



## **Churchill Fellowship Report**

To enhance expertise in children's books as vehicles for disrupting prejudice and discrimination

Culturally responsive pathways to a more equitable education for Australian children

By Helen Adam  
2022 Research Fellow

## Indemnity Clause

### THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

Churchill Fellowship 2022

**Project Title: To enhance expertise in children's books as vehicles for disrupting prejudice and discrimination.**

Report by Helen Adam  
2022 Churchill Fellow  
Awarded by The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

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## Keywords

children's literature, diverse books, culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, libraries, school librarians, book gifting, socially just education, equitable education, censorship, book bans



*Posing with Winston Churchill's Statue in London*

# Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge that this report has been prepared on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk Noongar people who have been educating children on country in this country for tens of thousands of years. I acknowledge, too, the traditional custodians of the many lands on which I trod during my Fellowship travels. I hope that my work goes some way to shedding light on the need to listen and respond to the voices of First Nations people and others who are minoritised by political and education systems, policies and practices.

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# Executive Summary

## Dr Helen Adam- Churchill Fellow 2022

**Project Title:** To enhance expertise in children's books as vehicles for disrupting prejudice and discrimination: Culturally responsive pathways to a more equitable education for Australian children

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My eight-week Churchill Fellowship focused on expanding expertise on culturally diverse children's literature as a means to create more inclusive classrooms and to combat prejudice and discrimination. I travelled through the United States and the United Kingdom, meeting with international experts in culturally responsive education and the importance of diverse children's books for equity and educational transformation. I met with numerous scholars involved in Initial Teacher Education, visited classrooms, visited not-for-profit organisations and explored educational policies and practices.

I identified critical inter-related issues relating to poverty, diversity and equitable access, as well as opportunities and challenges in and to education. As I present these findings and recommendations, I do not suggest that this is all new knowledge or that aspects of my recommendations are not already taking place in some contexts. Rather I offer these as an informed contribution to the goals of a better, fairer and more equitable education for all children. This report is intended for a wide audience including state and federal ministers in related portfolios of education, early childhood, and social services; those in education policy and curriculum; Initial Teacher Educators; preservice and in-service educators; school and public librarians and other library staff members; principals and school administrators; philanthropic organisations; and all those in wider society who care about equitable, quality education for all young Australians.

### Key Findings/Outcomes

#### **Finding 1: Inequitable access to books for children and families living in poverty.**

There was an undisputed belief throughout the Fellowship that books play an essential role in children's lives and educational settings. However, a strong recurring theme of concern and urgency was the inequitable access to books among children affected by poverty, many of whom are also from underrepresented communities. Prior to beginning formal education, many children and families are precluded from early access to books due to affordability. This hinders poorer children's opportunities for developing school based early literacy skills and understandings which in turn impacts on their readiness for formal instruction and their subsequent overrepresentation in intervention programs. Many underrepresented families and children are disproportionately affected by poverty, and this intersects with findings relating to provision of diverse books.

#### **Finding 2: Lack of equity in book access within education settings.**

Disparate distribution of libraries and qualified teacher librarians across schools and communities as well as threats to library funding compound the issue of inequitable book access. This often disproportionately affects poorer and underrepresented communities where school libraries may be the only access children have to books. To combat this, it is crucial to prioritise equitable book access, quality accessible libraries in every learning environment and promote reading for pleasure throughout students' educational journeys.

### **Finding 3: Lack of access to culturally diverse books.**

Current educational landscapes and much of the children's publishing industry rarely reflect the diversity of students in available children's literature. This absence negatively impacts underrepresented children impacting on a sense of belonging in the classroom and motivation to read as well as broader literacy, educational and social-emotional outcomes. The intersection of poverty and underrepresentation in books exacerbates the challenges faced by children from underrepresented and impoverished backgrounds. Among the diverse scholars I met with there was a strong sense of frustration and outrage at the lack of support and vision from governments to address this intersection through policy and action.

### **Finding 4: Limited opportunities for reading for pleasure.**

Reading for pleasure from an early age fosters positive identity, social-emotional growth, empathy, and comprehension skills. Thus, children need not only high-quality reading instruction throughout their formal education but also regular opportunities to read books for pleasure. For children to be motivated to read for pleasure, they need access to multiple books that reflect and connect to their own lives and backgrounds. Thus, provision of diverse books is essential. Throughout the Fellowship repeated concerns were raised about limitations on children's opportunities to read for pleasure in educational settings due to competing priorities of instructional time and lack of priority placed on reading for pleasure. This is especially important for those children who may not have access to books at home.

### **Finding 5: Book gifting programs have proven benefit.**

There is strong evidence that book gifting programs are linked to improved early literacy readiness and increased family literacy practice and that long term, sustained programs offer the greatest benefit. Book gifting programs often also ensure equitable provision of diverse books. However, such programs are reliant on funding and need long term investment from government and philanthropic organisations.

### **Finding 6: The need for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

For educators to effectively integrate diverse books and resources into their practice they need a sound foundation and understanding of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching.

### **Finding 7: The value of tracking and reporting on diversity in children's books.**

The work of the Cooperative Children's Book Center in the USA and the Centre for Literacy in Primary education in the UK has influenced the publication rates of diverse literature in those countries and contributed to awareness of the importance and value of diverse books among scholars, teacher educators, teachers and the wider community. Australia would benefit from similar long-term research that tracks and reports on diversity in children's books.

### **Finding 8: Challenges and Threats.**

Current challenges to culturally responsive education in the US and UK include book censorship, banning, library restrictions and simplification or erasure of contentious historical aspects. Australia is facing similar movements. Such actions undermine efforts to increase diverse representation in classroom resources and curriculum. Many educators and librarians experience a sense of uncertainty or even fear about including diverse books and resources and in some contexts a fear for personal safety is evident due to an increasing prevalence of threats and protests by those opposing diverse books. This phenomenon has implications for education in Australia, necessitating pre-emptive actions to preserve intellectual freedom in education and broader society.

## **Finding 9: Broader Implications: Community Education through Truth-Telling.**

Initiatives such as the Columbia SC Civil Rights Tour in South Carolina, the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre in Manchester exemplify the importance and value of truth telling and public education. Acknowledging historical injustices, including slavery and the historical treatment of Indigenous people, fosters community awareness and can inform educational policy, inclusive practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1: Provision of equitable access to books.**

Current government educational priorities are aimed at ensuring children receive quality reading instruction in educational settings. Other government priorities and early childhood initiatives aim to address impacts of poverty, and many include aims to improve literacy outcomes for all children. These priorities must expand and link to encompass initiatives that grant families and children access to books from an early age and throughout their school years. Book gifting programs such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library® (DPIL) should be expanded and supported across Australia and ongoing funding provided to maintain these programs. Evidence suggests DPIL brings a four to one return on investment and a 14-point improvement on Year Three NAPLAN scores making this a wise and much needed investment. The success of this program in NSW demonstrates the positive impact when state and local governments support such initiatives. Early childhood initiatives by government or philanthropy should also include or be linked to such programs. Integrated and whole system approaches are needed.

### **Recommendation 2: Equitable provision and access to libraries.**

All schools and early learning settings should be adequately funded and required as part of federal and state government school funding models to have well-resourced school libraries and qualified school librarians. Libraries should be open and available to children and children should be free to select and read books of their own choosing including a diverse range of books reflecting children's diverse backgrounds. Access to, or even provision of, school libraries should be an educational requirement in the interests of equitable, fair and high-quality education. Federal, state and school-based initiatives aimed at improving literacy outcomes should include a requirement for funding allocations to ensure consideration of library provision and accessibility of these for children.

### **Recommendation 3: Equitable access to reading for pleasure.**

Policies, programs and initiatives that focus on high quality reading instruction must also emphasise reading for pleasure and providing time for this in the school day as a recognised and essential component of quality educational environments. This should also include and recognise the importance of adults, especially carers and educators, frequently reading to children for pleasure and for modelling of reading skills and strategies. These should also include provision and use of a diverse range of books.

### **Recommendation 4: Requirements for diverse and equitable representation in books and educational resources.**

That government and educational policies relating to provision of educational resources and books, including those available in school libraries, articulate a need and requirement for diverse and equitable representation in those resources and books. Further, organisations, both commercial and not-for-profit, developing and providing educational resources to support educators ensure development of culturally relevant and appropriate resources reflecting Australia's diversity. In the case of such organisations being contracted and/or funded by government organisations (e.g., Federal or state Education Departments; Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) government funded schools etc) that such funding agreements include requirements relating to provision of culturally relevant and responsive materials.

In addition, those making decisions at school and classroom level as to what resources to purchase and ultimately use, do so through a critical lens with understanding of the importance of visibility and connection for all children.

#### **Recommendation 5: Increase in publication of diverse books and educational resources.**

That children's publishers, including those publishing educational resources, seek the voices and expertise of diverse authors and illustrators when making publishing decisions and aim to equitably reflect the diversity of Australian society in future books and resources.

#### **Recommendation 6: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching as part of teacher preparation.**

As one of the four areas of Core Content identified in the Strong Beginnings Report of the Teacher Education Expert panel (2023), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching must be prioritised in Initial Teacher Education programs, and this should include the selection and use of culturally relevant resources. Models of best practice such as the Urban Cohort program at the University of South Carolina and the Master's in Early Childhood Education at The Erikson Institute in Chicago could be considered to guide implementation and development.

#### **Recommendation 7: Harnessing the expertise of diverse academics in Initial Teacher Education.**

Initial Teacher Education should involve and engage academics from diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to cultural, linguistic and gender diversity, to prepare future educators for serving diverse student populations.

#### **Recommendation 8: Listening to the voices and expertise of diverse scholars.**

Broader government and education initiatives should ensure they seek and heed the voices and expertise of diverse scholars, educators and community members including, but not limited to, those from First Nations, cultural, linguistic and gender diverse backgrounds.

#### **Recommendation 9: Foregrounding of culturally responsive practice in Initial Teacher Education.**

That Initial Teacher Education Accreditation Requirements and Graduate and Professional Standards for Teachers be amended to include requirements for culturally responsive education and capabilities. Models such as the [ITE Accreditation Guidelines for Scotland](#), and the [Standard for Provisional Registration for Scotland](#) could be consulted as guiding exemplars.

#### **Recommendation 10: Supporting in-service teachers in culturally responsive practice.**

That Inservice teachers be provided with opportunities to develop and strengthen their culturally responsive practice. The [Building Racial Literacy](#) program offered by Education Scotland could be used as an exemplar for such professional learning.

#### **Recommendation 11: Tracking and reporting of diversity statistics in children's books.**

That further research is funded through government and/or philanthropic grants and enabled to develop sustainable long-term reporting on diversity statistics in Australia. This could be linked to the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature and include presentations to the publishing industry and other stakeholders, research of impact on teachers and children as well as public education initiatives on the benefits and availability of diverse books.

#### **Recommendation 12: Support for educators and librarians coupled with community education.**

Educators and librarians should be supported and trusted to effectively define, advocate for, and integrate diverse books in their programs, classrooms and communities. Community education initiatives should be encouraged to provide open conversation, opportunities for concerned parents or community members to view diverse books and discuss with informed academics, librarians, and other community members.

### **Recommendation 13: Engaging the voices of diverse families and children.**

More research should be undertaken to engage the voices of diverse families and children so that the impact of provision of diverse books can be further demonstrated.

### **Recommendation 14: Community education initiatives.**

That national, state and local initiatives be undertaken or extended to provide publicly accessible community education on diversity in all its forms and on the more troublesome aspects of Australian history. Research could also extend to engaging with those who object to diverse books in the hope of improving public education by identifying concerns and objections. There is a need for a clear public narrative about the value and benefits of diverse books.

### **Recommendation 15: Broader Implications: Tests and teacher resources.**

That mandated and other frequently used tests and classroom resources, including teacher designed tests, be adjusted for differing contexts and children to ensure cultural relevance, and thus give children equitable opportunities to succeed in these tests and classroom learning activities. As shown by the NAPLAN study conducted by [researchers from the University of NSW](#), this can be done in a way that maintains the integrity of the tests. While some might argue this would affect the notion of standardisation, I argue this is a necessary consideration. Failure to consider cultural relevance in tests and resources ensures that many of these remain culturally biased thus contributing to the continuation of societal and educational inequities.

# Glossary and Abbreviations

TERM	ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
Australian Education Research Organisation	AERO	The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia’s independent education evidence body. AERO was established as one of the national policy initiatives under the 2020 National School Reform Agreement.
Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership	AITSL	AITSL provides national leadership for the Australian State and Territories in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership. AITSL has oversight of the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education courses and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.
Cooperative Children’s Book Center	CCBC	The CCBC is a noncirculating examination, study, and research library for Wisconsin school and public librarians, teachers, early childhood care providers, university students, and others interested in children’s and young adult literature. The CCBC is part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, and receives additional support from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. <a href="https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/">https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/</a>
Centre for Literacy in Primary Education	CLPE	The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education is a UK based children’s literacy charity working with primary schools. Their work raises the achievement of children’s reading and writing by helping schools to teach literacy creatively and effectively, putting quality children’s books at the heart of all learning.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	CRP	An approach (Morrison et al., 2019) that originated in the USA in the context of African American educational disadvantage. For the purposes of this report, I embrace the definition of CRP used by Australian scholars Morrison, Rigney, Hattam and Diplock in their publication, “Towards an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy - a narrative review of the literature” (Morrison et al., 2019): “those pedagogies that actively value, and mobilise as resources, the cultural repertoires and intelligences that students bring to the learning relationship” (2019, p. v).
Culturally Relevant Teaching		<p>“Using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance style of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay cited in Souto-Manning et al, 2018 p 29). Gay identifies six key practices of culturally responsive teaching:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High expectations for all students</li> <li>• Engaging students’ cultural knowledge, experiences, practices, and perspectives</li> </ul>

# Glossary and Abbreviations

TERM	ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bridging gaps between home and school practices</li> <li>• seeking to educate the whole child</li> <li>• identifying and leveraging students' strengths to transform education</li> <li>• critically questioning normative schooling practices, content and assessments (Gay cited in Souto-Manning et al, 2018 p 29).</li> </ul>
Diversity		The term diversity is generally held to encompass a broad range of differences; the most commonly accepted include differences in age, race, colour, religion, ethnicity, gender, languages and sexual orientation. Additionally, it can include aspects such as socio-economic background, education, work experience and physical and mental capabilities. While most of my Fellowship conversations, activities and this report focus on cultural and racial diversity, socio-economic diversity and at times gender and sexual diversity, the findings and recommendations are applicable and relevant to all types of diversity and the intersections experienced by many in society.
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library	DPIL	Dolly Parton's Imagination Library: a charity established by Dolly Parton dedicated to inspiring a love of reading by gifting books free of charge to children from birth to age five, through funding shared by Dolly Parton and local community partners in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and Republic of Ireland.
Initial Teacher Education	ITE	Initial Teacher Education: Higher education courses preparing students to be qualified educators.
Preservice Teachers	PSTs	Students enrolled in Initial Teacher Education Courses.
	SC	University of South Carolina
	SES	Socio-economic Status
Underrepresented		Across the many research fields encompassing diversity, many terms are used to attempt to describe those who are discriminated against, minoritised or marginalised. These include minority groups, minoritised groups, marginalised groups, People of Colour, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), historically excluded, underrepresented and underserved. I acknowledge this dilemma and the challenge of using a term that does not position any people or groups in a deficit light. In this report I attempt to consistently use the term underrepresented (people or groups).

