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# Using picturebooks to support student teachers to address complex social justice issues in early childhood education settings

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## ABSTRACT

Aotearoa New Zealand society is diverse in its ethnic, cultural and linguistic composition. Teachers in all education settings in this country are required to develop learning focused-cultures that are collaborative, respectful and inclusive for all children/students and their families. In this article, we report on a case study describing how picturebooks were utilised in a compulsory graduate course entitled 'Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing' for preservice early childhood education (ECE) student teachers. Thirteen picturebooks selected to match weekly topics were shared with students in face-to-face and online classes. Weekly reflections by the tertiary lecturer/teacher educator relating to the picturebooks, associated readings and subsequent discussions by students were analysed to explore student teacher responses to the picturebooks. The findings are discussed in relation to exploring the power of picturebooks as pedagogical tools in a tertiary environment and as advocacy and activism provocations for student teachers and teachers to use with children/students and their families.

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## Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) occurs at a crucial time in the development of children's identities and their attitudes towards others (Ministry of Education 2017). Thus ECE teachers play a pivotal role in supporting children as they learn through play with and alongside diverse others. Inclusion, wellbeing, language, culture and identity are central tenets in the Aotearoa New Zealand bicultural curriculum framework document *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education 2017).

Beyond the home, ECE settings are often the first contact that families have with education settings, making them important social spaces for children learning about the world – especially the increasingly complex and diverse societies we live in (Kelly-Ware 2019). *Te Whāriki* points to children's agency and citizenship, describing a vision for children as 'competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body,

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and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society' (p. 5).

Teachers need to enact the aspirations of *Te Whāriki* within the superdiversity of Aotearoa New Zealand (Chan 2019), balancing the interests of the child with the interests of the community. Kelly-Ware (2019) argues that contemporary curriculum should speak to 'the things that really matter in children's lives or in the lives of those who care for them' (Silin, 1995, p. 40 as cited in Kelly-Ware 2019, 56). How, then, can student teachers be supported to advocate for issues like fairness, justice, anti-racism and the concept of a shared humanity – issues of concern to society as a whole in the twenty-first century?

In this article we describe a pedagogical practice involving the use of picturebooks in preservice ECE teacher education to support 'advocacy and activism' (Mevawalla and Archer 2022) in relation to diversity and inclusion.

### The early childhood education context in Aotearoa New Zealand

There were 181,045 children were enrolled in 4,597 ECE services in Aotearoa New Zealand according to the government's ECE Census in June 2022 (Education Counts 2023). While ECE is non-compulsory for children from birth to five years in this country, participation of three-to-four year-olds in ECE is higher than the OECD average. Rates for three-year-olds were 87% in New Zealand compared with 71% across the OECD (OECD 2014). In 2022, 97% of children had previously attended ECE prior to school entry. The average number of weekly hours per child enrolment in 2022 was 21.6 hours (Education Counts 2023). Hence, more children are attending ECE in this country than ever before, and learning with and alongside diverse others, a concept central to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 2017).

The ECE Census also identified that women account for 97% of teaching staff in the ECE workforce, and 73% of qualified teaching staff identify as European Pākehā.<sup>1</sup> Seventy percent of teaching staff in ECE are qualified and half of the ECE teaching workforce are aged between 31 and 51 years of age (Education Counts 2023). These statistics show the limited extent of diversity in the ECE teacher workforce when compared to the diversity found amongst children and their families in ECE settings.

The Education Review Office (ERO), the government's external evaluation agency charged with monitoring and facilitating improvement in early learning centres and schools, reports that nowadays more than 200 languages are spoken in this country and that one-third of children in this country have an overseas born parent (Education Review Office 2022). 'Today New Zealand children are growing up in a diverse society that comprises people from a wide variety of cultures and ethnicities. *Te Whāriki* supports children from all backgrounds to grow up strong in identity, language and culture' (Ministry of Education 2017, 7). Hence, to support culturally responsive teaching, initial teacher education and ongoing professional development are of vital importance.

