma & Christ, 2017). In these books, characters and their experiences are intricately linked to their cultural, racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identity. CRBs are essential for use in urban classrooms because of the prevalence of structural and pedagogical inequities (Sandy & Duncan 2010; Talbert & Johnson, 2004). CRBs can provide windows and affirming mirrors into the lives of BIPOC students (Bishop, 1990). Books with mirrors can be affirming when they offer positive reflections of race and/or culture. Such reflection can be humanizing and let students know that they have a place in the world (Bishop, 1990), which can lead to the development of positive self-images. Positive self-identity can help students in urban

communities resist peer pressure, avoid negative behaviors, form coping skills, and develop resiliency to life's challenges (Ridley, 2015). When CRBs depict the unique experiences of BIPOC students in non-distorted ways, they can also serve as windows, facilitating empathy and deeper cross-cultural understanding.

CRBs are also important because they can support literacy development (Rodriguez, 2014). Cultural ecologists have argued that centering culture within an educational context is critical to the academic success of underrepresented students (Trueba, 1988). CRBs increase engagement for BIPOC students and have been linked to improvements in reading comprehension (Ebe, 2011; Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021; Tuminaro, 2022; Woods, 2020). When introduced to CRBs, BIPOC students have increased opportunities to make text-to-self and text-to-world connections, which allows them to gain a better understanding of how the messages found within books play out within the broader context of society (Wahyuni & Jufri, 2016) and within their own lives. Students can apply a book's broader message to their own life in ways that can help them think through personal life choices.

Intentional Selection of CRBs

As librarians and educators, we code and catalog books. This work makes us privy to the gaps in narratives being published that impact both the quantity and quality of culturally relevant texts available for classroom use (Dahlen & Huyck, 2015; Larrick, 1965; Mabbot, 2017). We, therefore, recommend that educators think deeply about how they identify and select high quality CRBs. Educators must do more than just reckon with the question of whether BIPOC characters are featured in a text; they must reckon with how BIPOC characters and their identities are centered and discussed. To this end, we recommend selecting high-quality CRBs by considering several key characteristics. 1. These books should positively depict BIPOC characters as protagonists across multiple genres and themes. 2. They should feature BIPOC characters in ways that are either desire-centered or that highlight historical and systemic injustices while granting BIPOC protagonists' agency, allowing them to drive their own stories rather than being solely defined by oppressive conditions. 3. High quality CRBs should be written by authors whose cultural identity matches that of the

characters within the narrative, ensuring the authenticity of lived experiences. 4. They should depict cultural richness, offering nuanced and meaningful mirrors and windows of BIPOC communities. 5. We recommend prioritizing books published after the founding of the We Need Diverse Books Movement in 2014, as this movement has significantly increased the availability of books that accurately reflect the lived experiences of BIPOC individuals.

Examples of high quality CRBs that highlight systemic injustices in ways that give BIPOC characters agency include Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) or its prequel *Concrete Rose* (2021). Both books present main characters who experience the world through the lens of being Black in America (Jamison, 2023). In *The Hate U Give*, culture is evidenced through the characters' experiences with inter/intra racial differences, systems of racism, economic disparities, and police brutality. In *Concrete Rose*, the protagonist's identity is explored through a cultural context. This context influences how the protagonist internalizes and responds to the surrounding world. In both books, the protagonists demonstrate agency and refuse to allow oppressive circumstances to dictate their lives.

An example of a desire-centered and culturally relevant text would be Renée Watson's *Some Places More Than Others* (2019). The identity of Amara, the protagonist, is explored through cultural context as she learns how and why African Americans settled in various regions across the United States. In her hometown of Portland, Oregon, Amara is one of the only Black kids she knows. Although she knows that her family is not the only Black family in town, her understanding of her history is not taught in school, and her larger community does not put an emphasis on African American history, either. When she visits her cousins in Harlem, though, she begins to understand herself in new ways because of how Harlem showcases Black legacies. When one of Amara's cousins says that they did not know that Black people live in Oregon, the book's main message is brought to the forefront: of course, Black people live in Oregon— Black people are everywhere, but they are in some places more than others. Throughout the narrative, Amara learns that changing cultural contexts also changes experience. Desire-centered narratives, like this, are important because

they align with Tuck’s notion of desire-centered research (2009). These books do not “document the effects of oppression on [marginalized] communities” (Tuck, 2009) “as defeated and broken” (Tuck, 2009). Instead, they are “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives...by documenting not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope” (Tuck, 2009). To engage with desire-centered narratives, readers must “depathologiz[e] the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered” (Tuck, 2009). We highlight desire-centered narratives as a characteristic of high quality CRBs because it is mentally detrimental for readers from marginalized backgrounds to only see themselves as protagonists in damage-centered narratives (Stone, 2020).

Examples of high quality CRBs that positively depict BIPOC characters as protagonists across multiple genres and themes include Brian Young's *Healer of the Water Monster* (2021) and Gloria Chao's *American Panda* (2018). These books show young characters grappling with the challenges of being preteens/teenagers from the perspective of BIPOC protagonists. Pedro Martin's *MexiKid* (2023) and Tracy Ocomy Crowder's *Montgomery and the Case of the Golden Key* (2023) show non-White characters going on adventures. Carole Boston Weatherford's *Kin: Rooted in Hope* (2023) or *Marvelous Maravilloso* by Carrie Lara and Christine Battuz (2018) centers family and culture.

When selecting CRBs, we recommend that educators utilize resources like the Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature and Teaching for Change because they provide information about accessing books that highlight identity and promote cross cultural competencies. We also recommend that educators purchase CRBs through small presses, like Lee and Low Books or Beach House Publishing, or imprints like Heartdrum, Joy Revolution, Rick Riordan Presents, and Versify, as they specialize in multicultural content. Similarly, diverse book awards like the American Indian Youth Literature Award, Arab American Book Awards, Coretta Scott King Book Awards, Freeman Book Awards, Pura Belpré, Rainbow Booklist, and Tomás

Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, to name a few, will offer recommendations for exemplary books that depict rich cultural experiences across the characteristics that we have highlighted.

How to Use CRBs in the Classroom

Ladson-Billings (1995) makes a case for culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) through the following core tenets: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. To create academic success, educators must value culture as an asset in the classroom by leveraging students' cultural funds of knowledge during instruction and assessment. To facilitate cultural competence, educators must create spaces that visually and textually provide accurate representations of BIPOC communities on a consistent basis. Lastly, to facilitate critical consciousness, educators should engage students in learning that explores how one's identity has political, social, and economic implications. Students should be encouraged to question unfair systems and to think of solutions that can dismantle these injustices.

We believe that using CRBs in the following ways can help educators align their teachings practices with CRP:

Academic Success

1. CRBs should be used to make cultural experiences a necessary and inseparable part of their literacy instruction by using them as core texts for literacy instruction. We recommend a dialogic approach for using CRBs as core literacy texts because learning is a social process (Ouimet, 2011). Educators can use CRBs to facilitate rich classroom discussion about the experiences of diverse characters that invite students to explore character motives, question value systems, and make comparisons across multiple texts and experiences. Educators can also provide space for students to make connections to their own worlds in ways that allow students to think about how identity impacts characters' experiences and choices. These types of conversations foster deep thinking which improves comprehension and can ultimately decrease achievement debts (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Cultural Competence

2. We recommend the use of CRBs that present first-person narration either through one or multiple character-narrator focalizers as options for self-selected, independent reading and classroom displays. These types of narratives center BIPOC characters as “designated tellers” (Lanser, 1992), giving them authority in their own story worlds. This is significant because “for the collectively and personally silenced, the term [voice] has become a trope of identity and power” (Trites, 2000). First-person narration allows characters to proclaim, “I was here” and that their experience is valid and matters (Cadden, 2000; Woloch, 2009). In presenting narratives focalized through multiple diverse narrators, readers learn that no culture is a monolith, and each person experiences the world differently, due to the uniqueness of each person’s intersectionality. These types of experiences will not only create a more equitable classroom environment but will stimulate intra/intercultural and cross-cultural understanding amongst youth. Here, students can be encouraged to explore various types of narrations, like dual- and multi-narration, to learn how identities and experiences differ (Koss, 2009).

