

# *How do Preschool Teachers Teach Cultural Diversity Using Picture Books?*

Xiaoyue Zhang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Curriculum & Teaching, Teachers College Columbia University*

*a. xz3035@tc.columbia.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Cultural diversity is endorsed by many educators as a major teaching concept due to its significance for the achievement of social equity in education. Recently, the use of picture books to promote cultural diversity has become a trend in early-childhood education. This study examines the attitudes of Chinese preschool teachers toward using picture books to teach topics related to cultural diversity, and their reported practices. Seven preschool teachers from four institutions in Shanghai, China, were surveyed, with three key findings. 1) Teachers interpret cultural diversity in a narrow way, and are usually unaware that they are teaching the concept; 2) Teachers adopt a multifaceted approach to selecting the picture books used for teaching cultural diversity, and see the illustrations as the most important criteria; 3) Teachers often supplement the reading of picture books with their experiences. These results have important implications for preschool teachers, curriculum designers, and organizations that provide training to pre- and in-service early-childhood educators.

**Keywords:** cultural diversity, picture books, early-childhood education, language, literacy.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Multicultural Education**

#### **1.1.1. What is Multicultural Education, and Why is it Important in Contemporary Society?**

Globalization is a process by which distances among nation and regions are constantly shrinking, and connectivity is growing [51]. In this context, tolerance for the world's rich cultural diversity should be fostered, and an essential tool of this is multicultural education, a culturally responsive pedagogy that builds upon the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality [41,32]. Such education involves challenging discrimination and affirming and appreciating the diversity that students, teachers, and their communities represent [42]. Recently, a more progressive approach to multicultural education has moved beyond enhancing appreciation for the variety of cultural forms to empowering social change. According to Banks [6], this endeavor starts with having students understand and question issues related to cultural diversity. It also helps them acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to participate in decisions and actions that promote social equality and justice [6].

### **1.1.2. Teacher Conceptions of Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education is often seen as just an add-on to school offerings already available [61], with teachers understanding it in ways more restricted than the widely-accepted interpretations, which include ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, class, race, ability, and age differences [60]. They tend to interpret multicultural education as a process of delivering education about or to minority ethnic groups. Many school curricula, furthermore, include little content on cultural diversity; it tends to be presented in sidebars and special sections [34]. Teachers, unless highly motivated to teach such content, are unlikely to deal with it seriously.

## **1.2. Picture Books**

### **1.2.1. The Roles of Picture Books**

Picture books, or books in which text and illustrations together tell a story, are ubiquitous in curricula across China and the United States [58]. In recent years, their use in multicultural curricula has been growing due to their effectiveness in fostering cultural sensitivity in young children. Picture books with authentic representations of diverse cultural groups teach children to embrace cultural diversity, and challenge many of the dominant values [1]. In a study by Colby & Lyon [16], picture books are shown to give students the ability to point out problematic portrayals of minority groups in their curriculum materials.

Furthermore, they outperform similar teaching tools in providing immersive cultural experiences. They offer glimpses into the diversity of lives and worlds, and invite entry into whatever world has been created or recreated by the author [7]. Students thus learn to think critically and analytically about diverse cultural phenomena, propose alternative solutions to social problems, and demonstrate understanding in multiple ways.

Finally, picture books can help authenticate cultural identities [38]. For students from both dominant and non-dominant cultural backgrounds, exposure to picture books that mirror their identities helps them develop a sense of belonging to that community [40], while exposure to the cultural experiences of underrepresented groups helps them feel connected to the cultural identities of others [40]. Either way, their multicultural awareness is enhanced.

### **1.2.2. Selection of Picture Books for Teaching Cultural Diversity**

Researchers have reported that teachers apply a variety of picture-book-selection strategies for teaching cultural diversity, guided by evaluation criteria developed either by themselves or by leading researchers [8,43]. They tend to follow the criteria of texts used for other educational purposes: author, story, character, setting, plot, theme, illustrations, and developmental appropriateness [25,55], consulting resources such as websites, picture-book apps, libraries, colleagues, and curriculum directors. However, selection of picture books for multicultural education includes a critical examination of their multicultural aspects, such as the accuracy of the contents [20]. In addition, in dealing with tough topics, stories should not simplify these, but provide multiple perspectives.

According to researchers, the first barrier to selecting high-quality picture books lies with teachers, whose limited experience of multicultural literature limits their abilities to examine cross-cultural issues from perspectives other than their own, and initiate critical conversations on these [12]. This affects pedagogical practices and engenders the second barrier: the overwhelmingly monocultural collections of picture books in classroom book corners [3]. When books that represent other cultures are absent from classroom libraries, dominant values and ideologies are normalized. The third barrier has to do with over-reliance on single texts to provide appropriate representations of cultures. One person's story does not represent the whole story of the cultural group to which that person belongs

[39]. Worse still, when a book portrays a minority group in a stereotyped or outdated way, the one story the children hear may itself be distorted. Mistakes in transmitting the ideologies, values, and practices of a particular culture lead to further misunderstanding and prejudice [13].

### **1.2.3. Use of Picture Books in Teaching Cultural Diversity**

In many recent studies, mere exposure to culturally authentic picture books has limited impact on promoting cultural sensitivity. As [18] states, educators should provide evidence-based cultural-diversity lessons that use picture books, but most teachers are unaware of both the importance of introducing other cultures and their book-sharing practices [12]. For Adam [2], most teachers share picture books without focusing on cultural diversity, which in the long term normalizes the dominant cultural perspectives, and even the few teachers who teach cultural diversity using picture books approach the theme only in terms of cultural celebration and language preservation [2], reflecting a superficial and conservative understanding of multicultural education as education about “celebrations of the joys of diversity” [24].

Overall, teachers show less confidence in using picture books to address cultural diversity than for other purposes. The idea that only cultural “insiders” can present their cultures accurately has much to do with this [31], and teachers will compensate for this perceived limitation by reaching out to cultural insiders to provide students with immersive experiences. By engaging in meaningful conversations with members of diverse cultural groups, students gain a deeper understanding of other cultures, the ability to challenge stereotypes, and improved cross-cultural competence [48, 46].