To be qualified to teach in an ECE centre in Aotearoa New Zealand, teaching staff must hold a recognised ECE teaching qualification from one of 17 ECE teacher education providers that leads to registration with the New Zealand Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. ECE teachers can gain either a three-year Bachelor of Teaching (ECE), or a one year Graduate Diploma of Teaching (ECE) for graduates who already have a degree in another field. Cherrington and Shuker (2012) conducted a national survey of ECE settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. Questionnaires were completed by

335 licensed ECE services (approximately 10% of the sector at that time). Survey questions focused on educators' experiences of and attitudes towards diversity, and the effectiveness of their practices when working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. The findings identified multiple dimensions of family diversity including refugee families, families experiencing poverty, families with a parent in prison, and children with multiple special needs that teachers may or may not have collected formal or informal information about. In their conclusion Cherrington and Shuker (2012) highlighted the critical role for providers of initial teacher education and professional development of addressing issues of diversity and inclusion.

While there is some research about effective ECE teacher education in New Zealand (Kane 2005; Nuttall 2012; Zhang 2021), there is little if any which explores the potential of picturebooks when working in the area of teacher preparation in tertiary settings.

## Literature Review

There is extensive literature supporting the use of picturebooks in educational contexts including ECE (Foe, Kelly-Ware, and Daly 2022; Fuimaono, Daly, and Kelly-Ware 2023; Kelly 2012; Morgan & Kelly-Ware, 2016), primary (Arizpe and Styles 2015; Blakeney-William and Daly 2013; Daly, Kleker, and Short 2021, 2022; Pantaleo 2008) and secondary (Taliaferro 2009). Conversely, the body of work exploring how children's literature can be used in tertiary education contexts is small but growing. An early study in the USA, for example, explored how picturebooks could be used with undergraduate education majors to support learning about theories of learning and development (Meyerson 2006). A few years later Johnston and Bainbridge (2014) coordinated research into how Canadian children's literature supported explorations of diversity for preservice Canadian teachers. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Daly and Blakeney-Williams (2015) also documented the use of picturebooks in teacher education across a range of curriculum areas including science, visual arts, drama, mathematics and literacy. Their findings showed the potential of picturebooks to increase content knowledge, develop visual analysis skills, work with negative attitudes and to open discussion concerning social and cultural topics.

More recently, a conference exploring the use of children's literature in tertiary education has led to the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Literacy Education* (Compagnaro, Daly, and Short 2021). Hartmann and Hélot (2021) worked with French preservice teachers to explore how a trilingual picturebook featuring French, German and Alsace could be used to develop awareness of biliteracy and multilingualism. Hoffmann's (2021) work with German preservice teachers and picturebooks also showed how the reading aloud of picturebooks supported the teachers' awareness of how literacy develops. In the Southwestern USA, Daly and Short (2022) worked with nine preservice teachers and showed how working with dual language picturebooks from around the world led to the development of a critical language awareness among the participants.

Evans (2015) explored challenging and controversial picturebooks in some depth, noting that while parents are often very happy for their children to read early nineteenth century folktales involving sex and violence retold by the Grimm brothers, more conservative decisions are made in relation to contemporary picturebooks, particularly those published in England and the USA. She explains that while many

assume that picturebooks are for children only due to their emphasis on illustration and brief text,

there are increasing numbers of picturebooks where the age of the implied reader is questionable. These are picturebooks whose controversial subject matter and unconventional, often unsettling styles of illustration challenge the readers, pushing them to question and probe deeper to understand what the book is about ... they compel the reader to respond to them and ask questions and in many instances are intrinsically philosophical, dealing with fundamental issues and asking 'big questions' which often form the basis of life. (p. 4)

In summary, this literature shows us the potential of picturebooks for working with tertiary students, in particular in relation to intercultural awareness and challenging topics, but to date, the use of picturebooks in ECE preservice teacher education has not been explored. In this article we aim to answer the question, *How can picturebooks support student teachers' critical understandings about diversity, difference and inclusion necessary to work with diverse children and their families?*

## Theoretical framework

Early childhood teachers play a critical role in the lives of young children and their families.

