

2022

## Contemporary Children's Literature in Education Courses: Diverse, Complex, and Critical

Jennifer Graff

*University of Georgia*, [jgraff@uga.edu](mailto:jgraff@uga.edu)

Lauren Aimonette Liang

*University of Utah*, [Lauren.Liang@utah.edu](mailto:Lauren.Liang@utah.edu)

Miriam G. Martinez

*University of Texas at San Antonio*, [miriam.martinez@utsa.edu](mailto:miriam.martinez@utsa.edu)

Amy McClure

*Ohio Wesleyan University*, [aamclur@owu.edu](mailto:aamclur@owu.edu)

Deanna Day

*Washington State University*, [dday-wiff@vancouver.wsu.edu](mailto:dday-wiff@vancouver.wsu.edu)

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/lpr>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Graff, Jennifer; Liang, Lauren Aimonette; Martinez, Miriam G.; McClure, Amy; Day, Deanna; Sableski, Mary-Kate; and Arnold, Jackie M. (2022) "Contemporary Children's Literature in Education Courses: Diverse, Complex, and Critical," *Literacy Practice and Research*: Vol. 47: No. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/lpr/vol47/iss3/3>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literacy Practice and Research by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

---

## Contemporary Children's Literature in Education Courses: Diverse, Complex, and Critical

### Authors

Jennifer Graff, Lauren Aimonette Liang, Miriam G. Martinez, Amy McClure, Deanna Day, Mary-Kate Sableski, and Jackie M. Arnold

## **Contemporary Children's Literature in Education Courses: Diverse, Complex, and Critical**

As literacy education professors for over a decade, we have witnessed the continuous cycle of teacher education programmatic shifts in response to new education policy, research based pedagogical innovations, changes in theoretical frames, and increased awareness of diversity and the need for justice in schools and society. Recently, the confluence of ongoing budget cuts in public education, a call for accelerated teacher accreditation, and growing pressure to emphasize “science of reading” principles in literacy courses (Schwartz and Sparks, 2019; Shaywitz, 2020) have contributed to significant scrutiny of children's literature courses for preservice teachers. Despite research demonstrating the critical importance of rich, authentic children's literature in classrooms (e.g., Allington, 2018; Serafini, 2011), and particularly culturally and linguistically diverse literature (Bishop, 1997; Short, 2015), questions about the role and value of children's literature courses in teacher education programs continue, with children's literature courses being shifted from required to elective status in teacher preparation programs or children's literature content being integrated into reading and language arts pedagogy courses in ways that likely fragment and dilute the content.

Concerned about the future of children's literature courses, we sought to gain a better perspective on the current landscape of these courses in P-8 teacher certification programs within the United States. How are they situated within teacher certification programs? What are their curricular foci and objectives? Discussion of these questions spurred our team to undertake a nationwide survey of children's literature course offerings in departments and colleges of education at higher education institutions. Obtaining this snapshot of the current state of the courses can offer critical information to help understand the role of children's literature courses in certification programs and possibilities for the future.

### **Surveying the Past**

A formal national perspective of U.S. children's literature courses appeared first over 50 years ago. In Elliot D. Landau's (1968) *Teaching Children's Literature in Colleges and Universities*, a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) sponsored survey of 573 individuals revealed that the majority of the children's literature courses were taught in Elementary Education departments, with the remaining courses primarily taught in English and Library Science departments. The three most common “course content areas” were “criteria for good children's literature,” and “children's reading interests and tastes” (p. 27), followed by a range of genres and formats. The two primary “teaching techniques” reported by respondents were exams and individual book reports, with over half of the

respondents rarely or never including author and/or illustrator visits or “demonstrations with children using books” (p. 29). Ninety percent reported using a textbook or anthology, and 65% said that students were expected to read 40 or more children’s books.

Sixteen years later, the Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA) of NCTE randomly sampled 251 instructors of children’s literature courses in Education, English, and Library Science departments to determine any relationships between who was offering the course and what was being taught (Adamson, 1987). Similar to the 1968 report, all three departments organized courses by genres with a common focus on traditional literature, modern fantasy, animal and adventure stories, science fiction, and drama/short stories. Additionally, English department faculty focused on the history of children’s literature while the Education and Library Science faculty focused on book selection criteria and guidelines, learning theory and child development in concert with reading, and instructional strategies such as reading aloud. Education faculty also identified understanding reader response and the integration of children’s literature into the content areas as important content objectives (Adamson, 1987).

Regardless of the department, classroom learning occurred through lecture and demonstration, whole class and small group discussions and storytelling. Required readings, individual reports and essays, and exams were common course assignments. Other less-frequent assignments involved curriculum development and classroom or library-based work with children. While the 1968 survey report did not discuss specific children’s authors or book titles, the 1983 survey responses included almost 100 children’s literature authors. All of the authors were white, and included award-winning authors such as Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Ezra Jack Keats, Maurice Sendak, Robert McCloskey, and Katherine Paterson (Adamson, 1987).