# Introduction: The importance of equity, diversity and inclusion in education

Since Australia became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the importance of recognising, valuing and respecting a child's family, culture, language, identities and values has been increasingly articulated in education policy. Children's literature can be a powerful tool for extending children's knowledge and understandings of themselves and others who may be different culturally, socially or historically thus having the potential to be a valuable resource in promoting diversity and inclusion and disrupting prejudice and discrimination. Evidence from many researchers shows that culturally responsive use of diverse literature makes a difference to the educational and social outcomes of children who have been traditionally underserved by education.

## Defining diversity in the context of this report

The term diversity is generally held to encompass a broad range of differences; the most accepted include differences in age, race, colour, religion, ethnicity, gender, languages and sexual orientation. Additionally, it can include aspects such as socio-economic background, education, work experience and physical and mental capabilities. While most of my Fellowship conversations, activities and this report focus on cultural and racial diversity, socio-economic diversity and at times gender and sexual diversity, the findings and recommendations are applicable and relevant to all types of diversity and the intersections experienced by many in society.

Across the many research fields encompassing diversity, many terms are used to attempt to describe those who are discriminated against, minoritised or marginalised. These include minority groups, minoritised groups, marginalised groups, People of Color, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), historically excluded, underrepresented and underserved. I acknowledge this dilemma and the challenge of using a term that does not position any people or groups in a deficit light. In this paper, I attempt to consistently use the term underrepresented (people or groups).

## My work in this field

In 2019, I completed my doctoral study into the ways in which early childhood educators in Australia use children's literature to address principles of diversity. I found, as have others in this field, that there is a significant lack of diverse books available for children and that use of children's literature in education frequently does not promote principles of diversity, rather it often serves to promote outdated or stereotypical notions of underrepresented groups or leaves children from many diverse background invisible in the curriculum.

## The Fellowship

My eight-week Churchill Fellowship focused on expanding expertise on culturally diverse children's literature as a means to create more inclusive classrooms and to combat prejudice and discrimination. I travelled through the United States and the United Kingdom, meeting with international experts in culturally responsive education and the importance of diverse children's books for equity and educational transformation. I aimed to explore what others are doing and how their research and work contributes to the body of knowledge about diverse books and culturally responsive practice with diverse books. I met with numerous scholars involved in Initial Teacher Education, visited classrooms, visited not-for-profit organisations, and explored educational policies and practices.



What I found went so much further than my initial aims. With these experts I explored the importance of children seeing themselves in books, the potential of diverse books to disrupt prejudice and discrimination and to build intercultural awareness, empathy and understandings, and the importance of authenticity and truth-telling. I identified critical inter-related issues of poverty, diversity and equitable access, as well as opportunities and challenges in, and to, education.

In this body of the report, I have synthesised these conversations, observations, and experiences into clear but connected themes. Through this, I aim to demonstrate ways in which Australia can consider both the opportunities and some of the challenges in supporting culturally responsive practice using diverse literature and resources to achieve more equitable educational outcomes and a more cohesive society through breaking down and disrupting the development of prejudice and discrimination. In the words of several of my interviewees “This is urgent!”

## Why Children’s Books?

### How books impact readers socially and academically

Parents, carers and educators are strongly encouraged to read to children from, or even before, birth in order to give them a solid start to their literacy journey. Early literacy skills including phonemic and phonological awareness, patterns of language, understandings of print and vocabulary development are intrinsically developed when children have books shared with them. It is also generally well known that reading to children has a powerful impact on their academic and intellectual development (Merga, 2017). These early experiences with books help set children up for success in learning the skills of reading when they enter formal education. Unsurprisingly, therefore, in the early years of formal education, a key priority is to teach children to read for themselves.

Naturally, books have a central role in classrooms and other educational settings. Books are used in the teaching of reading, with instructional books created specifically for this purpose. Books are used to teach concepts and information about the world and as a foundation for critical thinking and spoken language activities. As children master the skills of reading, books become a central part of their reading to learn in other curriculum areas where both specially produced textbooks and children’s literature form important resources in classrooms. It is also well known that the ability to read with skill and understanding is strongly linked to positive educational, social, and economic outcomes for individuals and for society.

Reading is a cultural invention of humankind. Unlike speech, learning to read is not a natural process. The skills of reading need to be taught. Therefore, it is little wonder that governments, policy makers, educational leaders and educators place a strong emphasis on the teaching of reading and “getting it right” so that all children can become successful readers.

It is important, too, that children become not just children who can read, but children who want to read, love to read, and do read for pleasure, for purpose and for learning. “Scientific research has shown that motivation for reading is an(other) important determinant of reading comprehension, one that we ignore at our peril” (Duke et al., 2021). This necessitates ensuring the teaching and learning of reading skills takes place within a positive reading culture where books are celebrated, made available and shared, not only for the learning of skills but for joy and entertainment. This also necessitates ensuring all children have access to books that reflect their own lives, backgrounds, and interests.

Australian scholar Maurice Saxby (1924-2014) summed up the potential of literature to enhance the life of a child in his text, *Books in the life of a child*:

*Literature entertains. It allows, too, for the re-creation of thoughts, sensations, dreams, feelings, fears, aspirations. It causes awe and wonder. It can bring Joy. It can set off reverberations that are echoes of far-off, distant insights from times past. It can propel the reader into a more secure future as self-awareness and understanding is nourished and grows. Literature is life, illuminated and sweetened by the artist (Saxby, 1997, p. 35).*

What Saxby is saying, but is sometimes lesser known or acknowledged, is that children learn about themselves, the world, history, and society through literature. Importantly, children can learn understanding and respect for themselves and for those who are different to them (Bennett et al., 2018). Frequent exposure to books, through having books shared with children by adults and through children's independent engagement with books has a powerful reciprocal influence on their ability to read and comprehend increasingly complex texts. Very importantly, frequent exposure to books builds children's knowledge about the world and different topics, experiences and ideas. This is critical to children's increasing development of comprehension skills but is also a powerful contributor to children's sense of self and their place in the world.

Children (and adults) who read and engage with books show stronger ability to display empathy, to consider multiple perspectives and to consider the opinions and beliefs of others (Mar et al., 2010). Kidd and Castano (2013) found that those who read fiction are more able to understand and empathise with those around them. A recent large-scale study of more than 10 000 young adolescents in the USA published by the University of Cambridge found that beginning to read for pleasure early in life is linked to important developmental factors in children. This is shown by improved cognition, better mental health, and stronger brain development in adolescence (Sun et al., 2023).



*Some of the books distributed - Dolly Parton's Imagination Library*

It is no surprise then that educational policies and curriculum worldwide place great importance on books and learning to read. The Early Years Learning Framework, Australia's national approved learning framework for young children from birth – five years of age, places great emphasis on books as important resources in developing literacy and social skills. The Australian Curriculum highlights the value of books stating the importance of literature texts being selected “because they are judged to have potential for enriching the lives of students” and to “expand the scope of their experience.”

In our diverse society, by implication, this also necessitates providing all children with books that will appeal to their interests and experiences. Therefore, in classrooms and other learning environments, it is important to provide a wide range of books to ensure all children, no matter their background, have multiple opportunities to access books reflecting their interests and experiences.

However, in today's classrooms, and in the broader publishing industry, there is a serious lack of diverse books. By this, I mean books which centre the voices of diverse authors, the lives of diverse characters, and themes that accurately reflect the diversity of the Australian community. This matters greatly if we truly mean what we say when we argue for **all** children's right to read!

## The importance of diverse books

### Why we need diverse books for children

For children to succeed in their learning they need to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in the classroom. Learning environments that reflect, connect with, and build on children's diverse identities and funds of knowledge (Morrison et al., 2019; O'Keeffe et al., 2019) can make a powerful difference to children's sense of belonging and ultimately to their educational and life outcomes. The books present in classrooms, used in instruction, and made available for children to read are a powerful way to reflect and connect with the diverse backgrounds in today's classrooms and contribute to a child's sense of belonging. All children benefit from both seeing themselves reflected and from learning about and connecting with other ways of living and being - diverse books are a proven way to do this.

Children develop their sense of identity and perceptions of others from a very early age – as early as three months old (Bar-Haim et al., 2006). Because of this, young children are particularly vulnerable to the messages they see and hear in the media and in books (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020b). Research over many years has shown books can empower, include and validate the way children see themselves. However, books can also exclude, stereotype and oppress children's identities (Boutte et al., 2011). Given the importance of books in the lives and learning of children, an absence or misrepresentation of underrepresented groups in children's book, can impact on children's sense of belonging, of identity, motivation to learn and, ultimately their educational and social outcomes. An absence or misrepresentation of underrepresented groups can also contribute to misunderstanding, prejudice and discrimination as well as a sense of cultural superiority among children from majority backgrounds. Conversely, provision of authentic diverse books can build empathy and understanding and disrupt the development of prejudice and discrimination for all children.

Rudine Sims Bishop, arguably the world's most seminal scholar in the field of diverse children's literature, refers to the power and potential of books being windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors.

*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).*

It is not difficult, therefore, to see how important it is to provide frequent opportunities for children to see themselves and those different to them reflected in multiple ways in multiple books.

Seeking the expertise and practice of others in this field formed the essence of my Fellowship.

## Links with motivation to read and educational outcomes

Motivation to read is a key determinant of children's engagement in reading, their development of comprehension skills and children's interest in reading for pleasure and purpose (Duke et al., 2021). The recently released NAPLAN data for 2023 shows a continuing trend of children in lower SES groups, rural and remote areas, and Indigenous children being more likely to fall below national benchmarks. As part of investigating ways to improve such outcomes, children's motivation to read should not be overlooked. Research in the USA consistently shows that African American boys have the lowest reading achievement and are less likely to be interested in reading. In Australia, literacy rates among Aboriginal children, particularly those in remote areas, are consistently behind those of their non-Indigenous counterparts. While the factors behind these are complex, one thing that is constantly overlooked is the question, why do we insist underrepresented children constantly read or be expected to read books about predominantly white people and lifestyles nothing like their own? When the books some children learn to read through, have read to them, learn about other curriculum areas through, and are expected to read for pleasure constantly show a world in which people like themselves are invisible, is it any wonder that motivation to read for many children from underrepresented backgrounds is often low? The scholars I met with during the Fellowship, spoke with frustration that this aspect is ignored or overlooked in the quest to improve literacy outcomes.

## Availability of diverse books

My research and that of many others shows there is a serious lack of diverse books published and made available to children (Adam & Urquhart, 2023; Adam, 2019; Crisp et al., 2016). Currently, children from underrepresented backgrounds rarely see themselves reflected in the books they're exposed to (Crisp et al., 2016). Research over the last two decades shows the world presented in children's books is overwhelmingly white, male and middle class. My doctoral studies in early learning centres in Australia found that only 18% of books in these centres portrayed any racial diversity and in the majority of those the representation was outdated, stereotypical or simply background characters to white main protagonists. Less than 1% of books available to children in my studies showed authentic representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020b).

Recent studies of award listed Australian children's picture books (Adam & Urquhart, 2023; Caple & Tian, 2021) show that while diverse characters are becoming more prevalent, these are often non-specific background characters and there is still a lack of recognisable central characters from underrepresented backgrounds.

Studies also show that diverse authors are underrepresented in published books. In 2022, a large-scale study of the cultural identity of published creators in Australian books which were published in 2018 was undertaken by researchers at Victoria University. This study confirmed a "severe underrepresentation of First Nations writers and Writers of Colour within Australian literature" (Atkinson, 2022).

With the strong body of evidence demonstrating the impact diverse books can have on children from underrepresented backgrounds and their educational and social and emotional outcomes, and the value for all children through the disruption of prejudice and discrimination, this continuing lack of diverse books should be considered an educational and equity crisis.

## Collation and promotion of diversity statistics

During my Fellowship I visited two institutions which undertake annual collation of diversity statistics in children's books. The first of these was the [Cooperative Children's Book Center](#) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

"The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) is a unique examination, study, and research library of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The CCBC is also funded by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction through the Division for Libraries and Technology." (Dickinson, 2023). In 1985, the CCBC began documenting books by and about Black people and since 1994, they have been conducting an annual audit of books for children and teens about Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC). Since 2018 they have also documented other diverse representations including LGBTQI+, and diverse abilities and religions.

The work of the CCBC is world leading and almost every academic in this field sources and refers to these annual statistics as a key measure of diversity in children's books. More than this, their collation of these statistics shines a light on, and raises awareness of, the importance of diverse representation.



*The amazing team at CCBC l-r: Madeline Tyner, Megan Schliesman, Merri Lindgren, Tessa Michaelson-Schmidt, Helen Adam*

Similar reporting is also undertaken in the UK by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) which I visited during my time in London. Here, under the lead of Research and Development Director, Farrah Serroukh they research and report on diversity in children's books and produce an annual Reflecting Realities report. The [Reflecting Realities](#) project began in 2018 as the first UK study looking at diversity in children's literature. The project is funded by the Arts Council and aims to "quantify and evaluate the extent and quality of ethnic representation and diversity in children's publishing in the UK."

The CLPE worked closely with the CCBC when first designing and initiating their study. Like the CCBC, the CLPE has expanded the scope of reporting since the study's inception.