And teacher educators are tasked with preparing future teachers to work with the children and their families in culturally responsive and inclusive ways (Education Council 2017). This graduate course and this article draw on 'activism and advocacy in early childhood' (Mevawalla and Archer 2022) as a theoretical framework. This framework is consistent with *Te Whāriki* where '... teachers are urged to use "critical inquiry and problem solving to shape their practice ... and to promote equitable practices with children, parents and whānau"' (pp. 59, 62). The curriculum document explicitly refers to "critical theory perspectives challenge disparities, injustices, inequalities and perceived norms" (p. 62). Critical theory perspectives are also fundamental to critical multiculturalism and in keeping with renewed/revisioned anti-bias approaches to socially relevant curriculum' (Kelly-Ware 2019, 56).

'Activism and advocacy in early childhood' as a theoretical framework is also underpinned by rights perspectives as found in United Nations Conventions on: the rights of the child (United Nations 1989; the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations 2007b), the rights of indigenous people (United Nations 2007a), and the concept of global citizenship. This framework involves: investigating concepts of inclusion, social justice and equity as educational issues for young children; engaging critically with discourses related to inclusive ECE; understanding the professional expectations for teachers, and examining ways to address issues of injustice and exclusion in the context of ECE teaching.

## Method

A qualitative and interpretive approach was utilized in this bounded case study research (Cohen, Manion, and Morris 2000). The case involved exploration of the use of picturebooks as a teaching pedagogy in a compulsory English-medium graduate course focused

**Table 1.** Topics and picturebooks used in TEACH403 class over a nine-week period.

Week	Topics	Picturebooks used in the research
1	Multiple perspectives on Wellbeing	<i>This is our House</i> by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Bob Graham (Rosen et al. 1996)
2	Children's rights and citizenship	<i>For each and every child: He taonga tonu te tamariki</i> by Alex Collins and Hēni Jacob (Learning Media, 2010) <i>For every child</i> by Caroline Castle, illustrated by John Burningham (Phyllis Fogelman Books, 2001)
3	Ableism, disability and special needs	<i>Colour the stars. Taea ngā whetū</i> by Dawn McMillan and Ngaere Roberts, illustrated by Keinyo White (Scholastic, 2022)
4	Socio economic status, class and classism (Prison, Foodbank)	<i>Last stop on Market Street</i> by Matt de la Pena and Christian Robinson (Penguin Random House, 2017) <i>Milo imagines the world</i> by Matt de la Pena and Christian Robinson (Pan Macmillan, 2022)
5	Multiple perspectives on gender	<i>Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress</i> by Christine Baldacchino and Isabelle Malenfant (Groundwood Books, 2014)
6	Newcomers to this country: Refugees and migrants	<i>My Two blankets</i> by Irena Kobald and Freya Blackwood (Little Hare, 2017) <i>The Name Jar</i> by Yangsook Choi (Random House, 2001)
7	Xenophobia, otherness and 'who is 'us'?	<i>The Proudest Blue</i> by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali, illustrated by Hatem Aly (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2019) <i>Yo soy Muslim</i> by Mark Gonzalez and Mehrdokht Amini (Simon and Schuster, 2017) <i>Aya and the Butterfly</i> by Maysoun Salama and Jenny Cooper (Ministry of Education 2021)
8	#1 Spiritualities #2 Children, physical activity and obesity	<i>The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden</i> by Heather Smith and Rachel Wada (Orca Books, 2020) Student suggestion: <i>Brontorina</i> by James Howe and Randy Cecil (Candlewick Press, 2010)
9	Teaching and learning for all Courageous conversations	Student suggestion: <i>Enough</i> by Sarah Johnson and Deborah Hinde (Picturebook Publishing, 2021)

on diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. English language picturebooks were selected to support the weekly topics covered in the course (see Table 1) and shared with preservice ECE student teachers in online and face-to-face classes across a nine-week trimester period.

