

# OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES: TEACHING WITH MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



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“THE FEAR is real,” asserts Mae (all names and schools are pseudonyms), a 1st-grade teacher at Redcrest Elementary, a school in a small, rural, conservative community. Mae describes the anxiety she and her colleagues face when selecting books to use in their lessons or share in their classroom library. Many educators in today’s classrooms are well versed in Rudine Sims Bishop’s “windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors” metaphor, which asserts that children who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) need more “mirror” books that accurately and authentically represent them, while white children need more “window” books that afford them the opportunity to see cultures and experiences other than their own (Bishop, 1990).

In today’s political climate, there is a rise of conservative activism opposing social justice and equity work that targets schools and teachers, making the work of teaching with multicultural literature especially challenging for educators. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of elementary teachers in rural, conservative communities as they participate in a voluntary, yearlong professional development project focused on “Mirror and Window” books. We sought to understand the obstacles and barriers—as well as the opportunities and benefits—of using multicultural children’s literature, and to describe the experiences of educators in rural, conservative communities committed to this crucial work.

## Power of Multicultural Children’s Literature

This study focused on multicultural children’s literature be-

cause of the great potential it presents for impactful equity work. The term “multicultural literature” is used throughout this article and is defined by Gates & Mark (2010) as “a body of literature that spans all literary genres but generally focuses on primary characters who are members of underrepresented groups whose racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, or culture historically has been marginalized or misrepresented by the dominant culture” (p. 9).”

Children’s literature authors (Alexander, 2016; Russo, 2016; Myers, C., 2014; Myers, W. D., 2014) and scholars (Bishop, 1990; Gates & Mark, 2010; Ghiso, et. al., 2012; Gilton, 2020; Larrick, 1965; Thomas, 2016) argue that it is critical for young readers of all racial identities to read children’s books created by authors and illustrators who identify as BIPOC and that feature BIPOC characters and experiences. Researchers have found that multicultural children’s literature is a powerful tool to foster equity and inclusion by humanizing others and inspiring children to dream of and create a more just and equitable world (Bishop, 1993; Thomas, 2016). In communities serving predominantly white students, teaching with diverse books takes on special importance because it holds the potential to challenge readers’ misperceptions, assumptions, and misunderstandings of other cultures (Ketter & Lewis, 2001), which in turn fosters positive attitudes and the humanization of others with whom they do not share a cultural identity (Mongillo & Holland, 2016; Paris & Winn, 2013).

### Challenges and Obstacles

Educators face many potential challenges and obstacles to fully integrating multicultural books into their teaching. While the lack of books that accurately and authentically depict the lived experiences of marginalized racial and ethnic groups is one well-documented challenge (CCBC, n.d.; Larrick, 1965; Bishop, 1993), many others exist. In some schools and communities, there is a perception that diverse books need not be a priority (DeLap & Simeon, 2017), or need only be brought into the classroom for holidays, rather than being fully integrated into the curriculum (Mongillo & Holland, 2017). Additionally, the limitations of the cultural lenses of white teachers and students potentially complicate the use of multicultural books. DeLap & Simeon (2017) assert, “white readers are often unaware of the limitations of the cultural lens they bring to their evaluation of diverse books, resulting in negative judgments they believe are objective but which prevent them from appreciating and promoting these titles” (p. 28). Further, in predominantly white communities teachers fear their text choices may appear “political,” preferring to be viewed as “neutral” (Ketter & Lewis, 2001, p. 178).

Importantly, simply placing multicultural literature in classrooms is insufficient. Efforts to merely expose white students to diversity functionally “skirt the sensitive and hard issues related to the historical and global implications related to racism and prejudice” (Gates & Mark, 2010, p. 13). Prompting students to make connections to characters in multicultural books over universal experiences misses a valuable opportunity to leverage the power of books to examine systemic inequities (Ketter & Lewis, 2001). Cai (2008) describes the tendency of students from the mainstream culture to “read egocentrically,” forming assumptions and judgments about a culture depicted in a diverse book based on their own mainstream cultural lens (p. 212). Bringing multicultural books into classrooms in predominantly white communities and sharing them with students in the absence of discussion or engagement with issues of equity and justice misses or at least underutilizes the potential of books to build a more equitable world.

### Impact of Teachers

Teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and actions are arguably the most significant factor in shaping students’ experiences with and responses to multicultural books (Yokota, 1993). Many studies have documented the importance of using multicultural books to teach for equity as early as possible, rather than de-

laying these critical experiences until they reach middle or high school (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; D’Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Mongillo & Holland, 2016). Teachers’ willingness to develop students’ awareness of racism and prejudice through teaching with multicultural books is necessary for creating social change by helping students grow into critical readers with a commitment to making the world more equitable (Cai, 2008; Gates & Mark, 2010; Thomas, 2016). To accomplish this, teachers should select books that “include diverse lives and perspectives—books that are affirming, books that help us question, and books that evoke discomfort and self-reflexivity” (Thomas, 2016, p. 121). The potential power of teaching with multicultural books to build towards a more equitable and just world is well-established in decades of research; however, little is known about the impact of the current socio-political climate on teachers’ motivation, experiences, and challenges in this work.

### The Windows to the World Project

As teacher educators at a college in a small, rural conservative community, we see firsthand the social and political challenges faced by educators who are committed to anti-bias, anti-racist teaching. We learn of troubling stories from schools in surrounding communities, for example: A librarian forced by parent complaints to take down a Black History Month display; principals fielding angry calls from community members about words like “equity” or “diversity” in materials sent home; BIPOC students experiencing bullying and harassment; and, numerous challenges to literature about racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice (e.g., Berg, 2022; Judd, 2022; Shockman, 2023).