On the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, another survey of 184 instructors of undergraduate and graduate children’s literature courses (McClure & Tomlinson, 2000) reflected, in part, the findings from earlier surveys as well as new foci. In undergraduate children’s literature courses, genre continued to be a prominent course design structure (72%); however, themes and specific issues in children’s literature (14%) were also becoming central to course content. Courses continued to be lecture-based with some including student-centered class activities such as book discussions and presentations. Common course assignments beyond reading responses involved student inquiries (author studies), curations (annotated booklists, teaching ideas) and applications (storytelling, critical reviews, and writing children’s books).

As in previous survey reports, textbooks and required children’s literature had little consistency across courses beyond a strong trend towards award-winning literature. Interestingly, the number of required children’s books read in an

undergraduate course (20 books) was half of what was required in the 1960's (40+ books). Additionally, instructors expressed concerns about excessive content coverage and required work as well as pressure to keep up with trends, issues, and contemporary literature due to limited time and resources.

In the past decade, studies about children's literature courses shifted from national surveys to document analysis and instructor interviews, offering another perspective about these courses preparing prospective educators to teach "with and through literature" (Martinez & Roser, 2011). Focused on a three-part goal framework of familiarity with diverse children's literature, understanding the art and craft of literary texts, and acquisition of instructional strategies for children's deep, interpretive, and joyful reading (pp. 5-7), Martinez and Roser analyzed 55 children's literature course syllabi from 22 states and interviewed a subset of the professors who offered innovative instructional approaches with regard to digital technology, varied course formats, and thematic organization to help cultivate critical thinking. Even with such innovations, many assignments continued to include personal responses, critiques, and author studies. There was little focus on classroom application and fieldwork. Additionally, like earlier research (Adamson, 1987; McClure & Tomlinson, 2000), high variety in textbook and trade books with minimal overlap persisted, and readings included few culturally diverse books.

Knowledge about high-quality, culturally diverse books is also imperative for today's classrooms, as evidenced by teachers, administrators, and professors' ranking "access to high quality, diverse books and content" as one of the top five critical issues in the International Literacy Association's "The 2020 What's Hot in Literacy Report" (ILA, 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, "42% of literacy professionals cite a lack of diversity and cultural relevance in literacy resources as a barrier to equity in literacy education" (p. 37). This, combined with the national call for culturally relevant children's literature from the We Need Diverse Books movement (<https://diversebooks.org>), further reflects a collective need for teacher expertise in children's literature, especially for our culturally and linguistically diverse students.

## Methods

Using Survey Monkey, we developed a 239-item survey that included multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The survey operated within a multi-level matrix that included questions about required and elective children's literature courses for three different degree program options: 1) undergraduate, 2) dual-degree (undergraduate/graduate), and 3) graduate. In addition to demographic information, questions focused on course type, format, descriptions, goals/objectives, readings, and assignments. All questions were voluntary. Respondents were asked to answer only questions focused on the type of program in which they taught (e.g.,

undergraduate) and thus typically concluded the survey within 15 minutes.

After piloting and revising the survey, we recruited participants via voluntary response sampling as well as limited virtual snowballing techniques. We used the nonprobability sampling technique due to the need to gain professional knowledge from a group of experts (university-level children's literature instructors) without having an established list of these experts. We sent the survey to memberships and listservs of various literacy and children's literature organizations (e.g., CLA, LRA, ALSC), social media outlets used by children's literature faculty and researchers, and key known children's literature faculty, encouraging all to forward the survey to eligible people. To meet our purposes of a snapshot examination of undergraduate children's literature courses, the survey was cross-sectional and open for 2.5 months.

### **Data Description and Analysis**

We received 140 eligible responses from faculty teaching children's literature courses or overseeing these courses at their institutions. We further refined the sample, excluding responses for courses exclusively for secondary licensure programs, as well as courses at community colleges and international institutions. The 64 remaining respondents answered all questions pertinent to degree program options and were included in initial analysis. In a subsequent cross data analysis, we included undergraduate-only courses that completed answers for all three areas: course description, objectives, and assignments (N=37).

We collected two types of data: initial demographic data and core course component data. Initial demographic data included institution type (e.g., public, private, etc.), department housing the course (e.g., education, English, etc.), the number of courses offered and status (e.g., required, elective), course type (e.g., survey, specialized), and course format (e.g., online, on campus, hybrid). That information was collected through single-response, multiple-choice questions and was used to understand the common settings and characteristics of surveyed cases. We solicited core course component data via open-ended response questions requesting four types of core information from their children's literature course syllabi or university documents: 1) course catalogue descriptions (hereafter, "course descriptions"), 2) goals/objectives, 3) assignment descriptions, and 4) reading requirements. Four data teams each examined one of the four types of information collected.