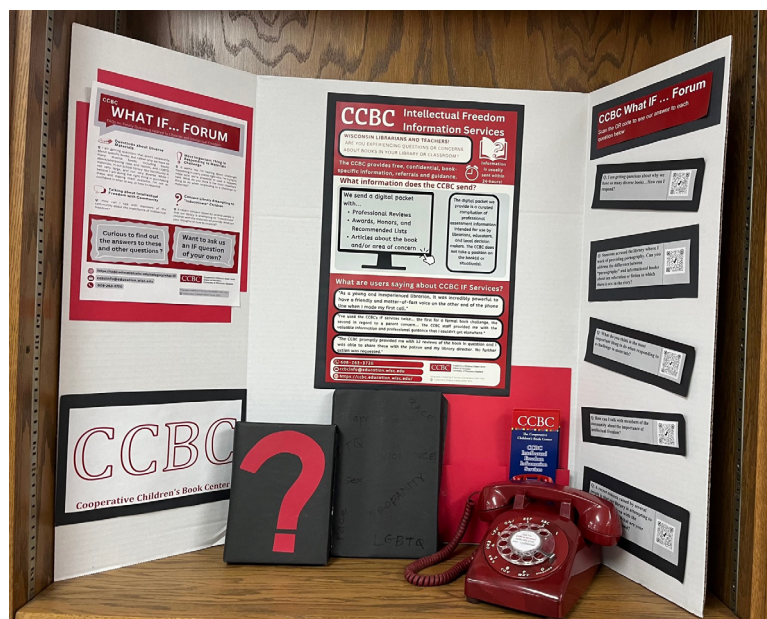
The work of both the CCBC in the USA and the CLPE in the UK has played a significant role in the increasing representation of diversity in children's books in these two countries.

Similarly, annual reporting by the CLPE shows the number of children's books published in the UK featuring a minority ethnic character increased from 4% in 2017 to 20% in 2021. Further, the percentage of books with a main character from a racially underrepresented background has risen year on year though this remains extremely low at 9% in 2021 (Centre for Literacy In Primary Education [CLPE], 2022).

In Australia, there is currently no broad scale annual research into diversity statistics in children's books. While my research and that of others including Hateley (2017) and Caple and Tian (2021; 2022), have conducted small studies on diverse representation, there is a justifiable need for larger scale research similar to that of the CCBC and CLPE.

## Advocacy and professional learning and support

The CCBC also acts as a key resource for advice to educators in sourcing books for schools and provides a professional learning outreach service. They also provide an Intellectual Freedom Service to support educators when faced with challenges or queries regarding their book choices. The impact of the work goes well beyond the state of Wisconsin and even beyond the USA giving important support for educators nationally and worldwide.



*Information about the CCBC Intellectual Freedom Service*

The CLPE is a key provider of professional learning for schools in the UK and, as part of this, it collates and publishes [suggested lists](#) of books for classroom resources.

Children's Books Ireland also collates lists of suggested books for schools. Unlike the CCBC and CLPE, Children's books Ireland does not research or collate statistics on diverse books, but they do collate list of diverse books. Two recent releases include "[Reading Together with Refugees](#)" and "[Pride Reading Guide 2023](#)".

In Australia, literacy teaching organisations such as Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, (PETAA), the Australian Literacy Educators Association of Australia (ALEA) and organisations such as the [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies](#) (AIATSIS) are increasingly promoting awareness of the importance of diverse books in the lives and learning of children. The National Centre for Australian Children's Literature (NCACL), housed at the University of Canberra has established [The NCACL Cultural Diversity Database](#) and [The Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Resource](#) to support educators, families and the broader community in locating diverse books. Both resources are updated as new books are published.

Such groups play an important role in raising awareness among educators, families and communities of the importance of diverse books for children.

# The need for equitable access to books

While the need for provision and use of diverse books was the key focus of my Fellowship, a pressing issue of equitable access to books was a strong concern and focus of many of those I visited.

For children to gain the benefits of books and reading it is obvious that they need access to books. Children need access to books at home, in classrooms and early education and care settings, in school libraries and in public libraries. Limited access to books also interacts with, and compounds, the lack of diverse books.

During my Fellowship, it was very apparent that access to books is affecting many children and families and disproportionately affecting those from underrepresented backgrounds, further compounding the impact of lack of access to diverse books.

In my conversations I found three main hindrances to access to books for children: poverty, access to school libraries and limited opportunities to read for pleasure. Each of these further compounded the impact of a lack of diverse books.

## Poverty

Strongly evident in each of the countries I visited was the prevalence of children and families living in poverty and the compounding effects of poverty on children's educational and life outcomes. From a book provision perspective, if families are struggling to provide their children's basic needs, they are not able to spend money on books. As with Australia, in the UK and USA, there is a disproportionate number of children from underrepresented groups living in poverty.

Members of the Diverse Books for all Coalition in the USA, spoke with frustration at the impact poverty has on families and their ability to provide books and share these with their children. Their frustration extended to a lack of government support to make books available to children living in poverty. As one member stated, "the kids who most need books, can't afford them" and another "we are outraged, this is urgent!"

The authors of the recently published Cambridge study, Early-initiated childhood reading for pleasure, cite evidence suggesting poverty is linked to [poorer brain development](#) and highlight that reading for pleasure from a young age can help counteract the impacts of poverty on brain development (Sun et al., 2023).

However, this demonstrates the compounding effect of poverty on educational outcomes – children living in poverty benefit greatly from reading for pleasure, but children living in poverty are often deprived of books. There is a close link to this finding and discussion later in this report about the disproportionate labelling of children from underrepresented backgrounds as experiencing "literacy poverty." Children from poorer backgrounds are often classed as being "at risk" from an educational perspective and often automatically identified for intervention programs once they begin formal education. The scholars I worked with expressed frustration and anger at the deficit perspectives often used to view such children and the frequent blame being placed on parents for children lacking school-based literacy practices.

What the Cambridge study suggests is a reciprocal disadvantage between poverty and cognitive development and thus, educational and social outcomes. If reading can help limit the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, then books must be accessible to all families regardless of financial circumstances. Provision of books should be part of front-line systemic support for families. Without this we will continue to see children from impoverished backgrounds targeted for intervention programs as soon as they enter formal education. This is not an argument against intervention programs in education settings but an argument for earlier support for families and children that addresses one of the key contributors to the prevalence of school-based intervention programs – poverty depriving children from early access to books and reading for pleasure.

## Defunding/lack of funding of libraries and librarians

Given the key focus in educational policies on the teaching of reading, it would seem obvious that children need access to a wide variety of books at home and at school. For many children, especially those living in poverty, the main or only access they may have to books is through classroom, school and local libraries. However, in the USA over 8 830 public schools have no school library and for those that do, nearly 17 000 schools do not have a qualified school librarian (American Library Association, 2022). In addition, school libraries across the country are facing increasing attacks from conservative parent and political groups seeking to limit access to diverse books. While this will be discussed in greater detail later in this report, the result is that in many states funding for school libraries is being cut as are qualified teacher librarians. In some jurisdictions school libraries have been removed completely. Recently Houston, the largest school district in Texas, has removed school librarians and [replaced school libraries with discipline centres](#). There is a strong pattern of these decisions being disproportionately related to poorer areas and areas of large populations of African American and other underrepresented groups. This exacerbates the lack of access to books that these children need and often removes the only access they might have had.

In the UK there is also no formal government requirement or funding for schools to have a designated library, with school leaders having the autonomy to decide whether and how to provide library services in schools. Recent research by research company BMG Research found that 14% of schools across the UK do not have a dedicated library. Of greater concern, is their finding that children from lower social economic areas were less likely to have school libraries than those in higher SES areas and had fewer library resources in general.

During my visit to Children's Books Ireland, I learnt that Ireland is regarded as being a nation of storytellers and readers with enormous pride in their history and culture of writers, a thriving community of writers today and a high percentage of readers for pleasure in the population. However, school libraries were defunded by the government in 2018 as a cost-saving measure and despite a post pandemic top up of funds the ongoing and regular funding has not been reinstated. It seems possible that the pride in being considered a nation of readers could possibly be influencing government policy through an assumption that all children have equitable access to books outside of school thus assuming less need for funding of school libraries.


Decisions to reduce or remove funding of school libraries are misplaced. Despite perceptions such as those in Ireland about reading rates, recent evidence from the World Book Day charity shows that reading for pleasure is at its lowest since 2005 across the UK and Ireland and that less than half (47.8%) of children aged nine to 18 say they enjoy reading.

Similar evidence in the US shows that only 42% of nine-year-olds say they read for pleasure and only 17% of 13-year-olds. Recent data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows 72% of children say they read for pleasure, but only about 52% of Australian children spend more than two hours a week reading for pleasure.

While the ABS study in Australia suggests competing interest of screen time and other activities is a factor in reduced reading for pleasure, other evidence suggests that access to literature is a major contributing factor. In the World Book Day<sup>1</sup> project, one in seven children said the book they purchased with their World Book Day token was the first book they had owned. In the US, a biennial study conducted by [Scholastic Inc](#) showed that [20% of children do not read during their summer break](#) as they do not have access to books.




In Australia, most schools have school libraries. However, as in the US and UK, the resourcing and staffing of these vary between jurisdictions and between schools themselves. Softlink conducts an annual school libraries survey across Australia and recurring themes are a desire for increased funding for libraries, and a strong need for qualified teacher librarians. As in the UK, lower SES schools report having less funding to resource and staff their libraries. Evidence from the 2019 school library census conducted in South Australia suggest that smaller primary schools and those in remote areas have lower school library budgets with school in high SES areas having much larger library budgets (Dix et al., 2019). [Recent evidence in Victoria shows similar alarming trends](#) showing “a vicious cycle had resulted from under-resourcing school libraries and having insufficient numbers of appropriately qualified staff” (Heffernan, 2023). With library budgets in Australia varying from as little as \$1000 up to \$50000 per year this means a highly inequitable provision of library resources to children in lower SES, smaller and remote schools and these schools are often those serving communities of underrepresented children and families.

A lack of funding, defunding or limited access to school libraries creates another systemic inequity that compounds the impact of poverty. With these factors clearly affecting lower SES areas more than higher SES areas, those children who already have limited or no books in the home are also those with the least access to books when at school. The compounding impacts, of course, contribute to the reading and educational outcomes of these children. 

Well known author, poet and former UK children’s laureate Michael Rosen urges for such findings to be seen as a wake-up call for governments.

*We have countless examples of research showing that children who read for pleasure widely and often are best able to benefit from what education offers. Berating parents, children or teachers for ‘failing’ will solve nothing. It [improving reading levels] needs full government backing, with as much money and effort as they put into compulsory phonics teaching, to support schools and communities in this (Ferguson, 2020).*

This highlights some key needs that should be prioritised: the importance of getting books into the homes of those who cannot afford them and quality libraries in schools supported with qualified teacher librarians. When schools serving with  children with the greatest literacy needs are not able to provide children with equitable access to books, the effects of inequity and poverty are compounded. This is an urgent social justice issue.

<sup>1</sup> World Book Day involves an initiative in which children receive a book token to purchase a one-pound book. <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/03/02/world-book-day-which-european-countries-are-the-biggest-readers-and-whos-reading-the-least>

## Limited opportunities for reading for pleasure.

Another issue shared by those I met with during the Fellowship that impacts children's access to books is a limitation in many classrooms and schools on children's opportunities to read for pleasure. This is largely due to what is termed by many as a "crowded curriculum" in which instructional time in key learning areas leaves little time for educators to read to children and for children to have time to select and read books for pleasure. This is despite research over many years showing that the volume of reading by a child is strongly linked to the development and continued growth of their reading ability and the numerous long term cognitive, educational and social benefits of reading for pleasure (Allington, 2014; Duke et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2023).

In my doctoral studies in early learning centres, I found that children were not receiving the amount of shared book time recommended by experts. In addition, I found that children living in areas more likely to be considered disadvantaged, all of which had high populations of cultural diversity and underrepresented people, received less than half the book sharing time as children living in affluent areas (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020a).

One related theme evident in my Fellowship and in my own work with practising educators, is that, despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of children reading independently, many educators feel they must justify to school leadership time used to read to children or to allow children to read for pleasure. The Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report in 2019, found that only 17% of school aged children surveyed stated there was an opportunity to read books of their own choice every day at school, while 30% of six-to-eight-year-olds reported this did not happen at all (Scholastic, 2019). Similarly, other evidence shows that many school librarians feel a similar need to justify library budgets and resourcing to school leadership.

Another concern that was highlighted during Fellowship discussions is the practice in some schools of limiting children's book choices based on their perceived reading ability. This approach restricts children from accessing books that may be deemed too challenging or above their assigned reading level. It is disheartening to hear stories of children being discouraged from reading books they are interested in or penalised for reading above their perceived level. Such practices not only hinder children's reading motivation but also undermine their potential for growth and exploration through reading (Shanahan, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, limited opportunity to read for pleasure at school impacts more strongly on those who do not have access to books at home and contributes to the cyclical nature of poverty and poor literacy outcomes. As highlighted earlier, children from underrepresented backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by this, thus further compounding the challenges they face.

# Solutions and best practice for addressing access to books.

## Book gifting (early years initiatives)

One successful way of supporting families in poverty to be able to provide books to their children is through book gifting programs. Book gifting programs operate in many countries, including Australia. These are usually operated by Not-for-Profit groups which rely largely on philanthropic and government donations or grants. Some are initiatives of state or local governments, which also often rely on support from philanthropy and grants. Some programs, such as [Better Beginnings](#) in Western Australia provide book packs at given stages in a child's life such as at birth, at two years old and at kindergarten age. Others, such as the [Raising Literacy Australia](#) in South Australia and [Books in Homes](#) provide book packs through registered preschool programs or schools. The [Indigenous Literacy Foundation Book Supply Program](#) provides new books to remote communities across Australia and ensure that over 50% of these books feature Indigenous authors and illustrators. Others, such as the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation's [Share a Book](#) program, seek to build and promote libraries and book sharing in underrepresented communities. In Ireland, Children's Books Ireland coordinates [various book gifting programs](#), and in the UK a number of book gifting charities operate with perhaps the best known being [Bookstart](#) run by Book Trust.

In the USA, there are also many charities involved in book gifting. I visited what is perhaps the best known of these - The Dollywood Foundation™ in Sevierville, Tennessee which has operated its signature program, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL), since 1995.

*Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is dedicated to inspiring a love of reading by gifting books free of charge to children from birth to age five, through funding shared by Dolly Parton and local community partners in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and Republic of Ireland. (<https://imaginationlibrary.com/>)*



*Dolly Parton's Office at The Dollywood Foundation*

Globally, there are currently over 2 500 000 children enrolled in the program and over 210 million books have been gifted to children since the program's inception. One in ten children under the age of five in the USA receive books from DPIL – a monumental reach for this charity.