The Windows to the World Literature Project (W2W) was developed to support educators who face these obstacles; teachers in schools where the majority of students see their white identities and white culture reflected in the books they encounter in and out of school. The overarching goal of the W2W project was to support educators as they disrupted racism and sought to develop their students’ empathy for people with other cultural identities. To accomplish this goal, we recruited a cohort of elementary educators from rural, predominantly white schools to receive a collection of grade-appropriate, multicultural children’s literature and participate in a yearlong professional development series of four workshops. The workshops offered professional learning opportunities that prepared teachers to critically examine children’s literature and

to select books that accurately and authentically represent diverse cultures. Participants also collaborated to plan lessons that helped students make connections between their own lives and the lives of characters in the books. W2W provided ongoing support for teachers responding to parental and community questions and concerns related to using the selected texts in the classroom. Each workshop included time for teachers to share lessons they had implemented and student work samples generated from books received through Windows to the World.

We organized our four workshops around distinct themes. For each theme, we curated the book collection each teacher received (See Appendix I for book titles). The first workshop was a general introduction to multicultural literature and “windows and mirrors.” We watched a video of Rudine Sims Bishop (Reading Rockets, 2015) explaining her windows and mirrors metaphor, examined historical trends in publishing data from the Children’s Cooperative Book Center (n.d.) at UW-Madison, and planned a read-aloud with one of the new books using questions taken from *Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts* (Teaching Tolerance, 2015).

The second workshop centered on books by Indigenous authors and illustrators and explored the challenges of finding books that accurately and authentically represent Indigenous cultures. We led participants in using criteria derived from Reese (2019), and compared these to the books they received by Indigenous authors. Numerous examples of problematic and exemplary texts can be found on Reese’s blog, *American Indians in Children’s Literature*. Participants then collaborated to plan a read-aloud lesson with one of their new books by an Indigenous author.

The third workshop focused on the genre of poetry. All teachers received copies of *Imagine* (Herrera, 2018) and *Change sings: A children’s anthem* (Gorman, 2021), and several additional poetry books by BIPOC poets. Participants discussed the article, “Interrogating Classroom Libraries: From Diversity to Responsiveness and Inclusion” (Johnson, 2022), and watched a video of poet Nikki Grimes (Reading Rockets, n.d.) discussing how to approach teaching poetry. Teachers worked in grade-alike groups and developed poetry lessons using their new books to implement in their classrooms.

During the final workshop participants received books that featured BIPOC children in nature, inspired by the article, “Where is the Black *Blueberries for Sal?*” (Fetters, 2019), as well as some of our favorite multicultural titles published in recent years. We sought to conclude the year of workshops

with opportunities for teachers to practice an essential skill of teaching with multicultural books: evaluating books for accuracy and authenticity. We used the red (not recommended), yellow (recommended with caveat), and green (recommended) ratings from the website, Social Justice Books (2017). Using questions drawn from “Empowering Educators: A Guidebook on Racism and Racism” (Williams, 2020), teachers critically examined a set of three books through an anti-bias, anti-racist lens to determine which book matched each of the three ratings (red, yellow, green). They compared their analysis to what was written about each book on the Social Justice Books website and reflected on how to select accurate and authentic multicultural literature for their classrooms in the future. Resources used during the workshops and shared with participants are listed in Appendix II.

### Context

Teachers who participated in the W2W program worked in school districts in rural communities in the upper Midwest that are politically conservative, predominantly white, and Christian. Teachers elected to participate in the project and did not receive compensation beyond the book collection and continuing education units (CEUS). In 2022-2023, 20 elementary teachers and librarians participated.

We believe it is important to acknowledge our own racial identities and the positioning of whiteness in this work. We are white teacher educators working with predominantly white future teachers and school districts, and researching challenges and opportunities faced by white teachers. We see the overt resistance to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives in the communities with whom we work. We believe that teachers having access to and using multicultural literature in their teaching is critical and complex. Given the well-documented power of multicultural books, we sought to study the unique challenges teachers face and how they might overcome these to successfully teach with books that reflect the multicultural nature of the world, rather than the demographics of their school communities.

### Methodology

We used case study methodologies to collect and analyze qualitative data to illuminate the perspectives of teachers, describe their instructional practices, and explore their reflective processing of teaching experiences (Barone, 2011; Yin, 1994), and to answer the following research questions:

1. What motivates elementary teachers working in predominantly white, rural communities to increase their use of multicultural children’s literature in instruction? What opportunities or benefits do they hope to experience? What challenges or obstacles do they anticipate encountering?
2. What do teaching and learning look like in predominantly white, rural elementary classrooms when teachers use multicultural children’s literature? What opportunities and obstacles are encountered and how do students respond to multicultural children’s literature?
3. Through reflection, how do teachers describe their experience? Which aspects of their professional learning experience did they identify as most impactful?

The study examined the case of the 2022-23 W2W cohort of elementary teachers. All cohort members were invited to voluntarily participate in a research study by completing pre- and post-project surveys and joining focus groups.

**Participants, Data Sources, and Analysis**

The pre-survey posed questions about participants’ motivation to be a part of the project and their perceptions about opportunities and anticipated challenges in using multi-

cultural books in their classrooms. The post-survey asked participants to reflect on their experiences participating in W2W, the impact and efficacy of using multicultural books, the challenges faced, and the impact of the experience on their future teaching. Ten cohort members completed the pre-survey, all respondents self-identified as white, and their years of teaching experience ranged from 3 to 28. Five cohort members completed the post-survey, all respondents self-identified as white, and their years of teaching experience ranged from 3 to 28. All cohort members were invited to participate in the focus groups (Greenbaum, 1998; Vaughn et al., 1996). Discussion prompts centered on participants’ perceived successes, obstacles encountered in using multicultural literature in the specific context of their respective schools, and the impact of their experiences. Five teachers from 5 different school districts elected to participate in the focus groups. All focus group participants identified as white and had between 3 and 18 years of teaching experience. The focus group participants were: Mae, a first grade teacher from Redcrest Elementary (PK-5); Emily, a first grade teacher from Meadowvale Community School (PK-6); Samantha, a fourth grade teacher from Crestwood Lane Elementary (4-5); Jessica, a fifth and sixth grade teach-

