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## If I Knew Then What I Do Now: Fostering Pre-Service Teachers' Capacity to Promote Expansive and Critical Conversations with Children's Literature

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# If I Knew Then What I Do Now: Fostering Pre-Service Teachers' Capacity to Promote Expansive and Critical Conversations with Children's Literature

*Stephen Adam Crawley*

As class dismissed one early November afternoon, Courtney<sup>1</sup> and another student approached me with a question. Throughout the semester, we had discussed the important role children's literature provides as windows and mirrors for youth (Bishop, 1990). On this particular day we had explored a wide range of representations in books, including chronic illness, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and death. She asked, "Dr. Crawley, did you ever have these books in your classroom when you were an elementary teacher?" It was an honest and important question, and one I had often thought about as well.

I said that no, I did not share such children's literature with my students during my 12 years as an elementary teacher and regretted it. I contextualized my answer, describing how I felt vulnerable as an elementary teacher (largely related to my non-heterosexual orientation), which caused me to self-censor. I recalled how diverse children's literature or other emphases on supporting diverse youth and topics—to my recollection—was not much discussed in my own undergraduate teacher education program, the primary professional development informing the majority of my teaching years. I explained to Courtney that as a result, one of my course goals was to provide concepts and strategies that would help prepare them in ways I felt unprepared as a teacher.

In this article, I reflect on my practices as a teacher educator and respond to the following questions: How do I foster pre-service teachers' capacity to use children's literature to promote expansive and critical conversations in the classroom? How do pre-service teachers report their stances and sense of preparedness when reflecting on the course? To address these questions, I share two strategies I employed in my undergraduate course for elementary education majors. For each strategy, I include pre-service teachers' statements reflecting how the strategy impacted their stances about children's literature and preparedness to foster expansive and critical conversations that are relevant and responsive to students' diverse lives.

## **Literature Review**

Reviewing research about children's literature and its use for fostering critical and expansive conversations, I identified two central areas: "difficult" terminology and pre-service training.

### ***Reframing "Difficult" Terminology***

For over two decades, researchers and teacher educators have discussed the use of children's literature to foster conversations about race, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, divorce, chronic illness, and death, among other topics. Scholars have explicitly used the term "difficult" when describing such topics (Husbye, Buchholz, Powell, & Zanden, 2019; Gibbs, 2016). Similar referents have also been used. For example, Bowen and Schutt (2007) used "sensitive" to describe adoption, pregnancy, aging, war, and violence. Hollingsworth (2009) called exploring race "complicated,"

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<sup>1</sup> All pre-service teachers' names are pseudonyms.

Shlafer and Scignoli (2015) noted the concept of incarcerated parents was “tough,” and Husbye et al. (2019) termed conversations about death “brave” and “heavy.” Other words used to describe such literature and conversations include “courageous” (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998), “dangerous” (Ballentine & Hill, 2000; Bigler & Collins, 1995; Nieto, 2009), “challenging” (Nieto, 2009), “hard” (Flores, Vlach, & Lammert, 2019; Gibbs, 2016), “controversial” (Darvin, 2017; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019; Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2017), “edgy” (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020), “risky,” and “uncomfortable” (Leland et al., 2017).

The repeated framing of children’s literature and subsequent conversations as difficult is important to consider for multiple reasons. First, such terminology may reinforce pre-service teachers’ already existing fears or concerns and thus limit the likelihood of them embarking on such reading with their students. Second, the terminology may allude to conversations being difficult for the teacher rather than the children. In other words, the focus is on the teacher’s anxiety and discomfort about the topic and how to navigate conversation. This distracts from many children’s realities—having particular identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation) and experiences (e.g., parents’ divorce, family member’s death) with limited opportunities to see reflections of themselves or discuss their experiences with others. Despite adults’ hesitations about particular topics in the classroom, research has shown that children are often ready, willing, and able to have important conversations in respectful and meaningful ways (Crawley, 2020; Cueto & Corapi, 2019; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

Instead of framing particular topics and texts as difficult, some scholars use different terms, including “critical” (Darvin, 2017; Flores, Vlach, & Lammert, 2019), “expansive” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and “contemporary realism” (Short, Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 122). While contemporary realism “often focuses on current societal issues...that are part of many children’s lives” (Short et al., 2017, p. 122), the term is specific to the realistic fiction genre. I primarily use the terms expansive and critical because they can function across genres. The terms expansive (i.e., widening and nuancing understandings) and critical (i.e., recognizing the necessity of the topic and the power of critical inquiry) emphasize the importance, responsiveness, and relevance of topics rather than their difficulty. Such terms might increasingly foster pre-service teachers’ capacity to promote conversations with children’s literature—conversations particularly necessary in a political climate that attacks the rights and respect of marginalized individuals and appears devoid of empathy for those outside dominant, mainstream cultures (Flores et al., 2019; Kitzmiller, 2018).