For areas 1-3, the teams followed an inductive coding process for the open-ended responses and noted code frequencies and percentages. The teams used multiple codes to capture the presence of discrete themes within each individual case. Thus, frequencies and percentages reflect the number of times a code appeared across all cases in the set of course descriptions, the set of course

objectives/goals, or the set of assignment descriptions. The team analyzing the course readings requirements used a slightly different approach due to the nature of the responses. We divided individual cases into two sections, "Academic Readings" and "Children's Literature Readings," and assigned one a priori code for each section. These codes were more descriptive about the format of the readings than the content (e.g., "textbook," "academic article," "specific title of children's book").

In our small teams, we individually analyzed our data sets, interspersing multiple team meetings to ensure an inter-rater reliability of 95% and a clear understanding of each code used. We compiled all information in an internet cloud-based folder where we engaged in online whole team meetings to discuss further processes and determinations. We present the core course component data in two sections: 1) children's literature courses in undergraduate-only programs, and 2) children's literature courses in dual-degree programs (see Table 1).

Following the core course component data determinations, we engaged in a more focused cross-data comparison between course descriptions, course objectives/goals, and course assignment descriptions. This particular combination allowed us to examine possible similarities and differences between what might be suggested as the nature of the course within the constraints of course catalogue language, what was proposed as the main point of the course as represented in instructor-created goals and objectives within the syllabus, and what was captured as the intended outcomes through course assignments. Within this combined data, we used an inductive coding process to identify larger emerging themes across the entire set, assessing the presence of the theme within each subset.

### **A Contemporary Composite of Children's Literature Courses**

The children's literature courses in undergraduate and dual-degree initial P-8 teacher preparation programs represented in this study were largely singular, in-person courses offered through US higher education institutions. Almost 75% of the courses were at public universities. All major regions of the country were represented.

Almost 80% of courses were offered through education departments, with humanities departments following. Approximately 94% of respondents stated their programs required one children's literature course. These courses were predominately offered on-campus (88%) with virtual or hybrid formats constituting 12% of the course offerings. Only 33% of the courses included field experiences. In general, children's literature courses are structured as either survey courses, or courses which focus on specialized content (e.g., multicultural children's literature, international children's literature), or ones that include both. In this study, just over half of the courses offered in undergraduate programs were a mixture of survey and

specialized content while one-third were survey courses. This pattern was reversed for dual-degree programs (See Table 1).

Since respondents indicated the children's literature courses were for both undergraduate (59%) and dual-degree (41%) programs, we used those two program options when conducting an initial comparison of course descriptions, objectives/goals, assignment descriptions, and readings. While we largely identified strong similarities in the programs in core course components overall, we also noted course description differences between the two. We first share these differences, then provide descriptions of the course goals/objectives and course assignments data. We conclude with a discussion of course readings data.

### **Course Description Differences**

Analysis of course descriptions revealed two differences between programs: 1) dual degree course descriptions had a higher frequency of terms related to instruction, and 2) included more references to analysis (see Table 1). Undergraduate-level course descriptions included slightly more cases of "understanding" related terminology. This language seems to be deliberately open-ended yet partnered with language associated with analysis or instruction. Additionally, course descriptions for undergraduate degree programs included more genre focused terms and fewer references to children's psycho-social development than did the descriptions for dual-degree programs. The percentage of diversity-focused terms was approximately the same (see Table 1).

### **Course Goals/Objectives and Course Assignments**

The course goals/objectives of undergraduate and dual-degree programs were more similar than different. In both types of programs, one major goal was evaluating children's literature and/or understanding genre. The majority of respondents in both programs also identified the following goals: appreciating and sharing children's literature, knowing classroom applications, and understanding the importance of diversity (see Table 1).

The most frequently described assignments were engaging in textual analysis, conducting instruction related to children's literature, reading children's literature, and responding to literature (see Table 1). Within these categories, there was greater emphasis on engaging in textual analysis in undergraduate programs. Further, the types of textual analyses differed somewhat by program type. In undergraduate programs, the most frequently mentioned assignment was an author/illustrator study, followed by picturebook analyses, investigation of literary elements and devices, and studying texts with a critical focus. In dual-degree programs, author/illustrator studies, picturebook analyses, and analyses of literary

elements and devices received almost equal frequency.

A greater proportion of respondents from dual-degree programs listed assignments focused on instruction related to children's literature than did those from undergraduate programs (see Table 1). Nonetheless, this type of assignment constituted a relatively high percentage for both groups. Respondents from dual-degree programs most frequently mentioned read-alouds as a required instructional assignment, while more instances of book presentations for peers were mentioned for undergraduate programs.