DPIL operates in several countries now, including in Australia under licence with United Way. Currently DPIL operates in every state in Australia, except for Tasmania and Western Australia (with a recent cessation of operation of United Way in WA). United Way hopes to commence a program in Tasmania in the next 6 to 12 months.

DPIL's largest operations in Australia are in Victoria and NSW, and this is due, in large, to funding from the Victorian and NSW State Governments, as well as additional local council funding. In NSW there are 27 whole of community programs, where every child born is eligible for the program, and an additional whole of community program in Goondiwindi, QLD. The whole of community approach includes early literacy wraparounds such as engagement with the local library.

In Victoria, DPIL is available for the state government School Readiness Funding initiative, which means that kindergartens have the option to spend their allocated funding on providing the Imagination Library to children in their service. Kindergartens then incorporate the books in their programming, to build the home to service connection. United Way also provides capacity building resources for educators.

What sets DPIL apart from other book gifting programs is that children are enrolled into the program at birth and remain so until they turn five. During that time, they receive one book a month – a total of 60 free books in the first five years of their life.

Many of these book-gifting programs, including DPIL, include supporting resources for parents. Some are tied to early learning centres where the centres also receive the same books for their libraries. This enables educators to read and talk about books that all children have and undertake extended conversations through repeated readings.

However, where 10% of American children have the benefit of DPIL service, in Australia the reach is much smaller, with 40 000 children in 2023 and approximately 72 000 since its Australian inception in 2013. There is an urgent need for increased funding to support expansion of this or other highly successful programs in Australia.

Book gifting programs are increasingly leading the way in the provision of diverse books showing a recognition of the need for children to have exposure to books that are windows and mirrors. One recent initiative in this area is the recent formation of the [Diverse Books for All Coalition](#) in the USA. This is a coalition of over 30 not for profit groups involved in promoting strong foundations for children in the early years. Several of these groups operate book gifting programs as part of their operations. During my time in Chicago, I attended a webinar to learn more about this group. In the words of Kyle Zimmer of First books and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation:

*The Diverse Books for All Coalition is working to address three issues: the lack of access to affordable, quality children's books by and about diverse cultures and races; the need for a clear narrative about the value and benefits of diverse books; and support for parents, caregivers and educators to effectively define, advocate for and integrate diverse books in their programs, classrooms and communities.*

This group is harnessing a collective influence to aim for systemic change. They are united in a belief that working together can achieve this more quickly than working individually. Their concerns for the impact of poverty combined with a lack of access to accurate diverse representation in books showed a tangible sense of urgency.

Given the numerous benefits of children having access to books from a young age, it is not surprising to learn that book gifting programs have a powerful impact on families and communities. However, what is abundantly clear is that the sustainability and longevity of book gifting programs can significantly extend and amplify the benefits.

A recently published study in the UK, found that book gifting schemes need be long-term to positively influence home literacy environments (Tura et al., 2023). Numerous studies conducted on the success of DPIL attest to this importance. These studies show that parents read aloud more often to their children and that the increase of books in the home has a positive impact on children's literary and language development.

In Australia the DPIL National Impact Report 2021- 2023 reported:

- Children on the Imagination Library are being read to more often, for longer duration and have more books in the home compared to Australian children not on the program.
- Caregivers who read daily or more at baseline were 8 times more likely to still be reading daily or more 12 months after being on the program.
- The Imagination Library increases the use of reading techniques known to be beneficial for language acquisition and development.
- The Imagination Library increases caregiver confidence and enjoyment.
- 90% of caregivers reported spending more quality time together as a family with books (United Way Australia, 2023).

Very importantly, the return on investment for DPIL is exceptional. A recent impact assessment conducted on behalf of DPIL Australia suggests that the program can lead to a 14 point increase in Year 3 NAPLAN scores and “that the monetary benefit of a 14- point increase in Year 3 NAPLAN is around \$2000 per student” (dandolopartners, 2022 p. 17). This is a four to one return on investment. This evaluation goes on to point out this is a conservative estimate and that there are numerous other benefits that flow on to the wider community and this was confirmed to me by Alexandra Irving, the Partnership Manger at United Way Australia

It is not hard to see that inclusion of such programs across underrepresented communities Australia-wide would have far reaching and long-term positive impacts on future generations of Australian children and families.

## The challenge of funding

Despite the success of these programs, one thing is abundantly clear, they all rely on funding to maintain, extend and ensure longevity of their programs. Unsurprisingly, the funding needed to provide multiple books over months and years is substantial and requires long term vision and investment from funding providers.

With the national and international focus on the early years of life, coupled with the importance of teaching children to read being such high priorities, such ventures should be an intrinsic part of government and community initiatives to support families.

From political and economic viewpoints funding is often tied to evidence on return for investment and there is abundant evidence that for every dollar invested in the early years, Australia reaps two in economic benefit.

I highlight though, that provision of books or any other support to families living in poverty, should not simply be viewed through a lens of return for investment. Firstly, support for impoverished children is a social justice issue and secondly, in the words of Australian scholars Iorio and Yelland “Children ...have important stories to share – stories that are responsive to their lives, experiences, and communities” (Iorio & Yelland, 2021). Ensuring children have access to books from a young age, and especially books that reflect their diverse ways of being, assists in responding to children's lives and helps create a more level playing field for all children to contribute to their communities and world.

## Consistent approaches to provision and staffing of school libraries.

Evidence across the world consistently shows a strong link between well-resourced and funded school libraries, especially those staffed with qualified teacher librarians and the literacy outcomes of the students in the school. In Australia, the annual Australian School Library Survey, conducted by Softlink, consistently shows this positive correlation including with positive NAPLAN Reading Literacy results.

Those I visited were unanimous in their call for well-funded school libraries staffed with qualified teacher librarians. School librarians are trained and take the time to assist children to find books that suit their interest, reading ability and potential.

The disparity of services is obvious. Library requirements vary across states, and in some states funding and staffing of libraries decisions are made at individual school level. The evidence shows that schools serving lower SES communities are less likely to have a school library. Thus, there is an urgent need for education departments to look more closely at policies, approaches and funding to ensure all children have access to well-resourced and staffed school libraries.

## Providing time to read during the school day.

Those I worked with on the Fellowship shared a view of the importance of building strong reading cultures in schools. To achieve this, children need access to a wide range of diverse and engaging books and to be given the opportunity and encouragement to select and read books that interest them. By providing children with opportunities to make choices and explore their interests, we can nurture an intrinsic motivation to read and cultivate a lifelong love of reading. With the benefits of reading for pleasure extending to cognitive development, academic achievement and long-term mental health and social outcomes, all children need adequate time to read for pleasure and this should be a central component of classroom time.

## Book Access Summary

Overall, my visits and conversations with experts, scholars, and organizations have reinforced the urgent need for children to have access to diverse books. The impact of equitable access to books, well-funded school libraries, and book gifting programs cannot be underestimated. It is through these initiatives that we can ensure all children can see themselves represented in literature, develop empathy, and thrive academically and socially.

Multiple studies show that the benefits of supporting the early years are more than cost effective when the impact and gains are measured. If more funding was directed towards long term sustained book gifting to children from birth with associated supports for families, it is highly likely there would be a reduced need for costly interventions later in their development.

# The need for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching

Equitable access for all children to diverse books (and books in general) would go a long way towards addressing some of the inequities in education and to providing a critical way to disrupt prejudice and discrimination from an early age. However, diverse books on their own are not enough in today's learning environments. The inequities denying many children access to books also form part of the discourse around identification of children's learning needs.

Throughout the Fellowship a common theme was that of the identification or labelling of many children from underrepresented groups as having gaps that need to be addressed in the classroom. Some frequent terms used to refer to such gaps are literacy poverty, poor literacy background and word gaps. Throughout this report I have frequently mentioned the disproportionate number of children from underrepresented groups in intervention programs that seek to close these perceived gaps and address these perceived deficits.

The scholars I worked with overwhelmingly urged for a shift in focus from seeing and labelling underrepresented children and families as being deficit and in need of fixing. This shift needs an honest appraisal of the factors that create these perceived deficits and a recognition of children's funds of knowledge as well as their agency and capability to contribute to their local and global communities (Adam et al., 2023; Iorio & Yelland, 2021)

As I have outlined in this report, poverty plays an enormous part in the ability of families to provide some of the essential tools to support children's development of the early literacy skills that are valued by the education system and recognised as being precursors to academic success. The previous section of this report highlighted the need for addressing some of the impacts of poverty through the provision of books and supports for families.

However, another factor affecting children from underrepresented backgrounds is an increase in standardised approaches to education. It is important to acknowledge and explore how this relates to the experience of diverse children in education settings. A common theme among the many scholars I met with on my Fellowship, was a frustration at the invisibility of underrepresented groups in classroom resources and practices.

In line with the focus with the key aims of my Fellowship, much of this report has focused on the importance of using diverse books so that all children can see themselves and others reflected, thus improving motivation, belonging, educational outcomes and creating deeper understanding and empathy for others. However, all too frequently the invisibility of underrepresented children extends to other classroom resources including textbooks, decodable and other readers, and other commercially produced or freely available teaching and learning materials. In Australia as with the US and UK, many schools implement commercially produced teaching programs, while educational organisations and departments increasingly seek to provide teachers with ready-made resources to support heavy teaching workload of teachers. These are often prepared and implemented with aims of ensuring high quality and consistent evidence-based instruction.

However, exploration of several well-known and widely promoted commercial and free programs, resources and recommended book lists in Australia shows that in Australia as in the US and UK, many of these reflect monocultural viewpoints and themes. Further, assumptions of shared background knowledge, experiences and understandings is often reflected and compounded in associated resources such as worksheets or recommended texts. There is evidence of some commercial providers engaging with cultural advisers and diverse creators which is encouraging, but this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. It is essential that creators of such programs and resources develop culturally relevant and appropriate resources reflecting Australia's diversity. Further, it is important that those making decisions at school and classroom level as to what resources to purchase and ultimately use, do so through a critical lens with understanding of the importance of visibility and connections for all children.

At the time of submitting this report there are increasing movements by education departments and government agencies such as AERO and AITSL to provide readymade resources for educators. It is imperative that where government funds are involved, there are requirements for creators of such resources to incorporate culturally responsive and relevant reflections of the diversity of Australian society. Further, educators should ensure they adapt resources and approaches to suit the context and communities they serve.

Another theme was the lack of recognition in classrooms of the immense cultural resources and “funds of knowledge” (O’Keeffe et al., 2019, p. 154) that underrepresented children do have but are commonly overlooked or devalued in the curriculum and classroom practices.

While much of the earlier part of this report focused on how a lack of books can impact early reading development, a singular focus on children’s early school-based literacies can lead to an oversight of the many literacies, language skills and capabilities that children do have.

When educators are supported to understand the funds of knowledge, diverse experiences and linguistic diversity that children do bring to the classroom, they can build and extend on these as strengths rather than solely focusing on what the children may need support in to achieve the goals of a standardised curriculum. By sourcing and creating classroom materials that affirm students’ voices, educators can leverage children’s funds of knowledge and give underrepresented children’s backgrounds and cultures equitable space in the classroom. The work of Professor Mariana Souto-Manning, Professor Gloria Boutte, Dr Ian Cushing, Professor Evelyn Arizpe, Dr Navan Govender and the many others I met on my Fellowship gives strong evidence of the success of such approaches in improving the engagement and learning outcomes of all children.

Several of the scholars on my journey generously gifted me with their own recent publications attesting to the success of culturally responsive and relevant practices shown through their own research and work with underrepresented children and communities. In one of these books, *No More Culturally Irrelevant Teaching* (Souto-Manning et al, 2018), Mariana Souto-Manning, president of the Erikson Institute in Chicago, urges a shift in mindset from gaps to debt:

*Making a mindset shift from thinking of gaps to thinking of debts is critical because “the debt language holds us all accountable. When we talk about the gap, we say ‘those kids, those teachers’ when we talk about national debt we all ask: ‘What’s my part in this? How much do I owe?’ So education debt throws it back on all of us. It leads us to ask: What should I be doing” (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Culturally relevant teaching can serve as a pathway for teachers to address this education debt in their own classrooms, instead of blaming students and their families for how they are being failed by schooling and by society. (p. 27).*

Research world-wide shows learning environments where culturally responsive pedagogy is enacted see “promising outcomes among underrepresented student populations” (Morrison et al., 2019, p. v). As part of this, authentic diverse books and materials enacted through CRP should be at the heart of teaching and learning. Diverse school and classroom libraries that represent and reflect their students contribute to safe and productive spaces for students who otherwise may not see themselves in the curriculum. When children see themselves in their classroom materials and are valued through teachers’ approaches, their engagement and motivation for learning grow. When they have these experiences, they can use and build on what they bring to the classroom to enrich not only their learning but that of others around them.

By incorporating authentic diverse books into teaching practices, educators provide opportunities for students to see themselves and others represented in literature. These books can act as mirrors, affirming their identities and validating their experiences. They can also serve as windows, offering insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds. Through culturally relevant books, students can develop empathy, understanding, and a broader worldview.



This plays a significant role in children's development of literacy, their motivation to read and learn, and other academic skills, not to mention their sense of identity and place in the world. Not only does this impact positively on the academic and social outcomes of all children but it serves as a vehicle for educating all children about diverse ways of living and being and thus can help disrupt the development of misunderstanding prejudice and discrimination.

## Impact of culturally responsive use of diverse books

In my role as Teacher Educator and academic researcher, I have been teaching and researching about diverse books for over 15 years. I frequently work closely with preservice teachers, Inservice teachers, school librarians and other educational stakeholders. In late 2022, Edith Cowan University funded a small grant to conduct a study into the impact my work to date has had in classrooms and schools.