Critical Consciousness

3. We believe that CRBs should not be relegated to special projects that take time outside of “normal” classroom practice to celebrate or learn about various cultures. Therefore, we recommend that classroom teachers partner with librarians to implement culturally conscious research projects that encourage students to investigate social problems. In doing so, students can be exposed to primary, secondary, and tertiary resources that will allow them to explore a topic from multiple perspectives, examining both mainstream perspectives and counternarratives. Students can also use information and digital literacies to examine the credibility, authoritativeness, scope and currency of various information sources. Knowledge acquired through research can be used to write an op-ed essay, create a public service announcement, make a podcast, or take action through grade level appropriate service projects.

Conclusion

To counter educational inequality produced by norms of Whiteness, we argue that students should use CRBs within their classrooms. Providing students with access to CRBs will affirm BIPOC students and support literacy. However, educators must be intentional about the selection and use of these books to ensure that classroom environments do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes, inaccurate, or incomplete narratives of BIPOC communities.

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Best Practice Article: Empowering Urban Educators

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Abstract

This study investigates a fellowship program designed to address these issues through an innovative approach involving diversity in children's literature, drawing on Rudine Sims Bishop's framework of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. This framework helps pre-service teachers to use literature to reflect students' realities (mirrors), introduce them to different perspectives (windows), and engage actively with diverse views (sliding glass doors), which is essential for meeting the diverse needs of students in urban environments. This research aims to define and evaluate how the fellowship equips participants with the tools to implement transformative teaching practices in urban Pennsylvania schools. The study is based on an ethnographic case study methodology, employing semi-structured interviews, field notes, and a comprehensive case study database. Data analysis involved thematic coding to uncover key themes related to the participants' confidence in selecting, using, and advocating for texts with diverse representations.

“I want to learn more about how to keep children in the classroom.”

– Cherie (Focal Participant)

Background of the Study

In recent years, there has been a troubling trend in the United States where lawmakers and influential figures have increasingly targeted initiatives designed to promote diversity and inclusion in educational contexts (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). There has been a surge in efforts to ban books that acknowledge or celebrate identities that diverge from the white, cisgender, heterosexual standard, posing significant challenges for creating inclusive educational environments that respect and reflect the diversity of the student body (Meehan & Baeta, 2024). Amidst escalating debates over Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs (e.g., Ray & Gibbons, 2021), along with persistent anti-Black

sentiments (e.g., Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024; NAACP, 2023), there is a risk of educational spaces becoming increasingly homogeneous, moving away from embracing a diverse student population (e.g., Souto-Manning et al., 2019). This trend is particularly disheartening in urban school districts serving Black and Brown children who may ultimately find themselves present in the classroom but absent from the curriculum (McKoy Lowry, 2023) .

Further, in response to the urgent need for culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, the state of Pennsylvania recently introduced the CR-SE (Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education) competencies (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022). These competencies were designed to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to support diverse learning environments that promote equity and respect for all students. However, due to legal action funded by the conservative Thomas More Society, the Pennsylvania Department of Education no longer requires that public schools in Pennsylvania require these competencies (Scicchitano, 2024). Though the competencies have been replaced by a new set of competencies that address culture and differences (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024), they are far less comprehensive in how they address issues of systemic racism, microaggressions, and issues of equity (Clarey, 2024). Without strong guidelines meant to prepare preservice teachers to teach in ways that are culturally sustaining, the gap the CR-SEs attempted to close has reopened. Left with no guarantee that preservice teachers will gain the pedagogical skills to teach in culturally relevant and sustaining ways, teacher educators committed to this work are now tasked with finding ways to creatively integrate culturally sustaining learning experiences into educational practices outside of formal coursework.

The educational landscape in urban schools across Pennsylvania is fraught with challenges, including budget constraints, unequal distribution of resources, and significant achievement gaps (Moon, 2021). These obstacles not only compromise educational outcomes but also impede the implementation of culturally responsive teaching methods (Pagan, 2022). This research study explores a fellowship program dedicated to tackling these complex issues through diversity in children's literature. Utilizing Rudine Sims Bishop's

mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors framework (1990), the fellowship uses literature and other educational strategies to reflect students' own experiences (mirrors), offer perspectives on others' lives (windows), and facilitate active engagement with diverse viewpoints (sliding glass doors). This pedagogical approach is crucial in equipping pre-service teachers to authentically and effectively meet the needs of diverse student populations (O'Donnell, 2019), particularly now that the Pennsylvania Department of Education has agreed to replace the CR-SE competencies (Scicchitano, 2024).

This study aims to define and assess how this fellowship, rooted in innovative pedagogical frameworks, equips students to implement impactful and transformative teaching practices in Pennsylvania's urban schools. Insights from one of the fellowship participants, Cherie (a pseudonym), a Black woman and undergraduate student (at a public institution in the northeast) preparing to teach in these urban settings, provide a valuable perspective. Through this investigation, we aim to contribute to the wider conversation on culturally responsive education in urban settings and underscore its essential role in addressing educational disparities and promoting inclusivity.

Review of the Literature

Honoring Diversity in Children's Literature

Inclusivity is fundamental in children's literature, demonstrating how books are essential tools in shaping young minds (Crisp et al., 2016). The inclusion of diverse narratives helps promote an understanding and acceptance of various cultural, social, and personal identities. Studies have shown that seeing oneself (Brooks, 2006) and others represented positively in literature can significantly benefit a child's development, enhancing self-esteem and fostering empathy (Dahlen, 2020; Thomas, 2016, 2019). Such representation in children's books enriches their educational experience and supports their social-emotional growth by affirming their sense of identity and enhancing their ability to empathize with others.

Diversity in children's literature also helps to reflect varied life (Flowers, 2016) and sociocultural experiences (Dahlen, 2020), acting as both a mirror (Bishop, 1990; Toliver, 2018) reflecting their own

experiences and a window into the lives of others. This dual role helps children closely examine their identity and sense of belonging while exposing them to different cultures and perspectives (Willis & Harris, 2005), thereby broadening their understanding and compassion. Additionally, children's books play a significant role in developing critical thinking and imagination (Matthews, 2021). Engaging with stories allows children to analyze and question, connecting the narrative to real-life situations (Martin, 2004) and conceiving imaginative solutions to problems. By introducing complex ideas in accessible ways, children's literature encourages them to address sophisticated topics early on, equipping them with the necessary cognitive tools to navigate and influence their world effectively.

Neoliberalism in Education, Diversity, and Implications for Urban Schools

Neoliberalism significantly shapes the educational landscape, influencing the way preservice teachers are trained and how children and teachers experience the educational system. Under this regime, education is framed largely in terms of market-driven imperatives where standards and productivity govern the teaching and learning process. Watson (2015) and Canella (1997) discuss how this environment fosters a dynamic where children and educators are continuously evaluated against stringent, often inflexible criteria that prioritize conformity and output. This approach turns schools into arenas where performance metrics, rather than educational equity or holistic development, dominate.

In this context, educational success is measured by standardized outputs that are designed to produce high returns in terms of educational attainment and future earnings, as noted by Brown et al. (2019). However, this focus neglects the broader, critical purpose of education, such as fostering critical thinking and accommodating diverse learning needs. The overarching influence of neoliberal policies not only pressures teachers to conform to strict benchmarks but also undermines the professional autonomy of educators by dictating that efficacy is contingent upon adherence to standardized norms. This system devalues the rich, diverse backgrounds and abilities of students and educators alike, positioning those who deviate as deficient. De Lissovoy (2015) points out the inherent contradictions in a system that promotes equal access to

competitive frameworks while simultaneously perpetuating racial, classist, and sexist disparities. This flawed notion of equality often manifests in superficial, "colour-blind" approaches to teaching that ignore structural inequities and the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups. The critical examination of these dynamics reveals a pressing need to rethink how educational standards and success are defined and achieved in a neoliberal context.

