Intentional Shelves: Bias, Representation, And Equity in Early Literacy Workshop

Good morning, I’d like to begin this workshop by telling you a little about me. My name is Kelly Melton. I have been in the field of Early Childhood Education for over 10 years. I began my journey working for a group center. I worked in Milwaukee for three years, Fox point for two years, and I owned my own family childcare center in Milwaukee for six years. I closed my program in September of 2024. I began consulting and assisting prospective providers on their journey towards licensure in July of 2024. I love sharing resources with prospective providers and connecting them to like-minded individuals who share lived experiences with them and can be of assistance to them in the future. In 2023, I became an Author. I self-published my first children’s book. I’ve always recognized the importance of early literacy. It was always my focus in my program. We practiced letter recognition, phonics, spelling our names and the names of our friends, and we read many books. I learned about the preschool to prison pipeline early on in my education journey. It has always been a priority for me to contribute to helping scholars prepare to become young readers so that they won’t fall subject to becoming illiterate.

Today’s Agenda will consist of an overview of Why Early literacy matters, The Power of representation, and Literacy and the preschool to prison pipeline. We will go over a list of ways that we can use to check our biases. We will participate in two small group activities. I will share a booklist that you can add to or inspire you to create your own. Then we will conclude with a final reflection and commitment to one change.

“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

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 isn’t about teaching kids to read early — it’s about building the foundation for learning.**

From birth, children are developing the skills they’ll need to become strong readers and writers later on. When parents and caregivers talk, sing, read, and play with children, they help build language, curiosity, and a love of learning.

Early literacy promotes:

* **Brain growth:** Early experiences with books, stories, and conversations strengthen brain connections for language and thinking.
* **Vocabulary:** Children who hear more words early on have larger vocabulary, which makes reading and school easier.
* **School readiness:** Kids who are familiar with books and stories are more confident learners when they start school.
* **Bonding:** Reading together builds closeness and helps children feel secure.
* **Love of learning:** Positive early experiences with books spark joy in reading that can last a lifetime.

**Simple ways to support early literacy:**

* Read aloud every day, even for just a few minutes.
* Talk about the pictures in books and let your child turn the pages.
* Sing songs, nursery rhymes, and play word games.
* Encourage drawing and scribbling — it’s early writing!
* **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

**Why Representation Matters in Books**

* When children see characters who look like them, live like them, or share their culture, they feel seen and valued. It helps build self-esteem and pride in who they are.
* Books also show children lives that are different from their own. This helps them develop empathy, respect, and understanding for others.
* **Belonging:** Representation tells kids, *“Your story matters. You belong here.”*
* **Motivation to read:** Children are more excited about reading when the characters and stories reflect their own experiences and interests.
* **Preparing for the world:** Diverse books prepare children to live in a world full of different people, perspectives, and cultures.

A rich mix of stories helps children grow into confident, curious, and compassionate readers.

Bookshelf 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.\*

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.

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 biases:

* 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.

1. Seek Feedback. Ask trusted colleagues or families for input about your interactions and materials. Be open to hearing where bias may be showing up.
2. Examine Expectations. Are your expectations of behavior or academic ability different for certain groups of children?
3. Engage in Ongoing Learning. Attend Anti-bias trainings, read articles/books by educators of color, and participate in equity-focused professional development.
4. 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 early literacy:

* 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.

Call to action/Reflection

* What will you do differently after today?
* Commit to ONE Change

I have curated a book list and a list of authors of color in early childhood education literature.   
  
I encourage you to add to this list or create a list of your own!

Thank you!  
  
You can contact me at: Info@theitsybitsyscholars.com

**Diverse & Inclusive Children’s Booklist**

**Mañana Iguana** by Ann Whitford Paul  
– A playful bilingual twist on *The Little Red Hen*, featuring iguanas, conejos, and tortugas.

**Hair Love** by Matthew A. Cherry  
– A heartwarming story about a dad learning to style his daughter’s hair, celebrating love, pride, and confidence.

**Last Stop on Market Street** by Matt de la Peña  
– A boy and his grandmother ride the bus and discover beauty and community in everyday places.

**Round Is a Tortilla / Redonda como una tortilla** by Roseanne Greenfield Thong  
– A bilingual introduction to shapes with cultural references kids will love.

**Our Class is a Family** by Shannon Olsen  
– Encourages children to see their classroom as a supportive, loving community.

**Los Pollitos / Little Chickies** by Susie Jaramillo  
– A bilingual board book based on the classic Spanish nursery rhyme *“Los Pollitos Dicen.”*

**Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story** by Kevin Noble Maillard  
– A joyful celebration of Native American culture, traditions, and family through food.