**Table 1**  
**DISTRICT ENROLLMENT AND RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS**

PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICT ENROLLMENT BY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP									
SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL DISTRICT ENROLLMENT	AMERICAN INDIAN	ASIAN	BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	HISPANIC/LATINO	NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER	OTHER INDIGENOUS PEOPLES	WHITE	TWO OR MORE RACES
Redcrest	1,788	0.8%	0.2%	0.6%	2.9%	0.0%	0.1%	93.5%	2.0%
Meadowvale	1,082	0.3%	0.2%	0.5%	0.9%	0.1%	0.3%	96.1%	1.7%
Crestwood	2,765	0.1%	0.9%	1.2%	11.8%	0.1%	0.0%	82.4%	3.5%
Riverview	331	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	97.3%	0.3%
Sunflower Hills	2049	0.6%	0.4%	0.3%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	91.8%	3.9%

er from Riverview School (K-8); and Olivia, a sixth grade teacher from Sunflower Hills Middle School (6-8). Enrollment and racial demographics for each school district may be found in Table 1 and the pre and post surveys and focus group questions are available in Appendices III and IV.

Data coding was used throughout the study with deductive coding categories derived from a review of literature on teaching with diverse books (e.g., fear of community perception of text choices (Ketter & Lewis, 2001)), and findings from a pilot study of the program conducted during the 2021-2022 school year (e.g., using diverse books as a professional responsibility). Additional coding categories were identified inductively during the analysis of survey and focus group data, specifically, descriptive, interpretive, and pattern codes. Coding categories were used to identify properties and dimensions of concepts and axial coding was applied to relate concepts to each other (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Dillon, 2013; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Findings

### Teacher's Motivation to Use Multicultural Books

The first research question explored factors motivating teachers to join the W2W project, opportunities and benefits they anticipated, and challenges and obstacles they were concerned about encountering.

#### *Professional Responsibility*

Analysis of data from the pre-survey and the focus groups indicated that participants overwhelmingly were motivated to join the W2W project out of a sense of professional responsibility. Survey responses named professional benefits including satisfying cultural competency relicensure requirements, staying current on publications and teaching practices, improving knowledge of culturally accurate books, and growing their classroom collection of multicultural books.

Both pre-survey and focus group data demonstrated that the majority of respondents were driven by what they desired and envisioned for their students. One pre-survey respondent recounted an experience in the community in which she lives and works, how she related that to her students, and how this experience led to her participation in W2W:

I...saw one of my neighbors has a car window decal that manages to be both racist and misogynistic. There are children in that home and (they) see that daily. What can I do to offer other options

for love and inclusion? Participating in this program, I figure, is one (Pre-survey, 2022).

Focus group participants believed that cohort members shared a common commitment to challenging prejudice and injustice through the work they do in their classrooms and a similar vision for their students' future. Mae articulated this sentiment, with others nodding in agreement with her statement:

"I think it's a battle worth fighting because children will never learn what the world is around them if they don't have people who can teach it with fidelity and teach it accurately...I think W2W is a magnet for those people, and it brings them together and it allows them to collaborate and we're stronger together. So if we have a group of people who are willing to fight this fight...slowly the pendulum will shift...and the children that we impact and teach to know better and do better will turn around and do the same thing for the generation after them and we'll slowly start to see the ripple effects. But someone has to start it, so I think it starts here."

Although many anticipated benefits were evidenced in data analysis, the most significant finding was that teachers were driven to participate in W2W by a sense of professional responsibility to provide their students with opportunities to experience the multicultural nature of the world through literature, and their desire to connect, share, and collaborate with other educators who share their professional goals.

#### *Fear of Book Challenges*

Teachers' anticipated obstacles were overwhelmingly related to the possibility of their book choices being challenged. While pre-survey respondents anticipated criticisms of their use of diverse books from community members, school administration, parents, or even students, focus group participants were especially concerned about challenges from students' parents. Mae described the constant fear she and her school colleagues experience of parents being offended by their book choices. She stated, "It haunts the teachers a little bit." Despite her belief that parents should not be offended by multicultural literature, she realized that there was a possibility that they may complain about her book choices if she read the books she received from W2W to students. In the same focus group, a fifth-grade teacher shared that some of her students "take on their parents' feelings" about the use of multicultural books

and she worried that students might complain about the use of multicultural books when they go home.

Another challenge identified in focus groups was the resistance of their school colleagues to bringing multicultural books into their classrooms because of the potential for book challenges. Emily described an experience at her school's Scholastic Book Fair where some colleagues chose not to pick multicultural books because they believed doing so would upset parents. Mae shared that after she read *We are water protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020)—which uses the image of a black snake to symbolize the Dakota Access Pipeline and takes a clear political stance to protect and safeguard the Earth's water—she offered to lend the book to her grade-level colleague because her students had enjoyed it. She recounted her colleague's response, “No, I'm not really comfortable reading that to the class because I don't know how parents will respond, you know, if they're for that particular topic or against it...I don't really want to stir that pot.” The teachers who elected to participate in the W2W program did so despite the challenges they anticipated from their school communities.

### Teaching with Multicultural Literature in Practice

The second research question examined what learning looked like when teachers used multicultural children's literature, their perspectives on the opportunities and obstacles they experienced, and their views on how students responded to the books. Data from the post-survey and focus groups were analyzed to answer these research questions.