### Context

The research was conducted in the context of a Graduate Diploma in Teaching ECE – a one year (three trimester) programme recognised by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. The degree was made up of nine taught courses alongside professional experience in licensed ECE settings totalling 80 days. The course which is at the centre of this research spanned nine weeks in Trimester B before the students' final six-week Professional Experience block. Students were expected to spend 36 hours in class over the trimester either face to face or online to cover the course content. The course description stated: 'In this course, student teachers will develop critical understandings about diversity, difference and inclusion necessary to work with diverse children and their families in order that early childhood settings become places where everyone involved feels they belong and can contribute' (Paper outline).

### **The chosen picturebooks**

The 13 picturebooks selected (see [Table 1](#)) were jointly chosen by Author N and Author J (the lecturer for this course) from a list of possible books linked to the weekly topics curated by Author N. Two other picturebooks were introduced by student teachers near the end of the course. Each week the lecturer (Author J) read the designated picturebook aloud in class and/or provided a YouTube recording (by various authors, presenters, and individuals) for the students who were studying online.

*This is our house* (Rosen et al. 1996) was used as an introduction to the course about diversity, wellbeing and inclusion, with the focus of Week 1 being wellbeing. In this story, George (the protagonist) excludes children from his cardboard house based on their identities, for example they are girls, or small people, or twins, or like tunnelling, and they are not allowed in. When George vacates the 'house' as he needs to go to the toilet, the other children crowd in and exclude him.

Children's rights and citizenship were the focus in Week 2, and two picturebooks were used, both focusing on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC, United Nations 1989) - *For each and every child: He taonga tonu te tamariki* (Collins & Jacob, 2010) and *For every child* (Castle & Burningham, 2001). Both picturebooks focus on specific rights which are illustrated in words and text. The first book published by UNICEF in New Zealand is bilingual (English/Māori) and explains UNCROC in child-friendly language while the latter book details 15 of the most important rights for children, each with a specific illustration by a different artist from around the world. Ableism was the focus of Week 3, and *Colour the Stars* (McMillan, Roberts & White, 2022) was chosen. This picturebook tells the story of two boys, one of whom is blind and one sighted, learning different ways of sensing colour. Two picturebooks by the same author and illustrator were used for the Week 4 focus on socioeconomic status. *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Pena & Robinson, 2017) is the story of a boy travelling on the bus with his grandmother to help at a foodbank, and *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Pena & Robinson, 2022) features a young boy (Milo) and his sister travelling on the underground to visit their mother who is in prison. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino & Malenfant, 2014) was shared in Week 5 when the focus was multiple perspectives on gender. The eponymous main character, Morris enjoys wearing the tangerine dress from the dress-up box at school, but he faces ongoing negative judgement from his peers.

The experiences of refugees and migrants were the focus of Week 6, and two books were shared for this topic. *My Two Blankets* (Kobald & Blackwood, 2017) tells the story of a refugee girl learning a new language, using the metaphor of a blanket for each language. *The Name Jar* (Yangsook Choi, 2001) focuses on the name of a Korean child which is unfamiliar to her classmates, and how they respond. Three picturebooks were used for the Week 7 focus on xenophobia and 'who is us?' *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad & Ali, 2019) is the story of two sisters going to school, one of whom is wearing a hijab for the first time. *Yo soy Muslim* (Gonzalez & Amini, 2017) is a poetic love letter from a father to his daughter, affirming her Muslim Identity. Lastly, *Aya and the butterfly* (Salama & Cooper, 2021) is written by Aya's grandmother who lost her beloved son (Aya's father) in the Christchurch (New Zealand) Mosque massacre on 15 March 2019. Written to help children come to terms with grief, and dedicated to the children and families of the Muslim

community whose lives were changed forever on that day, this picturebook was circulated to all ECE settings and schools in this country free of charge by the MoE.