**Table 1**

*Undergraduate Degree and Dual Degree Program Courses: Type, Catalogue Descriptions, Goals/Objectives, and Assignments*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Undergraduate Degree Course Type</b>	<b>Dual Degree Course Type</b>
Mixture of Survey Based and Specialized Course Content	53%	27%
Survey Course	32%	54%
Specialized Course	8%	12%
Other	8%	8%
<b>Category</b>	<b>Undergraduate Degree Course Catalogue Description</b>	<b>Dual Degree Course Catalogue Description</b>
Foundational Evaluation Skills	58%	65%
Genre-Focused	50%	30%
Instruction-Focused	47%	85%
Diversity-Focused	32%	60%
Analysis (Literary and Critical)	32%	35%
Psycho-Social Focused	21%	30%
Ambiguous "Understanding"	21%	10%
<b>Category</b>	<b>Undergraduate Degree Course Goals/Objectives</b>	<b>Dual Degree Course Goals/Objectives</b>
Evaluating Children's Literature/Understanding Genre	74%	73%
Appreciation and Sharing of Children's Literature	58%	77%
Classroom Applications	55%	65%
Diversity	53%	65%
Theories and Historical Components	29%	31%
<b>Category</b>	<b>Undergraduate Degree Course Assignments</b>	<b>Dual Degree Course Assignments</b>

Engaging in Textual Analysis	64%	58%
Instruction Related to Children's Literature	58%	84%
Documenting Reading Children's Literature	42%	74%
Responding to Literature	42%	32%
Exploring Professional Resources	28%	48%
Exams and Quizzes	28%	23%
Reflecting on the Reader	11%	21%
Creating a Children's Book	0%	5%

### Course Readings

A majority of faculty in both programs included scholarly readings in their courses. However, instructors in undergraduate programs tended to assign either a children's literature textbook or "scholarly articles" (e.g., journal articles, selected chapters from longer texts, and online content), while instructors in dual-degree programs tended to assign both textbooks and academic readings. A paucity of required scholarly readings was more common in undergraduate programs, although a few dual-degree programs also did not require scholarly readings. There was little overlap in textbooks and no overlap in the articles assigned in all courses examined.

Almost one-third of undergraduate program respondents cited specific children's books they required students to read; only one-fifth of dual-degree program respondents listed specific titles. There was wide variation in the number of titles listed, ranging from one to twenty books, and in the specific book titles used. Specific titles listed were often major award winners and were culturally diverse literature (e.g., *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson, 2014), *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2015), *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2011), *Amal Unbound* (Saeed, 2018)). Additionally, approximately another one-fifth of dual-degree and one-fifth of undergraduate program respondents referenced the general use of children's literature (e.g., "choice of books is left up to students," "book club books," etc.). However, a significant number of the respondents did not indicate children's literature were required readings. We believe that nearly all courses do include children's books as required reading and hypothesize that some respondents may have interpreted the term "readings" to be more about scholarly texts. A question specific to "children's books assigned" was not included in the survey.

### Narrowing the Focus

After examining these initial findings, we took a more in-depth look using a cross-data comparison of course descriptions, course objectives, and assignments in the

undergraduate courses. Given the formulaic language often used in course descriptions due to university requirements, as well as the frequent emphasis on licensure and standards-based language for course objectives, we wondered if what was stated in these descriptions and objectives would match with what actually happens in the courses, as represented by assignment descriptions. The analysis yielded two major findings: 1) the attention paid to diversity, and 2) the high volume and complexity of assignments.

### **Attention to Diversity**

The cross-data comparison revealed significant attention to diversity in undergraduate children's literature courses. While the term "diversity" can signal varied meanings, respondents seemed to interpret it within sociocultural dimensions such as race, ethnicity, language, gender identification, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, economics, and ideologies.

For the 32 institutions that reported having one required children's literature course, 75% included explicit references to diversity in course descriptions, objectives/goals, and/or assignment descriptions. Five institutions required two literature courses, with four of those institutions focusing on diversity in one of the two courses.

A focus on diversity was particularly noticeable in course objectives, with nearly 60% including terms such as "diversity," "multicultural," "social justice," and "marginalized groups," paired with verbs that represent a continuum of awareness and application (e.g., "identify," "understand," "analyze," "critique," "evaluate"). This attention was all-encompassing, from emphasizing diversity of characters and authorship in selecting children's books to considering the diverse needs of the child audience. For example, the objectives for one course included statements requiring the ability to identify and evaluate diverse literature, create learning spaces valuing diversity, consider diversity of responses, create and manage diverse groupings, and understand and use differentiated instruction for students with diverse language abilities.

Additionally, over 60% of course objectives referred to developing understanding of the human condition and sociocultural equity. This was most often related to aspects of diversity through the components, contexts, and consequences of reading children's literature. Objectives included wording such as "understanding that literature facilitates an understanding of the human condition, presenting human options, and encouraging empathy by providing insight and heightening sensitivity to people, places, and things." Such goals were accompanied by the expectation that students will translate their new understandings into instruction that helps children "respect the worth and uniqueness of all cultures and individuals." Thus, preservice teachers were tasked

to simultaneously evolve in their own self and social cultural awareness and also learn how to instill cultural awareness in their students.

