

SEEING ALL FAMILIES THROUGH BOOK WINDOWS

Seeing All Families Through Book Windows: Using Children's Literature to Help Early
Childhood Teacher Candidates Understand Diverse Families

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Abstract

Engaging families is an essential skill for early childhood educators. Doing so with families that have backgrounds and structures that differ from their own can be challenging. Early childhood teacher candidates benefit from opportunities to explore diverse family backgrounds and structures within the context of their teacher preparation programs. Children's picture books have been used in teacher preparation programs to help students understand child development (see Cooper Hansen et al., 2005). Riojas Cortez and Cataldo (2015) used Latino children's stories to demonstrate how to help practicing teachers understand the social issues many Latino families face. In this paper, I illustrate how to select and use children's literature that depicts culturally and linguistically diverse families to help early childhood teacher candidates understand family and community diversity. I argue that embedding targeted use of such children's literature in course assignments and in-class activities can support future early childhood teachers' enactment of high-quality family and community engagement strategies that align with the South Carolina Family Engagement K-12 Framework.

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In this article, I explore possibilities for using children’s literature as one approach to supporting early childhood teacher candidates’ abilities to communicate and build relationships with diverse families. Family engagement is a critical dimension of the work of early childhood educators that extends beyond the classroom. For example, strong family engagement practices have been associated with supporting academic achievement (Castro et al., 2015), reduced chronic absenteeism (Pilarz et al., 2024) and fostering children’s healthy social-emotional and behavioral development (Bierman et al., 2017).

The South Carolina Department of Education’s Family Engagement K-12 Framework (2019) emphasizes a multidimensional approach to family engagement, including building relationships and communicating with families. As stated in the framework, “the foundation for building relationships begins with mutual respect, trust, and valuing diversity” (p. 5). Hence, family engagement begins with the understanding of diverse family backgrounds and structures. Further, the ability to communicate effectively with families is a contributory factor to relationship building (González & Frumkin, 2018).

Professional organizations specific to early childhood educators make similar calls for family engagement. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offers guidelines for implementing developmentally appropriate practice (2020). NAEYC calls for early childhood educators to engage in “reciprocal partnerships with families and foster(ing) community connections” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 18). In addition, the NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (2019) states in Standard 2: Family–Teacher Partnerships and Community Connections, that early childhood educators understand the uniqueness of each family and “recognize that families who share similar socioeconomic and

racial and/or ethnic backgrounds are not monolithic but are diverse in and of themselves. Early childhood educators understand how to build on family assets and strengths” (p. 14). Likewise, The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFCE) has developed Family Engagement Core Competencies: A Body of Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Family Facing Professionals (NAFCE, 2022). This document provides guidance for family engagement within a structure of reflection, connection, collaboration, and leadership. Preparing teacher candidates to meet these calls for family engagement and all that family engagement entails presents a tall order for early childhood teacher educators who are also tasked with teaching preservice teachers about child development theory, class management strategies, content knowledge and general pedagogy. Thus, finding ways to incorporate course experiences that foster teacher candidates’ abilities to communicate and build relationships with families becomes a considerable challenge especially when teachers are likely to encounter families much different than their own.

Multiple data sets highlight how the diverse student population is not represented in teacher demographics. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) reports on characteristics of public school teachers. Data from the 2020-2021 school year indicates eighty-nine percent of elementary teachers in South Carolina reported as female and eighty percent reported as White, non-Hispanic. While the teacher workforce in South Carolina consists mainly of White teachers, the student population is more diverse. According to the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) 2023-24 school year 135-Day Active Headcount (SCDE, 2024) approximately 46.89 % of total students were White, 31.05 % were Black or African American, 13.73 % were Hispanic or Latino, 1.89 % were Asian, and 6.44 % were of two or more races, American Indian/Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander with over 60 percent of all

South Carolina students in poverty. In addition, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) reported over a quarter million immigrants residing in South Carolina based on American Community Survey data pooled between 2018 and 2022, making it probable that early childhood teachers will encounter a child from an immigrant family in their classroom. Overall, these data point to the likelihood that teacher candidates will encounter families in their future classrooms that are different from their own.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena (2014) stressed the importance of early childhood educators in appreciating all kinds of families. Koralek, Nemeth, and Ramsey (2019) provide a broad definition of family to include “one or more children and the adults who have sole or shared primary responsibility for the children’s well-being as the children’s guardians and primary caregivers” (p. 6). I argue that early childhood teacher candidates’ appreciation of all kinds of families begins with understanding the uniqueness and strengths of each family. Perhaps such understanding can come from exposure to and exploration of culturally diverse families within the context of coursework and field experiences intentionally designed to help them understand the families that they will encounter in their initial years of teaching and beyond. I adhere to Sonia Nieto’s (2010) conception of culture as an intersectional set of values, traditions, and relationships groups of people create, share, and transform within a social context of common experience that may include where they live, what language they speak, their social class, and their religion. In doing so, I seek to expand the conception of culture beyond boundaries of race and ethnicity to include an understanding of culture as shared experience (e.g., the experience of poverty, single parent households, multigenerational households etc.).

