

INTENTIONAL SHELVES: BIAS, REPRESENTATION, AND EQUITY IN EARLY LITERACY

KELLY MELTON, M.S.

- Children's Book Author
- Technical Consultant
- Educator/Trainer

The Itsy Bitsy Scholars, LLC



AGENDA

- Why Early Literacy Matters
- The Power of Representation
- Bookshelf Audit Activity
- Literacy and the School-to Prison Pipeline
- 10 Ways Early Childhood Professionals Can Check Their Biases



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)



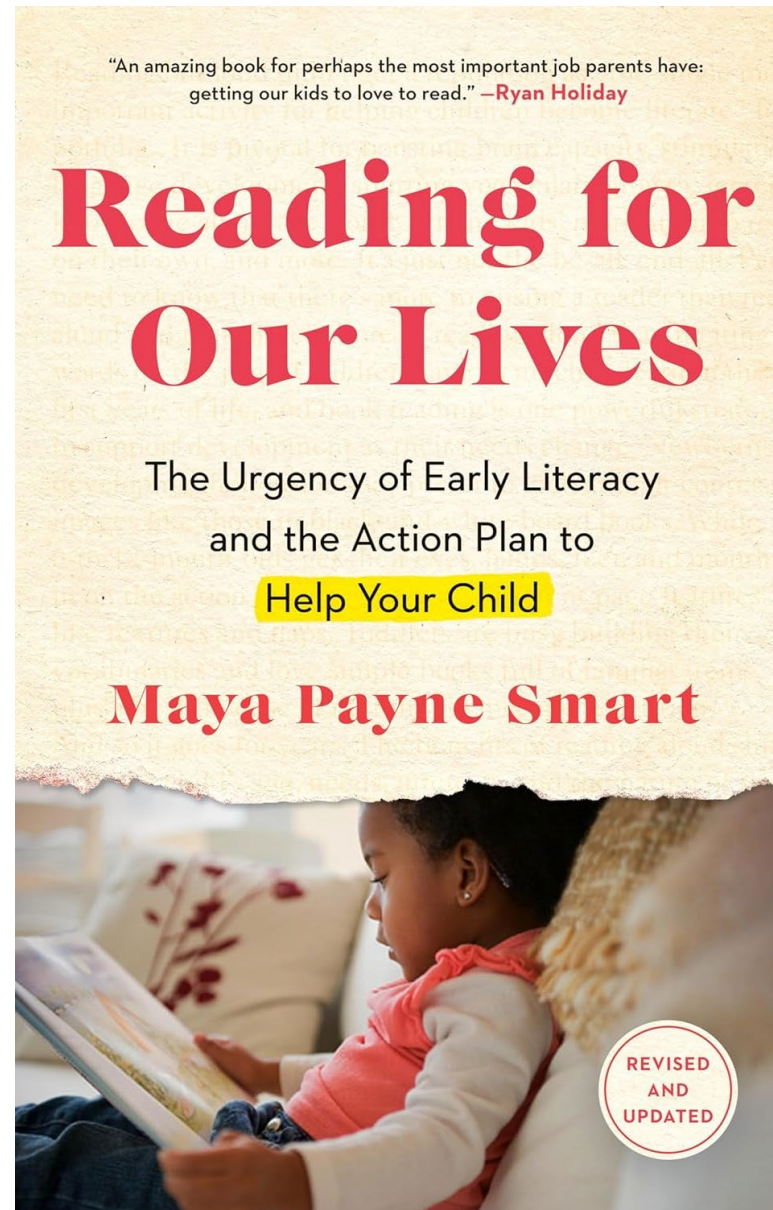
■ AGENDA CONTINUED

■ -Real-Life Scenario Discussion

■ -Final Reflection/Call to Action

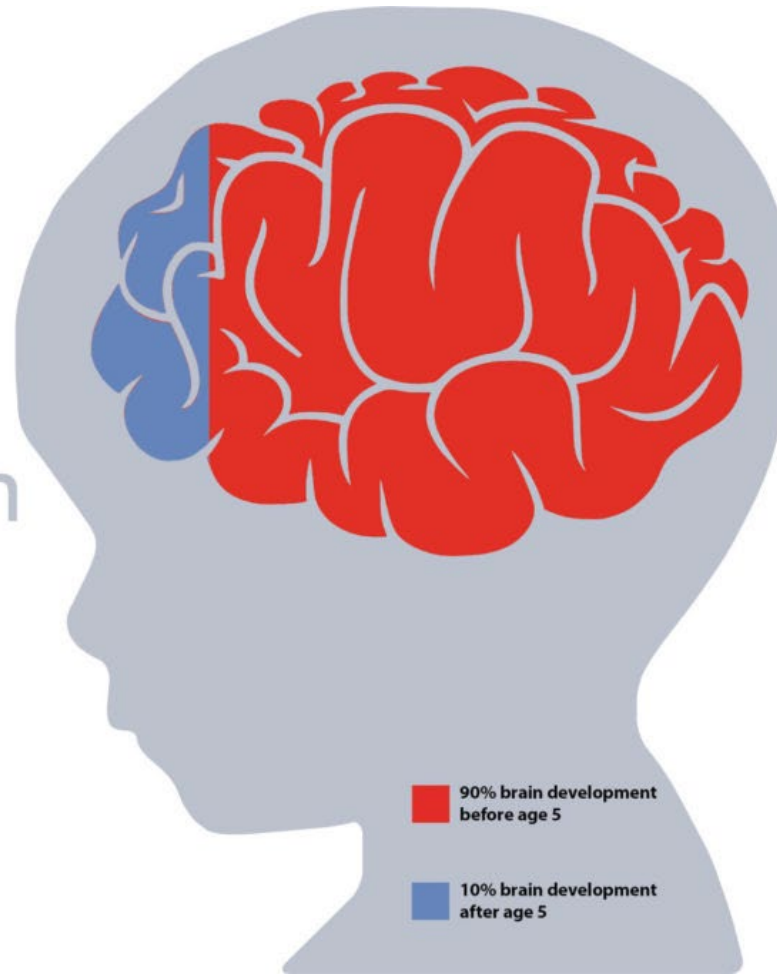
■ -Take home a Culturally Inclusive Book List and Add to it!


■ -Take home a list of Authors of Color in ECE Literature and Add to it!



- “We lack the basic systems of care, communication, connection, and family support required to nurture critical language and literacy skills in children from birth. We focus time, attention, and resources on the school years neglecting the foundational brain, language, and social development upon which school and life success rest.” – Maya Smart

90%
of a child's brain
development
happens before
age 5





In the first few years of life, a child's brain is growing faster than it ever will again. During this time, **the brain makes up to a million new connections (synapses) every second.** These connections are like “wiring” that allows children to think, feel, and learn.

But here's the key: not all of those connections will last. The brain keeps the ones that are used often and trims away the ones that aren't. This is why people often say: “**use it or lose it.**” Every time a child hears words, plays, is comforted, or explores, those experiences strengthen brain connections that support learning and healthy development.

What parents and caregivers can do:

Talk and read often: Every conversation builds language and thinking skills.

Play together: Playtime helps children practice problem-solving, imagination, and social skills.

Provide comfort and love: Positive, caring relationships strengthen emotional development.

Encourage exploration: Safe opportunities to touch, move, and discover help the brain learn about the world.

In short, everyday interactions — talking, reading, playing, singing, cuddling — are the building blocks of a strong, healthy brain.

WHY EARLY LITERACY MATTERS

- Early Literacy is foundational for lifelong learning and success.
- Gaps in early literacy often contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline
- Language and literacy skills support cognitive, social-emotional and academic development



SIX WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN EARLY LITERACY

■ CONVERSATION

- Talk with children throughout the day — describe what you're doing, ask questions, and listen to their responses. Every conversation builds vocabulary and thinking skills.

■ BOOK SHARING

- Read together every day. Let children hold the book, turn the pages, and point to pictures. Reading aloud makes stories come alive and creates joyful moments.

■ TEACHING THROUGH PLAY

- Play pretend, sing songs, and do everyday activities together. Play helps children learn problem-solving, imagination, and language in a natural way.