### **1.3. The Present Study**

The intention of this study is twofold. First, few studies have looked at the promotion of cultural diversity by teachers, and most have been completed within Western contexts. I intend to fill this gap by investigating the attitudes and practices of preschool teachers in relation to cultural diversity. Second, the study area is Shanghai, China, known for its mix of Eastern and Western culture, and therefore a suitable and interesting background for this topic.

The study uses surveys and interviews to explore how preschool teachers teach cultural diversity using picture books. Three themes have emerged from the research findings to assist in answering the sub-questions, which are:

- 1) What are the attitudes of preschool teachers toward teaching cultural diversity using picture books?
- 2) What are their criteria for selecting picture books?
- 3) How do they incorporate these into their multicultural instruction?

## **2. Methodology**

This study adopts a constructivist and interpretivist form of inquiry that centers on the fundamental notion that reality is a finite subjective experience and that multiple interpretations of experience give rise to multiple versions of reality [19]. The researcher makes sense of the participants’ versions of reality by collecting empirical evidence [37]. At the same time, through his or her lens, the researcher interprets the lived reality and situation-specific meanings constructed by the participants.

## 2.1. Participants

Seven Chinese preschool teachers participated in this study, recruited from four preschools: one from a bilingual, Reggio-inspired preschool, two from a monolingual public preschool, one from a bilingual, Montessori-inspired preschool, and three from a monolingual private preschool. Their information is given in the following tables.

Table 1: Participant Demographics.

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	0	0
Female	7	100
Education		
Associate's Degree	1	14.29
Bachelor's Degree	5	71.43
Master's Degree	1	14.29
Years of Teaching		
1-2	2	28.57
3-5	1	14.29
6-10	1	14.29
11-15	2	28.57
> 20	1	14.29
Years of Teaching Preschoolers		
1-2		
3-5	1	14.29
6-10	2	28.57
11-15	1	14.29
> 20	2	28.57
Grade Levels	1	14.29
Junior Kindergarten (Xiaoban)	2	28.57
Middle Kindergarten (Zhongban)	4	57.14
Senior Kindergarten (Daban)	1	14.29

Table 2: Participant Classrooms.

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Numbers of Students		
11-15	1	14.29
15-20	3	42.86
20-25	3	42.86
Numbers of Students from Cultural Minorities <sup>a</sup>		
0	2	28.57
1-5	5	71.14

a For this study, a cultural minority is most appropriately defined by [57] as any group which, because of cultural characteristics, is singled out from the rest of society and subject to unequal treatment. Examples include people with hearing disabilities, non-Han ethnic groups, and those from single-parent families.

Among the seven teachers, five have students from cultural minorities, and four of these created a list of national minorities, including Malaysian, American and French. Only two teachers described their minority students as disabled (autistic) or from single-parent families.

## 2.2. Data Collection

Surveys eliciting quantitative information, followed by semi-structured interviews, were employed to help answer the research questions. The participants were separated into three groups: 1) those who had never taught the concept of cultural diversity; 2) those who had, but never using picture books; and 3) those who had incorporated picture books into their cultural-diversity lessons. Three versions of the surveys and interviews were designed accordingly.

All the surveys were completed on an online Chinese crowdsourcing platform, and consisted of five sections. The first elicited background information on the participants and their classrooms. The second began by asking participants whether they had taught cultural diversity in their classrooms, and whether they had done so using picture books. If they answered “Yes” to both questions, they were directed onto a track in which they were asked how often they conducted cultural-diversity lessons with or without picture books, and the typical length of such a lesson. A “Yes” on the first question and a “No” on the second led to a track asking about the frequency and length of lessons on cultural diversity, and why instructional tools other than picture books were used. Finally, if a participant who answered “No” twice, the reasons she did not teach cultural diversity were explored. At the end of this section, all participants were invited to rank ten teaching activities in terms of effectiveness at promoting cultural diversity. The third section aimed to elicit the attitudes of the participants toward teaching cultural diversity using picture books, asking them to rate three statements: 1) “If used appropriately in a lesson on cultural diversity, picture books can enhance understanding of it”; 2) “Using picture books is essential to teaching cultural diversity”; and 3) “Teaching cultural diversity using picture books can benefit all students”. The fourth section was designed for the participants who had answered “Yes” twice on the second section, and had the goal of documenting the strategies and criteria they typically use for selecting picture books to teach cultural diversity. The final section of the survey explored approaches to teaching cultural diversity using picture books, asking participants how much time they spend sharing picture books and on follow-up activities, as well as the frequency of the latter.

The interviews took place in the schools of the participants, and lasted from 10 to 40 minutes, with all questions open-ended, and categorized into three sections. The first sought opinions on the importance of picture books in promoting cultural diversity. The second section consisted of five questions, with four designed to help the participants elaborate on their responses regarding picture-book selection. One question asked them to identify the similarities and differences in selection for teaching cultural diversity versus other topics. The third section, also building upon the survey responses, invited participants to describe their most successful picture-book lessons related to cultural diversity, and offered ten prompts. For those with no experience teaching cultural diversity, the questions focused on either the factors behind their reluctance to teach it (using picture books), or whether the teaching is too challenging. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses by providing concrete examples from their teaching, and at the end they were invited to make additional comments.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

In this study, the data generated from the surveys and interviews are analyzed separately but discussed together to yield a complete picture of the attitudes and practices of participants in teaching cultural diversity in preschool classrooms.

The survey results were analyzed using program-embedded analysis, which generates representations of numerical data as charts and graphs. For questions that require numerical answers, the mean, mode, standard deviation (SD), and percentages of answers for each question were calculated. For ranking questions, ranking scores were applied to understand the preference level of a given answer.