Table 2 offers an overview of this presence of diversity within course descriptions, where it was explicitly mentioned (59%), followed by assignments (43%) and course descriptions (22%). All of the course descriptions which included diversity terms were connected to the presence of diversity-related details within the course objectives and, in three cases, within the assignment descriptions. The limited explicit presence of diversity within course descriptions is disconcerting, especially in light of the persistent call to diversify children's literature for the past 50 years (see Larrick, 1965). However, course descriptions in university catalogues are not routinely updated, and descriptions are often general and broad in scope. Given the presence of diversity in the course objectives and assignments, we suspect that instructors used the allowance of the general descriptions to infuse more diversity focused texts and activities into the course as they desired.

**Table 2**

*Cross-Data Comparison Presence of Diversity-Related Terms*

	Catalogue Descriptions	Objectives	Assignments	Description and Objectives	Objectives and Assignments	All Three Areas
Percentage of Diversity- Related Terms	22%	59%	43%	14%	24%	8%

*Note. We only included cases that had complete answers for all three areas: course catalogue descriptions, objectives, and assignments.*

Diversity-rich language was present in multiple components of several cases, with course objectives and course assignments having the strongest alignment (32% of the cases). Some of the course objective language about books (“representing diverse genres,” “variety of multicultural literature”) matched assignments of selecting and evaluating culturally diverse books, a connection that at first glance seems rather simple. Yet assignments such as “a content analysis research project on books featuring groups traditionally marginalized in children's literature,” or “annotated book reviews using Gene Luen Yang's ‘Reading Without Walls’ challenge to explore books from diverse voices,” demand nuanced understandings and a juggling of beliefs-in-transition among teacher candidates.

Three unique cases included diversity-related terminology across the course description, objectives, and assignments. The alignment helps to reify the students' role in understanding the complexity of diversity within children's literature and

the larger picture of literacy education. Table 3 illustrates a case with this type of alignment and exemplifies the strong presence of diversity-related terms in the responses.

**Table 3**

*Example of Course Catalogue Description, Objectives, and Assignment Description Case Alignment*

<b>Course Catalogue Description</b>	<b>Course Objectives</b>	<b>Course Assignment Description</b>
<i>Analytical study of children’s literature with a focus on children’s books that grapple with difficult social issues and learning how authors deal with topics such as homelessness, divorce, race, war, disabilities, gender, sexual orientations, etc.</i>	<i>Study select books written for children and consider how these books influence society, or are reflections of society</i>	<i>Social Justice/Critical Literacy Project including:</i>
<i>Integration of children’s literature throughout the . . . curriculum using content area reading strategies</i>	<i>Examine the interrelationships of the individual, cultural milieu, and society by reading and analyzing children's literature</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Development of a text set</i></li> <li>• <i>Critical analyses of culturally diverse children’s literature,</i></li> <li>• <i>School-age youth interviews and critical discussions</i></li> <li>• <i>Interactive read-aloud with a critical literacy approach</i></li> <li>• <i>Comprehension instruction using children’s literature with social studies content</i></li> <li>• <i>Student reflection about learning and offering of gaps in available children’s literature</i></li> </ul>
	<i>Identify and examine appropriate content area reading strategies to be integrated into classroom instruction</i>	

### **Volume and Complexity of Course Assignments**

The volume and complexity of assignments in courses were striking. Course descriptions were, as mentioned, often focused on developing preservice teachers’ “understanding of children’s literature.” “Understanding” typically lacked any elaboration or language that suggested reading and responding to children’s literature as cultural acts shaped by social and cultural norms and beliefs (Galda and Beach, 2001). Yet, course objectives and assignments suggested that by implicitly requiring education majors to (1) develop nuanced, multilayered understandings of children’s literature as a field, (2) be able to cultivate that same

complex understanding for their future students, and (3) understand and employ children's literature as an invaluable resource for personal, academic, and social development.

Course objectives such as “provide an understanding of various genres,” “critically evaluate children's books by applying criteria based on literary and artistic guidelines,” “examine the multimodal nature of picture books,” “evaluate the language use, vocabulary, and literary elements of a book,” “consider cultural and sociopolitical considerations and research on young children's needs, interests and reading preferences,” and “integrate quality children's literature into classroom instruction” collectively illustrate a trifecta of purposes: to understand, to analyze, and to integrate quality, culturally diverse children's literature into classrooms. The integration of quality children's literature encompassed recognizing major children's literature awards such as the Newbery and Caldecott, and notable award-winning authors and illustrators. The integration also involved responding to children's literature in multimodal ways and creating instructional possibilities (techniques, methods, and media) that enhance and extend young children's knowledge and responses to books while also meeting specific learner needs.