In Week 8 the featured picturebook was *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden* (Smith & Wada, 2020) inspired by the true story of the wind phone in Otsuchi, Japan set up following the devastating 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. This picturebook tells the story of a disaster and the phone booth that provided a place to connect people to their lost loved ones, supporting their grief. In Week 8 the focus was 'Children, physical exercise and obesity', and a student shared a picturebook called *Brontorina* (Howe & Cecil, 2010) a story about a dinosaur who knows, in her heart, that she is meant to be a ballerina despite her size and lack of grace. In the final week of the course (Week 9) the topic was inclusive teaching and having courageous conversations, and a student shared a picturebook *Enough* (Johnson & Hinde, 2021), a story about community, kindness and the power of helping hands. This picturebook was written to support younger children to reflect on and make sense of what has happened in the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Ethical approval**

The project received institutional ethical approval from the Division of Education Ethics Committee. In the first instance permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Chair of the School in which Author J was teaching/lecturing. Author J was then invited to participate as a participant-researcher. Students were informed that their lecturer was participating in this research but that they were not expected to contribute data due to the Pandemic restrictions which were in place across the period of the research.

### **Data collected**

Data collected included two semi-structured interviews, one conducted before Author J began teaching the course using picturebooks in her pedagogy, and one after the nine week period of using picturebooks. In addition, weekly reflections from the participant researcher (Author J), audio recorded each week after the classes where she shared the picturebooks, formed part of the data set. The audio recordings were transcribed by Author N, and then checked with Author J before thematic analysis commenced (Braun and Clarke 2006).

### **Participant**

Author J describes herself as a 62-year-old Pākehā<sup>2</sup> woman who has been working in the ECE sector for 42 years. Throughout her education, she had teachers and lecturers who loved picturebooks, and she has access to an extensive picturebook collection at the Teaching Resources Library at her university. She has been a preservice ECE tertiary lecturer/teacher educator for more than 15 years. She completed her PhD thesis on the topic of negotiating fairness and diversity in an Aotearoa New Zealand kindergarten (ECE setting), and as part of her research she had observed an example of a picturebook *This is our house* (Rosen & Graham, 2007) being used as a pedagogical

tool possibly to address a ‘homophobic bullying’ incident between several children that she had observed and alerted teachers to. A teacher read the picturebook aloud at the end of the session and children and their families were observed responding to the ideas therein (Kelly-Ware 2018). These significant experiences indirectly led to her being involved in this research.

## Findings and discussion

After all the transcriptions from the pre and post interviews and 8 weeks of reflections were checked and then read, the following themes emerged from the data: (1) Communicating complex ideas in accessible ways; (2) Picturebooks as agents of change; (3) Picturebook pedagogy. These themes will now be discussed in relation to the specific picturebooks being used.

### Communicating complex ideas in accessible ways

Many of the reflections from Author J, completed after using the picturebooks in her teacher education classes, reflected on the power of the picturebooks to communicate complex ideas in accessible ways. For example, in Week 2 of the nine-week paper using two picturebooks (see Table 1), she reflected, ‘[t]he two books were able to cover a whole lot of information succinctly and simply in words and pictures’. And in Week 5 where the focus was on multiple perspectives of gender (heteronormativity and sexism) she noted how the picturebook also reflected emotions, for example, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* encouraged the students to see how a little boy feels/responds from being teased for enjoying wearing a dress. Author J noted that the picturebooks also gave students a way to voice things. *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota’s Garden* featured as part of the Week 8 focus on spirituality. The story is set in Japan in the aftermath of a tsunami which takes the life of the protagonist’s father. Mr Hirota sets up an old-fashioned phone booth in his garden for bereaved people to speak to their loved ones, and this helps a little boy find his voice. ‘They [the students] got to think about the concept behind Mr Hirota’s garden – there is another place where people who die go to, and you can connect with them. That notion was really provocative for students to think about’. The students commented on the topics in the picturebook including grief, hope, sadness and spirituality. *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota’s Garden* (Smith & Wada, 2020) also encapsulated a complex story of loss and grief in a simple story which enabled the student teachers to come closer to understanding the enormity of the after-effects of the Japanese tsunami, and the ongoing effects of loss and grief.