One approach to supporting early childhood teacher candidates’ abilities to enact high-quality family engagement is to use children’s literature in their teacher preparation program.

Cooper Hansen & Zambo (2005) described using children's picture books in an early childhood teacher preparation program to help their students understand concepts of child development. For example, to help understand the concept of modeling as per Bandura's social learning theory (1977) they *described* using Robert Munsch's (1996) *Stephanie's Ponytail*, which depicts multiple characters imitating the protagonist's [Stephanie's] hairstyle, despite how silly it made them look. Cooper Hansen & Zambo (2005) framed their use of children's literature as one approach to helping early childhood teacher candidates "conceptualize important principles and theories for the education of young children" (p. 44). Similarly, children's literature depicting diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds can be used to supplement course texts and assigned readings to support early childhood teacher candidates' understanding of families different than their own as well as to interrogate their own bias and stereotypes about families and the concept of family. I assert that course assignments designed with use of children's literature depicting diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds can also be useful in helping teacher candidates make connections between family engagement principles and their practice.

The use of children's literature to facilitate teacher candidates' understanding of diverse cultures has been explored by multiple authors. Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003) documented a teaching project in which they embedded use of Latino children's literature within course assignments and field experiences to help elementary teacher candidates develop understanding of and form connections with Latino students. They interpreted their data as evidence of the teacher candidates beginning to "see parallels, even superficial ones, in their own life experiences and the lives of their students" (p. 112). Likewise, Latino children's stories have been used to help practicing teachers understand Latino family structures and social issues faced

by many Latino families (Riojas-Cortez & Cataldo, 2015). Tschida et al. (2014) illustrated how they created a framework for their education students to consider children's texts in terms of representation of diverse perspectives by intertwining Bishop's (1990) concept of children's texts serving as windows and mirrors along with Adichie's (2009) cautionary tale of the single story. This body of work suggests potential for using children's literature depicting culturally diverse families to support early childhood teacher candidates in developing their ability to implement high-quality family engagement strategies with culturally diverse families.

Unfortunately, multiple studies and reports (see, e.g., Chaudhri & Teale, 2013; Crisp, 2015; Horning, et al., 2015) have exposed the dearth of children's books representing diverse cultural backgrounds—making it likely that current early childhood teacher candidates did not have exposure to such texts during their own childhood and may not see such texts in their field placement classrooms. For example, Crisp et al. (2016) implemented a multi-step coding process to examine the contents of libraries in 21 early childhood classrooms in the Atlanta, Georgia area. They found little diversity represented in terms of language or culture, specifically, “only 5.7% of these books explicitly depicted people identified as members of parallel cultures, and only 2.6% were coded as culturally conscious literature” (p. 38). Although the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has reported a consistent positive trend in the quantity of books for children and youth that include diversity in character representation as well as books written and illustrated by authors of color since 2015, this trend began years after current teacher candidates were students in early childhood classrooms—meaning that current teacher candidates did not benefit from this trend as children. The good news; however, is twofold—teacher educators now have more choices for infusing children's literature that is representative of diverse cultural backgrounds into course assignments

and activities, while teacher candidates have broader prospects for selecting children's literature for their own classrooms than did their predecessors. Helping future early childhood teachers locate and navigate these newer texts then becomes part of the role we bear as early childhood educators.

In the remaining sections of this article, I offer descriptions of multiple active learning strategies for using culturally and/or linguistically diverse children's literature as a supplement to course textbooks to facilitate teacher candidates' understanding of families that differ from their own. Implementation of active learning strategies is a student-centered approach to instruction that engages students in critical thinking, communication with each other, problem solving, and writing or performance tasks that require them to go beyond passive lecture listening to actively examining course material (Bean & Melzer, 2021). During active learning students are doing, applying, and interacting both inside and outside of the classroom in ways that support linking thinking with intention (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Partner Discussion

Early in the semester, I prompt partner discussion using questions about concepts of family during think, pair, share or think, write, pair, share activities. Think, pair, share experiences can deepen conceptual understanding while allowing a more intimate interaction which might be initially more comfortable for teacher candidates when discussing sensitive questions (Kagan, 2001; Kothiyal, 2014; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2013). These partner discussions serve as a structured introductory approach to prepare teacher candidates for keeping enactment of high-quality family and community engagement strategies in mind that align with the South Carolina Family Engagement K-12 Framework.

To shape this partner discussion, I first pose questions such as “What does family mean to you?” or “What is a ‘normal’ family?” and give students thinking or writing time to consider their response. Next, to spark discussion using a common anchor text, I distribute multiple copies of Robert Skutch’s (1997) *Who’s in a Family* or *All Families are Special* by Norma Simon (2003) for teacher candidates to read individually. After allowing ample time for reading, teacher candidates revisit their thinking or writing and pair with a classmate to share their responses to the questions. Finally, I pose further questions prompting the class to consider their level of comfort communicating with each of the families depicted in the story. I might ask, “Was there a family in the story you could see yourself easily communicating with and why?” or “Was there a family you might not be sure how to communicate with and why?” By sharing their responses to these questions with a partner, teacher candidates can begin to consider their own concept of family and how they might communicate with families different from their own.