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended survey questions were interpreted using an inductive approach, which allows research findings to “emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” [54]. [10] five stages of thematic analysis were adopted to examine the raw data and identify common or repeated themes. Then the semi-structured-interview recordings were transcribed, and the responses to the open-ended survey questions documented in the same file. The transcripts and responses were read multiple times, and recordings listened to several times, to ensure accuracy of transcription. In the next phase, the initial codes were generated to identify features of the data relevant to the research questions, with frequent or dominant themes generated by categorizing codes sharing similar patterns, then refined by ensuring that the coded data formed a coherent pattern, and the themes were in close relation to the data set as a whole[22]. Finally, the themes were defined by capturing the essence of each theme and the aspects of the data it captured. For each individual theme, a detailed analysis was provided, quoting extensively from the participants.

## 3. Quantitative-data Analysis

### 3.1. Teaching Cultural Diversity Using Picture Books: Basic Information

All the participants in this study had brought the concept of cultural diversity into their classrooms. In the previous semester or four months, five teachers (71.43%) had often conducted lessons on cultural diversity while two (28.57%) had rarely done so. Over half of the teachers (57.14%) had designed or taught a unit devoted specifically to cultural diversity or related topics, while the remaining 42.86% had never done so.

Six of the seven teachers (85.71%) had used picture books to teach cultural diversity. Among them, four teachers (66.67%) claimed that they had sometimes used picture books to teach cultural diversity, one rarely, and one often. For five of the six picture-book users (83.33%), each cultural-diversity lesson lasted 10 to 30 minutes, while the remaining teacher indicated that her typical cultural-diversity lesson lasted less than 10 minutes.

The one teacher who has never taught cultural diversity using picture books has planned on teaching such a lesson, but has not yet executed the plan.

### 3.2. Teaching Cultural Diversity Using Picture Books: Teacher Attitudes

Overall, the teachers called picture books effective tools for teaching cultural diversity, giving them an average rating of 8.71 out of 10 (SD=1.58). Four teachers (57.14%) gave them a 10 (extremely effective) and the other three an 8, 7 and 6. As methods of teaching cultural diversity, picture books, at 8.5, ranked only behind games (8.67) and ahead of role-playing (6), classroom discussion (4.33), and field trips (4).

Their overall perception of the effectiveness of picture books as a teaching tool is also revealed in their high levels of agreement with the following three statements: 1) “If used appropriately in a



lesson that revolves around cultural diversity, picture books can enhance student understanding of cultural diversity”; 2) “Using picture books is essential for teaching cultural diversity”; and 3) “Teaching cultural diversity using picture books can benefit all students.”

### **3.3. Selecting Picture Books for Teaching Cultural Diversity**

To find picture books to teach cultural diversity, all six of the teachers who have done so have primarily used online resources such as Taobao. Home (16.67%), classroom book corners (66.67%), school libraries (66.67%), and community libraries (16.67%) have been alternative sources. Not all the teachers have asked for recommendations, but all the five who have done so have asked other teachers or curriculum directors. School librarians (40%), parents (20%), picture-book sellers (40%), live-chat representatives (20%), and online information (80%) have also contributed suggestions.

The quality of the text and illustrations were both important for teachers selecting picture books to teach cultural diversity. For the former, plot and story were the most significant, and when asked to state whether they considered the text or illustrations more important, 66.67% said that they are equally important, and 33.33% that the illustrations are more important.

### **3.4. Approaches to Teaching Cultural Diversity Using Picture Books**

In this section, the questions helped the researcher acquire basic information about the frequency of lessons on cultural diversity using picture books, the lengths of lessons, and patterns of planned or unplanned follow-up activities. Data were collected from the six teachers who claimed to have used picture books to teach cultural diversity.

The first part of this section asked how much time teachers spend reading picture books with their students. Most of them (83.33%) spend 10 to 30 minutes doing so, with one teacher (16.67%) spending 30 to 60 minutes.

The second part addressed follow-up activities. Four teachers (66.67%) often incorporate these into their picture-book lessons, while two teachers (33.33%) rarely do so. Five teachers (83.33%) spend 10 to 30 minutes on an activity relevant to the picture book, and one teacher (16.67%) 30 to 60.

Follow-up activities can be categorized into planned and unplanned, and the survey shows that teachers carry out planned more often than unplanned activities. More teachers claimed to use planned activities often (66.67%) than those who claimed the same for unplanned activities (50%). Moreover, one teacher (16.67%) claimed to have never used unplanned activities in her cultural-diversity lessons, while all of the teachers reported that they have used planned activities.

## **4. Qualitative Data Analysis**

### **4.1. Teacher Attitudes toward Teaching Cultural Diversity**

#### **4.1.1. Narrow Understandings of Cultural Diversity**

The teachers in this study exhibited a limited understanding of cultural diversity. Three of the seven teachers explicitly stated either before or during the interviews that “cultural diversity” mainly refers to non-Han people within a social group, and that “cultural minority” is roughly equivalent to “ethnic minority.” When teachers were asked to list all the cultural minorities to which their students belong, most mentioned exclusively their countries of birth, with only two referring to disability (autism) or family structure (single-parent).

However, two of the teachers considered culture from a multifaceted perspective. One teacher, with a masters' degree from a British university, stated that it is "ubiquitous," and that diverse cultures "exist whenever differences, even the most subtle ones, among groups of people can be detected."

Some of the teachers saw attention to diversity as relating to the preservation of local minority-group customs and beliefs. One teacher mentioned in the interview that "the primary goal of teaching cultural diversity is to help students gain a more vivid understanding of the languages, clothing, food, and customs of different ethnic groups." In addition, the teacher spoke of addressing cultural diversity as a matter of concentrating on the unique traits, usually the celebrations, of "non-mainstream" cultures. In fact, when asked to give an example of a successful lesson plan on a topic other than celebrations, the teacher explained that celebrations are the entire focus of her lessons on cultural diversity.