In the Week 3 focus on Ableism, Author J shared *Colour the Stars* (Macmillan, Roberts & White, 2022), and reflected that the picturebook supported the students to look at the world differently, through the experiences of a blind child. She noted that it prompted students to consider how often ‘disability’ among children is discussed as a ‘deficit’, but this picturebook enabled everyone to see the blind child’s deepened connection with sound, touch and smell, and his friend better understood his experiences. Author J pointed out the particular power of picturebooks to communicate complex ideas in an accessible way: ‘I wasn’t very familiar with some of the books beforehand like *Colour the Stars*, so when the students had an amazing reaction to it. . . it prompted them to think

about their senses, and how they favour one at the expense of the rest, and when one (sense) is impaired, like vision, how you have to...they got when the child was choosing things to describe the sun as a colour...I could give them an article to read, but the picturebook gave them the message in a much more accessible way, and it connected with their emotions’.

This theme relating to the use of picturebooks in tertiary contexts to communicate complex ideas in accessible ways aligns with findings from previous studies which have examined how picturebooks support understandings in relation to cultural identities. Daly and Barbour (2023) used picturebooks reflecting the cultural identities of students and tutors in a large second-year Arts paper, showing that part of the power of these picturebooks was to present complex cultural events succinctly, within a time-frame that allowed for discussion amongst students in the tutorial.

### Picturebooks as agents of change

In Author J’s weekly reflections on her use of picturebooks in her tertiary ECE preservice teacher pedagogy, it was clear that the picturebooks were powerful agents of change. They fostered new understandings among the ECE student teachers, as they came to grips with ‘big’ ideas like poverty, racism, heteronormativity and xenophobia and consequently they were supported to consider changes in society. This concurs with the findings of Daly and Blakeney-Williams (2015) whose work with eight teacher educators showed the potential of picturebooks to model pedagogy for future teachers, to make links to communities, language and cultures, to develop visual analysis. In Week 5 when the class focussed on gender identities, and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino & Malenfant, 2014) was the featured picturebook, she noted that the students discussed supporting children’s working theories about gender identity. ‘It was the perfect book to help them consider a whole lot of issues around children performing their gender ... once again we see the power of picturebooks’. In Week 6 when *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) was read, Author J in her lecturer role overheard several Asian student teachers reconsidering their practice of choosing English names for themselves ‘because they were easier’ as well as discussion about the importance of teachers learning how to pronounce unfamiliar names. She noted that this picturebook ‘was a beautiful story highlighting how language can be a barrier but can also be overcome through kindness and making an effort to say someone’s name correctly’. In Week 7 after reading *Ava and the Butterfly* (Salama & Cooper, 2021), Author J noted a realisation among the students that as ECE teachers they would have a role in supporting children to deal with traumatic events, difficult experiences, and emotions. In Week 4 when *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Pena & Robinson, 2022) was the featured picturebook, Author J could see her students’ awareness of ‘the danger of a single story’ (Adichie, 2009) in relation to Milo’s imaginings about people he saw on/from the train when he was going with his sister to visit their mother in prison. The students discussed not making judgments based on appearances, and the alternative backstories to the characters that Milo, the eponymous main character, encountered and drew. They also noted the importance of checking whether the books, available in the ECE settings where they gained professional experience, supported or disrupted stereotypes. Half-way through the course, at the end of Week 4 Author J reflected, ‘Our care in selecting picturebooks which fit all kinds of social justice themes is encouraging student teachers to be agents of change’.

## Picturebook pedagogy

After 9 weeks of sharing picturebooks with ECE preservice student teachers (five of which she had to convert to online pedagogy for the whole cohort because of a lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic), Author J was impressed by the power of picturebooks in her own pedagogy:

'I knew about the power of picturebooks but I don't think that I fully comprehended the power that they would have to reinforce key messages in this paper [course]. . . Somehow the students hearing someone reading, whether it was me face-to-face or someone else electronically, the experience of being read a story with key messages in it was hugely [powerful]. . . I got to see the power of it when I read students' online posts when they got together in small groups and curated their learning. Picturebooks came to be a significant part of each week . . .'. [final interview transcription]

Author J also reflected on the power of picturebooks in combination with other classroom resources. She believed that the combination of three things – an academic reading, a TED talk or other YouTube recording and the picturebook came together in powerful ways especially when there were strong synergies between them. Author J gave an example from Week 4 when the topic was socioeconomic status, class, and classism. The resources available to student teachers included a TED Global talk 'The danger of a single story' by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (Adichie, 2009) about stereotypes, a peer reviewed academic journal article *Building on windows and mirrors: Encouraging the disruption of single stories through children's literature* (Tschida, Ryan, and Swenson Ticknor 2014) and picturebooks *Milo imagines the world* (de la Pena & Robinson, 2021) and *Last stop on Market street* (de la Pena & Robinson, 2015). She said, 'I don't think they [the students] connect with their emotions in an academic article like they do in a picturebook'.