#### Learning Opportunities

Members of the W2W cohort shared many instructional strategies they implemented in their classrooms to use the books they received through W2W. Teachers described instructional practices including reading the books out loud and discussing them with students; using them as “Mentor Texts” in writing instruction; and, introducing and generating interest in the new books through “First Chapter Fridays,” where the teacher reads the first chapter of a novel before making it available to students. W2W participants offered additional plans and strategies to increase students' experience and engagement with multicultural literature. During a focus group, Emily shared an idea she got from another teacher during a W2W workshop: Implement a 100-book challenge in the classroom, during which the teacher reads a new multicultural children's book every day, prints a color copy of the cover, and

creates a display on the classroom wall of the books that were read. Mae planned to implement the 100 book challenge and to integrate her W2W books into content-area lessons as often as possible. She gave examples of using the book, *Ten ways to hear snow* (Camper, 2020) during a science unit on weather, and *We are water protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020) for an Earth Day unit.

Several W2W teachers who work with 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-grade students implemented a lesson they planned together during the poetry-themed workshop using the illustrated poem *Imagine* (Herrera, 2018). Many teachers read the poem to students and some also shared the video of Herrera reading the poem aloud. Teachers described using *Imagine* as a mentor text, asking students to choose their own word and write and illustrate a poem about their future aspirations. W2W teachers brought student work samples from this assignment and engaged in rich discussion of how their students emulated the poetry of Juan Felipe Herrera to express their own hopes for their futures.

During the focus groups, teachers elaborated on what teaching and learning looked like in their classrooms when they used multicultural books, describing students making independent connections between the books and other content areas. Samantha described how her students connected the ideas of freedom and choice explored in a Langston Hughes poem to what they were learning in social studies. Similarly, her students applied prior learning about civil rights and segregation when listening to the book *Stella by starlight* (Draper, 2015), a historical fiction middle-grade novel set in the Jim Crow South, and were able to more deeply understand the injustices portrayed.

Focus group participants emphasized the power of multicultural books to engage students in discussion of critical topics. Emily described her experiences sharing books with students as “a great opportunity for me to share the books, and have a great discussion about topics, what they thought, just connections that they have, a lot of windows, you know, into somebody else's family, into somebody else's world.”

Mae shared an illustrative experience that occurred when she read the book *All are welcome here* (Penfold, 2018), and her students noticed children in the illustrations wearing hijabs.

My students were particularly interested in the characters of that book that were wearing a hijab... why that was being worn and what it meant and if they could wear one too and where do you get them and who makes them. We had a whole conversation about it.

Similarly, Olivia discussed a reading conference she shared with a student that revealed how the book *Clean getaway* (Stone, 2020) impacted the student:

I had a student in a reader's conference, or a reading conference, talk about how shocked they were from reading *Clean Getaway*, that it was unsafe for his, I forget the character's name, but his grandparents to travel being an interracial marriage, and that it was unsafe in places in our country for them to be. And the student was just shocked by that. And I think it was life-changing for that student to read that, because they think that is so far off in the past. It's, you know, relatively recent history, unfortunately, in our country. So that made a change or made an impact on this kid.

Using diverse books promoted curiosity about other cultures in the students of W2W teachers. Additionally, some of the books they shared created opportunities for their students to develop an understanding of historical and contemporary injustices.

#### *Personal Fears*

Post-survey respondents named obstacles they encountered, such as the challenge of reading multilingual books in a monolingual classroom; personal discomfort with book topics or illustrations (i.e., illustration of breast-feeding); and, overall dislike of a book. Emily shared that she chose not to place *The undefeated* (Alexander, 2019)—an illustrated poem about Black history in the United States—on her shelf. She described her thought process in making this decision:

I just felt like Black Lives Matter is still a very hot topic, and I knew that...probably my students would find it, and probably, it would cause concern, you know. So that was one I did not put, but the rest of them I did. But that was one that, you know, when I read it, I was like, yeah, I just feel like this might be something that students would pick out and be very concerned. Because that was a very controversial concept.

During the final focus group, Mae summarized a significant challenge to teaching with diverse books experienced by many educators in predominantly white rural communities, "I think the biggest challenge was getting over the mental block that sometimes it feels like everybody's against having diverse literature in the classroom."

#### *No Book Challenges*

Although the majority of study participants shared their fears and concerns about book challenges and resistance from community and family members and students, none of the educators faced book challenges during the year of the study.

During the second focus group, Mae described the difference between how she anticipated her students may respond to diverse books and what happened during the school year:

And I think having, truly having those books as windows was a lot more, I don't know, it was just it was much better received by my students than I was anticipating. Especially because I work in a very small town, a very White Christian community. I just had this hunch I was like, oh my gosh, one of my kids is gonna say something smart, and it's gonna cause a ruckus. But it was actually, it was kind of fun to watch them just soak it up, and appreciate...yeah, I was pleasantly surprised by that.

Emily described a similar experience with her worries about possible responses from parents:

I was very nervous sharing. We have, in our community, we have a group of people who are trying to start a different school like [a] private school, because of different things in our district that they oppose. And so I was very nervous, but I never, I was very supported by parents, and, like, administration.

Although teachers did not encounter book challenges, all participants were very clear during the focus groups that they did not "draw attention" to their participation in the W2W project and their use of diverse books. Participants agreed that they were committed to using diverse literature in their classrooms, but they did not overtly publicize this; rather, they sought to "fly under the radar" and "not broadcast" the fact. Emily shared, "I was quiet about it. I just didn't announce it to my parents that I did this program. I just gave the kids the books." Similarly, Samantha stated, "I don't necessarily send out those titles to my parents. So I thought it was a good book, so I read it." This practice of "not hiding, but not broadcasting" their use of diverse books was used by all focus group participants across five different school districts.

### **Experiences and Reflections**

Finally, we asked participants to reflect upon and describe their experiences in the W2W Project. In the final research

question, we sought to learn which aspects of their professional learning experience they identified as most impactful.