#### **4.1.2. Cultural Diversity as a Peripheral Theme**

Cultural diversity is considered a peripheral theme in the preschool curriculum. Two teachers from a monolingual public preschool told me during their interviews that their preschool has a detailed curriculum, but no focus on cultural diversity. One of them explained this by saying, "I think that the curriculum directors don't place much value on cultural diversity because this school doesn't recruit foreign students." Similarly, a teacher who works for a monolingual private preschool said, "In the contemporary [Chinese] educational context, the majority of preschoolers come from the same cultural background – raised in the same country, speaking the same language, and thinking the same way."

Teachers displayed their indifference toward teaching cultural diversity by misinterpreting the question, "How do preschool teachers use picture books to teach cultural diversity?", as, "How do preschool teachers use picture books in their classrooms?" For example, in answering the question, "Why do you think that using picture books to teach cultural diversity in the preschool setting is important?", four of the seven teachers spoke in general terms of the advantages of using picture books while overlooking the specific issue, that is, teaching cultural diversity. Only two teachers discussed the benefits of using picture books in both cultural-diversity lessons and lessons on other topics.

#### **4.1.3. Teaching Cultural Diversity as Unintentional**

Even though cultural diversity is considered supplementary rather than essential to curricula, all the teachers interviewed have taught, discussed, or at least introduced topics related to it, mindfully or otherwise. In the interviews, several claimed initially that they have seldom or never taught cultural diversity, yet turned out to be very experienced in addressing this topic. For example, a teacher stated at the beginning of the interview that "I don't think my classroom has a particular emphasis on cultural diversity. But I did design a month-long course unit on world-famous landscapes. Oh, and another unit on embracing differences." (Pause.) "Would you call those cultural-diversity lessons?"

One teacher, by participating in this study, came to realize that she has had plenty of experience teaching cultural diversity. Her definition of cultural diversity was broadened by participating in the interview, and she has become more aware of what she does as a teacher. "I reexamined my past teaching and discovered that a lot of my lessons could be counted as covering cultural diversity. For example, last year we spent one month teaching the theme of respecting older people and people with disabilities. Now I see that these can be considered to belong to cultures different from our own, and lessons focusing on them as cultural-diversity lessons."



## **4.2. Selecting Picture Books for Cultural-diversity Lessons**

### **4.2.1. Multi-faceted Selection Criteria**

Teachers take various factors into consideration when selecting picture books to teach cultural diversity, three above all: 1) the children's background; 2) the aspect of the topic on which the books focus; and 3) teacher interest.

### **4.2.2. Children's Background**

Teachers generally believe that children's interests should be central when selecting picture books. To meet these, they carefully select books that are popular with their students. In addition, teachers prefer selecting books that depict cultural groups highly relevant to the experiences of students. One teacher mentioned that when she shared a picture book about a boy with autism who becomes a world-famous artist, it echoed the experience of an autistic child in her class: "My students loved that story because they could relate it to the child with autism."

### **4.2.3. Focus**

In selecting picture books to teach cultural diversity, teachers exhibit a strong preference for topics that have been exhaustively explored. One teacher offered two reasons for this. First, picture books that address popular themes such as celebrations are easy to find. Second, when many picture books on a certain topic exist, lesson design becomes easier by allowing the topic to be approached from different angles. Another teacher said, "Generally speaking, picture books focus on what is most important to a given society. For example, diversity is central to American society, and is therefore fully represented in picture books and other media. As a teacher, I want my students to understand their society and what is most important to it, and I have used picture books to fulfill this objective."

### **4.2.4. Teacher Interest**

According to [9,28], teachers tend to choose picture books with strong personal resonance, since this models personal engagement with and attachment to books, and conveys how important they can be in people's lives. Similarly, in the interviews, teachers considered their personal interests significant in choosing cultural-diversity-themed picture books. According to one teacher, if a teacher has a lot to say about a picture book, he or she will be able to guide in-depth discussions and provide creative opportunities for students to respond. Another offered a complementary view, saying that if a teacher knows nothing about a picture book, he or she cannot make it appealing.

### **4.2.5. Illustrations as the Most Important Selection Criterion**

In the interviews, the teachers rated the quality of illustrations as the most important picture-book-selection criterion due to their advantages in promoting understanding of cultural diversity. According to one teacher, they are often a student's first visual introduction to the outside world. When illustrations shed light on the commonalities and differences among book characters that represent both their own culture and other cultures, the idea that "differences need to be endorsed and appreciated" can be highlighted, and the theme of mutual respect introduced.

Two other teachers pointed out that, in picture-book illustrations, the embellishments of scenes, such as furniture, landscapes, or architecture, "authenticate the cultural settings" and "help make reading immersive for young readers." Also, the media used in these illustrations convey information about cultural settings.

### **4.3. Teaching Cultural Diversity Using Picture Books**

#### **4.3.1. Reading Picture Books in Groups**

Whole-group, teacher-led cultural-diversity lessons include reading picture books and related activities. In each session, both planned and unplanned support are provided to help students grasp the cultural-diversity-related themes. In terms of planned support, teachers invite students to examine how a picture book portrays a certain cultural group in terms of aspects of the characters (physical appearance, clothing, language and accent, and behavior), architecture, and so on. Then, teachers tap into the personal experiences of students by inviting them to state how the cultural experience portrayed in the picture book is different from and similar to their own. However, not all promotion of cultural diversity is explicitly stated in the lesson plans. For example, one teacher mentioned an incident in which a student from France shared how his family had celebrated Christmas the year before. The teacher seized this as an opportunity to discuss the different ways people from diverse backgrounds celebrate Christmas.

The follow-up activities, delivered either within the same instructional period or the next day, deepened student understanding of the themes by motivating participation in immersive cultural experiences designed around the picture book. Unlike the juxtaposition of both planned and unplanned instructional support in picture-book readings, the majority of teachers only used planned activities. Most activities echoed the concept of “learning by doing,” putting students in control of their own learning. Details of this are given in the following sections.