### ***Exploring Teacher Education Practices***

Numerous studies explore using children’s literature with pre-service teachers. Sharp, Diego-Medrano, and Coneway (2018) found that 53 of 69 university-based teacher education programs in Texas required pre-service teachers to take a children’s literature course. Analyzing course syllabi, the researchers identified nine themes related to learning outcomes. Two themes addressed the use of children’s literature to explore identities and experiences. For example, under the theme “appreciation and value of children’s literature,” some syllabi addressed literature’s potential to impact students’ lives “personally, socially, and academically” (Sharp, Diego-Medrano, & Coneway, 2017, p. 7). Under the theme “evaluating children’s literature,” two learning outcome sub-categories included “the influence of texts on individuals, cultural milieu, and society” and “biases and stereotypes with gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, family circumstances, and socioeconomic status” (p. 8).

In a separate study, Flores and colleagues (2019) conducted an extensive review of empirical research documenting children’s literature use with pre-service teachers to foster “transformative (e.g., culturally

relevant) pedagogies” (p. 214). Several of the studies Flores and colleagues describe involve teacher educators who not only shared and discussed books with pre-service teachers in expansive and critical ways (e.g., Mosley & Rogers, 2011), but transferred the pre-service teachers’ use of texts with actual youth via the creation of lesson plans (e.g., Glenn, 2012) and collaboration with mentor teachers in field placements (e.g., Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

Other research details how teacher educators share children’s literature and elicit pre-service teachers’ responses about whether or not they would use the books in their classroom and why. For example, as a means to explore pre-service teachers’ statements relative to religious pluralism and neutrality, Dávila (2015) read *In My Family/En Mi Familia* (Garza, 1996) and analyzed pre-service teachers’ survey responses. Hermann-Wilmarth (2010) asked pre-service teachers to select one of three gay and lesbian-inclusive novels for upper elementary school readers and share their responses in small groups. Wollman-Bonilla (1998) read and facilitated discussion about a variety of picture books and chapter books depicting topics including racism, homelessness, gender stereotypes, and death.

In all of the studies, the pre-service teachers’ responses ranged from a desire to share the books with children to facilitate discussion about identity and experience to being hesitant about or even resisting the texts. Pre-service teachers’ hesitation and resistance stemmed from considering topics as risky (Dávila, 2015, p. 69), inappropriate in various ways (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998, p. 289), and objectionable to parents (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010, p. 188). Pre-service teachers’ concerns about parents as a reason for not including diverse children’s literature in their classrooms is well documented (Bouley, 2011; Dedeoglu, Ulusoy, & Lamme, 2012; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019).

The body of research demonstrates that teacher educators have done much to share, explore, and support pre-service teachers’ use of children’s literature to promote expansive and critical conversation. However, the research also demonstrates that more promotion of pre-service teachers’ capacity to foster expansive and critical conversations with children’s literature in their classrooms is needed—especially in relation to concern about stakeholders such as parents and school administrators.

### **Providing Context: The Course, Instructor, and Pre-service Teachers**

I teach at a large university in the midwestern United States, serving as literacy education faculty within the broader elementary education program. Although aspects of my identity align with the majority of the program’s undergraduate students and faculty (i.e., cisgender, White), my other identities (i.e., man, gay) differ both at my institution and in elementary education writ large. I share my identities because they not only provide my positionality as a researcher but also indicate how they might impact students’ perceptions of me as a teacher educator.

In this article, I focus on one course I teach, “Children’s Literature Across the Curriculum,” in the undergraduate elementary education program. Pre-service teachers enrolled in the program work toward certification in first through eighth grades. While the children’s literature course is scheduled to occur during pre-service teachers’ sophomore year, many students take the course at other times in their program of study. For many of the pre-service teachers, the course is one of their first literacy education classes. The course includes topics such as book awards, genres, formats, connections across content areas, youth interest, narrative and visual elements, history of the field, types of literary criticism, read-aloud strategies, and diverse representations.