In light of these observations, we acknowledge the complex interplay between the need for diverse representations in children's literature and the restrictive influences of neoliberalism on educational progress. It is important to consider frameworks that help educators and other stakeholders appreciate the significance of diversity in children's literature. Similarly, we must recognize how neoliberal policies can obstruct genuine advancements in this area by prioritizing standardization and economic outcomes over the rich, varied experiences of individual learners. This understanding is crucial for developing strategies that genuinely support inclusivity and critical engagement in educational settings.

Teacher Preparation in Urban Schools

Teacher education for urban schools requires a specific set of strategies and understandings to effectively address the complex and dynamic educational landscapes these environments present (Howard & Milner, 2021). Urban schools often serve diverse populations with a broad range of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, teacher education programs must prioritize cultural competence, ensuring that future educators are well-prepared to meet the varied needs of their students. This includes training on how to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy into the classroom, which promotes learning through the cultural characteristics and experiences of students themselves (Lee, 2018). Additionally, educators must be skilled in differentiating instruction to cater to a wide array of learning styles and levels, as well as in implementing restorative practices that support a positive and inclusive school culture (Howard & Milner, 2021).

Furthermore, teacher education programs for urban settings need to equip teachers with the skills to address systemic issues that may affect their students, such as poverty, inequality, and systemic racism (Lee et al., 2010; Waddell & Ukpokodu, 2012). This involves not only preparing teachers to recognize and challenge these issues within the educational system but also empowering them to advocate for policy changes that support equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students. To achieve this, programs often include training in community engagement, encouraging future teachers to work collaboratively with families, community leaders, and organizations to foster a supportive network for students. By preparing teachers to be both educators and advocates, teacher education programs can play a crucial role in transforming urban education and making a lasting impact on the communities they serve.

Methodology

Our methodology is focused on ethnographic case study design. We chose a case study approach to understand how this fellowship prepares pre-service teachers with the knowledge, tools, and resources to evaluate and incorporate diverse children’s literature in their future classrooms utilizing a “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” framework (Bishop, 1990; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Toliver, 2018). The fellows served as a collective, distinct case that we studied through a variety of methodologies, including semi-structured interviews (and transcripts), fieldnotes, and a comprehensive case study database (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Patton, 1990). We recruited and interviewed six participants from the study during the Fall 2023 semester at Homestead University (a pseudonym). We utilized thematic coding to analyze the transcripts, identifying key themes concerning the participants' confidence in evaluating, integrating, and advocating for texts with diverse representations. Urban teacher preparation surfaced as a significant theme during data analysis, leading to the selection of Cherie as a primary participant and spokesperson for this topic. A comprehensive list of all texts—classified as either “good” or “bad” representations—utilized by the fellows can be found in the Appendix, with particular titles referenced by Cherie briefly cited throughout this article.

Overview of the Fellowship

A key objective of this fellowship was to compensate preservice teachers for their engagement in specialized topics by providing a stipend. For this purpose, we successfully obtained funding to support four cohorts of fellows over the 2022-2023 and 2023-2025 academic years. Specifically, we secured \$10,000 from the University Research Grant and \$7,800 from the State System of Higher Education Grant (exact titles withheld for confidentiality). This funding enabled us to pay each fellow \$1,000, equivalent to \$15 per hour for a commitment of four hours weekly across a 16-week semester.

The fellowship attracted significant interest from preservice teachers, with 38 applicants responding to our recruitment efforts, though we could only fund 15 positions. Selection was based on imminent graduation dates and prioritizing individuals underrepresented in the teaching field. Fellows were grouped into semester-long cohorts ranging from two to five members each. By the second year, we refined our approach to a productive schedule of weekly one-hour Zoom meetings.

Throughout the semester, we engaged fellows in deepening their understanding of children's literature, blending context, theory, text analysis, and an individual capstone project. Discussions initially focused on the contrast between new culturally responsive teaching mandates in Pennsylvania and the growing opposition to diverse literature nationwide (Cole-Mallot et al., 2021). The program then shifted to examining texts concerning racial and ethnic identity, gender and sexuality, and disability, respectively, organized in two-week segments. Each segment began with a faculty-led theoretical overview and examples of both positive and negative representations. Fellows then led discussions on texts (Appendix) they accessed easily, assessing authenticity and classroom applicability. The semester culminated in a capstone project, allowing fellows to creatively showcase their learning through various outputs such as daycare book lists, undergraduate presentations, Instagram stories, and a website detailing evaluation criteria. These projects not only demonstrated their developmental achievements but also served as valuable portfolio pieces for their forthcoming professional endeavors.

Findings

During our interviews with the fellows, many expressed how the "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" framework has informed their approach to diversity in the field. Our interview questions were crafted to explore deeply the fellows' experiences and the impact of their semester-long involvement with diverse representations in children's literature, framed through this particular model. All fellows offered insightful and engaging responses, detailing the evolution of their thoughts on children's literature. In our findings, we focus on Cherie as the central participant to explore how the fellowship equips teachers to address certain challenges in urban educational environments across the state. We present three key findings from our study: (1) evolution as a form of resistance, (2) self-efficacy as empowerment, and (3) perspectives on the impact of preservice training with the "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" framework in urban schools.

Evolution [Progression] as Resistance

“Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

We start by examining how Cherie has engaged with the "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" framework throughout her fellowship journey. Cherie discussed how utilizing this framework has opened up new perspectives and encouraged her to adopt a more critical approach towards recognizing the importance of diverse representations in children's literature. At the start of the interview, we invited Cherie to reflect on how her thinking may have shifted after successfully completing the fellowship. Cherie stated:

My thinking around children’s literature has evolved as, like, I’m confronting negative representations of children’s literature. I didn’t realize how much it [children’s literature diversity] changed since I was younger. I also saw how many negative views, or negative books, have negative views towards people in [under represented] groups.

In this section, Cherie shares her insights on the evolution of diversity in children’s literature since her childhood. She reflects on her earliest memory of representation in a book, citing *Shades of Black* by Sandra

and Myles Pinkney, a text she and her fellow students explored during the fellowship (Appendix). She then compares this experience with more recent works like *ABC Positive Affirmations for Young Black and Brown Girls* by Aaliyah Wilson. She further notes a greater presence of representation today (Toliver, 2018) and explains that using the mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors framework during the fellowship has enriched her understanding of its significance for her future teaching practice:

My thinking, in general, has also changed because of this fellowship. Now I know I need to look for an author who has the experience or knows what they're talking about. A direct correlation to the book they're talking about.

Cherie's reflections on her journey through the fellowship reveal a notable progression in her thinking regarding the selection of children's literature (Appendix). Initially, her criteria may have been less focused on the authenticity of the voices behind the stories. However, the fellowship experience has reshaped her approach, emphasizing the importance of choosing authors who possess firsthand knowledge or a deep understanding of the themes they explore. This evolution in thought underscores a direct correlation between the author's experiences and the credibility and impact of their narratives. By prioritizing this connection, Cherie now considers herself equipped to make more informed decisions that ensure the books she selects not only entertain but also educate and resonate authentically with her students. Additionally, she elaborates on how she applied the framework to reconcile her appreciation for classic, albeit problematic, books:

I had to confront my nostalgia, and my love for an older book. I changed my perspective on that, because not all books, even if we love them, are good representations of Black people. There are so many people who can't, or won't change their nostalgia, or they don't see that the nostalgia they have for the book is really negative.

Cherie discusses the challenging process of reevaluating her attachment to beloved older books through the lens of the framework learned in her fellowship. She explains how she confronted her nostalgia and personal fondness for these books, recognizing that her cherished classics (Thomas, 2019) do not always offer

positive or accurate representations of Black people (2016). This realization has led her to shift her perspective, acknowledging that emotional attachment to literature can often obscure the problematic elements within. Cherie points out that many struggle with this issue, unable to move beyond their nostalgia or fail to recognize the negative implications it harbors (Savsar, 2018). Her experience underscores the importance of critically assessing literary works to dissociate oneself from problematic representations, fostering a more inclusive and accurate literary environment for all readers.

