



EVALUATION OF THE SHERMAN CENTER DIVERSE BOOKS PROJECT

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**Increasing Access to Multicultural Books in Early Childhood Classroom Libraries:
An Evaluation of the Diverse Books Project**

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Abstract

This work evaluates the Diverse Books Project, a program of the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities, through the analysis of archival data on teachers' program participation and anticipated use of the program resources (Study 1). We also gathered retrospective data on teachers' perception of the program's utility (Study 2) to help inform future iterations of the program and to provide guidance to other institutions or schools that aim to create similar programming. The Diverse Books Project was designed to provide teachers with access to multicultural children's books for their classroom libraries. The program delivered over 1,700 copies of books to more than 100 teachers. The data suggest teachers perceived important benefits from the program for both themselves and their students. Recommendations are provided for future program iterations and lessons learned are offered for institutions who aim to create similar community-school partnerships.

Word count 145/150

Key Words: Early Childhood Education, Community-School Partnerships, DEI, Inclusive Classrooms, Literacy Programs, Multicultural Books

Introduction

The U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse, and this trend is expected to continue. A recent report from the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2023) found that in 2022, less than half (49%) of U.S. children identified as White, while 51% identified as either Hispanic (26%), Black (14%), Asian (6%), or belonging to another racial category (6%). By 2050, the agency estimates that 61% will be non-White. U.S. children are not only racially diverse, but they are also linguistically diverse with 21% of children reportedly speaking a language other than English in their homes. Children's economic context is also heterogeneous, with 15% of U.S. children estimated to be living in poverty and 13% reported to meet the USDA classification for being food insecure. Family composition is another aspect of children's identities that is heterogeneous, with 65% of children estimated to be living with two married parents. Given these dynamics in the U.S. population, teachers are likely to be working with a diverse student body. Yet, teachers' fundamental task remains the same, to create an inclusive classroom environment for their students. The potential consequences of failing to meet this challenge are profound. For example, Juvonen and colleagues (2019) noted a connection between inadequate social inclusion and a wide array of academic outcomes, including absenteeism rates, propensity to drop out of school, academic performance, as well as students' expectations for their educational attainment.

Teachers have the critically important task of creating an inclusive classroom in order to meet the needs of *all* students (NAEYC, 2022). There are several approaches teachers can take to help work towards this goal. One potential strategy to increase inclusivity in the classroom is through the incorporation of multicultural books in classroom libraries.

Multicultural Picture Books and Children's Learning

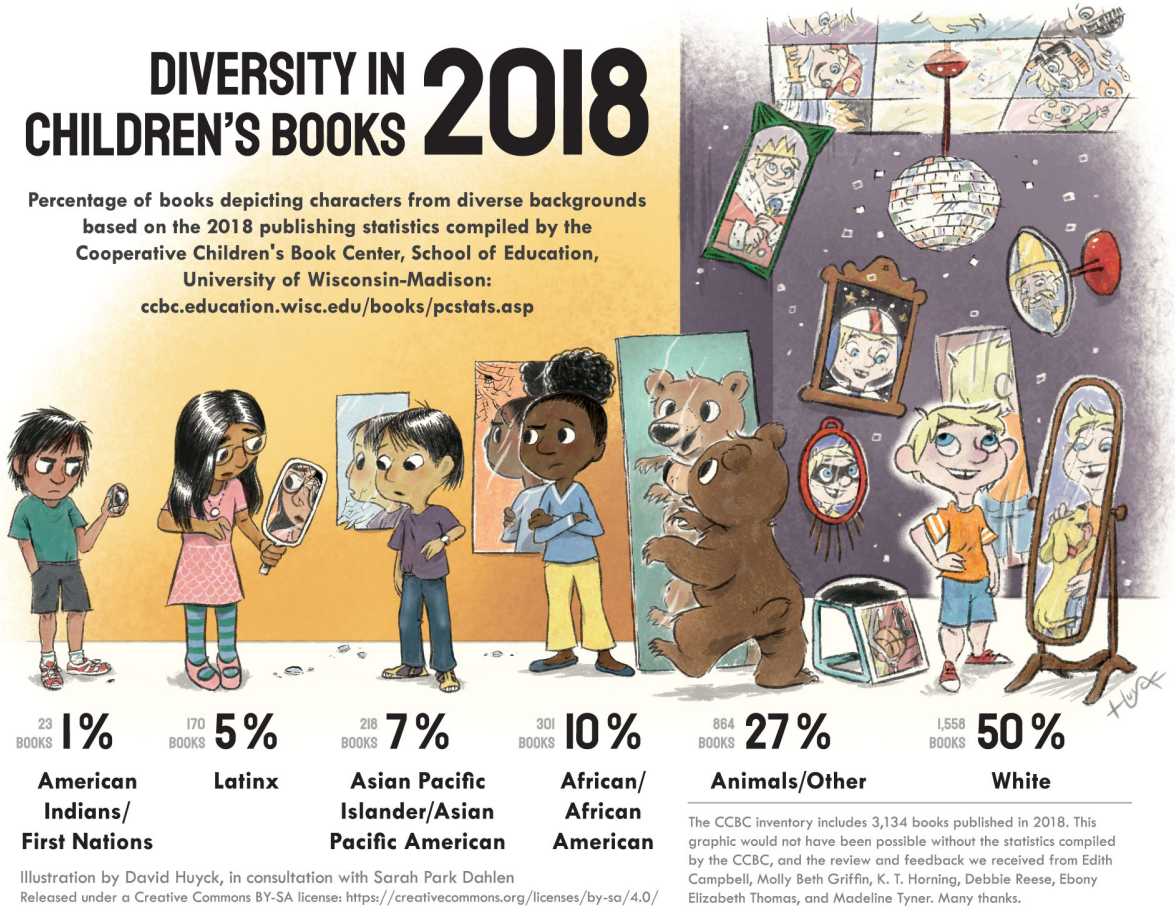
Early childhood classroom libraries play an important role in helping children make sense of the world around them. Research suggests that teaching with books that reflect diverse cultural backgrounds can support children's socio-emotional development and their literacy skills (see Adam & Harper, 2016; Harper & Brand, 2010; Kim et al., 2015; Naqvi et al., 2012). The presence and use of multicultural books in classrooms is one avenue by which children can help form and affirm their own identity as well as learn about their world:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop, 1990, p. ix).