### A Network of Support

Teachers in the W2W program expressed that they greatly valued the opportunity to connect and collaborate with educators from other schools and communities who share their commitment to teaching with multicultural literature. All post-survey respondents indicated that working with other educators in the W2W program was valuable to their professional development and growth, with some describing it as “invaluable.” For some teachers, the opportunity to connect with like-minded colleagues was especially valuable as they did not have that opportunity in their school communities. One survey respondent shared, “I appreciated the collaboration opportunities that were given during the Windows to the World cohort. Being from a very conservative school community I would be weary of having some of the same conversations with my colleagues.” Another respondent stated, “It made the experience so much more comforting knowing that other people are having similar experiences to what I am having in my school.”

Focus group participants elaborated on the value of connection and collaboration with other educators. Mae described the experience as “validating,” noting that across different grade levels and different school districts, W2W cohort members were encountering similar challenges to this work. She observed, “They were having the same struggles that our district is with inclusion and representation and accuracy in our literature.” Jessica described the W2W cohort as a “safe space” to discuss the fears, worries, and challenges of being a teacher committed to using multicultural books in communities that are resistant:

Understanding that we were not the only school that was experiencing it, and feeling like we could talk about it in that space, and it was a safe space to talk about it. And just know that other schools are experiencing that same thing ... have some of those fears or kind of pushbacks and setbacks that might come forward with, you know, pushing the diverse literature in our classrooms.

Olivia experienced an emotional response when discussing the challenges of being a teacher today and how being part of a cohort made her feel less alone:

I also found a lot of support; I was not in a good place. I think that was early in this school year, when there were a lot of stories in the news, locally ... teachers that were struggling with that... I just felt like...just knowing that we weren't alone, and it kind of gave me a little bit more strength to keep fighting the fight. Because I was kind of wondering, where (are) we headed? You know, kind of challenging or questioning whether or not teaching is a profession that I want to continue. It's just a really challenging time.

She shared that the work of teaching for social justice with multicultural books was very important to her. Connecting with other educators with this commitment helped her keep going in a discouraging and challenging time.

Focus groups participants also discussed the value of working with educators who were not a part of their school grade-level team, sharing that often their school colleagues were not interested or willing to engage in this work. Emily stated:

...sometimes you were the only one from your school. And so if you weren't getting that support from your school, from your team, from wherever it was nice to come together with some, you know, felt like we're on the same path. You know, same goals at the end. And so it was nice to feel that support, where if you went back to your school, maybe you wouldn't have had anybody else to support you...people [were] saying, “Oh, good luck. I'm not going to take that challenge. Good luck.”

Samantha shared that before W2W she felt “stuck a little bit in a rut” in her teaching. She compared participating in the W2W program to getting a “new fire” to her approach to planning and teaching. She stated, “Working with other educators outside of my team helped me to kind of get that fire back that I needed again.” Sharing teaching ideas, lesson plans, and other instructional resources were also named as valuable aspects of the experience of the W2W cohort model.

### Discussion

Key findings of this case study offer insight into teachers' motivations to increase their use of multicultural children's literature, barriers they anticipated and encountered, the impact on teaching and learning, and the professional development they found to be valuable in this work. Teachers were motivated

to increase their use of inclusive books in their teaching by a sense of professional responsibility and personal commitment. Study participants engaged in this work despite fears and anxiety about challenges to book choices from students' families and community members. When teachers used inclusive literature in their classrooms they reported that their students were curious, engaged, and inquisitive. Teachers' personal preferences or dislike of certain titles, and fear about the political nature of this work were challenges they encountered. Study participants reported that they did not experience any family or community challenges to their book choices, although they did not "broadcast" their use of multicultural literature within their communities and schools. Teachers shared that the cohort model provided vital collegial support, allowing them to feel less alone and isolated in facing the challenges of teaching with multicultural literature in resistant communities.

As previous studies have demonstrated, the findings indicate that study participants' use of multicultural literature had a positive impact on their students, including reported increases in student curiosity about other cultures and others' lived experiences and positive attitudes towards cultures to which they do not belong (Mongillo & Holland, 2016). Teachers working with older elementary students (4th-6th grade) shared that reading specific titles created opportunities for their students to learn about historical injustices. However, further extensive discussion and exploration of contemporary racism, prejudice, and systemic inequity were not reported by participants. While exposure to diverse cultures and prompts to make personal connections to characters in multicultural books is valuable, research suggests that in the absence of a critical stance, opportunities to realize the potential of children's literature as a catalyst for changing individual beliefs and envisioning an equitable future world are missed (Cai, 2008; Gates & Mark; Ketter & Lewis, 2001). Although there were missed opportunities to challenge students to think more critically about injustice and inequity, the choice to participate in the W2W program and the commitment to using multicultural literature in their teaching positioned the W2W teachers as unique among their colleagues.

Participants reported that while colleagues in their school buildings strongly desired that their text choices not be perceived as political, the W2W participants themselves did not conceptualize their use of multicultural books as political (Ketter & Lewis, 2000); rather, their focus was on concepts of diversity, multiculturalism, and presenting a view of the world that

differed from the small, culturally homogeneous communities in which their students live. Emily's comments that Black Lives Matter was "too controversial" in her community, which led to the decision to not share *The undefeated* (Alexander, 2019) with students exemplify the desire to avoid the appearance of being "political" in her choice of text. Evidence suggests that although participants did not specifically name "neutrality" as a goal in text selection, and were willing to take what they perceived to be risks in their text selection, the political climate in their communities did shape their level of comfort and willingness to include multicultural texts in their classrooms.

Despite the ongoing challenges inherent in this work, such as anxiety about community challenges; feeling isolated as the sole teacher in a school committed to using multicultural books; and, barriers to assuming a more critical or political approach to this work, the W2W teachers maintained their beliefs in the importance, value, and impact of multicultural literature, and their commitment to this work. As elementary educators, their commitment is especially critical. Their young students are growing up in communities that are predominately white, conservative, and Christian. Opportunities to learn about race, culture, diversity, and equity can be very impactful when children are young (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008; D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Mongillo & Holland, 2016). Teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and actions shape the impact of multicultural books in the classroom (Yokota, 1993). These factors make the efforts of the W2W teachers critical within their communities. The work they engage in may serve as a starting point to move towards a critical reading stance for both the teachers themselves and their young students.

