Fostering Inclusion and Sense of Belonging Through Engagement with Identity in a Children's Literature Course

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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 the larger human experience (Bishop, 1990, p. 1).

I use children's literature to increase teacher candidates' sense of belonging and to support the development of their understanding of diversity through reflective engagement with identity. My students are undergraduates seeking teacher licensure in PreK-Grade 5 who frequently aspire to teach in the same local schools they attended as children. This facilitates a deep connection to their district, but potentially limits their exposure to diversity, especially in our rural location, a problem I wished to address with this deep revision of my children's literature course. Because college provides an environment in which students explore their own identity and exposes them to diverse faculty and peers, I sought to intentionally facilitate student engagement with identity in relation to children's literature. Teacher candidates must value diversity so they will create welcoming environments in their future work as PreK-5 teachers, even if they return to their own communities to teach.

In previous iterations of the course, I used the *Building on Windows and Mirrors* (Tschida et al., 2014) process in which candidates read Bishop (1990), challenging them to consider how literature provides a unique means for children to see themselves and gain insight into the lives

of others. Next, they watch *A Girl Like Me* (Reel Works Teen Filmmaking, 2005), a documentary recreating the doll experiment (Clark & Clark, 1947), which found that Black children showed preference for White dolls over Black dolls. They then watch *The Danger of the Single Story* (Adichie, 2009)*,* illustrating the value of viewing people in their complexity, rather than through a single narrative. We discussed representation of diverse identities as a powerful tool to support student belonging and literature as an essential means to increase representation.

In spring 2023, in addition to these activities, I implemented a process for students to further engage with identity as I continued to develop this course. I introduced the identity wheel early in the semester to provide space for candidates to build relationships and establish a sense of community (Robinson, et al., 2022). I then provided copies of the personal identity wheel (University of Michigan, 2023a) and the social identity wheel (University of Michigan, 2023b), including the definitions for various identity traits, which I used to facilitate discussion and model inclusive language. Each student completed their identity wheels independently and wrote narrative reflections on their intersectional identities, reflecting on their personal identification with aspects of their identity, including those they felt best fit them, those other people use to define them, and places they feel more/ less comfortable in aspects of their identities. They reflected on with whom they share which aspects of their identity. Because in their role as teachers they must create classrooms where students and families feel a sense of belonging, they were invited to write about challenges and strategies for meeting this ideal. I facilitated a whole class discussion of their reflections, capitalizing on the wide range of experiences candidates bring, to allow them to engage with experiences outside their own while continuing to practice use of appropriate language to describe elements of diversity.

These assignments were foundational to the culminating course assignment: the creation and presentation of an identity-trait-centered text-set. A text-set is a collection of materials centered on a common topic, including a variety of genres, text types, levels, and formats. Candidates were instructed to choose an identity trait, which may be visible or invisible, as their text-set topic. Next, they were asked to find children's materials representing this trait, including examples of bias, neutral, and anti-bias representation, which they summarized in a table. Finally,

they developed a PreK-5 text-set following the Kentucky Text-Sets (2019) format with the goal of building a sense of belonging, empathy, and understanding. I demonstrated a text-set presentation based on my own identification with my Appalachian identity.

Candidate-selected identity traits included physical attributes, disability, diverse family structures, gender, and mental health. Candidates' reflections indicated overall gains in their insight into the value of representing diverse identities through book selection. Their in-class presentations of their text-sets were supportive to the whole group in developing classroom libraries that represent the diversity of children and families. Although I plan to continue the teaching process outlined above based on its overall success, there are aspects I will change in the future based on candidate misconceptions. For example, some candidates chose topics for focus that were not related to identity (such as *growth mindset*) or a broad category, such as *disability*, rather than a specific trait, like *autistic*. I believe this was the result of a combination of lack of understanding of the assignment, lack of advanced preparation, and discomfort discussing aspects of diversity. Other candidates overlooked the full range of high-quality resources, despite access to interlibrary lending, likely due to poor advanced planning.

To address these issues, I plan to add formative checkpoints in the overall process. To support their selection of identity traits, I will facilitate a brainstorming session and give immediate, specific feedback to students about their ideas, modeling the evaluative thinking necessary to select an identity trait on which to focus. To better support candidates in selecting excellent children's literature, I will add a formative assignment requiring them to engage with both the university and public libraries long before the text-set assignment is due. Intentional support at these stages will enrich their learning and their final products. Ultimately, I hope that engagement with identity and children's literature will further their sense of belonging in my class, as well as support candidates in fostering inclusion in their future PreK-5 classrooms.

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