### *Volume of assignments*

This trifecta of purpose for a singular course seemed to thus create a high volume of assignments. Almost half of the responses with detailed assignment descriptions listed five or more different assignments requiring multiple weeks of preparation. These assignments often required students to go beyond their university classrooms to conduct evaluations of cultural diversity and literary variety within public and/or classroom libraries, or visit schools to interview children and teachers about their literary preferences, attitudes, and habits, and conduct critical literacy lessons and interactive read-alouds with children. While learning to navigate school spaces is important, the sheer amount of time required for setting up these experiences (and arranging schedules, transportation, and permissions) seems significantly time-consuming for instructors and preservice teachers.

The time-intensive nature of assignments appeared elsewhere with requirements to design and implement thematic units (not merely individual lessons), to create learning centers, and to develop text sets and annotated bibliographies for anywhere from 20 to 100 children's books. This is all in addition to the more typical college course assignments of weekly reading reflections, quizzes, etc. All of these assignments additionally occurred while students were seemingly expected to engage in and negotiate ideologies and histories that might challenge their own understandings and belief systems. Together, these assignments, course descriptions, and objectives highlight that children's literature

courses are not “easy” courses focused on simply reading children's stories. Rather, they illustrate these are time-intensive and assignment-heavy courses, often with additional burdens of self-created and self-negotiated field experiences, and they require a sophisticated development of complex understandings.

### *Complexity of assignments*

Together, these descriptive responses offer a portrait of the magnitude and complexity of expectations for students in children's literature courses. Students are not only expected to read and understand all genres and formats of children's literature, but they must also apply their new knowledge about children's literature to create reader-centered, growth-oriented literacy experiences with literature. They explore the complexities of children's literature in terms of content and craft simultaneously with the complexities of connecting and using it with children for academic, personal, and societal benefits. Undergirding all of this are assumptions that these preservice teachers are already avid rather than aliterate or struggling readers.

Additionally, course objectives and assignment descriptions suggest that the students are to learn about literary analysis, critical literacy, reader response, and readers' preferences in order to cultivate reading engagement and motivation, as well as critical readership, for all youth. They must learn to do this while they also learn to recognize, and ultimately figure out how to successfully negotiate the social and educational policies and practices related to access to children's books (e.g., book challenges, censorship, ideological considerations of “appropriateness”) that can limit children's access to culturally diverse literature.

### **Course Readings and Diversity**

The cross-data comparison used to examine the main intentions of the courses (descriptions and objectives) as compared to what actually occurred in the courses (assignments) highlighted the core attention to diversity across all facets. When reviewing the course readings data in our cross-data set, we noted responses that included scholarly readings focused on issues of diversity and culturally responsive teaching as well as a strong presence of diverse representation in the identified book titles. Responses that listed specific scholarly readings included several examples relating to the importance of increasing diverse representation in children's literature (e.g., Bishop, 1990), gender issues in young children's literature (e.g., Tsao, 2008), the construction of disabilities in children's literature (e.g., Solis, 2004), developing diverse classroom libraries (e.g., Möller, 2016), racism in children's books (e.g., Fattal, 2017), and engaging in culturally relevant literacy teaching with children's literature (e.g., Souto Manning and Martell, 2017.)

Likewise, while many respondents did not indicate required children's books, those that did listed a number of award-winning contemporary novels and picturebooks by culturally diverse authors and illustrators such as *One Crazy Summer* (Williams Garcia, 2010), *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* (Lin, 2011), *Rain Reign* (Martin, 2014), *El Deafo* (Bell, 2014), *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* (Tonatiuh, 2014), *Niño Wrestles the World* (Morales, 2013), and *The Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2017), as well as older children's literature with culturally diverse authors and characters (e.g., *Esperanza Rising* [Ryan, 2000], *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* [Taylor, 1976]).

### **Superimposing the Present Upon the Past: Children's Literature Courses Then and Now**

The dual presence of attention to diversity throughout multiple components and the high complexity and volume of course assignments offer insight into the current purposes and goals for children's literature courses designed for future educators. These courses compact a wide range of topics and highly sophisticated knowledge requirements in a short period of time. But how does this current snapshot differ from earlier studies of children's literature courses from the past?

#### **Readings**

Our data adds to the overwhelming evidence of a consistent absence of a formal children's literature "canon," both within the actual studied years and across the entire 50-year time period. Our results, similar to earlier surveys, showed the majority of titles carry the cultural and literary capital of coveted children's literature awards. But as in the previous studies, only a few titles were repeated across our data set. This suggests that while instructors selected books with important "quality" commonalities, they are most often carefully selecting contemporary titles with a distinctive fit to the needs of their program and students.

Additionally, a new commonality emerged in our survey. The "Readings" data included a strong presence of books with diverse representation, something not found in studies prior to 2014. As a whole, current children's literature faculty appear committed to ensuring accurate and authentic representations of people, cultures, and communities in the books they assign. This new commonality suggests that assigned books for contemporary children's literature courses are grounded in current societal conversations. The continued variance of titles, with minimal repetition, also suggests faculty remain grounded in reflection of current local contexts.