### Implications and Limitations

The findings of this case study suggest that the opportunity to engage with colleagues in other school districts is especially valuable. Teachers felt isolated and in some cases overwhelmed by community hostility towards diversity, equity, and inclusion work in schools. Connecting with fellow educators from other school districts reduced the feeling of isolation. Teachers found power and inspiration from being among a group of educators with shared beliefs and commitments. The cohort model and collegial relationships formed allowed teachers to overcome the fear of community challenges and to fully engage in this work.

As a case study, the findings of this work are not generalizable to other contexts and populations. However, many

teachers in demographically similar communities share a sense of professional responsibility to use multicultural books in their teaching, as well as a fear of community challenges and resistance. The findings of the study suggest that ongoing collaboration with like-minded educators greatly aided these efforts. Additionally, although teachers feared book challenges, none of the study participants reported experiencing challenges to their use of multicultural texts. Thus, a limitation of this study is that it does not include teachers' experiences responding to book challenges.

### Conclusion

In the years since the W2W project began this work has become even more urgent. In 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom reported the highest number of books challenged ever; books "representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47% of those targeted in censorship attempts" (American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2023). Anti-immigrant rhetoric has risen to unprecedented levels in the United States (Garsd, 2023). Attempts to silence BIPOC authors converge with xenophobic rhetoric in the public sphere, effectively making the work of using multicultural books in an elementary classroom even more challenging and potentially risky. This work requires teachers to be courageous in their efforts to plan meaningful learning opportunities for students.

As it becomes more challenging and risky to engage in this work, the collegial relationships and community offered in the W2W workshops are imperative. In predominantly white, rural communities many educators choose not to intentionally seek accurate and authentic multicultural literature to use in their classrooms and share with their students. Teachers like those who elect to participate in W2W view using multicultural literature and providing these essential learning opportunities to their students as a professional responsibility. This work commences with including accurate and authentic multicultural literature in classroom libraries and lessons. With dedication, time, and collegial support from a community of like-minded educators and ongoing professional learning opportunities, educators may move from merely including multicultural books in their teaching, to assuming a critical stance to disrupt prejudice and cultural bias, even as lone voices in school communities that resist this work. •

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**Appendix I**  
**WINDOWS TO THE WORLD BOOK LIST**

GRADE LEVEL	WINDOWS & MIRRORS	INDIGENOUS AUTHORS & ILLUSTRATORS	POETRY	NATURAL WORLD
Kindergarten-1st Grade	<p><i>El Cucuy is Scared Too</i> by Donna Barba Higuera, illustrated by Juliana Perdomo</p> <p><i>The Day You Begin</i> by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafael Lopez</p> <p><i>Dreamers</i> by Yuyi Morales</p> <p><i>Drawn Together</i> by Minh Le, illustrated by Dan Santat</p> <p><i>Astro Girl</i> by Ken Wilson</p> <p><i>Jabari Jumps</i> by Gaia Cornwall</p>	<p><i>Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story</i> by Kevin Noble Maillard</p> <p><i>Berry Song</i> by Michaela Goade</p> <p><i>We Are Water Protectors</i> by Carole Lindstrom, illustrated by Michaela Goade</p> <p><i>Powwow Day</i> by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Madelyn Goodnight</p> <p><i>Bow Wow Pow Wow</i> by Brenda J. Child, illustrated by Jonathan Thunder</p> <p><i>Johnny's Pheasant</i> by Cheryl Minnema, illustrated by Julie Flett</p>	<p><i>What I Am</i> by Divya Srinivasan</p> <p><i>Nigel and the Moon</i> by Antwan Eady, illustrated by Gracey Zhang</p> <p><i>A Pocket Full of Poems</i> by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Javaka Steptoe</p> <p><i>Imagine</i> by Juan Felipe Herrera, illustrated by Lauren Castillo</p> <p><i>Change Sings</i> by Amanda Gorman, illustrated by Loren Long</p>	<p><i>From the Tops of the Trees</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Rachel Wada</p> <p><i>Map into the World</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Seo Kim</p> <p><i>Where's Rodney?</i> by Cameron Bogan, illustrated by Floyd Cooper</p> <p><i>Zonia's Rain Forest</i> by Juana Martinez-Neal, illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal</p> <p><i>Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood</i> by Tony Hillery, illustrated by Jessie Hartland</p> <p><i>Ten Ways to Hear Snow</i> by Cathy Camper, illustrated by Kenard Pak</p> <p><i>Me and the Boss</i> by Michelle Edwards, illustrated by April Harrison</p> <p><i>Hello, Mandarin Duck</i> by Bao Phi, illustrated by Dion MBD</p> <p><i>Thank You Omu</i> by Oge Mora</p> <p><i>All Are Welcome Here</i> by Alexandra Penfold, illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman</p> <p><i>The Proudest Blue</i> by Ibtiyah Muhammad, S.K. Ali, Illustrated by Hatem Aly</p>
2nd and 3rd Grade	<p><i>Buzzing With Questions</i> by Janice N. Harrington</p> <p><i>Kiyoshi's Walk</i> by Mark Karlins, illustrated by Nicole Wong</p> <p><i>Watercress</i> by Andrea Wang, illustrated by Jason Chin</p> <p><i>The Undeclared</i> by Kwame Alexander, illustrated by Kadir Nelson</p> <p><i>Just Ask</i> by Sonia Sotomayor, illustrated by Rafael Lopez</p>	<p><i>Finding My Dance</i> by Ria Thundercloud, illustrated by Kalila J. Fuller</p> <p><i>We Are Still Here</i> by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Frane Lessac</p> <p><i>We Are Water Protectors</i> by Carole Lindstrom, illustrated by Michaela Goade</p> <p><i>Jingle Dancer</i> by Cynthia Leitich Smith, illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright, Ying-Hwa Hu</p>	<p><i>Exquisite: The Poetry and Life of Gwendolyn Brooks</i> by Suzanne Slade, illustrated by Cozbi A. Cabrera</p> <p><i>A Pocket Full of Poems</i> by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Javaka Steptoe</p> <p><i>Imagine</i> by Juan Felipe Herrera, illustrated by Lauren Castillo</p> <p><i>Change Sings</i> by Amanda Gorman, illustrated by Loren Long</p>	<p><i>From the Tops of the Trees</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Rachel Wada</p> <p><i>Map into the World</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Seo Kim</p> <p><i>Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood</i> by Tony Hillery, illustrated by Jessie Hartland</p> <p><i>Ten Ways to Hear Snow</i> by Cathy Camper, illustrated by Kenard Pak</p>