Unfortunately, many children do not see themselves in the books they read (Morgan, 2009). As shown in Figure 1 (Huyck & Park Dahlen, 2019), it has been estimated that 50% of children's books depict characters that are White, while only 23% reflect diverse characters comprised predominantly of Black (10%) and Asian (7%) characters, while the remaining 27% depict non-human animals.

Figure 1

Representation in Children’s Books



Note. Image obtained from Huyck & Park Dahlen (2019). Image released for use under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0 license).

The Diverse Books Project

Here we focus on the implementation and outcomes of the Diverse Books Project, one of the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities’ programs. The Diverse Books Project aims to ensure that early childhood educators have access to multicultural children’s books for their classroom libraries. The Diverse Books Project has run for over 5 years (April 2018 - present). As part of this initiative, teachers from local schools that partner with the Sherman Center are invited each quarter to review 15 books from the Diverse Books Collection

and request books for their classroom libraries. Teachers were sent YouTube videos of read-alouds of each book title to assist with their book selection. Note that depending on the program year, teachers could request 1 or 2 book titles for their classroom each quarter. Teachers could also request multiple copies of the books they selected (up to 6 copies per book title). The average cost to run the program is \$2,156.19 ($SD = \859.26) per quarter. However, this is likely an underestimate of the total program expense as copies of books are obtained first from the Sherman Center's collection, and only book titles not currently available in the collection are purchased anew each quarter.

The book offerings rotate each quarter. The book titles are drawn from the Sherman Center's Diverse Books Collection, which includes over 100 titles¹. Title selection is based on the following criteria: the book must reflect diversity and inclusivity through its topic(s), illustrations, and/or authors, and the quality of the content and illustrations. Books were selected that spanned the early childhood period from pre-K to 2nd grade. Logistical considerations, including the availability of a book title and how recently it had been offered, were also factors taken into consideration when curating the quarterly book offerings.

Over the years, the program has continued to evolve to include new books as well as additional resources for educators. For example, the Diverse Books Project has a growing library of educator videos (<https://shermancenter.umbc.edu/professional-development-and-media/>) in which early childhood educators describe how they use the multicultural books in their classrooms and how their students engage with the texts. In 2023, the Diverse Books Project also expanded to include a new partnership with WEE Nation Radio which aimed to provide

¹ Note that the Sherman Center Diverse Books collection is not a static collection and new books are periodically added by teacher request and suggestion solicited at the Teacher Summer Institute (an annual professional development meeting), and by Sherman Center faculty and staff.

additional resources for educators participating in the Diverse Books Project and beyond. The collaboration with WEE Nation Radio yielded interviews with 8 authors of the most frequently requested books from the Sherman Center's Diverse Book Collection as well as read-alouds by the author or a professional storyteller. The interviews and read-alouds were recorded and aired on the radio and made available to teachers to share with their students and families through the podcast (<https://www.weenationradio.com/diversebooksproject>).

Current Studies

We evaluate the Diverse Book Project through the analysis of archival data on the program implementation and teachers' use of the program (Study 1). In addition, we gathered retrospective survey data on teachers' perception of the utility of the program (Study 2) in order to help inform future iterations of the program as well as to provide guidance to other institutions or schools that aim to create similar programming.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Participating teachers included 104 teachers from 5 elementary schools in a large urban district in Maryland. Participating teachers taught Pre-kindergarten through second grade (PreK = 19, Kindergarten = 23, 1st grade = 22, 2nd grade = 18) as well as special education ($n = 9$), and English as a Second Language ($n = 12$). For one teacher there was missing information for their grade-level taught. Teachers were typically invited to participate by email in collaboration with the school liaison. See Table 1 for participation rates by quarter and year.

Table 1*Diverse Books Project participation rates by year and quarter*

Academic Year	Program Quarter	Quarterly N	Yearly N
2017-2018	4	3	3
	1	9	
	2	6	
	3	8	
2018-2019	4	8	75
	PD ^a	10	
	TSI ^a	34	
	1	12	
2019-2020	3	12	29
	TSI ^a	5	
	1	17	
2020-2021	2	19	56
	3	11	
	4	9	
	1	18	
2021-2022	2	14	70
	3	21	
	4	17	
	1	25	
2022-2023	2	31	78
	3	22	

^aNote that PD and TSI “quarters” reflect teachers who participated in Professional Development (PD) and the Teacher Summer Institute (TSI) with the Sherman Center and were also invited to select books from the Diverse Books Project. This occurred for 2 years of the program (2018 - 2020).

Participating teachers worked in an urban school context that serves diverse student populations. School size ranged from 413 to 1052 students. Student populations ranged from 20% to 89% Black, the percentage of multilingual learners ranged from 7% to 60%, and the percentage of students that were eligible for Title I services ranged from 56% to 85%. For full demographic information see Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Information for the Student Body at Participating Schools

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Race & Ethnicity					
Black	89	53	35	21	20
Hispanic	8	38	39	74	60
White	< 5	7	17	< 5	15
Asian	< 5	< 5	< 5	< 5	< 5
Multiracial	< 5	< 5	8	< 5	< 5
Other	< 5	< 5	< 5	< 5	< 5
Students with Disabilities	9	13	10	12	12
Multilingual Learners	7	29	31	60	45
Title I Eligible	85	78	73	56	63

Note. Table reflects demographic data from the 2023-2024 academic year. Demographic information was collected from the school district's website. All values are provided as the percentage of students.