Self-Efficacy [Autonomy] as Empowerment

In the pursuit of fostering more inclusive learning environments, the empowerment and self-efficacy of educators are crucial (Narayanan, 2023). Engaging deeply with diverse representation in children's literature not only broadens educators' perspectives but also equips them with the necessary tools to advocate effectively for inclusivity. Through this fellowship focused on diverse children's literature, participants gain a nuanced understanding and appreciation for books that embody a wide range of experiences and identities. This knowledge is transformative, as Cherie noted, allowing her to confidently curate their classroom libraries with books that offer positive and diverse representations:

I know what to look for in books, and I know what books to add into my classroom library now.

Knowing and experiencing all the types of books that everyone shared during the fellowship. I thought.. 'I can add that..' or, 'That's a good one..' There are books out there that have good representation. My goal is to become a reading specialist, so I know it's important to have a good, positive representation that I'm showing to other kids. And I know that it's important to consider that as I'm teaching reading strategies to other kids.

Furthermore, the integration of fellowship experiences with academic coursework enhances this empowerment. Some teacher prep courses (particularly, those with an urban emphasis) provide a theoretical foundation, while the practical experience gained from research and fellowship activities deepens the fellows' ability to engage in meaningful discussions about diversity in children's literature. This combination of theory

and practice prepares educators not only to teach reading strategies but also to consider the broader implications of the content they choose to share. Cherie elaborated on this point during her interview:

In my coursework at Homestead University [a pseudonym], the readings tie into this. In different courses, I had a good understanding. Now, knowing that I have the experience from the research, I think I'm more prepared to talk and have discussions with regard to diversity in children's literature.

Cherie continued talking about what she considers to be the most important aspect of her time in the fellowship, and, moreover, what she believes more broadly about the world:

The most important thing that I learned is that books matter. After people see social media or tv, they see books, and so it is an important component of how we navigate. So, positive representations for the books is important because that is how people are going to see themselves in the world.

As future educators, particularly for Cherie as she prepares to become a reading specialist in predominantly Black and Brown urban schools, there is a keen awareness of the crucial need to present diverse and positive representations. This approach helps cultivate an inclusive atmosphere that enhances educational experience for all students.

Perspectives on Preservice Impact [Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors] in Urban Schools

Cherie reflected on the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors framework as she spoke about her plans to pursue a career as a reading specialist in urban classrooms. In the vibrant and diverse learning ecology of urban educational settings, the role of children's literature as a mirror and window becomes profoundly impactful. When children see themselves reflected in the stories they read, it affirms their identity and enhances their sense of belonging (Savsar, 2018). Equally important is their exposure to positive, authentic representations of others, which fosters empathy and broadens their worldview (Dahlen, 2020). This dual function of children's books—to reflect the reader's reality and to introduce them to the unfamiliar—is crucial in nurturing a generation that values diversity and inclusivity. We learn this from Cherie:

Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors, that part [conceptual framework] of this work [teaching], making sure that children, first of all, see themselves, and second, that other children are reading other, good positive representations of children of other groups. And asking: what is the book doing to create positive change about the people being written about? So I know to incorporate this into my teaching.

A deep understanding of diverse representation is crucial for educators in urban classrooms, characterized by a diverse range of student backgrounds and experiences. Engaging in fellowships focused on diverse children's literature can equip educators to thoughtfully choose books that not only captivate but also enlighten students about positive societal change and the complexities of different cultures. This training is essential for helping educators decide which materials to introduce into the classroom, ensuring that all children find both mirrors that reflect their own experiences and windows that offer insights into the lives of others. Cherie elaborated on how her preparation through field-placement courses further enhances this understanding and how it aligns with her values and transformative views on diversity in children's literature:

I would say, a lot of my field placements are taking place in urban settings. So I think, knowing that I have the experience [from this fellowship], I know what to bring, and what not to bring when I'm going to my classrooms and reading to the children. Just like a little bit of the interaction, and knowing that every child is different. So that the kids can see diverse literature, and see different people other than themselves. It's important.

This point is especially significant, as Cherie highlights the diverse identities (and sociocultural multiplicity) of children in urban classroom settings. Despite facing socioeconomic, logistical, and financial challenges, it remains crucial not to overlook the importance of celebrating and elevating children's identities in our teaching methods.

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

Cherie's experience in the fellowship program vividly illustrates the transformative influence of focused educational endeavors in equipping teachers for urban educational settings. Her introspections demonstrate a significant shift in her methodology for choosing and leveraging children's literature, largely influenced by the mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors framework. This framework has not only redefined her standards for selecting books but has also enriched her comprehension of literature's pivotal role in mirroring and molding youthful perspectives.

Cherie's growth from an initial awareness of diversity to a nuanced understanding of the need for authentic representation underscores the transformative potential of integrating theory with practical engagement. Her ability to critically evaluate her nostalgia and preferences in children's literature indicates a significant shift towards a more critical, inclusive approach. This critical stance is crucial for educators, particularly in urban settings where the diversity of the student population necessitates a broad and inclusive curriculum (Ferrell, 2023).

Cherie's empowerment through the fellowship is evident in her newfound confidence to curate a classroom library that is both reflective and aspirational for students from diverse backgrounds. Her focus on selecting books that provide "good, positive representation" demonstrates a commitment to fostering an environment where all students can see themselves and others in the stories they read (Thomas, 2016). This approach is critical in urban schools, where children's literature can be a powerful tool for building identity and empathy.

Strategies for Urban Education Teacher Preparation

This study contributes to contemporary literature on text selection (Flowers, 2016; Thomas, 2019) by highlighting the significance of criticality and reflection in the selection of children's texts for pedagogical purposes. Additionally, we posit that Cherie's reflections and other data from this study build upon the literature on teacher preparation programs (Edwards & White, 2018) by advocating for the establishment of fellowship opportunities that enable students to engage in rigorous research on the diversity of children's

literature as they prepare for their future classrooms. The insights provided by Cherie highlight several key areas for future development in teacher preparation programs: (1) *Critical Engagement with Literature*: training programs or other teacher educator initiatives should emphasize the importance of critical engagement with children's literature (Flores et al., 2019; Martin & Spencer, 2020), encouraging educators to assess books not just for their literary merits but also for their cultural and social implications; (2) *Balanced Representation in Curriculum*: educators should be equipped to balance nostalgia and tradition with the need for contemporary and diverse perspectives (Edwards & White, 2018), ensuring that their teaching materials avoid perpetuating outdated or harmful stereotypes; and (3) *Empowerment Through Knowledge*: there is a clear need for programs that empower teachers with the knowledge to choose and use literature that reflects and respects the diversity of their student body, particularly in urban settings where cultural competence is crucial (Edwards & White, 2018; Flowers, 2024).

Cherie's experience and growth during the fellowship highlight the effectiveness of programs that blend theoretical knowledge with practical application. The mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors framework (Toliver, 2018) not only guided her in reshaping her personal biases but also prepared her to enter an urban classroom with the tools necessary to support and validate the diverse experiences of her students (Edwards & White, 2018). As such, her journey underscores the importance of such frameworks in teacher preparation programs, particularly those aimed at urban education (Flowers, 2024). This suggests a broader application of these principles across teacher training initiatives to better prepare educators for the complexities of diverse educational environments.

A deep understanding of the importance of diverse representation (Hadley & Toliver, 2023) is particularly essential for educators working in urban classrooms, where the student body often encompasses a wide array of backgrounds and experiences. The knowledge gained from focused fellowships on diverse children's literature may empower educators to carefully select books that not only engage but also educate students about positive change and the nuances of different cultures. This preparation is critical (Flowers,

2016) as it informs their choices on what materials to bring into the classroom to ensure that all children find both mirrors reflecting their own experiences and windows into the lives of others (Martin, 2004). Educators, through experiences such as fellowships, learn to tailor their approach to each unique classroom, recognizing the individual differences among students and the specific dynamics of urban settings. They become adept at choosing (Hadley & Toliver, 2023) literature that supports an inclusive environment, allowing every student to see themselves and others in the stories they share. This careful curation of children's literature is not just about reading skills—it's about shaping a more understanding and empathetic society.

Implications for Future Studies

Based on our findings, it is evident that structuring preparatory programs such as fellowships, externships, or assistantships around the concept of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors could be beneficial for training teachers destined for urban school environments. Future research should consider evaluating the effectiveness of these structured programs in preparing educators not only to navigate but also to excel in urban teaching contexts. This approach, grounded in reflective and inclusive educational practices, could significantly enhance the ability of teachers to meet the diverse needs of students in urban districts.