## Appendix I cont.

## WINDOWS TO THE WORLD BOOK LIST

GRADE LEVEL	WINDOWS & MIRRORS	INDIGENOUS AUTHORS & ILLUSTRATORS	POETRY	NATURAL WORLD
2nd and 3rd Grade cont.	<i>Yasmin in Charge</i> by Saadia Faruqi, illustrated by Hatem Aly	<i>Pow Wow Day</i> by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Madelyn Goodnight  <i>Jo Jo Makoons</i> by Dawn Quigley, illustrated by Tara Audibert  <i>When We Were Alone</i> by David Robertson, illustrated by Julie Flett	<i>The Poetry of US: More than 200 poems that celebrate the people, places, and passions of the United States</i> by J. Patrick Lewis	<i>Redwoods</i> by Jason Chin  <i>Blue: A History of the Color as Deep as the Sea and as Wide as the Sky</i> by Nana Eku Brew-Hammond, illustrated by Daniel Minter  <i>Frida Kahlo and her Animalitos</i> by Monica Brown  <i>Yasmin the Fashionista</i> by Saadia Faruqi, illustrated by Hatem Aly  <i>Me and the Boss</i> by Michelle Edwards, illustrated by April Harrison  <i>Dreamers</i> by Yuyi Morales  <i>Hello, Mandarin Duck</i> by Bao Phi, illustrated by Dion MBD
4th-6th Grade	<i>The Undeclared</i> by Kwame Alexander, illustrated by Kadir Nelson  <i>Clean Getaway</i> by Nic Stone  <i>Merci Suarez Changes Gears</i> by Meg Medina  <i>Stella by Starlight</i> by Sharon M. Draper  <i>The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora</i> by Pablo Cartaya  <i>New Kid</i> by Jerry Craft	<i>Healer of the Water Monster</i> by Brian Young  <i>Ancestor Approved</i> by Cynthia L. Smith  <i>Indian, No More</i> by Charlene Willing McManis, Traci Sorell  <i>I Can Make this Promise</i> by Christine Day  <i>Sisters of the Neversea</i> by Cynthia L. Smith  <i>Makoons</i> by Louise Erdrich  <i>We are Still Here</i> by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Frane Lessac	<i>Love to Langston</i> by Tony Medina  <i>Out of Wonder</i> by Kwame Alexander, Chris Colderley, Marjory Wentworth, illustrated by Ekua Holmes  <i>Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes</i> by Langston Hughes, illustrated by Benny Andrews  <i>Bravo! Poems About Amazing Hispanics</i> by Margarita Engle, illustrated by Rafael Lopez  <i>Imagine</i> by Juan Felipe Herrera, illustrated by Lauren Castillo  <i>Change Sings</i> by Amanda Gorman, illustrated by Loren Long	<i>Your Place in the Universe</i> by Jason Chin  <i>The Red Pencil</i> by Andrea Davis Pinkney  <i>Redwoods</i> by Jason Chin  <i>Blue: A History of the Color as Deep as the Sea and as Wide as the Sky</i> by Nana Eku Brew-Hammond, illustrated by Daniel Minter  <i>From the Tops of the Trees</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Rachel Wada  <i>Map into the World</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illustrated by Seo Kim  <i>When Stars are Scattered</i> by Omar Mohamed, Victoria Jamieson  <i>From the Desk of Zoey Washington</i> by Janae Marks  <i>Amari and the Night Brothers</i> by B.B. Alston  <i>Long Walk to Water</i> by Linda Sue Park  <i>Ghost</i> by Jason Reynolds  <i>Front Desk</i> by Kelly Yang

## Appendix II

### WINDOWS TO THE WORLD BOOK RESOURCES

#### WEBSITES

- American Indians in Children's Literature: <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>
- FirstBook: Empowering Educators-ABAR Teaching in Action: <https://firstbook.org/blog/2021/04/26/empowering-educators-abar-teaching-in-action/>
- UW-Madison Cooperative Children's Book Center: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>
- Social Justice Books: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/>

#### VIDEOS

- Rudine Sims Bishop: Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAu58SNSyc>
- Nikki Grimes: Teaching Poetry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXWHBqtNzcA&t=802s>
- Juan Felipe Herrera reads "Imagine" from his inaugural reading as U.S. Poet Laureate: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXWHBqtNzcA&t=802s>

## Appendix III

**PRE- AND POST- SURVEY QUESTIONS****Windows to the World Books: Fostering Empathy and Understanding in White Rural Communities Through Diverse Children's Literature****Pre-Survey:**