Archival Analysis: Measures

Book Request Forms

Each quarter, participants completed a book request form in which they indicated their book selections. In addition, teachers were asked to indicate 1) why they selected a particular

book title(s) and 2) how they planned to use the book(s) in their classroom. Participants' responses were then coded qualitatively using a coding scheme developed for the purpose of this study by the third author. The coding scheme is described below. A subset of the data (11%) was re-coded by a second coder (the second author) to ensure strong inter-rater reliability (Kappas: Selection Rationale = .83; Intended Use = .77).

Book Selection Rationale. Participants' rationale as to why they selected the book titles they did were coded into one of six categories: (1) **Promotes Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)** included book selections intended to diversify the classroom library, books that told a unique/diverse story children might not otherwise be exposed to, and/or books that were representative of students in the class (i.e., culturally relevant). This category also includes bilingual books; (2) **Book characteristics** referred to book selections based on specific book features (e.g., author, art, wordless book, reading level/age-appropriate); (3) **Story Plot** included rationales in which book selections were based on liking the plot or moral and/or a belief that the book would inspire children; however, specific DEI themes were not mentioned. (4) **General Interest** captured responses in which teachers reported selecting books to add them to their classroom library and/or a belief that children would like the book, but teachers did not provide any specific details as to why they believed the book would be of interest; (5) **Curriculum alignment** referred to rationales in which the selected book aligned with the curriculum and/or a current or upcoming unit; or (6) **Combination** captured responses in which teachers expressed multiple reasons for selecting a book. Note that a second round of coding was conducted for this response category in order to identify the specific combinations of responses teachers provided. Teachers who did not provide a rationale for their book selection were recorded as **Missing**.

Intended Use. Participants' responses as to how they intended to use the requested book(s) were coded into one of 5 categories: (1) **Encourage discussion** referred to responses in which teachers' planned to use the book to start a class conversation about a topic that was outside of the core curriculum (e.g., inequities, what they see on the news, empathy); (2) **Support core curriculum/milestones** captured teachers' intentions to use the book to supplement the curriculum/lesson (e.g., to help teach math, colors, vocabulary, language/fluency); (3) **Passive use** referred to teachers' plans to make the book available in their classroom library for children to read on their own and for children to borrow to read with their families; (4) **General use** included responses that referred to general plans for book use without further explanation (e.g., to help students, read aloud, small group discussion, guided reading, author study, to teach non-core concepts); or (5) **Combination** captured responses where teachers indicated multiple plans for using the book. As was done for the coding of teachers' book selection rationale, a second round of coding was conducted for this category of responses in order to identify the specific combination of responses teachers gave. Teachers who did not provide a response as to how they planned to use the book were recorded as **Missing**.

Data Analysis Approach

The archival data was analyzed as follows: book requests were analyzed by calculating descriptive statistics to help quantify the extent to which teachers used the program resources both by quarter and program year. Participants' open-ended responses as to their rationale for their book selections and intended use of the diverse books in their classrooms were coded qualitatively, and descriptive statistics are provided overall and by grade level.

Results

Book Requests and Distribution

Up until 2020 teachers could select 1 book (from 15 options) and up to 6 copies of the selected title. At the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, teachers could select up to two books (from 15 options), and up to six copies of the selected titles. When teachers were able to select more than one book title (program years 2020-2023), 98% of teachers elected to do so. Further, when teachers could request multiple copies of their selected book titles (all program years except 2020-2021), 77% of teachers did so, suggesting that these program modifications were generally well received by teachers. Although teachers tended to request multiple copies of their selected book titles, there was variability in the number of copies requested, ranging from 2 to 6, with a mean of 4 ($SD = 2.13$). Teachers did not typically request the maximum number of copies (6); suggesting that the allotted maximum covered most teachers' anticipated needs. See Table 3 for the mean number of book copies requested per program year. The program has generally been popular with teachers as the Sherman Center distributed 1,706 book copies to 104 early childhood educators over the past 5 or so years.

Popular Book Titles

Teachers generally selected a diverse array of titles from the 15 title options. However, there were some trends in teacher preferences for specific book titles within and across program years. For example, *You Matter*, by Christian Robinson was the most popular book title in both 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 with 7% ($n=8$) and 10% ($n=13$) of requests respectively. In program year 2022-2023, *Benny Doesn't Like to be Hugged*, by Zetta Elliott was the most popular book title with 7% ($n=11$) of requests. For book title preference by program year, see Table 4.

Table 3*Number of Book Copies Requested Per Academic Year*

Academic Year	Title #1			Title #2 ^b		
	N ^a	Mean (SD)	Request Multiple Copies %	N ^a	Mean (SD)	Request Multiple Copies %
2017-2018	18	6.00 (0.00)	100	-	-	-
2018-2019	401	5.42 (1.54)	91	-	-	-
2019-2020	111	3.96 (2.35)	68	-	-	-
2020-2021 ^c	54	1.00 (0.00)	N/A	54	1.00 (0.00)	N/A
2021-2022	248	3.65 (2.16)	71	251	3.92 (2.11)	77
2022-2023	286	3.67 (2.11)	73	283	3.72 (2.11)	74
		Title 1			Title 2	
	Weighted Mean^d	4.24			3.82	

^a Number of book copies delivered.