**Every Night is Pizza Night** by J. Kenji López-Alt  
– A playful look at food, culture, and trying new things, reminding kids that every family’s meals matter.

**Opuestos: Opposites** by Cynthia Weill  
– A bright bilingual concept book featuring folk art animals that teach opposites in English and Spanish.

**The Day You Begin** by Jacqueline Woodson  
– A moving story about finding courage when you feel different and learning that everyone has a story to share.

**All Are Welcome** by Alexandra Penfold  
– A celebration of school communities that embrace diversity and belonging.

**Mi Papi Tiene una Moto / My Papi Has a Motorcycle** by Isabel Quintero  
– A nostalgic, love-filled ride through a community, seen through the eyes of a girl and her father.

**Mooncakes** by Loretta Seto  
– Explores family traditions and storytelling during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

**Saturday** by Oge Mora  
– A touching story of a mother and daughter who make the most of their day, even when things go wrong.

**Julián Is a Mermaid** by Jessica Love  
– A tender tale of identity and self-expression as a boy embraces who he wants to be.

**Dreamers / Soñadores** by Yuyi Morales  
– A beautiful, autobiographical story about migration, resilience, and the power of books.

**Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut** by Derrick Barnes  
– A vibrant celebration of barbershops, confidence, and Black culture.

**The Proudest Blue** by Ibtihaj Muhammad & S.K. Ali  
– A story of strength, pride, and sisterhood as a girl wears her hijab for the first time.

**I Am Enough** by Grace Byers  
– A lyrical affirmation of self-worth and kindness, reminding children they are worthy just as they are.

**My Hair Is a Garden** by Cozbi A. Cabrera  
– A metaphorical and empowering story about learning to love and care for natural hair.

**Green Is a Chile Pepper / Verde es un chile picante** by Roseanne Greenfield Thong  
– A lively bilingual book that explores colors through Latino culture.

**The Rough Patch** by Brian Lies  
– A touching story about loss, healing, and finding joy again.

**Drawn Together** by Minh Lê  
– A beautifully illustrated story about bridging language and generational gaps through art.

**Alma y cómo obtuvo su nombre / Alma and How She Got Her Name** by Juana Martinez-Neal  
– A bilingual story celebrating family history, identity, and belonging.

**A Bad Case of Stripes** by David Shannon  
– A fun, imaginative story about self-acceptance and the courage to be yourself.

**Thunder Boy Jr.** by Sherman Alexie  
– A humorous and heartfelt story about names, identity, and finding your own place in the world.

**Islandborn / Lola** by Junot Díaz (*Lola* in Spanish edition)  
– A girl discovers her family’s heritage and identity through community stories.

**I Am Violet** by Tania Duprey Stehlik  
– Celebrates the beauty of different skin colors through playful color imagery.

**I Love My Hair!** by Natasha Tarpley  
– A joyful affirmation of pride and confidence, reflecting African American heritage.

**A Is for All the Things You Are** by Anna Forgerson Hindley & National Museum of African American History and Culture  
– A multicultural ABC book promoting inclusivity and shared humanity.

**Global Babies** by The Global Fund for Children  
– Charming photos of babies across cultures, available in both English and Spanish.

**Besos for Baby: A Little Book of Kisses / Besos para bebé** by Jen Arena  
– A sweet bilingual board book with kisses in English and Spanish.

**Baby’s First Words** by Stella Blackstone & Sunny Scribens  
– Features a baby with two dads, embracing diverse family structures.

**All Kinds of People** by Shelley Rotner & Sheila M. Kelly  
– A celebration of the wide variety of skin tones and features in children around the world.

**Paletero Man / ¡Qué Paletero tan Cool!** by Lucky Diaz  
– A joyful bilingual picture book about community, kindness, and chasing after paletas on a hot day.

**Who? A Celebration of Babies** by Robie H. Harris  
– Playful photos and simple text show the universality of babyhood and family love.

**The Family Book** by Todd Parr – Illustrates the daily lives of diverse families in bright, engaging art.

**Everywhere Babies** by Susan Meyers – A rhyming board book featuring babies from all kinds of families.

**Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes** by Mem Fox – Celebrates universal baby traits across cultural illustrations.

**Danibi Leads the School Parade** by Anna Kim – A sweet immigrant story where a non-English–speaking girl brings classmates together using creativity and kindness.

**Niño Wrestles the World / Niño campeón de lucha libre** by Yuyi Morales  
– A fun, action-packed bilingual story celebrating lucha libre and imagination.