Here, I examine practices and pre-service teachers' responses from Fall 2019. During that semester, I taught two sections of the course. Twenty-one pre-service teachers were enrolled in each section, for a total of 42 taking the class. The majority identified as female and White. Many were in their early 20s and had attended high school in our university's state. As their concluding assignment, I asked the pre-service teachers to write a reflective essay to share their top five "take-aways" from the course. Students could select any course topics for their take-aways, and I was personally curious to see which topics were most prevalent. Once the semester ended and grades were posted, I e-mailed all the pre-service teachers—regardless of the content of their essays—asking for permission to use excerpts of their writing for my inquiry into pre-service teachers' stances about and sense of preparedness to use diverse children's literature in their classrooms. Nine pre-service teachers—all of whom addressed diversity in their papers—completed the formal consent process. Although the nine students represent less than a quarter of the enrollment, the majority of students across both classes discussed diversity in their essays.

### **Strategies for Fostering Pre-service Teacher Capacity**

Analyzing the nine essays, I identified two strategies that were most discussed by the pre-service teachers: (1) emphasizing windows and mirrors and (2) considering stakeholder responses. While these were not the sole strategies I incorporated to foster the pre-service teachers' capacity, they are the ones that most resonated with them. For each strategy, I provide context and share excerpts from the pre-service teachers' essays to highlight how they reported their understandings and current capacity to use children's literature to foster expansive and critical conversations in the classroom. It is important to note that the pre-service teachers' discussion of the topics came late in the semester, not immediately following class activities, reflecting how the strategies continued to impact and resonate with them as the course concluded.

#### ***Strategy #1: Emphasizing Windows and Mirrors***

Throughout the semester, literature's ability to provide windows and mirrors for readers (Bishop, 1990) was a central frame. In our second class session, we read and discussed Bishop's well-known essay and continued to use her metaphor in subsequent weeks as we explored texts across various genres, formats, and content area connections. In nearly every class session, we discussed how books can serve as windows and mirrors for identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, dis/ability), experiences (e.g., divorce, chronic illness, death, homelessness), and intersections of identities and experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). We also read and discussed how the metaphor of windows and mirrors has been expanded. For example, we examined the role of texts as maps for children's futures (Myers, 2014), the importance of ensuring accurate and respectful depictions rather than distorted "fun-house mirrors" (Reese, 2015), and the necessity to consider authorship as informed by #OwnVoices (Yorio, 2018).

Throughout the semester, we returned to the windows and mirrors metaphor and asserted that such representations are important for *all* children. We discussed how a book that is a window for one child might be a mirror for someone else, and how children often have identities that we may be unaware of as teachers (e.g., related to sexual orientation or religion). Therefore, it's imperative to share many representations rather than limit representations to those that we assume exist in our classroom. In addition, I emphasized that such books need to be read directly to youth. It is not enough for them to be present on bookshelves because there is no guarantee that children will select the books on their own.

We explored additional resources to expand understandings of windows and mirrors. For example, we

interpreted graphs showing the lack of diversity in classroom libraries (Crisp et al., 2016) and speculated on why classroom libraries were so homogenous relative to race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and language. As a group, we surmised that perhaps teachers were not aware of the increasing numbers of diverse books, had limited access to or funding for books, had not used or prioritized windows and mirrors as a frame when curating their collection, or censored certain books and topics. We also realized that the lack of diversity could stem from a combination of these and other factors. In addition to the article, we viewed a TED talk cautioning against repeating dominant narratives and thus perpetuating a single story (Adichie, 2009) and we read an article about expanding and nuancing understandings of particular identities and experiences via text sets (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

To expand on these readings, resources, and discussions, I facilitated an exploratory activity. I placed baskets around the room, each basket labeled with a particular identity or experience and filled with representative children's literature. For example, one basket was labeled "chronic illness" and included *Sadako* (Coerr, 1993), *Hair for Mama* (Tinkham, 2007), and *The Goodbye Cancer Garden* (Matthies, 2011). Another basket was labeled "sexual orientation" and contained *In Our Mothers' House* (Polacco, 2009), *Antonio's Card/La Tarjeta de Antonio* (González, 2005), and *Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude* (Winter, 2009).

The pre-service teachers were given time to visit various baskets, read sample texts, record book titles and make notes for their future classrooms, and discuss their observations. This book basket exploration was not the only time we read and discussed children's literature depicting diverse identities and realities, but it provided the pre-service teachers with an opportunity to encounter dozens of books during a single class session along with reinforcing the breadth and growing availability of diverse representations.

In their final papers, all nine of the pre-service teachers discussed the importance of children's literature in depicting diverse identities and experiences, and six of them included "windows and mirrors" as the first takeaway in their essays. Reflecting on her own identities and how the course impacted her thinking, Courtney wrote, "As a white and mostly privileged student, I never had difficulty finding texts that didn't relate to me, but this course has given me a window to see how other students in my classroom may have been feeling." Megan also discussed how children's literature can help students empathize with others:

Literature is a way for any person to find some way to connect to something bigger than themselves. It can often be difficult to connect to people when you don't know how you feel or to people when they don't understand what you are experiencing. The concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors allows readers to see things from their own experiences, to see things others can be experiencing, and to step into a world that they may not have otherwise found.