^b Requesting a 2nd title was only possible for academic years 2020-2021 through 2022-2023.

^c Teachers were not able to request multiple copies during this academic year.

^d Grand Means exclude 2020-2021 in which teachers were unable to order multiple copies of the selected book title.

Popular books across program years shared some similarities that may have made them more likely to be selected by early childhood educators. *Green is a Chile Pepper* promotes DEI through the application of colors embedded within Latine culture (e.g., “Yellow are *faroles* flickering bright”). The use of Spanish throughout the book also supports translanguaging, and the translation for each color is provided in the illustration. *Wolf in the Snow* has certain book characteristics that promote the themes of friendship and kindness for animals. The book has very few written words, allowing children to develop verbal retelling and creativity with the provided illustrations. *You Matter* has a positive message that reminds children that they are important and have self-worth, even when times feel difficult. *Benny Doesn't Like to be Hugged*

promotes DEI with respect to teaching children to recognize and support the needs of their neurodivergent peers. It also has a positive message of accepting others and respecting their boundaries. The popularity of this particular title may have also been due in part to teachers' increased exposure to this book through the Sherman Center 2021 Teacher Summer Institute in which Zetta Elliott, the book author, provided the keynote address.

Table 4

Book Title Preferences by Program Year

Program Year	Most Selected Title	Number of Teacher Requests	%
2017-2018	No dominant title preference	-	-
2018-2019	<i>Green is a Chile Pepper</i> , by Roseanne Greenfield Thong	11	15
2019-2020	<i>Wolf in the Snow</i> , by Matthew Cordell	5	18
2020-2021	<i>You Matter</i> , by Christian Robinson	8	7
2021-2022	<i>You Matter</i> , by Christian Robinson	13	10
2022-2023	<i>Benny Doesn't Like to be Hugged</i> , by Zetta Elliott	11	7

Qualitative Coding of the Educator Book Request Forms

Of the 307 book requests from the teachers involved in the Diverse Books Project, only a subset of teachers provided, along with their book requests, answers to the open-ended prompts about their title selections and intended use of the books (Book Selection Rationale: $n = 248$ or 81%; Intended Use: $n = 219$ or 71%). The available responses were analyzed using the coding scheme described above.

Book Selection Rationale

Educators who selected diverse books for their classrooms generally did so to help support their students as they related to themselves, each other, and the books' characters. Indeed, 43% of teachers' responses specifically mentioned that they selected books that promoted DEI, while 17% indicated their book selection was due to the plot or message without mentioning specific DEI themes. Additionally, 14% of teachers' responses indicated they selected specific books that aligned with the curriculum. Similar trends were observed across grade levels. Interestingly, kindergarten teachers were particularly likely to report selecting books that promoted DEI, with more than half (55%) indicating DEI as a factor in their book selections. See Table 5 for the frequency counts of teachers' reasons for their book selection by grade level.

Table 5

Frequency Counts (%) for Teachers Selection Rationale of Specific Book Titles for Their Classrooms by Grade Level Taught and Overall

Rationale	Grade Taught						Total
	Pre-K	K	1st	2nd	ESOL	Special Educ.	
Promotes DEI	11 (26%)	33 (55%)	24 (41%)	19 (45%)	13 (72%)	7 (28%)	107
Book Characteristics	7 (16%)	4 (7%)	2 (3%)	3 (7%)	1 (6%)	2 (8%)	19
Plot/Message	5 (12%)	8 (13%)	12 (20%)	8 (19%)	3 (17%)	6 (24%)	42
General/Student Interest	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	4 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5
Curriculum Alignment	11 (26%)	7 (12%)	9 (15%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)	4 (16%)	35
Combination	7 (16%)	6 (10%)	4 (7%)	5 (12%)	1 (6%)	5 (20%)	28
Other	1 (2%)	2 (3%)	4 (7%)	3 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	11
Total	43	60	59	42	18	25	247

* *Note.* Teachers were able to request multiple books; the total reflects the number of responses. Percentages provided are based on column frequencies.

Intended Use of the Requested Books

Teachers indicated a variety of uses for the selected books. However, the most dominant response indicated teachers intended to have the books in their classrooms for general use with 53% of teachers' responses being classified in this category. Other common, but less prevalent types of responses, included using the books to support the core curriculum (22%) and to encourage discussion (16%). Response patterns were largely consistent across grade levels. See Table 6 for the frequency counts of teachers' intended use of the requested books by grade level.

Table 6

Frequency Counts (%) for How Teachers Plan to Use the Selected Books in their Classroom by Grade level Taught and Overall

Plan for Usage	Grade Taught						Total
	Pre-K	K	1st	2nd	ESOL	Special Educ.	
Discussion	4 (11%)	9 (21%)	10 (16%)	2 (5%)	3 (20%)	6 (25%)	34
Support Core Curr.	14 (40%)	11 (26%)	8 (13%)	6 (16%)	5 (33%)	3 (13%)	47
Passive Use	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	4 (6%)	4 (11%)	1 (7%)	2 (8%)	12
General Use	14 (40%)	21 (49%)	40 (63%)	23 (62%)	5 (33%)	12 (50%)	115
Combination	2 (6%)	2 (5%)	2 (3%)	2 (5%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	9
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	1
Total	35	43	64	37	15	24	218

Note. Teachers were able to request multiple books; the total reflects the number of responses. Percentages provided are based on column frequencies.