Moreover, further investigation into the long-term impacts of these fellowship programs on teacher success in urban settings is warranted. Specifically, researchers should explore how such programs influence teachers' abilities to foster a sense of belonging and achievement among their students. This research could also examine the extent to which participating teachers intentionally develop classroom libraries that reflect diverse experiences and identities, as well as the ways in which they implement equitable teaching practices. By understanding these dynamics, future studies could provide deeper insights into the strategies that most effectively support both teacher and student success in urban educational environments.

Conclusion

As authors, researchers, and a team of teachers and teacher educators, we believe firmly that children in urban schools deserve to see themselves reflected in their classrooms' curricula, learning materials, and

libraries. That said, our commitment to mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors does not end in urban classrooms. As Dr. Bishop (1990) wrote, "racism is still one of the unresolved social problems" and "books may be one of few places where children who are socially isolated...from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves" (p. 2). As such, books that serve as accurate and loving windows and sliding glass doors (Toliver, 2018) into the lives of children who are underrepresented in literature are urgently needed in classrooms that predominantly serve children who are more likely to find their mirrors in books (i.e., White, non-disabled, gender-conforming, etc.). For as Bishop wrote, "[i]f they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world – a dangerous ethnocentrism" (p. 2).

Additionally, we aim to further employ the mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors framework as a powerful tool to empower, educate, and inspire teacher candidates—especially those preparing to teach in low-resourced schools. Our goal is to build upon Dr. Bishop's legacy by redefining the role of books, refining our literary choices, and enhancing the value of introducing enriching literature into classrooms throughout the state. We also strive to enable our students to view themselves as agents of change within these urban environments, equipping them to provide culturally-relevant and impactful educational experiences for their future students.

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Interview: Native Scholar, Debbie Reese, Speaks on Blogs, Books, and More!

Carrie Anne Thomas, The Ohio State University

When educators want to educate themselves on Native children's and young adult literature, there is no better place to turn than Debbie Reese's blog "American Indians in Children's Literature"

[<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>]

Reese, who is tribally enrolled at Nambé Owingeh, has a PhD in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) as well as a professional background in elementary education, school administration, and library and information science. Her articles, blog, book reviews, editorial work, and advisory work are critical to the field of children's literature, especially to the promotion and advancement of accurate Native representation. Reese generously provides her thoughts and expertise in the following interview.

1. What inspired you to create your blog "American Indians in Children's Literature"?

As a former schoolteacher, I could not afford to join professional associations where I'd find articles and book reviews. Once my research began to be published in those places, I remembered the life of teachers. There's rarely enough time or funds to do what teachers want to do or learn! So, one reason I started the blog was to share what I was learning and writing with anyone who had an internet connection.

2. What do you find most enjoyable about reading and reviewing Native children's and young adult literature?

Finding stories by Native writers that mirror my own life as a Native person is a huge lift, especially because US society hangs on to harmful stereotypes on athletic fields (mascots) and in schools (classic but flawed books with derogatory images of Native peoples). When I come upon those books -- like Laurel Goodluck's *Rock Your Mocs* -- I can't wait to tell others about them! Sharing them is so joyful!

3. In what ways do you see diverse texts serving as mirrors for Native children in urban schools?

I mentioned Laurel Goodluck's *Rock Your Mocs*. In it she shows kids in suburban areas, going to school with their mocs on. In her *Forever Cousins*, I see an urban experience in the pow wow that happens in what is the San Francisco Bay Area. In the Author's Note, Goodluck writes about growing up there--and why. It is a terrific note because it tells readers about federal government programs that enticed Native families to leave their homelands and seek work in urban areas. The story is primarily about two cousins. As we find out early on, the family of one decides to return to the reservation. The book is about how they sustain their relationship over the miles, and a reunion that occurs on the reservation. *Rock Your Mocs* and *Forever Cousins* are important for the millions of Native kids in suburbs or urban areas---and for kids on reservations, too. The way Goodluck writes stories creates mirrors for all of them.

- 4. You sometimes add a “curtain” to Bishop’s (1990) “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” metaphor when it comes to Native stories. Why is this curtain important, and what advice do you have for Native youth, particularly urban youth, who want to engage with and honor their stories behind the curtain?**

I began using curtain as a metaphor for what I was taught as a Native child growing up on our reservation. There are things we hold back from the public because of a history of misrepresentation that had negative impacts on Native peoples across the country. Due to misrepresentations, aspects of our spirituality were prohibited by non-Native entities. Another reason is the long history of non-Native people trying to mimic or conduct our ceremonies as if they are a product that anyone can do or use. I hope that Native youth growing up in urban areas are taught what they can--and cannot--share with others. That information would come from elders in their urban communities.

- 5. According to the U.S. Census, approximately 71 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in urban areas. What is one commonly held misconception about urban Indigenous populations that you would like to dispel for urban educators?**

There are people who think being Native is tied to living on a reservation, having dark hair, high cheekbones, and so on. That is not the case. Being Native is tied to your parents, grandparents, ancestors, and their life experiences as members or citizens of their particular nation. What you look like does not matter. Where you

live does not matter either, but where you live may have ramifications for what you can do. Some nations, for example, require citizens to live on the reservation in order to vote in tribal elections. Given the statistics you cite, teachers should assume they have Native children in their classroom and revisit how they teach about Native peoples. Too much content depicts us as people of the past. We are still here.

6. What recent Native children's and YA book recommendations do you have for urban educators to incorporate into their classrooms?

Mascot by Waters and Sorell is about an urban school that has a mascot that is meant to be an Indian. In it, several different voices -- including a Native one -- address it and its impact on school and community life. Some think it is fine, others do not. *Mascot* is well written and timely, given the number of schools in the country that are grappling with mascots and what to do about them. I'd also like to see teachers use Cynthia Leitich Smith's *Sisters of the Neversea*. It is her take on Peter Pan. It starts in Tulsa, Oklahoma and is about a blended family. The two main characters, Lily and Wendy are stepsisters. We read that Lily is Creek, and Wendy is English (from England), and the cover illustration suggests that Lily is Black Creek. On Neverland, they find several Native youth from several nations. There's so much to chew on in this book. I think students would be deeply engaged with it. And of course, I recommend Laurel Goodluck's books.

7. The United Nations General Assembly launched the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) to raise awareness on Indigenous language preservation, revitalization and promotion. What role do you see this or other initiatives playing in conjunction with Native children's and YA books for increased awareness of Indigenous languages in urban schools?

Any entities that ask others to be inclusive of Indigenous peoples -- from our existence to our languages, stories, and so on -- are important to the growing knowledge everyone has about who we are. Teachers could use initiatives like it to write grants to purchase books by Native writers, especially those that include Native languages.

8. Is there one final thought you'd like to share with teachers?

I give workshops for teachers and librarians and always encourage them to use present tense verbs when talking about Native peoples. The word 'IS' is only two letters but that word is powerful. Using it consistently -- daily -- can help students know that we are not a people of the past. We are here, and wherever a student or school are, they are on the homelands of an Indigenous tribal nation.

**Interview Print and digital book bans/censorship, antiracist children’s literature,
urban education, social justice**

Dr. Tisha Lewis Ellison, University of Georgia

In an era marked by unprecedented attacks on culturally sustaining children’s literature, through both traditional and digital book bans and emerging forms of print and digital censorship, educators and researchers are urgently exploring how readers develop antiracist literacies, digital literacies, and critical consciousness. Children’s picture books such as *I Am an Antiracist Superhero: With Activities to Help You Be One Too!* by Dr. Jennifer N. Bacon offer a powerful hybrid approach by pairing narrative representation with participatory activities that empower children to “Look, Listen, Feel, and Act” in the face of injustice.