*Directions: Please respond to the following questions.*

**Teacher and School/District Information**

1. Self-created code: (Code formula: birthdate (2 digits), first two letters of mother's name, number of siblings, first two letters of father's first name)
2. What gender do you identify as:  
 Male  Female  Non-binary  Prefer not to say  Other
3. What race(s) do you identify with? (write in):
4. Education and Degrees (check all that apply):  
 BA/BS  MA/MEd  EdD/PhD
5. What areas are you licensed to teach: (write in):
6. What is your current teaching position (check all that apply)?
  - Kindergarten classroom teacher
  - 1st Grade classroom teacher
  - 2nd Grade classroom teacher
  - 3rd Grade classroom teacher
  - 4th Grade teacher
  - 5th Grade teacher
  - 6th Grade teacher
  - Librarian/Media Specialist
  - Other (specify position \_\_\_\_\_)
7. How many total years have you spent as an elementary teacher or librarian (include current year)?  
 Write number of years \_\_\_\_\_
8. Classroom teachers:  
 How many students are in your classroom? (Select one)
  - Less than 15
  - 16–20
  - 21–25
  - More than 25
- Librarians/Media Specialists:  
 How many students do you teach on average in a week? (Select one)
  - Less than 15
  - 16–20
  - 21–25
  - More than 25
9. Does your district require a multicultural curriculum? \_\_\_\_  
 Yes \_\_\_\_ No If yes, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

**Multicultural/Diverse Children's Literature (Open-Ended)**

10. Describe your definition of "multicultural (diverse?) children's literature."

11. How often do you use diverse children's literature in your teaching?: \_\_\_\_ Daily \_\_\_\_ Weekly \_\_\_\_ Bi-Weekly \_\_\_\_ Monthly \_\_\_\_ Other (write in)

12. Please describe how you locate and select multicultural books for your classroom.

13. Are there any topics you consider too sensitive to read about in class? Please list all and explain why.

14. Describe why you chose to participate in Windows to the World Books. What do you hope to gain from the experience?

15. What benefits or opportunities are important to you when using diverse literature in your class?

16. What challenges or obstacles do you anticipate encountering when you use diverse books in your teaching?

**Post Survey:**

*Directions: Please respond to the following questions.*

**Teacher and School/District Information**

1. Self-created code: (Code formula: birthdate (2 digits), first two letters of mother's name, number of siblings, first two letters of father's first name)
2. Describe your definition of "multicultural (diverse?) children's literature."
3. How often do you use diverse children's literature in your teaching?:  
 \_\_\_\_ Daily \_\_\_\_ Weekly \_\_\_\_ Bi-Weekly \_\_\_\_ Monthly \_\_\_\_ Other (write in)
4. Describe what you feel was successful about your use of the Windows to the World reading materials this year. Provide as much detail as possible.
5. Describe any obstacles you encountered using your Windows to the World reading materials. Provide as much detail as possible.
6. Describe your students' responses to the Windows to the World reading materials.
7. What instructional practices do you feel were most effective for using your Windows to the World books?
8. Reflecting upon your teaching with Windows to the World reading materials, are there any adjustments to your teaching that you will make when using these books in the future?

## Appendix IV

**FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS****Windows to the World: Fostering Empathy and Understanding in Rural Communities Through Diverse Children's Literature****Focus Group Prompts****Focus Group 1****1. Factors contributing to joining Windows to the World Project**

- a. Please describe why you chose to participate in the Windows to the World Project. b. What do you hope to gain professionally or personally from participating?

**2. Benefits and Opportunities (provide teachers with hand-outs that include all of the books)**

- a. What do you view as the most important benefits to using diverse children's books in your classroom and teaching?
- b. What opportunities do you see for learning? Why are these important or valuable to you as an educator?
- c. Which of the books that you received are you most excited to share with your students? Why?
- d. W2W is a cohort-model professional development initiative. What opportunities or benefits have you experienced through conversation, connection, or collaboration with other W2W educators? Are there any strategies for collaboration on this work that you find to be especially effective?

**3. Challenges and Obstacles**

- a. What challenges do you anticipate encountering as you plan how to use your Windows to the World books in your teaching?
- b. How do you think you will address these challenges or obstacles?
- c. Are you hesitant to share any of the books you received with your students? Please explain.
- d. What support do you anticipate you will need?

**4. Students, Caregiver, and Community Responses**

- a. How do you anticipate your students will respond to your Windows to the World book collection?
- b. How do you anticipate their families, caregivers, and the broader community will respond?

**5. Instructional Practices**

- a. What instructional practices or structures for learning do you value or utilize the most when teaching with children's literature? Explain why.
- b. What instructional practices do you value or utilize when teaching about equity, justice, and diversity? Explain why.
- c. What resources have you used or do you currently use to select culturally authentic books for your classroom?

**6. Closure**

- a. What other things would help us understand your

motivation and goals for being a part of Windows to the World Books in a deeper way?

**Focus Group 2****1. Progress with using Windows to the World book collection:**

- a. Please describe how using the Windows to the World book collection in your teaching has gone so far, including how many and which books you have used and how you have integrated them into your teaching.

**2. Benefits and Opportunities (provide teachers with hand-outs that include all of the books)**

- a. What benefits and opportunities have you observed when using your Windows to the World books in your classroom? Describe in as much detail as possible.
- b. Which books have you found to be the most valuable (1) to your teaching, and (2) in fostering your students' empathy, understanding, or connection with others and the multicultural world?
- c. We discussed collaboration and the value of connecting with other educators engaged in this work. Do you have any additional thoughts or experiences to share?

**3. Challenges and Obstacles**

- a. What challenges have you encountered in using your Windows to the World books in your teaching?
- b. How did you address these challenges or obstacles?
- c. What support do you need?
- d. If your book selections were to be challenged, how would you respond? What resources or support would you seek?

**4. Students, Caregiver, and Community Responses**

- a. How have your students responded to your Windows to the World book collection?
- b. Which book or books do you feel most impacted students' understanding of equity, diversity, or social justice? Explain.
- c. How have families, caregivers, and the broader community responded?

**5. Instructional Practices**

- a. What instructional practices have you found to be most effective, engaging, or meaningful when using your Windows to the World books?
- b. Reflecting on the instruction and/or use of your book collection so far, will you make any changes, adjustments, or try anything new in future teaching with these reading materials?

**6. Closure**

- a. What other things would help us understand your motivation and goals for being a part of Windows to the World Books in a deeper way?