■Connecting with Community

- Tell parents to partner with helpers like doctors, teachers, and librarians. They can share tips, free resources, and guidance to support children's learning.

■Investing

- Take advantage of opportunities like tutors, libraries, museums, and story times. These experiences broaden children's world and spark curiosity.

■Advocacy

- Speak up for early literacy in your community — support libraries, schools, and programs that give all children access to books and learning opportunities



WHY REPRESENTATION MATTERS IN BOOKS

Children need to see themselves and others positively reflected in literature.

- Books can affirm identity, build empathy, and challenge stereotypes.

- Inclusive representation fosters a sense of belonging and pride.



BOOKSHELF AUDIT ACTIVITY

- Participants will choose one book on the table and answer these questions about the book:
- -Who is represented?
- -Are the characters diverse in race, family structure, ability, gender, etc.?
- -Who has power or voice in the story?
- *Choose one person from the small group to be the speaker that answers these questions aloud.*

DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2018

Percentage of books depicting characters from diverse backgrounds based on the 2018 publishing statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison: ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp



Illustration by David Huyck, in consultation with Sarah Park Dahlen
Released under a Creative Commons BY-SA license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>



The CCBC inventory includes 3,134 books published in 2018. This graphic would not have been possible without the statistics compiled by the CCBC, and the review and feedback we received from Edith Campbell, Molly Beth Griffin, K. T. Hanning, Debbie Reese, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and Madeline Tyner. Many thanks.

2020 REPRESENTATION IN CHILDRENS PICTURE BOOKS



41% White



29% Animals



12% Black



9% Asian



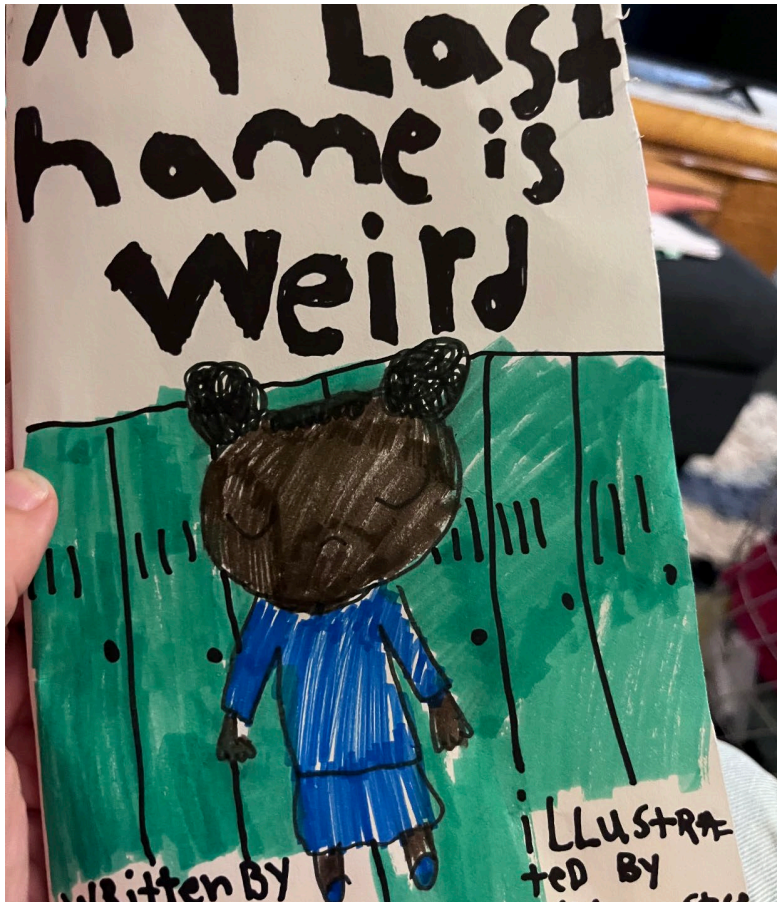
6% Latinx



3% Disability

0.001% Pacific Islander
0.008% Arab

STORYTELLING & REPRESENTATION – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE



- My Book, Did you say baby?, is a book about Raylan's emotions as he prepares for his new sibling to arrive.
- It highlights social-emotional learning from the child's perspective.
- Books can inspire meaningful conversations about change, emotions, and identity.
- Parents shared how their children felt seen in the story. They also shared how they were inspired to create their own stories.