This interview engages scholars, educators, and literacy leaders whose work intersects with urban education and social justice. Through Dr. Bacon's insights, we consider how literacy, digital literacies, along with antiracist children’s literature and the growing challenges of print and digital book censorship, can nurture agency, empathy, and activism in young readers, even amid restrictive political climates. The questions below invite nuanced reflection on how literacy, technology, censorship, and equity children’s lives and the broader struggle for educational justice.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Thank you for speaking with me about this critical topic impacting our education system and children. To begin, can you tell our readers who you are, your role at your university, and what inspired you to write *I Am an Antiracist Superhero: With Activities to Help You Be One Too!*?

Dr. Bacon: It is a pleasure. I am currently a Core Doctoral Faculty member of Human Development at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, CA. I have been in the field of education for over 20 years, working with preschool children to doctoral students. I am also a former public school special education teacher. I was a core Associate Professor in Elementary Education, working with future teachers, and an Associate Dean at Naropa University in Boulder, CO. *I Am an Antiracist Superhero* was written during the pandemic when

George Floyd (and many others) was tragically murdered. Students, teachers, friends, neighbors, and community members began asking me what they could do and how they could help their students and children make sense of these horrible events. As a mother, I began thinking of ways to both protect my daughter and help her better understand what was happening, so she could feel safe, protected by us, and possibly even empowered during these difficult times. It was then that I began writing *I Am an Antiracist Superhero: With Activities to Help You Be One Too!*

Dr. Lewis Ellison: How do you define “antiracist literacy” and how does this definition shape your selection and use of children’s literature (digital or print)?

Dr. Bacon: That’s a great question. I’d like to begin with the definition of racism. Anthropologist, ethnographer, and activist, Dr. Helán Enoch Page defines Racism as “an ideological, structural, and historic stratification process.” In this process, people of European descent, who have historically held power over people of African descent and people of color, by both individual and institutional distress patterns, have sustained their own advantage, power, and mobility to the disadvantage of the population (people of color). When I examine antiracism literature, I look to its intention to empower, take an active stance against promoting power over one another, and/or reinforcing stereotypes, negative roles, and harm in both covert and overt ways. One of the most important components for me, as a teacher, writer, and mother, is to inspire positive action. Antiracism literature is not passive. It’s an active stance against racism that engages children in an age-appropriate process through the exploration of feelings, activities that inspire and create a sense of freedom, and examples of how (whether small or large) we can make school, community, or the world better. Antiracist literacy involves both the individual and the collective in making things more just and equitable. For younger children, I often ask, How can things be fairer for everyone? I also tend to select books that encourage imagination and allow for exploration and play. What would you like the world to look like? What is your idea of being fair? When I wrote *I Am Antiracist Superhero*, I

included activities to help kids connect with their feelings and express themselves creatively, such as making vision boards for peace and fairness, and feeling jars to express emotions.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Book bans and digital book restrictions continue to rise, and access to diverse children’s literature remains low. According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, of 3,619 children’s and young adult books published in 2024, only 16% featured Black representation, 13% featured Asian representation, and 3% Indigenous representation. Given these realities, what can parents, teachers, schools, and universities do to strengthen learning and ensure equitable access to diverse children’s books?

Dr. Bacon: When you look at some of the books that are banned, they are often the books that simply represent diversity positively. Such as images that affirm Black/African American, Asian, and Indigenous characters and culture. One thing that parents, teachers, schools, and universities can do is to continue to purchase them. There are banned book lists. Bookstores, and clubs/societies that offer banned books and display them prominently in sections for banned book readings. Supporting independently owned bookstores is also key. One of the most heartening things I have found as a writer of an antiracist book is the number of venues where I have been invited to speak and read, from preschools to libraries and bookstore storytimes, as well as presentations for organizations of psychologists. Counter-hegemonic literacy practices become embedded in our homes, schools, and communities through exposure to and telling of different stories and experiences. If literature were not considered to be so powerful, it would not be banned in the first place.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: In urban and under-resourced school communities, how do digital literacies and digital book formats shape opportunities for equitable access to children’s and youth literature? What possibilities, and challenges, are emerging?

Dr. Bacon: Access. Electronic versions of books that can be read on tablets, computers, smart smartphones. They enable e-readers and other devices that enhance children’s literacy skills, allowing them to receive support more independently without requiring students to wait for the teacher to read with them, which can be

especially challenging in classes with high student-to-teacher ratios. Digital books are kept “new” rather than the wealthiest schools having the newest print books or the largest number of print books, while other schools remain under-resourced or given the least desirable copies or supplies. And at the same time, access continues to be one of the greatest challenges in what schools receive these resources as well such as computers and tablets.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Can you share an example of a moment when a banned or challenged book, (print or digital) had a tangible impact on students’ identities, self-perceptions, or engagement with reading?

Dr. Bacon: There are so many outstanding banned books that really capture children’s experiences and identities. The fact that they have been banned for providing a voice to diverse experiences, perspectives, or for affirming diverse families, love, racial identity, or being different often means it's something worth checking out or discussing. For instance, *Hair Love* is a beautiful story about a father and daughter learning to transform their relationship through his care for her hair, which also explores the concept of true beauty, self-expression, and self-esteem. It is crucial for children to see themselves reflected in books and to discover books that they love to read and engage with. Books where children and youth feel their identities are acknowledged, accepted, and honored, and their stories are respectfully, joyfully, or even humorously told.

On a more serious note, children’s books can help children, along with their trusted adult, work through things that make them feel afraid, like racism or the death of George Floyd. For instance, my character, Malik, first learns of George Floyd's murder and feels afraid and confused and begins to work through his fears with the help of his parents. Other books look at topics like grief of a loss of a pet or a parent, or a mother being sick from cancer, and help children know that they are not alone. Or help children affirm boundaries, like not touching their hair without permission.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Your book recently won a Bookstagang Best of 2023 Picture Book

Award. Congratulations! Why do you think pairing a narrative about becoming “an antiracist superhero” with child-friendly activities like “Look, Listen, Feel, Act” resonates so strongly with young readers? What do these activities help children do?

Dr. Bacon: Thank you, Dr. Lewis Ellison! It was such an honor to be part of the Bookstagan community! I believe a significant aspect of what resonates with young readers is a sense of agency. Children read about real-life heroes, including historical figures such as Ruby Bridges, James Baldwin, and Rosa Parks, as well as contemporary heroes like Wynta-Amor Rogers. And then they get to see themselves as heroes in activities that they can do. For instance, “I look to see if someone is left out on the playground.” “I listen when someone shares their feelings.” “I feel proud when I treat everyone fairly,” “I act by saying kind words when someone is scared,” and “I act by letting my parents know when I see something that is not fair.”

This also connects with social and emotional learning, which resonates strongly with parents and educators, with a goal to foster children’s ability to learn about and manage their emotions, enhance their relationships, which includes with themselves, and interaction in ways that are beneficial to them, to others, and their communities which can lead to greater empathy, self-awareness, conflict resolution, and problem-solving. Seeing, feeling, and doing help to make the activities and experiences “your own.”

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Amid growing print and digital censorship, what strategies have you seen educators, librarians, families, or community groups use to protect access to antiracist children’s literature? What approaches have been most effective?

Dr. Bacon : It has been very uplifting to see the visible commitment of educators, librarians, and community groups, even in these difficult times, continuing to feature, as you are doing, Dr. Lewis Ellison, antiracist literature, host read-alouds, stock bookshelves, have events in museums, spiritual centers, classrooms, libraries, etc. Book clubs, writing groups, social justice groups, and parent groups have all worked to provide truthful accounts of historical and contemporary racism, the availability of antiracism literature, and

opportunities for authentic conversation. I think grassroots and relational efforts have been some of the most effective, as they become a practice and a way to build community, rather than an isolated event.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Many communities are feeling the effects of censorship. As a mother scholar of a brilliant Black girl, what impacts, positive or negative, have you seen or experienced? Has your book been challenged or restricted in certain areas?

Dr. Bacon: Thank you! My daughter is the inspiration for most of my writings and works. She participates, at times, in my classes, read-alouds, presentations, and writing projects. She even recently contributed to one of my book chapters! For us, this work is an integral part of our daily lives and has yielded very positive experiences and connections. I think it has also helped to shape her sense of culture, identity, and voice as an African American girl. As a family, we have made a conscious effort to be intentional about the spaces we reside in, the schools we choose, and the communities we are part of, which fosters a community of care, freedom, and belonging, and helps minimize the negative impact of exclusion and censorship. And while we try to be intentional in our exposure and experiences, it is imperative to recognize that there are profound impacts on our communities and a deep silencing through censorship throughout the nation that affects us all.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: *I Am an Antiracist Superhero* invites children to see themselves as empowered change makers. How do you balance nurturing children's agency with helping them understand that dismantling systemic racism requires collective, not individual, action?