This study found the relevance of this research is not limited to educators and their learners but to society in general:

*Understanding how to use diverse books in culturally responsive ways allows educators and school leaders to connect meaningfully with underrepresented members of communities and to bring them into conversations from which they have previously been excluded.*

*Educational professionals in this study noted that their whole school appeared to develop an increased sense of inclusivity and respect for diversity, as well as an increased sense of belonging while, parents from diverse backgrounds felt more included and enjoyed sharing books in their own languages with their child's class or the school library.*

*Educators reported a deep impact on students, leading to several changes in behaviour and attitudes including improved enjoyment during book sharing, increased sense of belonging and reduced bullying behaviour.*

*Many participants across sectors recognised that the value of this work lies in its capacity to begin new conversations, change cultural paradigms, and transform thinking and practice (Enriquez Watt, 2023)*

## Telling evidence about cultural responsiveness and achievement gaps

A very telling study undertaken in 2021 by researchers from the university of NSW suggested a need to reconsider the nature of standardised testing. This study showed that "by adjusting NAPLAN questions to make them culturally relevant to regional and Aboriginal students could close the Indigenous reading gap by 50% and reduce the urban rural gap by a third" (Baker, 2021). In this study, the researchers conducted a randomised control trial with over 1100 students across 20 schools. The researchers made simple changes to test papers given to half of the students in the trial replacing terms likely to be unfamiliar to the students to terms relevant to local knowledge. Examples included changing a reading prompt from referring to a lighthouse to refer to the locally recognised Parkes dish; another changed a question referring to care of a guinea pig to care of a dog, another a reference to an avocado to a chicken, and another changed a treasure map to one using Aboriginal tools.

The results from students taking the modified tests were notable. Indigenous students improved their NAPLAN reading scores by 25 points which moved them from Band 4 to Band 5 which is above the national minimum standard. Not only does this demonstrate that standardised tests may be culturally biased but also that the measures of gaps between Indigenous and rural children and those from metropolitan and more affluent areas are impacted by the nature of standard assessment measures.

One of the researchers, Professor Richard Holden, has been involved in similar trials in the US. He has said “the magnitude of the difference in results suggested culturally appropriate classroom materials, such as textbooks and handouts, could also have a big impact on learning outcomes.”<sup>2</sup>

To the many scholars I worked with on my Fellowship travels, these findings are not surprising. The success stories of these scholars, some of which are outlined later in this report, show that when educators select and use culturally relevant books and teaching materials coupled with culturally responsive pedagogy, the outcomes for children from underrepresented backgrounds are significantly improved.

This raises another very important factor in these discussions, the voices, expertise and evidence of culturally diverse scholars need to be central to discussions and decisions about education policy and practice. These are the people with the greatest knowledge of the needs of culturally diverse children and communities and of the most effective ways to ensure inclusion and success.

## Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Best Practice

### ITE Programs focusing on CRP

There is a strong need for ITE to prepare preservice teachers to employ CRP and culturally relevant teaching. The recommendations of the recently released Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel, (Teacher Education Expert Panel, 2023), includes responsive teaching as core content that should be mandated in national accreditation of ITE programs in Australia. This is articulated as:

**Responsive teaching:** content that ensures teachers teach in ways that are culturally and contextually appropriate and responsive to student need.


This includes core content on:

- First Nations peoples, cultures and perspectives
- cultural responsiveness, including students who have English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D)
- family engagement for learning
- diverse learners, including students with disability (2023, p. 9)

During the Fellowship, I witnessed first-hand ITE courses built on a foundation of CRP. Those responsible for translating requirements of the Strong Beginnings report into national ITE accreditation requirements and into practice in ITE courses would do well to consider such models of exemplary practice.

Both the University of South Carolina and the Erikson Institute in Chicago offer programs specifically built around culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching.

At the University of South Carolina (SC), Professor Boutte has led the design and implementation of what is known as the Urban Education Cohort as part of SC’s Initial Teacher education (ITE) Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Education.

 *is cohort develops teacher leaders with expertise in early childhood (pre K-third grade) curriculum, instruction, and assessment through an in-depth focus on equity issues such as race, ethnicity, language diversity, sexual orientation, and gender identification and a particular emphasis on countering racial bias in and out of schools” (University of South Carolina, 2023).*

<sup>2</sup>Read more about this study here <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/what-s-an-avocado-localising-naplan-questions-lifts-scores-20211209-p59g8b.html>

The program prepares and empowers predominately white middle class preservice teachers to educate children in diverse and multiracial classrooms in culturally responsive ways. This program is having considerable success in providing graduates with a strong foundation in understanding the diverse needs of students and the systemic and social barriers that need to be challenged to support all children to succeed. This program includes a focus on selecting and using culturally relevant books and resources and connecting teaching and learning to children's backgrounds and funds of knowledge. Several graduates of this course have won prestigious SC and Early Childhood Education program awards.

The Erikson Institute in Chicago has recently commenced offering a Master's in Early Childhood Education. The course description places equity at the forefront of the course and unapologetically refers to the need for educators to

*“**to** know how to build on the strengths of every student and much more (and) need to be attuned to individual family dynamics and have a comprehensive understanding of the systemic forces that stand in the way of learning and opportunity” (Erikson Institute, 2023).*

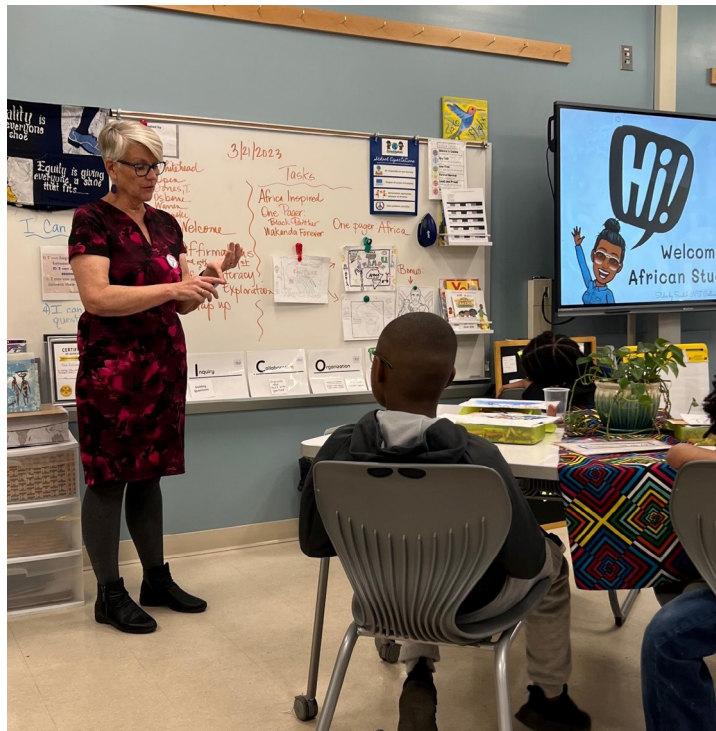
This program is supported with generous scholarships with a goal of boosting the uptake of the course among Black, Latino and Indigenous students. While this course has only just commenced, it is built on similar values and goals to SC's urban cohort – preparing a new generation of teachers with a deep understanding and competency in culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching.

Each of these programs places a strong emphasis on the need for diverse books and resources as an essential component of culturally responsive classrooms and teaching. Further, the importance of such for all children to breakdown barriers of prejudice and discrimination and promote strong intercultural awareness and understanding.

While in South Carolina, I had the privilege of visiting a local elementary school, which serves a predominantly African American population, to watch a graduate from the Urban Education Cohort at SC in action with her Grade Three class. Miss M is a dedicated young teacher who engages in culturally responsive teaching using the mirrors and windows analogy with her children, using a range of diverse books and resources. By actively teaching the children the concepts of mirrors and windows, Miss M has provided them with concrete tools and actions for critically addressing when they and their peers are invisible in the curriculum. The engagement of all the children in their learning was palpable. The children's ability to recognise and talk about these concepts themselves is a testament to the quality and strength of the training she received through Professor Boutte's Urban Education Cohort.

In a second school visit to another elementary school, also serving a predominantly African American population, I observed a music class given by Mr A, one of Gloria's doctoral students tracking and analysing his own journey in culturally relevant teaching. Mr A created and used resources reflecting the diversity of his students and engaged them through connecting to their cultures and communities. To watch him putting this into practice and to see Professor Boutte discussing his practice and coaching him was truly inspiring and strong evidence of the impact that training in culturally relevant pedagogy can have on a teacher's classroom practice.

I also visited an African Studies class taught by Dr E., a member of Professor Boutte's Anti-Racist Collective which is a group of SC faculty members working collaboratively to promote anti racist education. **Dr** E teaches the African Studies class across the entire school but during my visit was working with first grade children. In this, students were actively engaged in learning about their history and important topics related to race, civil rights, and social justice. Watching how the children were being taught about their history, their motherland and their self-worth was truly moving. Central to the lessons were thoughtfully designed resources reflecting the children's cultures and backgrounds and a well-stocked library of books on African and African American history and stories.



*Visiting Dr E's African Studies Class*

These school visits highlighted the impact of culturally responsive teaching and the transformative power it can have on students' educational experiences. They demonstrated the importance of preparing teachers who understand and embrace the diverse needs and backgrounds of their students, and who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to address systemic inequities and promote social justice in education. Very importantly, their classrooms were full of culturally relevant resources including books that reflected the diverse backgrounds of the children.

These examples highlight the significance of intentional and culturally responsive practices in education. By prioritising the needs and experiences of diverse students, providing targeted support and resources for teachers, and recognising the importance of local context and relevance in education, we can create more inclusive and effective learning environments.

### **Embedding CRP through selection and use of culturally diverse literature**

This importance of preparing culturally responsive graduates was apparent through all the ITE institutions I visited. While SC and Erikson have specific ITE programs around CRP, all have embedded culturally responsive use of diverse literature as key components of their literacy units and across their courses. Some scholars showed me examples of course content and outputs from preservice teachers when using diverse books with young children. There was clear evidence that when culturally responsive use of diverse children's literature is developed as part of ITE courses, PSTs develop their own cultural competence, including recognising and challenging their own subconscious biases and building strengths in working with children from underrepresented backgrounds. Just as importantly, graduates are prepared to work through critical lenses to help children challenge systemic and social inequities and break down barriers of prejudice and discrimination.

During my visit to the University of South Carolina and the University of Wisconsin, I presented to two groups of PSTs and one of preservice librarians on my co-authored study into Gender Equity in Children's books in the USA and (Adam & Harper, 2021). In each case I was struck by the passion and commitment these young people have for equitable education. It was strongly evident that these students were developing a very deep understanding of diversity and equity through their courses.

This is something so very much needed in ITE courses. By understanding our past and present and knowing that the ways these are represented in children's books and the curriculum, we can send powerful messages to children that can help shape their lives and our future. This is an important internationally growing focus and recognition of the value of such practices and is timely for Australia with the release of the Strong Beginnings Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (Teacher Education Expert Panel, 2023) and its emphasis on responsive teaching being core content in ITE courses.

## Supporting migrants and refugees

Two of the scholars I met with, Professor Evelyn Arizpe at the University of Glasgow and Professor Julia López-Robertson at University of South Carolina, have expertise in preparing teachers to work with migrant and refugee children. Both scholars spoke at length about the importance of providing a wide range of diverse books to ensure children from migrant and refugee groups can see themselves and the familiarity of their culture and experiences reflected. They also spoke of how such books can be a valuable resource for encouraging conversations about identity and belonging as well as for teachers to get to know and understand the children themselves. Professor López-Robertson's recent experience and research in such classrooms highlights that working with children from migrant and refugee backgrounds classrooms requires additional sensitivities to ensure these children feel safe and included in classrooms. She suggests that even classroom layout and desk positioning must consider the individual child, with migrant or refugee children likely to feel an increased sense of isolation if seated in single rows rather than grouped with peers (Lopez-Robertson, 2023). Culturally responsive approaches involve knowing and responding to the backgrounds and experiences of children when making curriculum and learning decisions.

## Leading through practice

Not only is the inclusion of diverse books an important inclusion in the ITE courses in the universities I visited, but each of the scholars I met during the Fellowship take an active and role in leading by example in their departments and faculties. They do this with a strong belief and focus that to truly serve and work with diverse preservice students (and subsequently the children and communities they go on to serve) the team of academic and professional staff need to enact and understand diversity and diverse perspectives in their own work and lives.

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Portsmouth University conduct staff sharing groups which meet four times a year to discuss different diverse books. Each group selects one of four books, all with themes of race and equity, to read and share. They have negotiated guidelines for the sharing sessions and faculty leadership shows the value placed on this work by including a time allocation in the workload of staff, including designated times to meet and discuss the books. At the University of South Carolina, Professor Boutte leads an Anti-Racist Collective among Faculty members, while at Strathclyde University Dr Navan Govender convenes a Languages, Literacies, and Literatures Praxis Hub. Groups such as these meet regularly to share and learn together. I presented my recent study on diverse representation in award listed Australian children's picture books to members of the Anti-Racist Collective and other faculty members at University of South Carolina. And, while at Strathclyde, I was part of a critical literacies round table forum with the Languages, Literacies, and Literatures Praxis Hub.



*Dinner with Professor Boutte and some her doctoral students  
L-r: Janice Baines, Eli Davis, Saudah Collins, Gloria Boutte, Helen Adam*

The trust and openness of members of these groups is palpable and the courage to reflect and share very openly on the opportunities and challenges of educating for equity and diversity are very apparent. Each of these universities showed a high-level commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion which is strongly articulated through university policies and processes. To successfully prepare graduate teachers with a strong commitment to socially just and equitable education, the environment in which they are learning must not only articulate and teach, but live the very values of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Similarly, the Diverse Books for all Coalition mentioned earlier in this report combines and builds on the collective strength of many seeking the inclusion of diverse books and culturally responsive education as a right for all children.

It is essential to continue supporting and amplifying these efforts, promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing among educators, researchers, policymakers, and community members. By learning from best practices, addressing systemic inequities, and valuing the voices and experiences of all students, we can work towards a more inclusive and just education system.



*Members of Strathclyde University Critical Literacies & Anti-Racist Education Roundtable  
L-R: Kirsty Aitchison, Jenny Carey, Clare Mouat, Jane Catlin, Helen Adam, Dr Zinnia Mevawalla, Navan Govender*

## Leading through policy

Of the countries I visited, Scotland stood out for the incorporation of culturally responsive practice into policy and teacher education. Accreditation requirements for ITE courses in Scotland place recognition and promotion of equity and diversity into key requirements of programme design. For example, the Requirements for Programmes state that the programme design and delivery should “develop and promote equality and diversity and empower students to adopt these principles” (The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2019, p. 7). During the accreditation process, articulation of attention to equality and diversity is closely scrutinised.

The associated professional standards for graduate teachers have strongly articulated requirements for graduates to demonstrate professional values of social justice, trust and respect, and integrity (The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021). As shown in the following diagrams taken from the professional standards, within the elaborations of each of these are numerous requirements relating to equity and social justice and considering the diverse backgrounds of children when making teaching and learning decisions (The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021, pp. 4-5).