In summary, Author J noted that she was very committed to using picturebooks whenever she taught this paper: 'I'm not doing this paper again without those picturebooks'. When we discussed what is needed to support tertiary teachers in using picturebook pedagogy, she identified a supportive librarian. Certainly being involved in the research enhanced her commitment and connection to the picturebooks. She did not have to hunt around for resources each week. 'I've always thought I could find a picturebooks about this or that [topics], but this has been much more thoughtful and prepared'. It was a new paper, so it was a good time to try deliberate and intentional new pedagogies. She felt that the pedagogy could be transferred to other papers she teaches in the preservice ECE teacher education programme. She noted the very positive response from her students: 'Even at the end of the paper, the students were still talking about the take-away messages from the picturebooks'.

## Conclusion

In this research, we sought to answer the research question - *How can picturebooks support student teachers' critical understandings about diversity, difference, and inclusion necessary to work with diverse children and their families?* The key finding from this nine-week bounded case study, was the realisation of the rich potential of picturebooks to explore ideas related to diversity, identity, and wellbeing, as much for the

tertiary lecturer/teacher educator (Author J) as the preservice ECE student teachers. Really this finding is nothing new. It concurs with findings published by Daly and Barbour (2023) who showed the power of bilingual picturebooks being used to teach first-year Arts students about language contact phenomenon (interactions between languages which are used together in a community). Similarly, Hartmann and Hélot (2021) showed the power of dual-language picturebooks with preservice teachers in France to increase knowledge of bilingualism and biliteracy, and Daly and Short (2022) worked with preservice teachers from the USA to raise critical language awareness in relation to language and power. There is no doubt, it seems, that carefully selected picturebooks, despite being written primarily for children, have immense pedagogical potential with tertiary students.

What is new in this research is the power of picturebooks in the particular context of ECE teacher education, and their potential to foster advocacy and activism in relation to the broad range of social justice topics related to diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. Student teachers encountered sometimes new and often complex social issues and contemplated their own actions and possibilities to be agents of change – choosing not to use English names or being open to seeing diversity and difference (and the many associated ‘isms) from alternative perspectives. They pledged to check the picturebook collections in their professional experience ECE settings for negative or limiting stereotypes and to advocate for inclusive picturebooks to be available to young children and their families. They realised how powerful picturebooks are pedagogically, and how they can support them as teachers, and children and families, to be advocates and activists in relation to issues of diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. These student teachers also began to envisage their roles and responsibilities as teachers and community members to take action following tragedies or significant events or when they witnessed exclusion and unfairness.

Previous research shows the power of picturebooks in relation to ‘difficult’ or ‘challenging’ topics (Evans 2015; Ommundsen, Haaland, and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2021), and in particular in relation to Intercultural Awareness (ICC). Our findings from this nine-week bounded case study support this work in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE teacher education context. Our data clearly shows the ways in which the carefully selected picturebooks encouraged deep discussions and questions relating to issues of inclusion, wellbeing, identity, language, and ability. While the current study focused on the voice of the tertiary lecturer/teacher educator (Author J), future research exploring student voice would add depth and richness to our understandings of how and why picturebooks can be pedagogically powerful. We also acknowledge that carefully choosing relevant picturebooks is at the heart of their pedagogical success, and future work examining how picturebooks are chosen, is also important.

## Notes

1. Pākēhā is the term used to describe New Zealanders of European ancestry.
2. Pākēhā is the term used to describe New Zealanders of European ancestry.

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