Study 1 Discussion

The results from the archival analysis indicate that the Diverse Books Project is a program that provided important resources to 104 early childhood educators across five schools. The program served to materially enhance the diversity of classroom libraries through the dissemination of over 1,700 copies of books from the Sherman Center Diverse Books collection. Teachers provided rationales for their book selections that indicated teachers were selecting books they felt promoted DEI. More than half of teachers also indicated that they planned to include the books in their classrooms for general use. This response pattern may point to a potential opportunity for the Sherman Center to provide additional support to educators regarding ways in which the books in the Diverse Book Collection can be purposefully integrated into the curriculum.

The archival analysis provides important information about program participation, book selection, and insights into teacher intentions with the provided books; however, it leaves open questions about how teachers actually used the books as well as teachers' perceptions of the utility of the program. In Study 2, we investigate these questions through a retrospective survey.

Study 2

Method

Participants

All teachers who participated in the Diverse Books Project were invited to complete the Study 2 survey; however, only a subset of teachers ($n = 18$) participated. Teachers predominantly identified as women (94%), Non-Hispanic/ Latino/ Spanish Origin (78%), and White (61%). Approximately 33% of teachers were 45 years of age or older. Teachers largely held advanced degrees with 72% holding a masters or doctoral degree. Teachers reported holding different types of teaching licenses with an advanced professional certificate (67%) being the most common type. Teachers had a range of early childhood education experience with 28% reporting teaching for 6 years or less, 39% teaching 7-14 years, and 33% with 15 years or more of teaching experience. While 44% of teachers reported providing general education instruction, 33% reported teaching a specific core discipline (English Language Arts/Literacy, Mathematics, or Social Studies), 11% provided special education instruction, and 11% identified their instructional area as "other." For full demographic information, please see Table 7.

Table 7*Demographic Information for Participating Teachers*

	N	%
Gender		
Woman	17	94.4
Man	1	5.6
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origin	4	22.2
Not Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origin	14	77.8
Race		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	5.6
Black/African American	3	16.7
White	11	61.1
Biracial/Multiracial	1	5.6
Other	1	5.6
Prefer Not to Report	1	5.6
Age		
18-24 yrs	1	5.6
25-34 yrs	5	27.8
35-44 yrs	6	33.3
45-54 yrs	4	22.2
55 yrs or more	2	11.1
Education		
Bachelor's degree	4	22.2
Master's degree	12	66.7
Doctoral degree	1	5.6
Other	1	5.6
Licensure		
Conditional Certificate	1	5.6
Standard Professional Certificate I	2	11.1
Standard Professional Certificate II	2	11.1
Advanced Professional Certificate	12	66.7
Other	1	5.6
Teaching Experience in Early Childhood		
1-3 yrs	1	5.6
4- 6 yrs	4	22.2
7-10 yrs	5	27.8
11-14 yrs	2	11.1
15 yrs or more	6	33.3

Procedure

Teachers were invited to complete the online survey via email. The online survey was fielded between Fall 2023 - Summer 2024 via Qualtrics. Reminder emails were sent to participants to complete the survey. The study was approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Boards (#1090 and #2023-009). Participants read the online consent form and indicated electronically whether they would like to participate in the study. Participants received a \$20 incentive via Reward Genius for completing the survey.

Measures

The online survey consisted of 60 items which included multiple choice and rating scales, as well as open-ended questions. The survey questions asked teachers about their experience and utilization of the program including questions about their book selection process, book selection rationale, book use, and the perceived impact of the program on themselves, on their instructional practices, and on students. The survey also included basic demographic items. Within the Qualtrics platform responses were requested, not forced, and thus participants could skip questions based on comfort level. As a result, sample size per item is variable.

Data Analysis Approach

Teachers' responses to the survey items were coded and descriptive statistics calculated including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Results

Participation and Use of the Diverse Books Project Resources

Teachers reported participating between one and four years in the program, with an average length of program participation of 3.12 years ($SD = .99$). As noted in the program description, teachers were invited to request books more than once a year, of which 72% of

teachers reported doing so throughout the program. Half (50%) of the teachers reported requesting both multiple book titles as well as multiple copies of the titles.

Recall that each quarter teachers were sent links to read-alouds on YouTube for each book title being offered. Half (50%) of the teachers reported watching the YouTube videos when making their title selections. Of the teachers who made use of these resources, 67% reported that the YouTube videos helped inform their book title selections. In particular, teachers reported that the YouTube videos provided an overview of the book content and helped them pick books based on their classroom needs and demographics.

Book Selection Rationale

To obtain a more nuanced understanding of teachers' book selection, teachers were asked to identify the factor(s) that contributed to their title selection(s). Factors included book characteristics (illustration), literary genre (fiction/non-fiction), diverse characters, addressed DEI theme or a particular aspect of DEI, connected to core content, or that the book was not a current holding in their classroom library. Note that teachers were allowed to select multiple factors that contributed to their book selection.

All teachers reported choosing book titles because they contained diverse characters. Teachers also commonly reported selecting books due to the beauty of their illustrations (83%). About two-thirds of teachers reported selecting book titles because they addressed a DEI theme or a particular aspect of DEI (67%). Half of teachers reported that they selected book titles that connected to core content areas (e.g., math, science). Somewhat less frequently teachers reported selecting books based on a literary genre (i.e., non-fiction 33%, fiction 39%) or simply because the book was not part of their current classroom library holdings (44%).

Teachers who indicated that they selected books because they addressed a particular aspect of diversity (n = 12) also received an open-ended prompt in which they were asked to identify what specific DEI aspects they were most interested in addressing through the program. Teachers' responses highlighted a variety of DEI areas including linguistic diversity (9%), social class (9%), multicultural/religious diversity (27%), gender (36%), disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, neurodivergence, special education, physical disabilities; 55%), and/or general enthusiasm for diversity in any form (18%). However, the overwhelming focus was on books that centered race (82%). For example, one teacher noted how they purposefully selected books to create a more inclusive classroom in which their own students would be represented:

I most specifically was looking for books that addressed race so that my students could see themselves more in the books I read and displayed in my classroom. While representation was and is always important to me, I think DBP [Diverse Book Project] made me take a more realistic look at my library and how it did not truly represent the students I serve.