*Diagram 1: Professional Value of Social Justice – Scottish Graduate Teacher Requirements*



*Diagram 2: Professional Value of Trust and Respect – Scottish Graduate Teacher Requirements*

## Integrity

Integrity is the practice of being honest and showing a consistent and uncompromising adherence to strong moral and ethical principles and values.

- Demonstrating kindness, honesty, courage, and wisdom.
- Being truthful and trustworthy.
- Critically examining professional beliefs, values and attitudes of self and others in the context of collegiate working.
- Challenging assumptions, biases and professional practice, where appropriate.

### *Diagram 3: Professional Value of Integrity – Scottish Graduate Teacher Requirements*

These professional standards also include the need for graduates to have a “deep awareness of the need for culturally responsive pedagogies” (The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021, p. 5).

This strong commitment to social justice and responsive teaching is further articulated by the Education Department (Education Scotland) which provides support of educators in developing an anti-racist curriculum through a professional learning program for “[Building Racial Literacy](#)”. Some of those I met with at University of Glasgow and University of Strathclyde are key partners in the development and operation of this program.

In line with the accreditation and professional standards set by Education Scotland, at both University of Glasgow and Strathclyde University, the commitment to preparing culturally responsive graduates clearly included ensuring graduates have strong understanding and capabilities in the importance of diverse literature for the inclusion and benefit of all children and as a vehicle to engage learners in critical conversations that can challenge and disrupt prejudice and discrimination.



# Challenges to Diverse Books and Culturally Responsive Practice

## Censorship and its impacts

Despite the evidence of the importance of diverse books being essential for children from underrepresented backgrounds and their potential for challenging and disrupting prejudice and discrimination, there is a strong backlash in the US against the inclusion of diverse books in classrooms, schools and even in public libraries. There is a similar backlash [emerging in the UK](#) and there is evidence that this is taking place in Australia, albeit currently to a lesser extent.

Through my meeting with the [Diverse Books for all Coalition](#), I learnt that despite 71% of American voters opposing book removals (bans) from public libraries and 68% opposing book removal (bans) from school libraries, 27 states have legislation in place restricting provision of diverse books to children. During the first half of the 2022-23 school year there were 2477 recorded instance of individual books being banned representing 874 unique titles. Experts from the Diverse Books for All Coalition and other groups such PEN America and the American Library Association agree that the figures do not fully represent the extent of the book bans and that the “full impact of the book ban movement is greater than can be counted as ‘wholesale bans’<sup>3</sup> are restricting access to untold numbers of books in classrooms and school libraries” (Meehan & Friedman, 2023).

The books challenged and removed are predominantly books with LGBTQI+ characters and themes, and representation of culturally and racially underrepresented groups. Many of these books are recognised on best sellers lists, award winning lists, and with multiple outstanding literary reviews.

*It is important to recognize that books available in schools, whether in a school or classroom library, or as part of a curriculum, were selected by librarians and educators as part of the educational offerings to students. Book bans occur when those choices are overridden by school boards, administrators, teachers, or even politicians, on the basis of a particular book’s content (Meehan & Friedman, 2023)*

These book challenges and bans are led by a vocal minority coordinated in well organised groups who claim they are protecting the right to decide what their children read and thus what they read about. However, in reality these actions ultimately dictate what all children can read and access, thus restricting the rights of the majority of parents and children to intellectual freedom themselves. This trend gathered momentum in 2021 and, in 2022, several US states introduced laws which censor ideas and materials in public schools.

During my visit, the South Carolina Senate was debating a bill called “Transparency and Integrity in Education Act.” This bill aims for censorship and restrictions about the teaching in schools of issues relating to race, civil rights history, and equity. The bill includes the mandating of lists of approved textbooks, children’s books and even of specific content lessons on topics relating to the history of slavery and other more contentious or sensitive parts of history. Similar bills have already been signed into law in Florida, Texas and several other US states. Some of these include a ban on teaching about gender identity and sexual orientation through all grades of primary and secondary schooling.

The combined effect of these advocacy groups and increasing state legislation in many states limiting materials has caused a flow on effect through which entire school districts are pressured to remove books, even when this is contravention their own policies. In some cases, books are removed without either the complainants or those making the decision to remove the books having even read the books in question.

<sup>3</sup> Wholesale bans are those in which entire classrooms and school libraries have been suspended, closed, or emptied of books, either permanently or temporarily.

In other cases, school leadership or school boards are pre-emptively removing large numbers of books, or even restricting children's access to libraries, to avoid complaints or challenges.

These actions are having a flow on effect to public libraries with several US states considering restrictions on funding or even defunding of public libraries and book ban groups targeting libraries with protests and often threats. For example, in June this year, two protesters checked out almost all the books in a [Pride Display in one San Diego library](#) to deny others the opportunity to view or check out the books. These protestors vowed to keep the books until the library eliminates what the protesters have defined as "inappropriate content" for children (Garrick, 2023). In the UK, "[Librarians are increasingly being asked to censor or remove books, and have also faced threats in discussions about the removal of books.](#)" A recent report in the UK shows that a third of librarians have been asked by members of the public to censor or remove books and 82% of librarians expressed concerns about the increase in this type of request.

As with the issues around access to books in general and diverse books in particular, actions to restrict access to books and specifically to diverse books once again disproportionately affect the very children most in need of access to books in general, and specifically to books reflecting their own backgrounds and experience. Further, such actions deprive all children of opportunities to learn about diverse ways of living and being, develop empathy and understanding of those different to themselves and thus to contribute to disrupting the development of prejudice and discrimination.

### Impact on publications and further availability of diverse books

These laws and actions risk turning back the clock regarding the gradual increase in recent years in the publication of diverse children's books. They also impact more broadly on the publication of textbooks and curriculum materials which in many US states now must be approved by state appointed textbook reviewers. An example of this is in Florida where earlier this year an initial review of social studies textbooks for state-wide use resulted in only 19 of 101 submitted books being approved for state-wide use. By mid-June this had increased to 87 of 101 after publishers made "unspecified changes" to comply with the Bureau of Standards and Instructional Support. Some of the material that reviewers labelled as inappropriate included a Grade One textbook containing one image of a same sex family, and a middle school social studies textbook that contained an image of a slave in chains, which reviewers claimed may make some children uncomfortable.

In response to these state laws, some educational publishing companies have moved to appease the legislators and government appointed text approvers. One example given in an article in the New York Times in March (New York Times, 2023) shows [three versions of the same first grade text about Rosa Parks](#) demonstrating the efforts of the publisher to write a version acceptable to mandated textbook approvers.

The existing version of the text reads: "In 1955, Rosa Park broke the law. In her city, the law said African Americans had to give up their seats on the bus if a white person wanted to sit down. She would not give up her seat. The police came and took her to jail."

In an initial version produced for the reviewers the text reads: "Rosa Parks showed courage. One day she rode the bus. She was told to move to a different seat because of the color of her skin. She did not. She did what she believed was right."

In a subsequent version it reads: "Rosa Parks showed courage. One day she rode the bus. She was told to move to a different seat. She did not. She did what she believed was right."

While it is not clear whether any of these were subsequently approved for use in Florida, these examples highlight the attempts by educational publishing companies to modify texts to align with state mandates and approval processes, often resulting in sanitised versions that downplay the historical context and significance of events. For children from underrepresented backgrounds such changes can negate their experiences and backgrounds.

This kind of censorship not only distorts history but also undermines the opportunity for students to critically engage with complex issues and develop a nuanced understanding of the world.

There are also signs that some publishers of children's books are developing a renewed hesitancy to publish books with content that may result in censorship or book bans. This places at risk the continued increase in publication of diverse books identified over recent years by CCBC and CLPE.

In the fortnight before I left Australia for the Fellowship journey, I was invited to comment in Australian media regarding controversies over the rewording of some of Roald Dahl's books. The outcry over Dahl's books had such an impact that the publishers decided to continue to produce the existing versions alongside the newer, edited versions. While I am on record for stating my belief that changes to Dahl's books were short-sighted and unnecessary, the actions of book ban groups and legislated book restrictions beg the question, how is that some can be up in arms about minor changes to Dahl's books but remain silent or supportive when it comes to censoring factual content when teaching history?

Censorship and restrictions on teaching materials have significant implications for education and the development of critical thinking skills to disrupt prejudice and discrimination. It is essential to foster an environment where students can engage with diverse ideas, challenge existing narratives, and develop empathy and understanding. Restricting access to diverse books not only limits children's exposure to different perspectives but also hampers their ability to think critically and engage in meaningful discussions about social issues.

Efforts to suppress diverse literature and censor factual content in educational materials and children's books undermine principles of democracy, freedom of expression, and academic integrity. It is essential for educators, policymakers, and communities to recognize the detrimental impact of censorship on children's education and advocate for the preservation of intellectual freedom in learning environments and libraries. Such signs should be seen as a powerful warning of the potential consequences of limiting intellectual freedom and controlling educational content. This should underscore the importance of protecting diverse perspectives and fostering inclusive learning environments that encourage critical thinking and understanding.

### Threats to educators and librarians

The CCBC's Intellectual Freedom service offers support and advice to many educators and librarians facing book challenges by furnishing them with book reviews and information about awards or recommendations made for specific books so to support educators to engage in open conversations with those raising concerns. Unfortunately, increasingly complainants are lodging formal book ban requests rather than going through a more informal process of approaching the educators to discuss their concerns.

Another impact of restrictive education laws in several US states and the actions of the book ban movement is that, in some schools and school districts, there are educators and librarians being threatened with personal harm to them or their families for having books containing diverse racial characters or diverse gender identity on their classroom or library shelves.

Children's Book Ireland told me of similar threats being made against their staff, along with protests and threats on their doorstep over their publication of a [Pride Reading Guide 2023](#) which compiled a list on 200 LGBTQI+ books for children aged 0-18.

Here in Australia, similar worrying signs of calls for censorship and of threats are emerging. One recent example is the issue of Drag Queen Storytime. This is an initiative where drag performers visit libraries or schools to read stories to children, promoting inclusivity and celebrating diversity. However, this has faced significant backlash from conservative groups who view it as inappropriate or a threat to children's well-being. This has led to protests and threats against librarians and hosts of these events and resulted in cancellation of several planned events across Australia. Despite the positive impact reported by many educators and families who have participated in Drag Queen Storytime events, the surrounding controversy highlights the challenges faced in promoting diverse and inclusive literature.

Similarly, a recent furore over a sex education book for children and young adults led to complaints, online threats, and [abuse of staff in Big W stores](#) resulting in Big W removing the book from its shelves to protect the safety of staff while maintaining the book in their online book sales. The book in question, *Welcome to Sex*, by Yumi Stynes and Dr Melissa Kang, (2023) has since topped Amazon's best seller list showing, that like the US, the majority of people do not support the banning or censoring of books.

In July this year, the Australian Classification Review Board rejected a call to ban graphic novel, *Gender Queer* (Kobabe, 2019). Despite winning multiple awards, this book is also the most challenged and banned book in the US and, as in the US, this call for banning in Australia was led by conservative activists.

In many cases those calling for bans are making false and misleading accusations toward the LGBTQI+ community through the misuse of terms such as grooming, paedophilia and bestiality.

This led me to reflect on criticisms sometimes levelled at those who promote the publication and availability of diverse books. Terms such as "political correctness" (PC) and "culture wars" are often used against those who support inclusion of diverse books, yet my Fellowship has shown that these terms are frequently (and, by some, perhaps unwittingly) used by some to deflect attention from an agenda to drive a war **against** culture, along with a desire for their own version of political correctness.

Scholars in this field, simply want to extend the joys, privileges and gains of reading to ALL children – the right to be seen and the right to read about themselves and others. It is difficult to comprehend that many who agree that literacy and reading is the foundation to learning will counterintuitively be so against simple steps for those who are so often deprived of equitable opportunities to achieve this foundation. It is through books we learn about ourselves, about the world, about how to live and be and what is possible.

## Challenges and support for educators and librarians

Most educators in classrooms across the US, UK and Australia are from Anglo-European backgrounds (Garmon, 2004; Hickling-Hudson, 2005; Johnston et al., 2007; Matias, Nishi, & Sarcedo, 2017). This leads to challenges when selecting diverse books and using these in culturally inclusive and responsive ways. Many educators select books based on their own favourites and these are likely to reflect their own dominant culture viewpoints and ideologies. Some are unaware of the importance and potential of using diverse books. Others experience uncertainty when selecting books that may be perceived as dealing with sensitive topics or worry that using diverse books might upset parents. Some simply do not know how to discuss topics such as race, gender and equity with children (Adam & Byrne, 2023). Campaigns for book banning add to such fear and uncertainty.

My research and that of others, including those I met with during my Fellowship, shows that in cases like this, teachers will often select and use the books they feel safe with (Adam et al., 2021). This often results in repeated exposure to classic and older books with newer diverse books left on the shelves or not selected at all. Alternatively, educators, though well-intentioned, can unwittingly reinforce, or even perpetuate stereotypes and incomplete information about underrepresented groups and about history.

To address these challenges, it is essential to provide educators with the necessary training and resources to navigate sensitive topics and select diverse books that authentically represent different experiences. This includes incorporating culturally relevant and authentic literature into teacher training programs and offering ongoing professional development opportunities. Additionally, it is crucial to foster open and respectful dialogue between educators, parents, and the wider community. Creating spaces for conversations about the importance of diverse books, their impact on children's understanding of themselves and others, and addressing any concerns or misconceptions can help bridge gaps and build understanding.

## Broader political and public discourse and the suppression of history

The suppression of history extends beyond textbooks and into public discourse. Efforts to suppress discussions on race, privilege, and social justice in educational settings reflect a larger backlash against diversity and inclusion initiatives. Politicians and policymakers in several US states, have imposed restrictions on teaching certain topics and concepts related to race and privilege. They argue that such discussions make children uncomfortable or promote a divisive agenda. These actions hinder honest conversations about systemic inequities and impede progress towards a more inclusive society.

In the US there are also ongoing attempts to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in schools and colleges. Several states have conducted hearings to gather information on how government funds are used to support DEI initiatives, signalling a pushback against efforts to address systemic inequalities. In recent months these have resulted in entire courses in African American Studies and gender studies being cancelled and, in some cases, banned. These challenges highlight the ongoing struggles in education to confront historical and present-day injustices, as well as the need for continued advocacy for inclusive education.