#### **Main content emphasis**

Our examination of course descriptions and objectives highlights an interesting shift in priorities. Like previous studies, evaluation of children's literature remains the main focus in our study, implying that the primary purpose in children's literature courses for prospective educators is learning to identify the highest quality children's books, likely leading to their ability to select the "best" books for children's use. However, secondary foci relay an important change in that purpose and implied subsequent actions. Earlier studies spoke to understanding children's preferences and to the relationship between child development and children's books; later studies mentioned reading engagement (selecting books that children will want to read/ "use"), but also began to speak more to the use of the books within actual literacy instruction. This move toward evaluation and selection for instruction continued in our findings, with over 50% of courses including course objectives related to classroom application. Thus, while earlier studies emphasized evaluation for selecting titles that encourage children's engagement with books, our study shows an emphasis on evaluation that leans more towards selecting books for instructional purposes.

### **Assignments**

The instructional use emphasis in the objectives and content was mirrored more dramatically in assignments. Landau's (1968) report stated exams and essay assignments as the major work with few assignments involving children. References to curriculum development and visits in classrooms and libraries were mentioned in the 1983 and 1997 surveys, but not at the level seen in our findings: 58% of undergraduate and 84% of dual-degree program assignments were child and instruction-related. Additionally, instruction and child-related assignments in the earlier studies had a connotation of entertainment and craft, such as storytelling and writing a children's book to share. Instructional-related assignments in our survey held a connotation of using the literature to teach a concept, discuss societal events and issues, or improve students' reading skills. Assignment complexity and volume were also notable in our findings, as previously discussed. Concern about assignment volume and complexity was not something explicitly mentioned in earlier studies; however, in the 1997 survey (McClure & Tomlinson, 2000), course instructors expressed concerns of excessive course content.

### **Limitations**

The sampling techniques of the survey, necessary due to the lack of a complete list of children's literature instructors, present limitations to the generalizability of findings due to possible sampling bias. However, the membership lists, listserv

postings, and snowball recruiting offered a broader spectrum of respondents than older studies that recruited from specific populations. The online nature of the survey may also have caused limitations on open-ended questions, although we posit that the question stems were asking for respondents only to copy and paste information from their university catalogues and syllabi, thus offering specific discrete information rather than respondent experiences or opinions that would be hampered by a lack of follow-up clarification. Finally, wording in some individual question stems may have caused difficulty (e.g., different interpretations of course readings) that if rephrased could have resulted in different responses.

### **Centrality of Children’s Literature in Teacher Certification Programs**

Earlier we mentioned universities eliminating children’s literature courses and attempting to infuse the content into reading and language arts methods courses. Yet important fundamental teacher knowledge is likely lost when programs eliminate children’s literature courses. These courses contribute to the development of teacher candidates’ preparation in ways literacy methods courses cannot (Flores et. al, 2019). This can be seen currently. While faculty in reading and language arts courses may use diverse children’s literature when teaching about instructional strategies, they have limited time to also help their preservice teachers build foundational understandings about cultural diversity that underlie knowledgeable selection of these important texts and how such selection might affect student engagement and learning. In children’s literature classes, however, preservice teachers are learning these underpinnings for evaluative methods of book selection, as well as how to consider cultural relevance while matching a particular book to a certain pedagogical method. Further, the critical analysis skills embedded in these decisions are imperative to effective instructional decisions in all content areas. A full semester children’s literature course can result in building a critical base of understanding about diversity and cultural competence that results in purposeful, effective, and culturally relevant teaching.

Research suggests that children’s books can be successful starting points for elementary classroom discussion of societal topics and critical issues (e.g., Dunkerly-Bean et al., 2017; Koltz and Kersten-Parrish, 2020; Wiseman et. al, 2019). Using children’s books for such discussions is complicated and complex, requiring several layers of nuanced steps. For example, with a current focus on diversity, students in children’s literature classes learn to evaluate literature for accurate and authentic representations of culturally and linguistically diverse people, contexts, behaviors, and ideologies. At the same time, they must negotiate the books’ content and their own ideologies, norms, ignorance, and biases, and partner those negotiations with an understanding of the role of cultural and linguistic diversity and awareness of systematic racism within the field of children’s

literature and the larger world. Then, they must learn how to talk about all of these important topics, issues, and personal negotiations with children. It is not surprising that children's literature courses seem to have potentially overwhelming requirements and expectations, especially as faculty themselves are often simultaneously engaged in the same types of personal negotiations and building expertise in facilitating challenging and courageous conversations.