Use of the Requested Books

Teachers were asked to indicate how they used the books in their classrooms. Response options included: (1) using the books in the classroom library for students to access independently, (2) using the books to read to students during read-alouds, (3) planning activities related to the books, (4) creating lesson plans around the books, and (5) other. Teachers could select one or more use cases for the selected book. As a result, the total exceeds 100%.

The vast majority of teachers reported using the books for their students to read on their own (94%) and/or to use for classroom read-alouds with their students (83%). Less than half of teachers (44%) reported planning activities related to the books, and only 17% of teachers created lesson plans around the books. No teachers indicated additional use cases.

Teacher Perception of the Program's Impact on Teachers and Students

Teachers were presented with a series of statements about the potential impact of the Diverse Books Project for both themselves and their students; (e.g., *The Diverse Books Project increased my [my students] access to diverse children's books*). Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5- point scale which ranged from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (5) “Strongly Agree”.

Program Impact on Teachers

Overall, teachers' ratings reflected general agreement across the items (Grand $M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.11$). Nevertheless, there was some variability in teachers' level of agreement both across items (Mean Range: 4.35 to 4.72) and within items as individual ratings ranged from the minimum (1; *Strongly Disagree*) to the maximum value (5; *Strongly Agree*) (see Table 8). Teachers tended to agree ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.96$) that the program was effective in increasing teachers' access to diverse children's books as well as at introducing teachers to diverse stories ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.97$), which are core components of the program. Additionally, teachers tended to agree that the stories ignited their own curiosity and interest to read diverse stories ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.04$). The statement that received the lowest level of agreement (although still reflecting general agreement; $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.22$) was that the program helped teachers to address sociocultural issues. This perhaps points to an area where program developers can provide educators with additional support and resources as this is a natural extension of the Diverse Books Project. We return to this idea in the discussion.

Table 8*Teacher Rating of the Program Impact on Teachers (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)*

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Increased My Access to Diverse Children's Books	18	1	5	4.72	0.96
Introduced Me to Diverse Stories	18	1	5	4.67	0.97
Created Opportunities for me to Connect with Diverse Stories	18	1	5	4.50	1.10
Increased Opportunities to Share Diverse Stories With Students	18	1	5	4.56	1.04
Helped Deepen My Learning of Myself and Others	17	1	5	4.47	1.07
Helped Create a Reading Habit in Me	16	1	5	4.44	1.09
Helped Me Address Sociocultural Issues	17	1	5	4.35	1.22
Helped Me Appreciate Diversity	18	1	5	4.44	1.04
Helped Me Appreciate Different Cultures	18	1	5	4.50	1.04
Ignited My Curiosity to Read DEI Stories	18	1	5	4.61	1.04
Grand Mean				4.53	0.11

Program Impact on Students

Regarding the impact of the Diverse Book Project on students, teachers' ratings reflected overall agreement across items (Grand $M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.09$, Range: 4.65 to 5.0). In contrast to ratings of the impact of the Diverse Book Project on teachers, there was reduced variability for student items as no individual ratings were below a value of 3 (*Uncertain*; see Table 9). Notably, all teachers strongly agreed that the program helped their students feel that difference was okay. Additionally, teachers generally endorsed that the program helped students deepen their learning about themselves ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.33$) while also helping students learn how to treat others with respect ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.49$).

Table 9

Teacher Rating of the Program Impact on Students (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Increased My Students' Access to Diverse Children's Books	17	4	5	4.88	0.33
Increased My Students' Opportunities to Share Diverse Stories with Their Fellow Students	17	3	5	4.88	0.49
Created Opportunities For Students to Share Diverse Stories With Their Families	17	3	5	4.76	0.56
Helped My Students Deepen Learning of Themselves and Others	17	4	5	4.88	0.33
Taught My Students How to Treat Others With Respect	17	3	5	4.88	0.49
Supported My Students' Knowledge About Being Different	17	4	5	4.88	0.33
Enhanced My Students' Literacy Skills	17	3	5	4.65	0.61
Helped My Students Feel Important	16	4	5	4.88	0.34
Helped My Students Learn to Accept People who are Different from Them	17	4	5	4.88	0.33
Helped My Students Feel That Differences are Okay	17	5	5	5.00	0.00
Grand Mean				4.86	0.09

Program Impact on Student Interest, Engagement, and Literacy Practices

Teachers were also presented with a series of statements about the potential impact of the Diverse Books Project on students' interest and engagement; (e.g., *The Diverse Books Project ignited my students' curiosity to read about DEI*) and their literacy habits and practices (e.g., *The Diverse Books Project books helped my students develop their literacy skills*). Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree".