LITERACY AND THE SCHOOL- TO- PRISON PIPELINE


The School-to-Prison Pipeline is a pattern where school policies and systemic inequities disproportionately push marginalized students—especially Black and Brown children—out of classrooms and into the criminal justice system.



-Low reading proficiency is one of the strongest predictors of incarceration.

-Children not reading on grade level by 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.


-Poor literacy skills can lead to behavioral issues, suspension, and disengagement from school.

- 
- Systemic barriers like lack of access to diverse books and early learning resources contribute to these outcomes.
 - Early literacy is a protective factor.
 - Quality early learning experiences can interrupt the pipeline.
 - Culturally responsive, inclusive literacy environments support children's self-worth, communication, and academic engagement.



10 WAYS TO CHECK YOUR BIAS AS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL

- 1) Reflect on your own identity & experiences – Consider how your background, upbringing, and culture influence your perceptions of children and families.
- 2) Conduct a classroom Audit –Review books, posters, toys, and learning materials: Who is represented? Who is missing? Are there stereotypes?
- 3) Examine Language Use- Reflect on how you describe children's behavior. Do you use different language for different children? Are you labeling some behaviors more harshly?
- 4) Acknowledge race, culture, and identity. Saying “I don't see color” ignores lived experiences and erases diversity.
- 5) Diversify your book collection. Ensure books reflect a wide range of racial, cultural, family, and ability-based identities-not just during holidays or awareness months.

- 
- 6) Seek Feedback. Ask trusted colleagues or families for input about your interactions and materials. Be open to hearing where bias may be showing up.
 - 7) Examine Expectations. Are your expectations of behavior or academic ability different for certain groups of children?
 - 8) Engage in Ongoing Learning. Attend Anti-bias trainings, read articles/books by educators of color, and participate in equity-focused professional development.
 - 9) Use Identity-Affirming Language. Call children by their correct names, pronounce them correctly, and honor home languages and cultural practices.
 - 10) Encourage Conversations about differences. Don't avoid conversations about race, ability, or family structures. Use books and child-led discussions to explore differences with openness and respect.



REFLECTION TOOLS FOR BIAS IN LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS

- Who is represented in your classroom library?
- Are books reinforcing stereotypes or offering multiple perspectives?
- Do books reflect diversity in race, culture, language, family structures, and abilities?



REAL-LIFE SCENARIO DISCUSSION

- Come up with one real-life scenario as a group and respond with talking points to share with the group.
- Example: A parent asks why there are books about two-mom families in your classroom. How do you respond?
- Do not use this example. Choose your own. Think about differences in family structures, gender, identity, or religion.





Literature does more than tell a story-

It sparks imagination, nurtures freedom, deepens learning, and builds connection.

In early learning environments, books serve as both mirrors and windows: Mirrors that affirm children's identities and experiences, and windows that open them to diverse perspectives and new possibilities. When we are intentional about the stories we place on our shelves, we are not only supporting literacy development, but also shaping environments that honor dignity, cultivate empathy, and reflect the fullness of every child's world.

FINAL REFLECTION/CALL TO ACTION



WHAT WILL YOU DO
DIFFERENTLY AFTER TODAY?



COMMIT TO ONE CHANGE

I HAVE CURATED A **DIVERSE & INCLUSIVE CHILDREN'S BOOKLIST**

I ENCOURAGE YOU TO ADD TO THIS LIST OR CREATE A LIST OF YOUR OWN.





10 Ways to Support Your Favorite Author

1. Buy their book
2. Write a review on Amazon and Goodreads.
3. Give their book as a gift.
4. Follow them on social media.
5. Post pics of you holding their book and tag them in it.
6. Tell 10 people about their book.
7. Donate copies of their book to an educational organization or non-profit.
8. Recommend their book to teachers and school administrators.
9. Request their book at your local library.
10. Wear their book merch to tell the world you're a fan!



THANK YOU!

INFO@THEITSYBITSYSCHOLARS.COM