#### **4.3.2. Limitations of Using Picture Books during Group Instruction**

While all seven teachers recognized children’s literature as valuable for promoting principles related to cultural diversity, they were also aware of the “deficiency of first-hand experience” and “isolation of students from a culturally diverse society” that it entails. One teacher said, “While students benefit from the language of the story, direct experience does not come via written words, and they still lack interaction with those from different cultural backgrounds.” Or, as another teacher said: “Students remember and recall cultural facts, but do not truly experience cultures.”

Some teachers provided examples of how the second-hand experience provided by picture books hinders understanding of cultural diversity. One pointed out that, without incorporation of activities such as field trips to consolidate their memory, the plots won’t remain with students long. “One day I read my students a picture book about respecting older people. I tried my best to help them comprehend and remember the plot, but when I asked them to recall it for me on the next day, few could do so. After a field trip to a local nursing home, we reread the book, and this time they seemed more interested. Some of them could link the story to the trip, and the next day most of them could confidently retell the story.”

#### **4.3.3. First-Hand Experience Offsets the Limitations of Using Picture Books**

To offset the limitations of using picture books in preschool classrooms, teachers tend to rely on activities that engage students in authentic cultural experiences. For example, one teacher described how a simulation and the involvement of family immersed her students in a traditional cultural event. “When I used the picture book *The Nian Monster* to teach about the traditional Chinese Spring Festival, I designed an activity in which the students wore firecracker costumes and decorated them with red sticky notes or red paper cut-offs. Then, to musical accompaniment, the students shook these decorations off them to simulate setting off firecrackers. In addition, on a day open to parents, I invited them to join in celebrating the Spring Festival with their children. My students love being immersed in an intense festive atmosphere.” Another teacher used dramatic play involving a sliding

glass door to take students on an exploratory journey into the lives of people with disabilities. “I believe that cramming and direct experience, passive and active learning, are very different. In my classroom, dramatic play offers my students direct and active learning experiences. In this one, each student was assigned a type of disability, and needed to act like a person with that disability. I wanted them to experience what it feels like to have a disability, and learn to respect people who deal with them.”

#### **4.3.4. Independent Reading of Picture Books**

Every day, students are given time to explore the classroom reading corner independently. Time for independent reading is flexible, depending on the schedules of group events, with typically two sessions of 15-30 minutes daily.

In teaching cultural diversity to preschoolers, some teachers add what they perceive as multicultural literature to the book corner, usually centering around cultural events and celebrations. One teacher mentioned that whenever a major festival or other cultural event is approaching, she picks out books related to it and displays them on a separate shelf. Before an independent-reading session, she encourages the students to check these out, and they always love to do so.

#### **4.3.5. Challenges in Promoting Cultural Diversity through Independent Reading**

Teachers have encountered unique challenges in promoting cultural diversity through independent reading. Two teachers mentioned that one of the main challenges comes from the linguistic and cognitive development level of the students.

1) “Most students this age have difficulty recognizing characters, not to mention reading short stories. All they can do at this stage is pretend to read.”

2) “I’ve seen students give all of their attention to irrelevant details when reading picture books on cultural diversity. I use prompts to guide them, but they seem to be ineffective. My point is that some students need more intensive support when they are reading independently, since they are not cognitively developed enough to comprehend the text.”

Two other teachers see large class sizes as a challenge, since they make individualized instruction almost impossible.

1) “I have about 20 students in my class, which means that I can’t provide them all instruction based on their individual learning needs when they are reading independently.”

2) “The primary goals of teaching cultural diversity are to enhance the sense of identity of students, and foster inclusiveness. Teaching should go beyond just the content of picture books, but having too many students makes it almost impossible to do so.”

#### **4.4. Narrow Understanding of Cultural Diversity**

The study shows that perspectives on cultural diversity need to become more comprehensive, moving beyond the idea that it consists simply of the existence of various ethnic minorities within a given society. The latter view has the following background.

First, many official Chinese documents define cultural diversity in terms of diverse ethnic backgrounds. According to Chinese Terms in Urban and Rural Planning, cultural diversity means the presence of diverse forms of cultural representation unique to ethnic groups or geographic regions [14]. In Chinese Terms in Pedagogy, “multicultural education” is defined as a range of strategies educators use to enhance understanding of foreign cultures (Ibid.).

Second, the use of “cultural diversity” and “ethnic diversity” in multiple Chinese scholarly articles suggests that even the most authoritative figures in this field interpret the terms as roughly equivalent [52,49,33]. Even so, in recent years, Chinese researchers have made a conscious effort to extend the

understanding of culture to any groups that have been historically marginalized, though this has not been influential enough to change the nature of the discourse [26,59].

Third, the concept of multicultural education was first raised in China as a response to an influx of ethnic minorities into large cities [62]. The appearance of minority students in previously Han-dominated classrooms created an urgent need for teachers to adapt their strategies to their needs. Therefore, the emphasis on teaching ethnic diversity resulted in a partial understanding of that term among teachers.

#### **4.4.1. Teaching Cultural Diversity as Teaching “Otherness”**

In teaching cultural diversity using picture books, teachers have focused on the exotic nature of non-dominant cultures. This was evident when they shared in the interviews their interpretation of cultural diversity as a special component of the preschool curriculum that attends mainly to the preservation of minority cultural beliefs and customs. Rather than being an intrinsic part of the curriculum, this topic is only introduced at special time, usually when cultural festivals are approaching. This aligns with multiple research findings[1,3]. Scholars have warned against this practice as having the potential to make students from minority cultures feel ‘other’ (Plastow & Hillel, 2010), and this is exacerbated when teachers fail to recognize the need to honor cultural differences in the classroom, as a result of which the cultural identities and practices of minority groups are marginalized, and cultural homogenization and assimilation are justified (Buchori & Dobinson, 2015; Macfarlane, 2004). However, contrary to the findings of [1], while teachers in this study tended to present cultural diversity as outside the lived experiences of their students, this was not at the expense of enhancing their discovery of the similarities among people of different cultural identities. Instead, when sharing picture books with students, some teachers prompt their students to compare and contrast the experiences of the protagonist with their own.