The sanitising of history is not just limited to changing texts. During a visit to Charleston with my hosts in South Carolina, Professor Boutte and Professor Johnson, we took a carriage ride through the streets. Our tour guide taught us about the architecture of the buildings and some of the history, including that the cropping of rice from the 1720s to early 1860s made Charleston one of the richest cities in the world at the time. He mentioned that this was economically successful due to the “enslavement of people from Africa.” However, little attention was given to the fact that in nearby buildings these African people were marketed to the highest bidder, nor was there any mention of the displaced, enslaved and often massacred, First Nation peoples who first lived on the land.

Much of the talk focused on the design of housing in Charleston to best accommodate the stiflingly hot conditions. This included the narrow one-room width so windows could be open on both sides to allow for the breeze to cool the houses, and the front porches complete with doors to the street to be closed to protect decency when people were outside in “various stages of undress,” again to account for the heat. But, notably, barely a mention of the ancestors of my hosts, forced to work sunup to sundown in that same heat with no protection and no reward to make those homeowners among the richest people in the world at the time.

While in Tennessee I visited Cades Cove in the Smoky Mountains and saw again how tourist brochures and historical narratives often present a sanitised version of history, selectively omitting or downplaying the experiences of underrepresented communities. In Cade Cove, a tourist brochure mentioned that the land was part of the traditional hunting grounds of the Cherokee that was “acquired by the government and given to settlers.” This failed to mention the displacement and dispossession of the Cherokee people and reduced their ancestral land to a simple acquisition by the government. Such narratives perpetuate a distorted understanding of history and perpetuate the erasure of Indigenous voices and experiences.

There is often a fear of discomfort when it comes to discussing and teaching uncomfortable aspects of history. However, acknowledging history helps us understand how present privileges and inequities are intertwined with past injustices. Children have a right to receive an education that is honest, inclusive, and empowering. Through the selection of diverse and culturally relevant materials, the integration of accurate historical perspectives, and the promotion of critical thinking skills, we can foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of our shared history and encourage students to challenge injustice and promote a more equitable future.

Moreover, truth-telling should extend beyond the classroom. It is essential to engage with local communities, elders, and cultural custodians to gain a deeper understanding of the histories and cultures of the lands we inhabit. By fostering respectful relationships and valuing Indigenous knowledge, we can create inclusive learning environments that honour the truths of the past and empower students to advocate for equity and justice.

## A Vision for the Future – Truth Telling

In sharp contrast to the restrictive push against diverse voices, I had several transformative experiences during the Fellowship that shone a light on the value and importance of truth-telling and sharing of diverse stories.

While in South Carolina, I took part in a personal guided Civil Rights History Tour starting from the African American Monument at the State House and walking down past key sites in Main St. Columbia SC. Many of the foundations of the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties were laid in Columbia SC. My guide D.J. from [Columbia SC 63: Our Story Matters](#) shared powerful stories and insights about the struggles, triumphs, and ongoing fight for racial justice.

Throughout the tour, D.J. emphasized the need for truth-telling and confronting uncomfortable truths about our past. This aligns with the broader theme of my Fellowship journey, where I have encountered numerous examples of the importance of acknowledging and addressing historical injustices.

The Civil Rights History Tour in Columbia was a powerful reminder of the resilience and determination of those who fought for equality and justice. It reinforced the urgent need for ongoing efforts to dismantle systemic racism and create inclusive societies where every individual is treated with dignity and respect. Columbia [SC 63: Our Story Matters](#), is a fantastic example of a platform and groups promoting the stories of diverse groups and their struggles for equity and justice. The stories of courage, resistance and determination were both inspiring and sobering. I could see some strong connections including the way Aboriginal people who served in the Australian army in major conflicts were treated on returning home. I was also reminded how little most Australians know about some of Australia's own historic Aboriginal activists such as Fanny Balbuk in Western Australia.

I also visited the Anne Frank House at the University of South Carolina – an official partner of Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. Doyle Stevick, the centre director took our group through some of the history leading to the atrocities of the Nazi regime. He traced the history of racism across much of the world showing how race has been used to control and dominate people and to justify atrocities thought history. We also visited a replica of the room in which the Frank family spent much of their time in hiding.

A key aspect that stood out was that Hitler had sent his people to the USA to learn about the “successful methods” of segregation and the almost total elimination of the First Nations people. The young Anne Frank herself, compared what was happening at the time to the greatest atrocity known to man at the time – the slave trade.

In Liverpool I visited the [International Slavery Museum](#). This is a raw and confronting exhibition tracing Liverpool's involvement in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. In Liverpool, there is a collective effort in truth-telling about the slave trade and the role of the British Empire in facilitating the atrocities of the slave trade while benefiting enormously from it.

Among the many pieces of information about the slave trade was reference to the way in which the traders intentionally separated families and people from the same communities and mixed them with others who spoke different languages. This was in part to ensure they could not share a common language and pass on their knowledge and customs or work together on plans to subvert the traders. These people were also often banned from using their own languages and not allowed to educate their children.

We have a similar historical record in Australia where Aboriginal people could be punished for speaking their own languages and we have a long record of taking children from their families with many growing up not knowing who their people were.

The work of Ian Cushing, who I met with at Manchester Metropolitan University, shines a spotlight on ways in which current educational policy and practice in the English-speaking world privileges standard language while holding diverse languages, accents or dialects as deficit and unacceptable. Ian talked about practices in many schools, and often endorsed by policy makers and the UK inspectorate that results in children from diverse backgrounds being silenced in classrooms and made to feel inferior and in need of fixing. Ian's work links this to historical silencing and denial of people's rights to use their natural language including that of the slave traders and the banning of Aboriginal people from speaking their own languages. While these conversations deviated from the primary focus of my Fellowship journey, these issues show the importance of culturally responsive practice and the work of scholars such as Ian can inform future policy and practice including those stemming from the recommendations of the Strong Beginning report.

In Manchester, at the suggestion of Ian Cushing, I visited the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre which is housed at the Manchester Central Library. Ahmed Iqbal Ullah was a 13-year-old boy stabbed to death by another student in a racially motivated school playground attack in Manchester in 1986. His death led to an inquiry into racism in Manchester schools and the RACE centre is named in his honour. This is a "specialist open-access library and archive, focusing on the study of race, migration and thinking about race, anti-racist activism and the fight for social justice." This library contains thousands of books and archives freely available for the public to educate themselves and to celebrate the diverse global majority.



*The Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre*

With the many racial inequities faced in Australia, I was led to consider whether centres like this one, through which the public can freely access and learn more about race and social justice in their communities are something that should be much more widespread.

I was inspired by the individuals and organizations I encountered who are dedicated to creating positive change in education. Their passion, knowledge, and unwavering commitment reinforce my belief in the transformative power of education as a catalyst for social justice.

# Findings and Recommendations

My eight-week Churchill Fellowship focused on expanding expertise about culturally diverse children's literature as a means to create more inclusive classrooms and to combat prejudice and discrimination. I travelled through the United States and the United Kingdom, meeting with international experts in culturally responsive education and the importance of diverse children's books for equity and educational transformation. I met with numerous scholars involved in Initial Teacher Education, visited classrooms, visited not-for-profit organisations and explored educational policies and practices.

I identified critical inter-related issues relating to poverty, diversity and equitable access, as well as opportunities and challenges in and to education. In this section of the report, I summarise my key findings and recommendations. I do not suggest that all findings present new knowledge or that aspects of my recommendations are not already taking place in some contexts. Rather I offer these as an informed and connected contribution to the goals of a better, fairer and more equitable education for all children.

This report is intended for a wide audience including: state and federal ministers in related portfolios of education, early childhood, and social services; those in education policy and curriculum; Initial Teacher Educators; principals and other education administrators; preservice and in-service educators; school and public librarians and other library staff members; producers of commercial and freely available teaching programs and resources; philanthropic organisations; and all those in wider society who care for equitable, quality education for all young Australians.

## Key Findings

### **Finding 1: Inequitable access to books for children and families living in poverty.**

There was an undisputed belief throughout the Fellowship that books play an essential role in children's lives and educational settings. However, a strong recurring theme of concern and urgency was the inequitable access to books among children affected by poverty, many of whom are also from underrepresented communities. Prior to beginning formal education, many children and families are precluded from early access to books due to affordability. This hinders poorer children's opportunities for developing school based early literacy skills and understandings which in turn impacts on their readiness for formal instruction and their subsequent overrepresentation in intervention programs. Many underrepresented families and children are disproportionately affected by poverty, and this intersects with findings relating to provision of diverse books.

### **Findings 2: Lack of equity in book access within education settings.**

Disparate distribution of libraries and qualified teacher librarians across schools and communities as well as threats to library funding compound the issue of inequitable book access. This often disproportionately affects poorer and underrepresented communities where school libraries may be the only access children have to books. To combat this, it is crucial to prioritise equitable book access, quality accessible libraries in every learning environment and promote reading for pleasure throughout students' educational journeys.

### **Finding 3: Lack of access to culturally diverse books.**

Current educational landscapes and much of the children's publishing industry rarely reflect the diversity of students in available children's literature. This absence negatively impacts underrepresented children impacting on a sense of belonging in the classroom and motivation to read as well as broader literacy, educational and social-emotional outcomes. The intersection of poverty and underrepresentation in books exacerbates the challenges faced by children from underrepresented and impoverished backgrounds. Among the diverse scholars I met with there was a strong sense of frustration and outrage at the lack of support and vision from governments to address this intersection through policy and action.



#### **Finding 4: Limited opportunities for reading for pleasure.**

Reading for pleasure from an early age fosters positive identity, social-emotional growth, empathy, and comprehension skills. Thus, children need not only high-quality reading instruction throughout their formal education but also regular opportunities to read books for pleasure. For children to be motivated to read for pleasure, they need access to multiple books that reflect and connect to their own lives and backgrounds. Thus, provision of diverse books is essential. Through the Fellowship repeated concerns were raised about limitations on children's opportunities to read for pleasure in educational settings due to competing priorities of instructional time and lack of priority placed on reading for pleasure. This is especially important for those children who may not have access to books at home.

#### **Finding 5: Book gifting programs have proven benefit.**

There is strong evidence that book gifting programs are linked to improved early literacy readiness and increased family literacy practice and that long term, sustained programs over the greatest benefit. Book gifting programs often also ensure equitable provision of diverse books. However, such programs are reliant on funding and need long term investment from government and philanthropic organisations.

#### **Finding 6: The need for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

For educators to effectively integrate diverse books and resources into their practice they need a sound foundation and understanding of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching.

#### **Finding 7: The value of tracking and reporting on diversity in children's books.**

The work of the Cooperative Children's Book Centre in the USA and the Centre for Literacy in Primary education in the UK has influenced the publication rates of diverse literature in those countries and contributed to awareness of the importance and value of diverse books among scholars, teacher educators, teachers and the wider community. Australia would benefit from similar long-term research that tracks and reports on diversity in children's books.

#### **Finding 8: Challenges and threats to culturally responsive education.**

Current challenges to culturally responsive education in the US and UK include book censorship, banning, library restrictions and simplification or erasure of contentious historical aspects. Australia is facing similar movements. Such actions undermine efforts to increase diverse representation in classroom resources and curriculum. Many educators and librarians experience a sense of uncertainty or even fear about including diverse books and resources and in some contexts a fear for personal safety is evident due to an increasing prevalence of threats and protests by those opposing diverse books. This phenomenon has implications for education in Australia, necessitating pre-emptive actions to preserve intellectual freedom in education and broader society.

#### **Broader Implications: Community Education through Truth-Telling.**

Initiatives such as the Columbia SC Civil Rights Tour in South Carolina, the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre in Manchester exemplify the importance and value of truth telling and public education. Acknowledging historical injustices, including slavery and the historical treatment of Indigenous people, fosters community awareness and can inform educational policy, inclusive practices, and culturally diverse pedagogy.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1: Provision of equitable access to books.

Current government educational priorities are aimed at ensuring children receive quality reading instruction in educational settings. Other government priorities and early childhood initiatives aim to address impacts of poverty, and some include aims to improve literacy outcomes for all children. These priorities must expand and link to encompass initiatives that grant families and children access to books from an early age and throughout their school years. Book gifting programs such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) should be expanded and supported across Australia and ongoing funding provided to maintain these programs. Evidence suggests DPIL brings a four to one return on investment and a 14-point improvement on Year Three NAPLAN scores making this a wise and much needed investment. The success of this program in NSW demonstrates the positive impact when state and local governments support such initiatives. Early childhood initiatives by government or philanthropy should also include or be linked to such programs. Integrated and whole system approaches are needed.

### Recommendation 2: Equitable provision and access to libraries.

All schools and early learning settings should be adequately funded and required as part of federal and state government school funding models to have well-resourced school libraries and qualified school librarians. Libraries should be open and available to children and children should be free to select and read books of their own choosing including a diverse range of books reflecting children's diverse backgrounds. Access to, or even provision of, school libraries should be an educational requirement in the interests of equitable, fair and high-quality education. Federal, state and school-based initiatives aimed at improving literacy outcomes should include a requirement for funding allocations to ensure consideration of library provision and accessibility of these for children. Recommendation 3: Equitable access to reading for pleasure. Policies, programs and initiatives that focus on high quality reading instruction must also emphasise reading for pleasure and providing time for this in the school day as a recognised and essential component of quality educational environments. This should also include and recognise the importance of adults, especially carers and educators, frequently reading to children for pleasure and for modelling of reading skills and strategies. These should also include provision and use of a diverse range of books.

### Recommendation 4: Requirements for diverse and equitable representation in books and educational resources.

That government and educational policies relating to provision of educational resources and books, including those available in school libraries, articulate a requirement for diverse and equitable representation in those resources and books. Further, organisations, both commercial and not-for-profit, developing and providing educational resources to support educators ensure development of culturally relevant and appropriate resources reflecting Australia's diversity. In the case of such organisations being contracted and/or funded by government organisations (e.g. Federal or state Education Departments; Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) government funded schools etc) that such funding agreements include requirements relating to provision of culturally relevant and responsive materials. In addition, those making decisions at school and classroom level as to what resources to purchase and ultimately use, do so through a critical lens with understanding of the importance of visibility and connections for all children.

### Recommendation 5: Increase in publication of diverse books.

That children's publishers, including those publishing educational resources, seek the voices and expertise of diverse authors and illustrators when making publishing decisions and aim to equitably reflect the diversity of Australian society in future books and resources.