Other pre-service teachers not only wrote about the benefits of windows and mirrors on readers, but listed specific books, representations, and possibilities. For example, Karen listed *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), *El Deafo* (Bell, 2014), and *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson, 2014) as "paramount" for the classroom, and Stephanie cited *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet* (Deedy, 2017) as a book she would read aloud to discuss discrimination. Michelle wrote about how sharing children's literature can address racism: "Providing diverse literature about ethnic and cultural groups can start to combat these issues and change the mindset students have that one color of skin is superior to others." She also wrote that children's literature can "open the door for discussions on real world issues, acceptance, inclusion, etc." relative to "LGBTIA+, social class, religion, illness, etc." Similarly, Mary wrote,

I want to be able to show my students different types of books and that incorporate different types of real life situations.... I want books that talk about divorce, same-sex parents, loss of a family member, blindness, deafness, and so many other subjects. I want kids to have books that they can relate to on a personal level. You never know what is going on in a child's life that you have in class.

Michelle's and Mary's use of such phrases as "open the door for discussions" and "I want to be able to show" demonstrate the pre-service teachers' intent to use books with their students in ways that forefront identity and experience. Another pre-service teacher, Rachel, emphasized the importance of directly using such books rather than simply making them available:

While reading children's books aloud can teach a lesson, choosing good books that are relatable also reinforces (sic) the children's books are written to "illuminate what it means to be human and to make the most fundamental experiences of life accessible—love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, and belonging" (Short et al., 2017, p. 4). There is so much that goes into readalouds.

As I reflect on the pre-service teachers' statements about children's literature as windows and mirrors, I am heartened by their conviction. At the same time, I realize their sentiments may not automatically translate into using such texts in their classrooms, especially because they may feel pressured to incorporate so much into their day-to-day teaching and adhere to the demands of multiple stakeholders. I also acknowledge that the strategy of introducing a variety of texts to pre-service teachers and emphasizing their importance as windows and mirrors is not new. As discussed in the literature review, this is a practice multiple teacher educators have employed as indicated by at least two decades of empirical research. Nonetheless, the strategy of introducing students to diverse texts and discussing their role as windows and mirrors is an important first step for building pre-service teacher capacity.

### ***Strategy #2: Considering Stakeholder Responses***

Although the pre-service teachers recognized the value of diverse texts for their future students, they frequently voiced their reticence to have or use such books in their classroom due to concern about how stakeholders—specifically parents, guardians, and/or administrators—might respond. As already noted, there is ample research documenting similar concerns by pre-service teachers (Bouley, 2011; Dedeoglu et al., 2012; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019). Therefore, we again engaged in professional reading followed by activities.

First, we explored infographics documenting the most frequently challenged books and topics, including who submits challenges, and from where (American Library Association, 2018). We read a blog post about the need for inclusive books in classrooms written from the author's perspective and experiences as a mother, former K-12 public school teacher, and current director of professional education in a university (Fuxa, 2017). Among the many important points she raises, the author says she never received a parental complaint in response to a book she had read in the classroom. We also read an article detailing the experiences of two teachers who navigated parental resistance in different states and grades (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2018). Both the blog post and the article were well suited to our context in that they document experiences in the midwestern U.S., similar to the settings where many of the pre-service teachers in my class have lived and may likely teach.

Several pre-service teachers noted the impact of the readings on stakeholder responses and how to navigate them. For example, Megan noted, "it is important to keep in mind that parents might resist some books that

are brought into the classroom, but [the authors] bring insight of different ways to go about the difficulties in parental resistance.” Similarly, Michelle wrote, “We have learned that others will potentially have lots of opinions about your classroom. This could be a parent, an administrator, [or] another teacher, but you need to be confident in your decisions and be able to back them up.” In her statement, Michelle not only listed various stakeholders that pre-service teachers—and in-service educators—encounter, but addressed the importance of providing the rationale for practices. These rationales were discussed during the readings and then reinforced through subsequent class activities.