Classroom Read Alouds

I often read children’s books aloud to my students as a model for technique as well as to introduce themes for discussion or to illustrate concepts. For example, I start the semester in my early childhood practicum course by reading Rachel Isadora’s (2010) *Say Hello!* to prompt discourse about the importance of each child seeing a representation of themselves in picture books. In this story, the main character, Carmelita, walks through her diverse neighborhood with her mother as they greet neighbors by saying hello in multiple languages. I use this opportunity to model asking questions as I would to preschoolers. I might ask, “Do you know anyone named Carmelita?” or “Can you say hello in Arabic?” to support children’s engagement in the story and prompt conversation about people who speak a language other than English. A natural extension of the read aloud could be to ask teacher candidates how learning to say hello to a family

member in their native language could demonstrate inclusivity and promote relationship building.

Connections in Field Placement

In our program's early childhood practicum course, teacher candidates are required to spend 50 hours in an early childhood classroom setting. In this field-based assignment, I expand on the work of Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla (2003) to help teacher candidates make connections with and build understanding of families of students in their field placements. Candidates are tasked with reading one of the books used for the partner discussions earlier in the semester to the students in their field placement then writing reflections on their experience. They are required to include and make meaning of students' responses to the story using language samples, thereby helping them make connections between the book and the students' perceptions of their own family life. Candidates are also prompted to reflect on how the data they gathered from student responses to the book might inform how they would communicate with the students' families.

Book Talk

In the Book Talk assignment, teacher candidates select a children's book depicting a culturally and/or linguistically diverse family. Candidates are assigned readings to support their selection process, such as Alanis's (2007) *Developing Literacy Through Culturally Relevant Texts*, Wanless & Crawford's (2016) *Reading your way to a culturally relevant classroom*, and *Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Readalouds* (May et al., 2014). This task allows students to explore and identify quality children's literature that celebrates diversity and provides culturally and linguistically diverse students an opportunity to see themselves represented in text. Both a written component and a recorded or live class presentation are required.

Students are required to explain the thinking behind their book selection process, including a justification of how the book addresses cultural and/or linguistic diversity. Students include a brief synopsis of the story and may read an excerpt aloud during the recorded 'Book Talk' or live presentation. Students are required to use curated resources (i.e., course textbook, assigned readings, NAEYC Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (2020) etc.) to support a critical analysis of the story as related to representation of family. They must also include questions they would ask children as they read the story or after the story and include prompts they would give to elicit student responses to the story. Explanation of a rationale for asking each question or giving each prompt is required. Finally, candidates are tasked with describing how they would use what they learned about the story family's cultural and/or linguistic background to personalize communication and interactions thereby applying the family context described in the book they selected to a hypothetical scenario. For example, if they wanted to share an anecdote from the child's day in the classroom or had concerns about the child's behavior or development, how would they approach that family about the child using what they had learned from the story? How would they leverage the information about the family to encourage the family's engagement in class and school events? In this way, the candidates are asked to consider asset-based approaches to family engagement.

Small Group Critical Analysis

Candidates work collaboratively in small groups of 3-5 to examine preselected children's books for evidence of culturally and linguistically affirmative representations of family, as well as evidence of stereotypes and potential for bias. Candidates contrast and compare the stories for common themes and variations of familial structures. For example, I might ask students to compare the following three children's books. The first book, *I love Saturdays y domingos*, a

multilingual text by Cuban American author Alma Flor Ada (2004), depicts growing up in a multicultural household. The main character visits two sets of Grandparents. She visits her English-speaking Grandma and Grandpa on Saturdays and her Spanish speaking Abuelita and Abuelito on Sundays. The second book, *Going down home with daddy*, by Kelly Starling Lyons (2019), depicts a Black urban family attending their annual family reunion in the country and celebrating cultural traditions and history amidst multiple generations. The third book, Mary Hoffman's (1991) *Amazing Grace*, provides strong female role models in African American culture, challenges gender stereotypes, and offers a peek into a multigenerational family structure. Candidates are prompted to think about and discuss how the families depicted in the books are alike or different from their own and from each other. I ask candidates to imagine that the families depicted in the books are families of children in their classrooms and how they might use the experiences described in the stories as a conversation starter with families.

Summary

Early childhood teachers support student success when they can effectively engage with their students' families. Building early childhood teacher candidates' understanding of families different than their own can foster an asset perspective that, in turn, supports positive communication and interactions, which are foundational to relationship-building. In this article, I illustrated five concrete ways to broaden teacher candidates' concepts of family diversity, including three classroom activities, one course assignment, and a field-based assignment. Through such active learning experiences, teacher candidates are exposed to and examine culturally and linguistically diverse families within the context of children's literature. Direct instruction in family engagement can be embedded in course and field assignments that build on the use of children's literature depicting culturally diverse families. With intentional design

keeping family diversity as the focal point, these experiences can serve as one way to help future early childhood educators understand the families that they are sure to encounter in their first years of teaching and beyond.

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