Again teachers' ratings reflected overall agreement across items (Grand $M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.11$, Range: 4.63 to 4.94) with limited variability within items as no individual rating was below

a value of 3 (*Uncertain*; see Table 10). Teachers were generally in agreement that their students found the books engaging and that they enjoyed reading and learning from the books (all $M_s = 4.94$). Teachers also reported that the books were generally fun to read-aloud ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.33$) and that the books encouraged students to ask questions ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.39$). Teachers were somewhat less likely to strongly agree that the program helped to build students' reading habits, increase a love of reading, or develop students literacy skills, although, importantly, the mean values still reflected general agreement ($M_s \leq 4.76$)

Table 10

Teacher Ratings of the Program Impact on Students' Interest, Engagement, and Literacy Practices (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Igniting My Students' Curiosity To Read About DEI	17	4	5	4.76	0.44
Having Students Enjoy Reading DBP Books	17	4	5	4.94	0.24
Having Students Enjoy Learning From DBP Books	17	4	5	4.94	0.24
Having Students Talk About Stories They Read in DBP Books	17	3	5	4.76	0.56
Increasing Students' Love Of Reading	18	3	5	4.72	0.58
Engaging Students in Stories from DBP Books	17	4	5	4.94	0.24
Providing Books That Were Fun To Read Aloud	17	4	5	4.88	0.33
Helping Teachers Build Reading Habits Among Their Students	17	3	5	4.76	0.56
Helping Students Develop Literacy Skills	16	3	5	4.63	0.62
Encouraging Students To Ask Questions About Stories From DBP Books	17	4	5	4.82	0.39
Grand Mean				4.82	0.11

Perceived Program Effectiveness

Teachers were also presented with a series of statements about the effectiveness of the program (see Table 11) and asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (5) “Strongly Agree”. Overall teachers tended to agree that the program was effective (Grand $M = 4.57$, $SD = .16$, Range: 4.37 to 4.71), although there was some individual variability both across and within items. For example, teachers generally reported that they agreed that the program prepared them to incorporate diversity into their instruction ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .47$), with teachers’ scores ranging between *Agree* (4) to *Strongly Agree* (5). On average teachers agreed that the program enhanced their understanding of literacy development ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .96$); however, scores were more variable on this item compared to other items and ranged from *Disagree* (2) all the way to *Strongly Agree* (5).

Table 11

Teacher Ratings of the Program Impact on Professional Practice (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Widening My Understanding of Children's Literacy Development	16	2	5	4.37	0.96
Helping Me Connect with More of My Students	17	3	5	4.65	0.70
Helping Me Build A Culture Of Tolerance and Acceptance	16	3	5	4.63	0.62
Helping Me Engage My Students in Literacy Development Activities	16	3	5	4.69	0.60
Shaping My Teaching Practices	16	2	5	4.37	1.03
Preparing Me to Incorporate Diversity in My Instruction	17	4	5	4.71	0.47
Grand Mean				4.57	0.16

Diverse Books Project Collection: Alignment to the Populations Served

Teachers were asked the extent to which they were able to obtain books through the Diverse Books Project that represented the students they served in their classrooms. While 83% (n = 15) of teachers reported that the books reflected most (33%) or all (50%) of their students, 17% (n = 3) disagreed. For example, 11% of teachers reported that only some of their students were represented in the book offerings and 6% felt that none of their students were represented. In future work it will be important to identify what particular populations may be missing from the collection in order to increase representation of the local community context. We return to this issue in the discussion section.

Suggested Changes to Improve the Diverse Books Project

Teachers were given an open-ended prompt in which they were asked to provide any suggestions for changes that would help improve the Diverse Books Project. Of the 15 teachers who provided responses to the prompt, more than half (67%) reported that no changes were needed. Of the teachers (n = 5) who provided ideas for potential changes to the program, 10% of teachers suggested expanding the program to more schools:

“I have moved schools and no longer have access to the DBP [Diverse Books Project]. I wish it were open to more schools within the district”

Twenty percent of teachers recommended expanding the program to include additional grade levels:

“...I am so grateful for all of the opportunities, community building, and conversations as a result of these books. My only thinking is how do we make these stories more accessible for older kids who probably want to talk or broach these subjects too.”

Teachers also recommended expanding the book collection to include more offerings on specific aspects of diversity such as gender identity, different family structures, as well as book titles that depict more students with disabilities.

Support for Expanding the Diverse Books Project to More Public Schools

Teachers also received a prompt in which they were asked if they felt the program should be implemented in additional public schools. Teachers overwhelmingly supported the idea of expanding the Diverse Books Project into more schools. All 17 of the teachers who responded to this question felt the program should be implemented in more schools, with one teacher noting that the program should be expanded to more grade levels. Teachers' enthusiasm for the program was also noted in their written responses to this prompt. For example, teachers noted that the Diverse Books Project enabled them to ensure students in their classroom were represented in their classroom library:

“Yes.... Its a great resource and it has help me create a better library for my students, where they get to pictures of people who look like them.”

Teachers also mentioned the importance of the program in helping them to be more reflective about their own library collections:

“ABSOLUTELY! As I mentioned before, I thought that I had a diverse book selection before the project. However, DBP [the Diverse Books Project] made me examine my books much more extensively. Now I have access to books on display and to read in my room that represent every race and culture of the students in which I serve. Every classroom should have ample representation so that ALL students feel seen, heard, accepted, loved, and respected.”

While one teacher noted the benefits of the Diverse Book Project for enhancing teacher confidence as well as benefits for learners engaging in DEI conversations in early childhood:

“YES! It was a great experience for myself and my students, and the well thought out guidance/PD around using diverse books helped me feel confident in expressing even ideas I hadn't felt wholly comfortable with before. Making this available to more teachers would increase early conversations about differences, equity, humanity, curiosity.... there would be no detractors in my mind.”

Teachers’ Concluding Remarks

At the end of the survey teachers were asked if they would like to share any additional thoughts about the Diverse Books Project. Of the teachers who provided a written response (n = 8) teachers’ comments reflected a desire to resume the program:

“I miss it!”

and general appreciation for the resources and professional development that the program provided:

“I just want to say thank you for all the books I have [received] over the years. I am grateful for this project and what I have learned.”

“Thank you for the opportunity to grow my practice! I appreciate all the work you poured into it, and all the support I was offered over the course of the program.”