Following the readings, I facilitated experiences to further support the pre-service teachers’ consideration of potential stakeholder response. To begin, I read *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) and discussed how the book could be connected to curriculum (e.g., habitats and animals in science) and other conversations (e.g., diverse family structures). I then asked the pre-service teachers to write a rationale for the book—or another book of their choosing—if a question or concern were raised by a parent or administrator. As the pre-service teachers drafted their responses, I encouraged them to consider their statements as a “rationale” rather than a “defense.” This terminology is important in that it emphasizes pro-activeness and educator expertise rather than being reactive and potentially laden with anxiety.

After providing time to draft their rationales, I formed the pre-service teachers into small groups and asked them to engage in role-playing as teachers, parents, and/or administrators. When it was the “teacher’s” turn, the pre-service teacher would provide a brief summary of their focal book. The group would then enter into the role-play scenario with the “parent” or “administrator” expressing their question or concern about the book, the “teacher” responding, and both continuing a brief conversation. Others in the group served as observers, providing feedback after the role-play concluded. Each person in the group took turns in the various roles. Throughout the role-play activity, I encouraged the pre-service teachers to use the practices described in the readings, including meeting face-to-face (rather than communicating via e-mail), acknowledging the stakeholder’s perspective, and—as a last resort—offering to provide an alternate book and activity to the child while continuing the reading and exploration with the rest of the class.

The rationale and role-play activities arose in the pre-service teachers’ final essays. Rachel wrote, “It was scary to think about the parental pushback that could occur over certain topics.... Learning how to have not only difficult conversations with students but with parents was very beneficial for me.” Her statement demonstrates how the concept of difficult is internalized as a pre-service teacher and was reinforced by her statement of parental resistance being “scary.” Sara similarly expressed her reticence as well as how the class activities aided her:

Dealing with parents is something that I have been worried about for the future but after reading this blog and having discussions about it in class has helped calm my worries.... The roleplay activity we did after really helped me act out how I would deal with being in a situation where a parent had a problem with a book read in class. I had the practice of trying to show parents the reasoning behind using books they may deem controversial; and I was able to see how I should not be afraid of using those types of books in my classroom because of those windows and mirrors that they open to students.

Sara raised many vital points in her writing. First, she highlighted the shifts in her thinking from concern to increased confidence. Second, her phrases such as “read in class” and “using books” demonstrated her intent to more directly share books with students beyond merely making them available. She transferred the concept of books as controversial to being a possible parent perspective rather than her own, and she concluded by reconnecting back to the importance of books as mirrors and windows for youth.



Through reading various perspectives, crafting rationales, and engaging in roleplay, it is evident the pre-service teachers' concerns about potential stakeholder response were somewhat alleviated. The experiences aided their feelings of preparedness, thus impacting their capacity to use children's literature to foster expansive and critical conversations in their future classrooms.

## Discussion

Despite the strategies of emphasizing windows and mirrors and considering stakeholder responses, I fear that these alone are not enough to foster the pre-service teachers' confidence and ability to use children's literature to promote expansive and critical conversations in the classroom. As I reflect on these two strategies, I see a significant gap. Asking the pre-service teachers to consider stakeholder responses assumes they will have actually used the texts in their classrooms. Although I shared with the pre-service teachers books they could use as windows and mirrors followed by how to consider and respond to potential stakeholders, I did not explicitly show them how such books might be read to and discussed with youth. While I'm hopeful pre-service teachers would transfer other more general strategies we explored (e.g., conducting interactive read-alouds), additional resources such as video samples, empirical studies providing glimpses into actual elementary classrooms, guest speakers, and classroom visits could all help to increase their capacity.

Such a multifaceted approach emphasizes the importance of centering expansive and critical topics across not only a semester in a single children's literature course, but throughout teacher education programs of study. While the number of topics, strategies, and discussion to incorporate may seem extensive—and teacher educators might wonder how to balance such practices along with everything else they are teaching—not providing a multifaceted approach would limit pre-service teachers' capacity to address the needs of their future students.

I frequently wonder as a teacher educator, "What else can I do to support pre-service teachers for their future classrooms?" However, I also reflect on my own experiences as an undergraduate student being trained as a future teacher. Even if my children's literature instructor (or other teacher educators) had employed just the two strategies I described in this article—emphasizing windows and mirrors and considering stakeholder responses—I would have felt better equipped to read and facilitate dialogue with children's literature relevant to my students' lives when I was a classroom teacher. Thus, my goal as a teacher educator is to provide the PTs in my classes with experiences and strategies that will support them in ways I wish I had earlier known and that emphasize the expansiveness and criticality of such practices rather than their difficulty. I encourage other teacher educators to similarly consider the descriptors they use, seek and employ strategies that support pre-service teachers' capacities, and continue to share their efforts to promote expansive and critical conversations via children's literature in classrooms.

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