The content of stand-alone children's literature courses thus requires, and can provide, that ample time and space for building the foundational educator skills of questioning, guiding discussion, and building learners' perspective-taking. The courses ask preservice teachers to engage in literature that considers children's experiences from multiple perspectives, learn from that engagement, and develop skills to guide children to do the same. This prepares preservice teachers not only to use children's books in meaningful ways that help children achieve literacy success, but also prepares them to develop their future students' critical thinking and deeper understanding of the world. Ultimately, the survey results offer a compelling argument for the centrality of children's literature courses, particularly those that focus on cultural diversity in teacher education programs. Children's literature courses need to be kept--not cut--as we strive to create sustaining and relevant instruction in culturally and linguistically rich communities.

## References

- Adamson, L. G. (1987). Results of CLA's survey of teaching children's literature in colleges and universities. *The Bulletin of the Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English*, 11(2), 9-11.
- Alexander, K. (2014). *The crossover*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Allington, R. L. (2018). *Children's literature in the reading program: Engaging young readers in the 21st century*. Guilford Publications.
- Bell, C. (2014). *El deafo*. Amulet Books.
- Bishop, R. Sims. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 1(2), ix xi.
- Bishop, R. S. (1997). Selecting literature for a multicultural curriculum. In V. J. Harris (Ed.), *Using multiethnic literature in grades K-8* (pp. 1-19). Christopher-Gordon.
- de la Peña, M., & Robinson, C. (2015). *Last stop on Market Street*. Putnam.
- Dunkerly-Bean, J., Bean, T. W., Sunday, K., & Summers, R. (2017). Poverty is two coins: Young children explore social justice through reading and art. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(6), 679-688. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1566>
- Fattal, I. (2017, August 15). Reading racism in Dr. Seuss. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/08/reading-racism-in-dr-seuss/536625/>
- Flores, T. T., Vlach, S. K., & Lammert, C. (2019). The role of children's literature

- in cultivating preservice teachers as transformative intellectuals: A literature review. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 51(2), 214-232.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X19839181>
- Galda, L., & Beach, R. (2001). Theory and research into practice: Response to literature. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 64-73.
- International Literacy Association. (2020). *What's hot in literacy report*.  
<https://literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/whats-hot-report>
- Koltz, J., & Kersten-Parrish, S. (2020). Using children's picturebooks to facilitate restorative justice discussion. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(5), 637-645.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1873>
- Lai, T. (2011). *Inside out and back again*. HarperCollins.
- Landau, E. D. (Ed). (1968). *Teaching children's literature in colleges and universities*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Larrick, N. (1965). The all-white world of children's books. *Saturday Review*, 48(11), 63-65.
- Lin, G. (2009). *Where the mountain meets the moon*. Little, Brown.
- Martin, A. M. (2014). *Rain reign*. Feiwel & Friends.
- Martinez, M., & Roser, N. L. (2011). What's going on in children's literature classes? An analysis of syllabi and a talk with some untraditional profs. In Bedford, A. W., & Albright, L. K. (Eds.). *A master class in children's literature: Trends and issues in an evolving field* (pp. 3-21). National Council of Teachers of English.
- McClure, A. A., & Tomlinson, C. M. (2000). Polling the profs: A national survey of teachers of children's literature in universities and colleges. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 26(2), 40-49.
- Möller, K. J. (2016). Creating diverse children's literature collections using Rudine Sims Bishop's conceptual metaphors and analytical frameworks as guides. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 42(2), 64-74.
- Morales, Y. (2015). *Niño wrestles the world*. Square Fish.
- Ryan P. M. (2002). *Esperanza rising*. Scholastic.
- Saeed, A. (2018). *Amal unbound*. Nancy Paulsen Books.
- Schwartz, S., & Sparks, S. D. (2019). How do kids learn to read? What the science says. *Education Week*, 2-6.
- Serafini, F. (2011). Creating space for children's literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(1), 30-34.
- Shaywitz, S. E. (2020). *Overcoming dyslexia: A new and complete science-based program for reading problems at any level* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Knopf.
- Short, K. G. (2015). *A curriculum that is intercultural* [Conference session]. Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Minneapolis, MN.
- Solis, S. (2004). The disability making factory: Manufacturing "differences" in

- children's books. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(1).  
<https://dsqds.org/article/view/851/1026>
- Souto-Manning, M., & Martell, J. (2017). *Reading, writing, and talk: Inclusive strategies for diverse learners, K-2*. Teachers College Press.
- Taylor, M. D. (1976). *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*. Dial.
- Tonatiuh, D. (2014). *Separate is never equal: Sylvia Mendez and her family's fight for desegregation*. Abrams.
- Williams-Garcia, R. (2010). *One crazy summer*. HarperCollins.
- Wiseman, A. M., Vehabovic, N., & Jones, J. S. (2019). Intersections of race and bullying in children's literature: Transitions, racism, and counternarratives. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(4), 465–474.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00933-9>
- Woodson, J. (2014). *Brown girl dreaming*. Nancy Paulsen Books.