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 provided several insights into teachers’ book selection and how they utilized the program resources. Teachers identified several factors that influenced their book selection, including choosing book titles because of the diverse characters represented as well as the book aesthetics (i.e., illustrations). Only half of the teachers reported selecting book titles that

connected to core content areas. In future iterations of the program, program providers may consider providing additional support to help teachers integrate the books into the curriculum as this may increase the frequency of use of the diverse book collection.

Teachers were provided with YouTube videos of read-alouds of the books in the collection so teachers could preview the books before making their quarterly book selections; however, only half of the teachers reported watching the read-aloud videos. Of those teachers that used this provided resource, the majority of teachers reported that the videos were helpful. Program developers may consider raising awareness of this resource to participating teachers as a tool to help support teachers' book title selections.

Teachers tended to predominantly use the program books passively (i.e., having the books available for students to read on their own) and/or for read-alouds. It was relatively uncommon for teachers to create lesson plans around the books. This finding may be reflective of the fact that only half of the teachers selected books that related to the core curriculum. This finding may simply be a function of the original process in which the Diverse Books Collection was curated. Nevertheless, it may also point to a potential opportunity for program developers (and/or program veterans/alumni) to showcase different ways the books can be utilized within classrooms and to provide educators with sample lesson plans that incorporate the diverse book collection. This potential extension of the programming could provide teachers with additional avenues (and support) to expand how they leverage these resources beyond passive use.

Teachers tended to endorse statements reflecting a positive impact of the program, including general agreement that the Diverse Books Project increased their awareness and access to diverse books. Teachers also strongly agreed that the program helped students feel it was okay to be different, supported students in learning how to treat others respectfully, while

simultaneously deepening students' self-learning. Teachers also perceived a positive impact of the program on measures of student interest, as teachers reported that students enjoyed learning from the books and that the books promoted student engagement via student question asking.

Importantly, none of the areas surveyed pointed to any major programmatic concerns. Nevertheless, there were some areas with somewhat lower agreement ratings and/or more variability in responses. In future iterations of the program it could be possible to target these areas more explicitly. For example, additional resources could be provided to offer ideas for ways in which the diverse books could be used to help teachers address sociocultural issues in their classrooms. Similarly, additional iterations of the program could use the diverse books to help explicitly develop students' literacy skills.

General Discussion

The Diverse Books Project provided over 100 teachers in urban schools with critical resources that can help create more inclusive classrooms. Indeed, the program disseminated over 1,700 copies of books to teachers, substantively enhancing the diversity of classroom libraries. The present archival and retrospective studies provide an initial evaluation of the Diverse Books Project. Taken together, these two studies provide information about the factors that contributed to teachers' book title selections (Study 1 & 2), their intended and actual use of the provided books (Study 1 & 2) and teachers' retrospective evaluation of the program's perceived impact (Study 2). The findings from these studies indicate that the Diverse Books Project is perceived as a beneficial program for both teachers and students. The data did not reveal any major areas of concern. Nevertheless, here we detail potential recommendations for program revisions, as program implementation is an iterative process.

Recommendations for Program Modifications

Expansion

A central recommendation for the Diverse Books Project is to expand the book title offerings to ensure there is alignment between the book collection and the students being served by the program. In this way, the program can provide an opportunity for all students to feel that they are represented in their classroom libraries and help to establish that their classroom is an inclusive learning space. This program modification is important given that 17% of teachers reported that only some or none of their students were represented within the title offerings. Program developers will need to identify what particular aspects of diversity are missing from the book collection in order to ensure all children feel seen. Relatedly some teachers also suggested expanding the DEI topics covered by the collection. Some teachers already provided suggestions as to what additional topics or areas could be highlighted more in the collection, including diverse family structures, gender identity, and more books that depict students with disabilities. In addition to expanding topical coverage, participating teachers also suggested expanding the Diverse Books Project to include more schools as well as additional grade levels.

Additional Resources

Opportunities to provide educators with additional resources to help support their use of the Diverse Books Project programming and resources were also identified. For example, program developers could prepare sample activities and lesson plans that incorporate the diverse books. Additionally, explicitly connecting books from the diverse books collection to the core curriculum could provide educators with concrete examples of how the program materials can be incorporated into regular instruction. This modification may be particularly impactful given the

pressure many educators are under to cover course content. Integrating the books into the curriculum could ultimately help increase the frequency of use of the diverse books.

Many, but not all teachers utilized the provided resources to aid their book title selection. Program developers could consider whether increasing awareness of the read-aloud video recordings could increase teachers' usage of this resource or whether additional resources that support title selection could be more beneficial. For example, program developers could create a matrix they disseminate to teachers each quarter with the book title offerings in which the DEI topic, key book features, and connections to core content areas are noted for each title, as well as links to the read-aloud recordings.

Research Limitations and Recommendations

It is important to keep in mind that the Diverse Books Project was not developed as a research project but rather as a service project, and as such there are severe limitations that the research team faced when trying to evaluate the program. These limitations included porous record keeping, missing archival data, small sample (Study 2), and exclusive reliance on self-report data (which has known limitations). Moreover, much of the self-report data is retrospective, which amplifies concerns regarding the accuracy of participants' memories. The most egregious omission is that there are no direct measures of how teachers used the books nor of the impact of the program on either teachers or students as pre/post measures were never administered. These omissions should be included in any future program implementation and evaluation of the Diverse Books Project.

The Diverse Books Project was positively received by teachers. Given the program's potential, coupled with the relative ease with which the program can be implemented and scaled, the research team contends that the Diverse Books Project is a program that is worthwhile to

continue as it is one way to support teachers and students by increasing representation and inclusivity in public school classrooms.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors are affiliated with the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities. However, the authors were not involved in the design of the programs.

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