#### **4.4.2. Teaching Cultural Diversity as Unintentional**

Based on the surveys, most of the teachers sometimes address cultural diversity using picture books, while one teacher claimed to have never done so. This finding did not hold true in the interviews, however, with teachers who had claimed to teach cultural diversity using picture books often turning out not to be experienced in teaching this topic. Furthermore, the one who claimed to have had no such experience had at least introduced picture books on diversity-related topics. This unintentionality in addressing cultural diversity in class can be explained as follows.

First, in the preschools from which the seven teachers were recruited, “cultural diversity” is not always identified as a distinct topic in the curriculum. However, this does not mean that it is left unaddressed. Rather, it is broken down into branching topics such as embracing differences and mutual respect, which are then thoroughly explored. In other words, cultural diversity is considered by the schools and teachers as worthy of promoting, though not explicitly.

Second, teacher perceptions of cultural diversity as a peripheral theme also contribute to unawareness of having taught it. As mentioned, teachers generally think of cultural diversity in relation to international students. Because of this, and the fact that most of the teachers in this study have few international students, they naturally believe that the concept is remote from the lived experiences of their students.

#### **4.4.3. Multi-faceted Considerations in Selecting Picture Books for Cultural-diversity Lessons**

Most of the teachers in this study had well-thought-out plans to guide their picture-book selections. In looking for appropriate picture books to teach cultural diversity, they used both human and non-human resources: websites, classroom book corners, school, home and community libraries; other

teachers, curriculum directors, school librarians, parents, picture-book sellers, and live-chat representatives. In addition, they took multiple factors into consideration, including student backgrounds, the richness of the books in addressing the topic, and their own interests.

#### **4.4.4. Advantages**

Such a multifaceted and systematic selection process has been shown by researchers to be able to ensure a high level of student engagement. A teacher's enthusiasm for a book inspires his or her students to read it, and seek out materials related to it [36,56 ,9,28]. When the topic is cultural diversity, students are likely to be motivated to search for more information on unfamiliar cultures. Also, when students are interested in exploring the cultures represented in their classrooms and communities, they will gravitate toward picture books that reflect these cultures. A high level of student engagement in picture-book lessons on cultural diversity arises from a match between teacher and student interests.

#### **4.4.5. The Pitfall of Colorblindness**

Some of the teachers claimed that they selected picture books on the basis of personal preference. Some researchers caution against this practice, asserting that it can result in a disproportionate amount of materials that reflect only the beliefs and perspectives of teachers [1]. When teachers fail to check the inclusivity of their selections, they can easily end up selecting books that are counterproductive to promoting diversity, namely, books in which certain cultural groups are absent or underrepresented [3] A result would be the marginalization of minority students and their forced integration into mainstream culture.

#### **4.4.6. The Pitfall of Using One Book to Represent the Experience of a Cultural Group**

Researchers have pointed out the pitfall of using a single book to portray a cultural group's experience by arguing that a single person's story can never be the whole story of the cultural group to which that person belongs [39]. This danger is also highlighted by [4]: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

In other words, teachers need to create book collections that avoid distortion [39]. Even when shortage of time and resources limits their ability to present the experiences of cultural groups using multiple books, they should always find ways to extend student understanding of those cultural groups beyond the single story.

#### **4.4.7. Illustrations as the Most Important Selection Criterion**

In the survey, illustrations were named one of the three most important picture-book selection criteria. The critical role of illustrations in picture books has already been addressed by an extensive body of literature. According to this research, picture-book illustrations, when used appropriately in classrooms, enhance creativity and critical thinking, help emergent readers with the nuances of language, foster their understanding of written texts, and facilitate their appreciation of art and beauty [21,44]. As [23] states, "A picture book is a unique art form, and every aspect of it is meaningful" (p. 4).

Additionally, while most of the teachers in the survey stated that texts and illustrations are equally important in picture books, for some teachers the importance of illustrations surpassed that of the text. This is in accordance with the argument of [28] that illustrations, rather than simply adding to the



verbal aspects, are a language in their own right, and sometimes provide a visual narrative that tells a story complementary to or even different from the text.

In the interviews, the teachers called illustrations the most important selection criteria because they show students themselves as well as those from other cultural backgrounds, and because the background scenery conveys rich cultural messages that give students a deeper understanding of the cultural groups depicted. This reasoning is substantiated by research finding that high-quality illustrations are effective in ensuring that multiple cultural perspectives are made explicit [28]. What's more, inauthentic representations of cultural groups generate opportunities to debunk stereotypical and tokenistic understandings of cultural diversity.

Given the important role of illustrations in transmitting the values of cultural diversity, further studies are needed to explore and innovate pedagogical practices to support student engagement with picture-book illustrations that highlight diversity. These studies should look into the preferred approaches of teachers to assessing the quality of illustrations, and hopefully propose evidence-based guidelines to refining their practices. Furthermore, studies should investigate and suggest teaching strategies to guide students in critical examination of the following questions: 1) How are diversity and inclusivity represented in the illustrations of selected picture books? 2) How does the illustrator represent diversity in his or her illustrations? 3) Whose voices are reflected, and whose are silenced? 4) How authentic are the illustrations?[28].

#### **4.4.8. First-hand Experience Offsets the Limitations of Using Picture Books in Preschool Classrooms**

One of the major themes that emerged from the qualitative data is that teachers use first-hand experiences to compensate for the dearth of this that comes from only reading. Their claim was that only providing literary experiences fails to immerse students in a culturally diverse society, and counteract the formation of prejudicial thoughts about unfamiliar cultures. To promote student interaction with diverse cultural groups, teachers offer first-hand experiences that take the form of simulations, field trips, and plays, which, as reported by the teachers, are effective in improving narrative recall and enhancing student understanding of cultural diversity.

A substantial body of research has shown the effectiveness of first-hand experiences, or the experiential learning approach, in enhancing multifaceted development of students of all ages [30,29,5]. This approach results in more meaningful learning experiences, since students are never disconnected from their own worlds [50].