Dr. Bacon: Through community building, we see that we are not alone. We also recognize that our actions have an impact on others. It can be as monumental as the Black Lives Matter movement, which was publicly demonstrated throughout the globe, or as connected as joining with your neighbors to address issues in your community. In *I Am an Antiracist Superhero: With Activities to Help You Be One Too!* I ask readers to reflect on their superpowers. "Everyone has something they can offer to make the world a more just place." Those superpowers can include making people laugh, speaking up for others, being a good listener, and more. There is power in our individual gifts that can be even more magnified when we combine them with others for a

positive purpose. While we are currently being bombarded with messages that many people must lose in order for some people to win, or continue winning, or to be on top at the expense of others, being an anti-racist superhero involves taking action to care for yourself and care for others, even when they do not look like you or are not from where you are from.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Looking ahead, what innovations are most urgent in publishing, teacher education, community engagement, or school and university policy to expand and protect access to antiracist print and digital children’s literature?

Dr. Bacon: Dr. Bettina Love, scholar, activist, and author of *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, speaks of abolitionist teaching. Abolitionist teaching is centered on intersectional racial justice, community building, and reimagining systems. I think this is the crux of what is needed in publishing, teacher education, community engagement, and school/university policy to not only to protect antiracist print and digital children’s literature, but to embody the principles of it.

Dr. Lewis Ellison: Thank you, Dr. Bacon, for your thoughtful reflections and your ongoing commitment to antiracist children’s literature and educational justice. Your work continues to shape how we think about access, equity, and literacy in challenging times. It has been a privilege to learn from you. Thank you for your time.

Dr. Bacon: Thank you so much for this opportunity!

Children’s Book Review: I’m from by Gray R. Gray Jr. (O. Mora, Illus.). Balzer + Bray. 2023, 40 pgs,

ISBN:0063089963

Review by: LaToya Tingle, Doctoral Student, The Ohio State University

Reiterating the phrase “I’m from...”, this picture book evokes emotion and nostalgia as it reminds readers to remember all the things that make them unique by taking them on a journey of exploration into familial and everyday life through the eyes of a young Black child. Written in a poetic format, the story emphasizes the home experience of being centered and surrounded by family and community. The beautiful

descriptions the young boy highlights, such as “Good morning beats, hip hop, and vibrating seats,” is just one way the story stresses that where a person comes from is more than a place—it’s family, traditions, culture, food, small moments, and big moments. Using scrap and recycled paper, Oga Mora adds beautifully layered imagery that enhances the words in the book. Every vibrant image is constructed in such a way that shows texture and illuminates the realities of the story being told. On one such page, when the young boy describes his favorite smells from the kitchen, the illustrations emphasize those smells, directly highlighting the significance of the young boy’s connections to family food. What is significantly interesting is the way in which the story shows an abrupt disruption of being seen within the home from the heaviness of being invisible in books, having his identity questioned, and his experiences of stereotyping outside of the home. Positioning across two pages shows the young boy’s separation from the community as he is surrounded, not with people, but with questions stating: “Can I touch your hair? You don’t sound Black? Do you play basketball? Where are you from?”. In contrast, images of home, family, and community seemingly reinforce the coziness and love that the author is met with from the moment he wakes up, nestled in a blanket full of memories, to the time he is kissed goodnight by his parents, who remind him that he comes from their “dreams, hopes, ambitions, lionlike traditions.” Overall, the ways of being, doing, seeing, living and the relationships that have formed all contribute to his Black identity. Through both text and visuals, the reader is compelled to see that where a person comes from is inclusive of a multitude of people, moments, and experiences—both good and bad—that shape our lives. This book serves as a unique mirror for students, particularly within urban classrooms, as it intentionally offers readers a critical examination of the comfort and tensions of everyday life to emphasize a fuller sense of a person’s identity. This book is recommended for pre-K-3 educators and adults just needing a reminder about the depth of history within a person’s identity.

***Children’s Book Review: Finding Papa* by Angela Pham Krans (Illustrator Thi Bui) 2023 First edition. New York, NY, Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. 40 pages. ISBN: 9780063060968, ISBN 10: 0063060965.**

Review by: Sanjukta Sarkar, Doctoral Student, University of Arizona

This children’s book opens with a scene of tender play between Mai and Papa, who goes “CHOMP! CHOMP!” to make Mai “giggle and squeal.” Soon, a hug “longer than usual,” a kiss “bigger than most,” and goodbye tears replacing the regular waves and smiles “at the end of the road” marked Papa’s furtive departure from home and Vietnam. Papa is absent from most of the narrative hereafter, as he is busy finding a new home for Mama and Mai. This picture book is a testament to the courage of “boat people” who fled from their homes in Vietnam on boats after the War ended in 1975.

Home is variously a favorite mango tree, a pet chicken, and a house at the end of a village dirt road which Mama and Mai later leave behind in their quest for Papa. These journeys of migration should be read in the context of the changing meanings of heart and home. *Finding Papa* could be alternately titled “Finding Home”, where home signifies shifting critical geographies, ideas, and emotions ranging from a site of carefree laughter to sustainable futurity, ultimately culminating in togetherness – home is with each other. Mama and Mai’s journey of hope takes them sneaking “through the village and around the rice paddies,” wading through the river, climbing onto a waiting boat, thirsting for water and Papa, braving a rumbling stomach and angry storm, before climbing an extra-high net onto a ship and going to America. It takes this to finally reunite with Papa and his new mustache.

Krans and Bui embody and archive their affects and memories of grief and gratitude through their refusal to silence remarkable resourcefulness during extraordinarily hard journeys to refugee camps in Singapore and Malaysia. Besides depicting lived histories of movements between bright and subdued memories, the vivid illustrations personify love as Mai is almost always seen with one of her doting parents.

While the narrative journeys along tropes of family separation, precarious movements, and family reunion, this dynamic of sheer love within the family lends a humanizing lens to the migration experience.

Stories rooted in migrant experiences write power and agency into the lived narratives of displacement and are historical accounts that shape refugee pedagogies and epistemologies. *Finding Papa* offers an entry point into critical and empowering conversations and literacies about migration rejecting harmful and deficit world-making. The caveat is to remember how movements between old and new homes are fraught with colonial and imperialist legacies of crossings. Portrayals of nurturing joy embodied through the father-daughter relationship also sends a message dismantling traditional gendered family outlines.

This socio-historical narrative, *among other recognitions, received the 2024 Asian/Pacific American Honor Award by the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association*. Apart from fostering much-needed belongingness within urban classrooms, *Finding Papa* advances higher-order thinking and global history. In the age of relentless censorship, this text is recommended for upper elementary and middle school.

Contributing Authors' Biographies

C. A. Thomas earned her doctorate in Literature for Children and Young Adults with a graduate minor in Comparative Cultural Studies and a graduate certificate in Anti-Racism in Education at The Ohio State University. Her current research interests are in linguistic pluralism and cultural diversity in children's literature.

Daris McInnis is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Literacy at West Chester University. Prior to this role, he taught early childhood and elementary grades in Washington, D.C. He teaches courses on reading/writing instruction, teacher preparation, literacy interventions, and multicultural education. His research interests focus on critical literacy, family literacy, the education and development of Black children, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

David Barry is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Early and Middle Grades Education at West Chester University. He was previously a Kindergarten teacher in the Boston Public Schools for ten years. His research interests include early childhood teacher education, the prioritization of self-compassion within and across teacher education programs, and the importance of accurate, loving depictions of diverse characters in children's literature.

Katelyn Quirin Manwiller is the Education Librarian and Assistant Professor at West Chester University. She supports the work of preservice teachers and graduate education students with a robust children's literature collection and research services. Her scholarship is grounded in her commitment to disability advocacy, working to advance disability inclusion in teacher education, libraries, and higher education.