### **Recommendation 6: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching as part of teacher preparation.**

As one of the four areas of Core Content identified in the Strong Beginnings Report of the Teacher Education Expert panel (2023), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Teaching must be prioritised in Initial Teacher Education programs, and this should include the selection and use of culturally relevant resources. Models of best practice such as the Urban Cohort program at the University of South Carolina and the Master's in Early Childhood Education at The Erikson Institute in Chicago could be considered to guide implementation and development.

### **Recommendation 7: Harnessing the expertise of diverse academics in Initial Teacher Education.**

Initial Teacher Education should involve and engage academics from diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to cultural, linguistic and gender diversity, to prepare future educators for serving diverse student populations.

### **Recommendation 8: Listening to the voices and expertise of diverse scholars.**

Broader government and education initiatives should ensure they seek and heed the voices and expertise of diverse scholars, educators and community members including, but not limited to, those from cultural, linguistic and gender diverse backgrounds.

### **Recommendation 9: Foregrounding of culturally responsive practice in Initial Teacher Education.**

That Initial Teacher Education Accreditation Requirements and Graduate and Professional Standards for Teachers be amended to include requirements for culturally responsive education and capabilities. Models such as the ITE Accreditation Guidelines for Scotland, and the Standard for Provisional Registration for Scotland could be consulted as guiding exemplars.

### **Recommendation 10: Supporting in-service teachers in culturally responsive practice.**

That Inservice teachers be provided with opportunities to develop and strengthen their culturally responsive practice. The Building Racial Literacy program offered by Education Scotland could be used as a exemplar for such professional learning.

### **Recommendation 11: Tracking and reporting of diversity statistics in children's books.**

That further research is funded through government and/or philanthropic grants and enabled to develop sustainable long-term reporting on diversity statistics in Australia. This could be linked to the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature and include presentations to the publishing industry and other stakeholders, research of impact on teachers and children as well as public education initiatives on the benefits and availability of diverse books.

### **Recommendation 12: Support for educators and librarians coupled with community education.**

Educators and librarians should be supported and trusted to effectively define, advocate for and integrate diverse books in their programs, classrooms and communities. Community education initiatives should be encouraged to provide open conversation, opportunities for concerned parents or community members to view diverse books and discuss with informed academics, librarians and other community members.

### **Recommendation 13: Engaging the voices of diverse families and children.**

More research should be undertaken to engage the voices of diverse families and children so that the impact of provision of diverse books can be further demonstrated.

#### **Recommendation 14: Community education initiatives.**

That national, state and local initiatives be undertaken or extended to provide publicly accessible community education on diversity in all its forms and on the more troublesome aspects of Australian history. Research could also extend to engaging with those who object to diverse books in the hope of improving public education by identifying concerns and objections. There is a need for a clear public narrative about the value and benefits of diverse books.

#### **Recommendation 15: Broader Implications: Teacher resources and tests.**

That mandated and other frequently used tests and classroom resources, including teacher designed tests, be adjusted for differing contexts and children to ensure cultural relevance, and thus give children equitable opportunities to succeed in these tests and classroom learning activities. The NAPLAN study conducted by researchers from the University of NSW, demonstrates the difference this can make. While some might argue this would affect the notion of standardisation, I argue this is a necessary consideration and that standardisation itself results in cultural biases. Failure to consider cultural relevance in tests and resources ensures that many of these remain culturally biased thus contributing to the continuation of societal and educational inequities.

# Conclusion: Australia's chance to lead, not simply follow

## Current Opportunities

At the time of writing this report, several key national initiatives are underway, which have the potential to play a part for Australia to transform our education system into one that is more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive. This report has significance to the goals and implementation of each of these.

First, at the time of writing and submitting this report, the national referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament has been defeated. Despite this defeat, what is clear and relevant from my Fellowship journey is the imperative for Australian educational policy initiatives to harness diverse voices, including the voices of Indigenous and other culturally, racially and gender diverse scholars, academics and community members. To ignore or undervalue such voices when making educational decisions continues to be at our own peril, or, more precisely, at the risk of continued inequities in educational outcomes.

Second, another initiative underway at the time of writing this report is the current Federal government enquiry to creating a Better and Fairer Education system. Given the theme of my Fellowship, all of the findings and recommendation of this report have immediate relevance to this enquiry.

Third, another government initiative in its early phases of design and implementation is the Early Childhood Strategy. The findings and recommendations in this report can inform this initiative. In particular, the impact of poverty on children's preparation for formal learning environments, is well known and undisputed. Any initiatives to improve early childhood outcomes and create more equitable education must not overlook the years prior to children joining education settings. Thus, considerations for improving equity and fairness must include provisions and strategies to assist families in poverty to be able to give their children access to books and book sharing as outlined in the recommendations of this report.

Fourth, the recently updated Early Years Learning Framework is currently being implemented across Australia. This framework centres the goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration and principles of diversity and equity. The findings and recommendations in this report can inform the implementation of the EYLF across Australian Early Education and Care at national, state, centre, and educator levels.

Fifth, the findings and recommendation of this report have particular relevance to the implementation of the Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (Teacher Education Expert Panel, 2023) in relation to Core Content 4: Responsive Teaching (2023, p. 9).

Finally, beyond these immediate initiatives, this report is intended for a wide audience including: state and federal ministers in related portfolios of education, early childhood, and social services; those in education policy and curriculum; Initial Teacher Educators; principals and other education administrators; preservice and in-service educators; school and public librarians and other library staff members; professional organisations for educators; producers of commercial and freely available teaching programs and resources; philanthropic organisations; and all those in wider society who care for equitable, quality education for all young Australians.

As we look ahead, it is crucial to recognise that true progress requires a comprehensive understanding of the broader context and the inclusion of the voices of those who have been, and continue to be, underrepresented. Australia must not simply follow trends, and seek guidance from those who have expertise and experience in addressing the challenges we face. The voices of diverse scholars and community groups – learning from them and embracing their lived experience, wisdom and knowledge.

It is a collective responsibility to ensure that every child has access to diverse books, quality teaching practices, and an education that recognises and celebrates their unique identities and backgrounds.

In conclusion, my Churchill Fellowship underscores the significance of culturally diverse children's literature as a tool to address prejudice and discrimination and my Fellowship journey and this report demonstrate the achievement of my Fellowship aims and provides important support for the direction of education in Australia. It is clear that equitable representation of diversity in books and resources makes a difference for all children. Diverse books and resources foster inclusive learning environments which can impact positively on the educational and social outcomes of underrepresented children, they also provide a valuable way to foster empathy and respect, and to break down stereotypes and misunderstanding. Equitable access to books, diverse representation, and culturally responsive pedagogy are vital for fostering inclusive and empathetic educational environments. The implementation of the recommendations from my Churchill Fellowship has the potential to transform the lives of children and positively influence wider society.

# Dissemination and Implementation

This Churchill Fellowship report will be disseminated to specific audiences with an invitation to discuss the report and recommendations further. The initial invitation will be tailored to highlight the most relevant findings and recommendations to each party.

## Audience includes:

- Australian government ministers with responsibility for federal, state and territory Departments of Education and Early Childhood Education and Care
- National and State Commissioners for Children and Young People
- Government education agencies including AITSL and AERO.
- Panel members of the National School Reform Agreement (NRSA)
- Panel members of the Early Years Strategy
- Public, Catholic, and independent school sectors
- The Grattan Institute
- Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)
- Australian Universities offering Initial Teacher Education
- Primary and Secondary Principal Associations
- Publishers of educational resources and commercial education programs
- Publishers of children's books
- Not for profit and other education organisations including but not limited to
  - Primary English Teachers Association of Australia (PETAA)
  - Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA)
  - Australian Association of Teachers of English
  - Literacy Educators Network of Western Australia
  - The Dyslexia SPELD Foundation (DSF)
  - Early Childhood Australia
  - Fogarty Foundation
  - Schools Catalogue Information Service (SCIS)
  - OCHRE Education
  - Foundation of Literacy Learning (FOLL)
- Fellowship hosts and contacts in the UK and US and my Fellowship referees.

## Other dissemination and implementation:

This report will be uploaded to the Winston Churchill platform as well as to the Edith Cowan University School of Education website and linked on the PETAA Website and Early Career Teachers Portal.

I have planned media releases and social media sharing of Key Findings and Recommendations. I intend to create a series of short podcasts and webinars on key findings and develop supporting resources for educators and families, and these will be provided free of charge on the PETAA Early Career Teachers Portal and Edith Cowan university School of Education Webpage. Other organisations may also request to share these.

## I have commenced the following dissemination prior to submitting this report:

- October 2023, Keynote Presentation for PETAA Leading with Literacy Conference – Literature: The Heart of the English Curriculum. Keynote title: “We are outraged – this is urgent!” Diverse books for all: - Teaching English through, and for, social justice.
- I have met with the Federal Minister for Early Childhood, the Hon Dr Anne Aly and, at her request, shared the draft of this report and the Executive Summary with the Preschool Outcomes Measure Expert Advisory Group Expert Panel
- I have shared the draft of this report and the Executive Summary with the Expert Panel for the

### Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

- I have met with and shared the draft of this report and the Executive Summary with Mr Jack McClellan the Director of Policy for the Hon Jason Clare, the Federal Minister for Education.
- I have shared the draft of this report and the Executive Summary with Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People with a view to engaging in conversations to investigate the provision of a race relations centre or library similar to the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre
- With my colleagues Dr Libby-Jackson-Barrett and Associate Professor Matthew Byrne, I have co-designed and developed a short course for educators to be offered by Edith Cowan University to develop intercultural awareness and culturally responsive practice.
- I have provided Input into the revised Western Australian English Curriculum
- I have delivered seminar presentations to:
  - Edith Cowan University research colleagues
  - Literacy Educators Network of Western Australia

## Further Research

I will seek government and philanthropic grants as well as future support offered through the Churchill Trust to undertake further research building on this Fellowship findings including:

- research to capture the voices of diverse children and families about the importance and impact of diverse books in their lives
- research to engage with those who support or advocate for book bans and censorship and seek to understand their motivations and concerns with a view to providing solutions to community concerns through public engagement and education
- research with and for teachers for the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy
- opportunities for Australia to develop educational libraries similar to the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre



# A word to those considering undertaking a Churchill Fellowship

To my fellow Australians who have a passion for improving the lives of their fellow citizens, I encourage you to follow your passion and consider applying for a future Churchill Fellowship.

Take your expertise and passion and develop a plan for how you could build your expertise and bring back fresh ideas and evidence to inform future direction at home. You will encounter more opportunities than you anticipate, seize these and learn from everyone you meet. Plan but be flexible so you have time to think and be in the moment throughout your journey as well as to experience what travel and other ways of living and being have to offer.

I cannot highlight enough the value of the Fellowship to me both personally and professionally and if I could do it all again, I would not hesitate!



*Posing with Winston Churchill's Statue in London*

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## Appendix I: Itinerary

DATE	LOCATIONS	KEY CONTACT	PROFILE & FURTHER INFORMATION
<b>13<sup>th</sup> March - 10<sup>th</sup> April</b>	Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina	Professor Gloria Boutte - Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Carolina Distinguished Professor, Early Childhood Education	<a href="https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/education/faculty-staff/boutte_gloria.php">https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/education/faculty-staff/boutte_gloria.php</a>
	Sevierville Tennessee: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library – Dolly Parton Foundation	Tracy Long Director of Marketing & Development, The Dollywood Foundation	<a href="https://imaginationlibrary.com/usa/">https://imaginationlibrary.com/usa/</a> <a href="https://imaginationlibrary.com/meet-our-team/">https://imaginationlibrary.com/meet-our-team/</a>
	Chicago: Erikson Institute	Professor Mariana Souto-Manning President Erikson Institute	<a href="https://www.erikson.edu/staff/mariana-souto-manning/">https://www.erikson.edu/staff/mariana-souto-manning/</a>
	Maddison, Wisconsin: Cooperative Children's Book Center, University of Wisconsin	Tessa Michaelson Schmidt Director of the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)	<a href="https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/about/staff/">https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/about/staff/</a> <a href="https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/">https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/</a> <a href="https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/intellectual-freedom-2/intellectual-freedom/">https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/intellectual-freedom-2/intellectual-freedom/</a>
<b>10<sup>th</sup> April - 25<sup>th</sup> April</b>	Portsmouth: Portsmouth University	Dr Jaqueline Priego Interim Associate Dean: Global Engagement	<a href="https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/our-staff/jacqueline-priego-herandez">https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/our-staff/jacqueline-priego-herandez</a>
	Uxbridge: Brunel University	Dr Wayne Tennant	<a href="https://www.brunel.ac.uk/people/wayne-tennant">https://www.brunel.ac.uk/people/wayne-tennant</a>
	Oxford: Oxford University	Professor Nicole Mockler (on Sabbatical to Oxford)	<a href="https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/about/our-people/academic-staff/nicole-mockler.html">https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/about/our-people/academic-staff/nicole-mockler.html</a>
	London: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education	Louise Johns-Shepherd -Chief Exec CLPE Phoebe Demeger- Librarian Farrah Serroukh – Research and Development Director CLPE	<a href="https://clpe.org.uk/">https://clpe.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://clpe.org.uk/research/reflecting-realities">https://clpe.org.uk/research/reflecting-realities</a> <a href="https://clpe.org.uk/about-us/meet-the-team">https://clpe.org.uk/about-us/meet-the-team</a>
	Liverpool/Manchester: Manchester City University	Dr Ian Cushing	<a href="https://www.mmu.ac.uk/staff/profile/dr-ian-cushing">https://www.mmu.ac.uk/staff/profile/dr-ian-cushing</a>
<b>17<sup>th</sup> April - 30<sup>th</sup> April</b>	Dublin: Children's books Ireland	Elaina Ryan Jenny Murray	<a href="https://childrensbooksireland.ie/">https://childrensbooksireland.ie/</a> <a href="https://childrensbooksireland.ie/about-us/our-team">https://childrensbooksireland.ie/about-us/our-team</a>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> May - 6<sup>th</sup> May</b>	Glasgow: University of Glasgow, Scotland University of Strathclyde, Scotland	Prof Evelyn Arizpe Professor of Children's Literature	<a href="https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/staff/evelynarizpe/">https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/staff/evelynarizpe/</a>
		Dr Navan Govender – University of Strathclyde	<a href="https://www.strath.ac.uk/staff/govendernavandr/">https://www.strath.ac.uk/staff/govendernavandr/</a>