Experiential learning is especially efficient in promoting the culturally sensitive dispositions critical for students living in diverse societies. As one of the main types of experiential learning, cultural immersion allows students to interact with individuals from a diverse range of cultures. According to some research, cultural immersion achieved through association with groups with whom students are unfamiliar, or toward which they have negative attitudes, leads to knowledge about other cultures, elimination of preconceived stereotypes, and greater global understanding [48,46]. This was evident in one teacher's use of a field trip to a local nursing home to facilitate a shift in student perspectives on older people. Another type of experiential learning is simulation/role-playing, which has also been used by the teachers in this study as a way of teaching cultural diversity. Research has highlighted the advantage of such immersive activities in helping students develop long-lasting emotional connections to cultural groups different from their own [53]. Accordingly, the teachers here have demonstrated how dramatic play facilitates student empathy for people with disabilities by emphasizing its immersive nature, allowing students to take on the roles of disabled people. Such an authentic cultural experience enables students to reexamine their relationships with self and others [17], and allows them to view themselves and other cultural groups from more sophisticated and multifaceted perspectives [45].



To provide students with a rich variety of experiences geared toward enhancing cultural understanding, teachers should tap into the range of cultural expertise within their communities, a resource that can include facilities committed to cultural inclusion and social equity, and members of minority groups that students have little or no prior experience of. These can maximize the effectiveness of promoting cultural diversity to young children. However, teachers are not equally able to connect students to such resources [62]. Therefore, I suggest that teacher-education programs support such resource outreach by linking teachers with community-resource specialists and enhancing their sensitivity to both ordinary and unconventional community resources. Such programs should also give pre-service or in-service teachers opportunities to explore the diverse ways of utilizing these resources to fulfill their educational objectives.

## 5. Limitations

The small size of the sample (seven participants from four preschools) limits the generalizability of the results. However, the rigor of the study and its in-depth investigation of the use of picture books by the participants lead to findings that are valid for answering my research questions.

Another limitation relates to the demographics of the sample. All seven of the participants work in preschools in Shanghai, five in private institutions that mainly recruit students from middle- or higher-class families. This limits their exposure to students from diverse cultural backgrounds, which in turn contributes to their negligent attitudes toward cultural diversity. If the participants had been selected from a wider variety of cultural backgrounds and institutions from across the country, this finding may not have held true. In addition, the preschools from which the participants were recruited adopt philosophies, policies, and curricula that are similar to one another, giving rise to the similar attitudes toward cultural diversity and picture-book sharing observed in the surveys and interviews.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the attitudes of seven Chinese preschool teachers toward teaching cultural diversity using picture books, and their reported practices. The study found that 1) the teachers have a narrow understanding of cultural diversity, and are usually unaware that their teaching relates to it; 2) when selecting picture books, they consider multiple factors, especially the illustrations; and 3) they typically use first-hand experience to supplement the picture books. The findings should inspire teaching practices that make better use of children's literature to support the teaching of cultural diversity, and have important implications for preschool teachers, curriculum designers, and teacher training.

## References

- [1] Adam, H. J. (2019). *Cultural diversity and children's literature: Kindergarten educators' practices to support principles of cultural diversity through book sharing*. [Doctoral dissertation, Edith Cowan University]. <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/2245>
- [2] Adam, H. (2021). *When authenticity goes missing: How monocultural children's literature is silencing the voices and contributing to invisibility of children from minority backgrounds*. *Education Sciences*, 11(1), 32.
- [3] Adam, H. J., Barratt-Pugh, C., & Haig, Y. (2019). "Portray cultures other than ours": How children's literature is being used to support the diversity goals of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46, 549-563.
- [4] Adichie, C. N. (2016, October 8). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. Streaming Service. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>
- [5] Association for Experiential Education (AEE). (2012). *What is experiential education?* Retrieved July 21, 2021, from <https://www.aee.org/what-is-experiential-education>
- [6] Banks, J. A. (2002). *An introduction to multicultural education*. Needham Heights, M.A.: Allyn and Bacon.