Madison Peacock earned a B.S. Ed. in Early Grades Preparation with a minor in Literacy at West Chester University. She is currently an M.Ed. student studying to become a certified Pk-12 reading specialist. Her research interests include critical literacy, Black girl literacies, and diverse children's texts.

Sanjukta Sarkar is a South Asian feminist and fourth-year interdisciplinary PhD scholar in Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona; studying to major in Diversity & Social Justice in Education with an emphasis on Migration and Education and double minor in Literacy and Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory. She holds a Masters in English Literature from the University of Calcutta and worked with diverse communities as a former English and Public Speaking teacher. Presently she works as the managing editor of the Journal of Environmental Education; serves on the boards of Division G Graduate Student Executive Committee, AERA and Women Founders Collective; and has formerly served on the boards of AZTESOL and Doctoral Student Innovative Community Group, LRA. She was awarded the College of Education Erasmus Circle Scholarship for 2023-2024 and the 2023 Summer Institute Fellowship in Anti-Racist and Decolonizing Research Methods at George Mason University, and has held a Jewell Lewis Scholarship for Literacy Acquisition, Development, and Pedagogy between 2021 and 2023. Through a 2023-2024 Paul Lindsey internship with the Borderlands Education Center and Make Way For Books, she has been developing and facilitating a literacy curriculum for families-in-transit at Casa Alitas, Tucson's migrant shelter system. She recently received the 2024 Mellon-Fronteridades Graduate Fellowship to build on this work and help address her burning questions on mobile pedagogies and feminist resistance in mobility and displacement.

Andrea Jamison is an assistant professor of school librarianship at Illinois State University with more than seventeen years of experience in education and libraries. She has served on the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Jury, been a reviewer for Booklist, worked as a Diverse BookFinder Coder and Group Leader, and chaired ALA's Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table. She currently serves as President of Literacy Nation, an American Library Association affiliate, and as the 2025–2027 Chair of the Coretta Scott King Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement Jury.

Emma K. McNamara, Ph.D., researches genre fiction, narrative theory, and books for young readers. She is currently the Chair of the Graduate Student and Contingent Faculty Caucus of the International Society for the Study of Narrative; a member of the American Library Association's Coretta Scott King Book Award jury; the 15+ reading group facilitator for Capitol Choices, the DC state reading list; and is a reviewer for Children's Books Ireland. She lives in Washington, DC.

Dr. Tisha Lewis Ellison, Ph.D. is an associate professor of in the department of language and literacy education at the university of Georgia. Her research examines the intersections of family literacy, multimodality, and digital and STEAM literacy practices among Black and LatinX families and adolescents.

LaToya Tingle is a doctoral candidate at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on how African American families enact literacy in the home, focusing specifically on how race impacts the construction, use and development of literacies. Prior to pursuing a doctorate, LaToya worked as an early childhood educator—where building strong home-school connections was an integral component of her work.

Peer Reviewers' Biographies

Min-Seok Choi is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Literacy at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. His research examines multilingual family learning, community-based literacy practices, and teacher education that prepares preservice teachers to work with multilingual children and families. He focuses on how multilingual families create literacy-rich opportunities for children at home, in museums, and in other community spaces, and how teacher education can help future teachers recognize and build on these strengths in their planning and instruction. His work on multilingual family literacies and teacher preparation appears in venues such as *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, *Linguistics and Education*, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, and several edited volumes.

Dr. Shuling Yang is an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her research examines family literacy, literacy teacher education, and AI integration in teacher preparation. She has received multiple awards, including the 2025 Outstanding Paper Award of the *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education*, the 2023 NCTE ELATE Research Initiative Award, the 2021 AERA Division C Equity Grant, the NCTE Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award, and the 2018 ILA Jeanne Chall Research Fellowship. She serves on the editorial boards of the *Bilingual Research Journal*, the *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education*, and the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.

Dr. Emily Hayden is a Literacy Specialist for the Strategic Education Research Partnership. She has served as a faculty member at SUNY University at Buffalo, University of Nebraska, and Iowa State University. Her research focuses on equitable, socially just access to literacy learning across disciplines as well as teacher development. Prior to earning her PhD Emily was a K-12 teacher, literacy specialist, and administrator for special education in public Title 1 schools, working with diverse students in high poverty/high mobility settings. Her teaching experience spans K-12 as well as undergraduate/graduate students at the university level, and she has worked with teachers, researchers, community leaders, and policymakers.

Darius Phelps is the Assistant Director of Programs at the NYU SPS Center for Publishing and Applied Liberal Arts. He is the author of *My God's Been Silent* (Writ Large Press, 2026) and *The Holy Ghost Lives In Her Laugh* (Kith Books, 2026). A poet before anything else, his work bears witness to grief, faith, and the act of becoming—offering language as a form of liberation and light. Through the lens of poetic inquiry, Dr. Phelps explores how verse can function as pedagogy, healing and survival. Rooted in Black literary traditions and personal testimony, his poems navigate silence, ancestry, and resilience, creating sanctuaries for voices too often unheard. His work has been featured by *Diode*, *Een Magazine*, *School Library Journal*, and many more across platforms that champion the power of story to honor every body, every history, and every voice.

Kaha Abdi is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching & Learning at The Ohio State University. Her research examines community-based literacies, language ideologies, and decolonial understandings of learning and teaching, with a particular focus on Black Muslim immigrant communities. She has received the Helen A. Robinson Grant from the International Literacy Association and has been named the 2026 Emerging Scholar Award recipient by the Language & Social Processes SIG of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Her work has also been published by the *English Journal*, *The Urban Review*, and *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.

Hiawatha Smith, Ph.D., is an associate professor of literacy education at the University of Wisconsin River Falls. There, he primarily teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in children's and adolescent literature as well as English language arts methods. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, he is the director of the graduate reading education and elementary education programs while also supervising pre-service teachers. Hiawatha's professional contributions span a wide range of literacy and teacher education areas, including pre-service teachers in practicum experiences, reading motivation, nonproficient readers, developmental word study instruction, and diverse perspectives in children's and adolescent literature. His professional contributions have been recognized by the academic community, as evidenced by his scholarly publications, membership in the Diversity Scholars Network at the University of Michigan, his 2022 NCTE Early Career Educator of Color award, and his affiliation and leadership within various professional literacy-related organizations.

Diana Liu is a full-time high school ELA who recently earned her doctorate in English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In addition to being a classroom teacher, she is an adjunct lecturer, and a mentor teacher.

Dr. Tiffany A. Flowers is an associate professor of reading and literacy in the teacher and special education department at Central Michigan University. *Dr. Flowers* is a multidisciplinary researcher with a background in early childhood education, curriculum and instruction, psychology, social, philosophical, and historical foundations of education, teaching and learning, and language, literacy, and culture. Using a variety of research methods, Dr. Flowers investigates educational policy, contemporary and historical curriculum issues, and equity within literacy. Her research also focuses on cultural contexts, community engagement, pedagogical concerns, and issues related to families. Through this multifaceted research focus, Tiffany conducts a variety of inquiries into areas such as family literacy, children's and young adult literature, African American literacy development, field placement, urban education, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Co-Editors Biographies

Dr. Tiffany A. Flowers is an associate professor of reading and literacy in the teacher and special education department at Central Michigan University. *Dr. Flowers* is a multidisciplinary researcher with a background in early childhood education, curriculum and instruction, psychology, social, philosophical, and historical foundations of education, teaching and learning, and language, literacy, and culture. Using a variety of research methods, Dr. Flowers investigates educational policy, contemporary and historical curriculum issues, and equity within literacy. Her research also focuses on cultural contexts, community engagement, pedagogical concerns, and issues related to families. Through this multifaceted research focus, Tiffany conducts a variety of inquiries into areas such as family literacy, children's and young adult literature, African American literacy development, field placement, urban education, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Alicia B. Leggett, Ph.D., is a Professorial Lecturer at American University's School of Education. There she teaches courses in Teacher Education and Literacy Instruction in Elementary classrooms. Dr. Leggett's research interests include the pedagogical strategies of teaching reading in Urban schools, and the experiences of Black Teachers.