- [7] Bishop, R. S. (1990). *Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3).
- [8] Bishop, R. S. (1997). *Selecting literature for a multicultural curriculum*. In V. J. Harris (Ed.), *Using multiethnic literature in the K-8 classroom* (pp. 1-19). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- [9] Blakeney-Williams, M., & Daly, N. (2013). *How do teachers use picture books to draw on the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms?* *International Art in Early Childhood Research Journal*, 1(1), 1-11.
- [10] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- [11] Buchori, S., & Dobinson, T. (2015). *Diversity in teaching and learning: Practitioners' perspectives in a multicultural early childhood setting in Australia*. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40(1), 71-79.
- [12] Calhoun, C. F. (2018). *Determining how preservice teachers select multicultural children's literature*. [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Alabama] [https://ir.ua.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/5387/file\\_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://ir.ua.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/5387/file_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- [13] Chaudhri, A., & Schau, N. (2016). *Imaginary Indians: Representations of Native Americans in Scholastic Reading Club*. *Children's Literature in Education: An International Quarterly*, 47(1), 18-35.
- [14] China National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies. (2021). *Chinese terms in urban and rural planning*. Beijing, China: Science Press.
- [15] China National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies. (2021). *Chinese terms in pedagogy*. Beijing, China: Science Press.
- [16] Colby, S. A., & Lyon, A. F. (2004). *Heightening awareness about the importance of using multicultural literature*. *Multicultural Education*, 11(3), 24-28.
- [17] Crowder, S. L. (2014). *International service learning: Transformational learning through experience*. [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Western Ontario] <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3810&context=etd>
- [18] Davenport, S. (2021). *Using multicultural picture books to motivate students and foster critical discussions on identity and social justice*. [Doctoral dissertation, Rowan University] <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/2855/>
- [19] Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research*. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [20] Diamond, B. J. & Moore, M. A. (1995). *Multicultural literacy: Mirroring the reality of the classroom*. New York, NY: Longman Publisher.
- [21] Fang, Z. (1996). *Illustrations, text, and the child reader: What are pictures in children's storybooks for?* *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 37(2), 130- 142.
- [22] Fielden, A. L., Sillence, E., & Little, L. (2011). *Children's understandings' of obesity, a thematic analysis*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 6(3). doi: 10.3402/qhw.v6i3.7170
- [23] Giorgis, C. (2012). *The art of picture books*. *Book links*, 22(2), 4-9.
- [24] Gorski, P. (2006). *Complicity with conservatism: the do-politicizing of multicultural and intercultural education*. *Intercultural Education*, 17(2), 163-177.
- [25] Harper, L. J., & Trostle-Brand, S. (2010). *More alike than different: Promoting respect through multicultural books & literacy strategies*. *Childhood Education: Journal of the Association for Childhood Education International*, 86(4), 224-233.
- [26] He, F. (2015). *Challenges and reflections on the localization of multicultural education in China*. *Education Review*, 12, 7-18.
- [27] Johnston, I., Bainbridge, J., & Shariff, F. (2010). *Exploring issues of national identity, ideology and diversity in contemporary Canadian picture books*. *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, 17(2), 75-83.
- [28] Kelly-Ware, J., & Daly, N. (2019). *Using picturebook illustrations to help young children understand diversity*. *International Art in Early Childhood Research Journal*, 1(1), 1-11.
- [29] Kisiel, J. (2006). *Making field trips work*. *Science Teacher*, 73(1), 46-48.
- [30] Kolb, D. (1983). *Experiential learning, experiences as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- [31] Kruse, M. (2001). *Escaping ethnic encapsulation: The role of multicultural children's literature*. *The Delta Gamma Bulletin*, 67(4), 26-32.
- [32] Ladson-Billings, G. (2003). *Critical race theory perspectives on the social studies: The profession policies, and curriculum*. Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Pub.
- [33] Liu, Q. (2007). *Construction and development of multicultural curriculum: A case study of multicultural curriculum development of Leishan Miao nationality*. [Doctoral dissertation, Southwest University]. doi:CNKI:CDMD:1.2007.130965
- [34] Loewen, J. W. (1995). *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong*. New York: New Press.

- [35] Macfarlane, A. (2004). *Kia hiwa ra! Listen to culture -Māori students' plea to educators*. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- [36] Malloy, J. A., Marinak, B. A., & Gambrell, L. B. (2014). Assessing motivation to read: *The Motivation to Read Profile-Revised*. *The Reading Teacher*, 67(4), 273-282.
- [37] Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2011). *Designing qualitative research* (5th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.
- [38] Massey, S. (2015). The multidimensionality of children's picture books for upper grades. *English Journal*, 104(5), 45-58.
- [39] Mendoza, J., & Reese, D. (2001). Examining multicultural picture books for the early childhood classroom: Possibilities and pitfalls. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 3(2), 1-31.
- [40] Moses, M. S. (2002). *Embracing race: Why we need race-conscious education policy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- [41] National Association of Multicultural Education. (2011). Definitions of multicultural education. Retrieved from <http://name.org/names-mission/definition-of-multicultural-education/> on August 7, 2021.
- [42] Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity*. New York, NY: Longman Publishing Group.
- [43] Norton, D. E. (2009). *Multicultural children's literature*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- [44] Olshansky, B. (2008). *The power of pictures: Creating pathways to literacy through art*. California: Jossey-Bass.
- [45] Onosu, O. G. (2020). Cultural immersion: A trigger for transformative learning. *Social Sciences* 9(2), 1-12.
- [46] Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2011). *When groups meet: The dynamics of intergroup contact*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- [47] Plastow, J., & Hillel, M. (2010). *The sands of time: Children's literature: culture, politics and identity*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.
- [48] Ruth, F. (2006). Building and sustaining short-term cross-cultural immersion programs in teacher education. *AILACTE Journal*, 3, 11-24.
- [49] Shen, X. (2005). *The Research of Multicultural Course in China: Its Present Situation and Developing Strategies*. *Journal of Southwest China Normal University*, 31(6), 102-109.
- [50] Short, K., & Burke, C. (1991). *Creating curriculum: Teachers and students as a community of learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- [51] Singh, N. K., Zhang, S., & Besmel, P. (2012). Globalization and language policies of multilingual societies: Some case studies of south east Asia. *Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada*, 12(2), 349-380.
- [52] Su, D. (2013). *Globalization and indigenization: Multicultural education research*. Beijing, China: China Minzu University Press.
- [53] Tal, T., & Morag, O. (2009). Reflective practice as a means for preparing to teach outdoors in an ecological garden. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 20(3), 245-262.
- [54] Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.
- [55] Tunnell, M. O., Jacobs, J. S., Young, T. A., & Bryan, G. (2016). *Children's literature, briefly*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- [56] Weih, T. G. (2008). A book club sheds light on boys and reading. *Middle School Journal*, 40(1), 19-25.
- [57] Wirth, L. (1945). The problem of minority groups. In R. Linton (Ed.), *The science of man in the world crisis* (pp. 347-372). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- [58] Wolfenbarger, C. D., & Sipe, L. (2007). A unique visual and literary art form: Recent research on picturebooks. *Language Arts*, 83(3), 273-280.
- [59] Xu, K., & Hu, P. (2019). Review on the localization of multicultural education theory in China *Contemporary Education and Culture*, 3, 14-23.
- [60] Yaqin, M. Ainul. (2005). *Pendidikan multikultural: Cross-cultural understanding untuk demokrasi dan keadilan*. Yogyakarta: Pilar Media.
- [61] Yuan, H. (2018). Educating culturally responsive Han teachers: Case study of a teacher education program in China. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 20(2), 42- 57.
- [62] Yuan, H. (2017). Multicultural teacher education in China: Preparing culturally responsive teachers in a multiethnic and multicultural country. *US-China Education Review B*, 7(2), 85-97.