# 1

# Welcome to the Conversation

## An Introduction to Using Children's Literature for Courageous Conversations

Dear Reader,

We are professors and parents, readers ourselves and those who read aloud. While we come from diverse scholarly and professional backgrounds, all three of us hold in common a strong desire to help young people as they struggle to make sense of the complex situations they face, while also developing a strong sense of identity and the agency to create change in their communities.

As you saw in the Preface, we have thought and talked a lot about this desire from many angles. A common thread in our conversations together has been how to best support the educators, counselors, and other school professionals with whom we work as they encourage their young students' development in both affective and cognitive realms. We find ourselves returning often to two shared beliefs: the power of outstanding books for learning and perspective taking, and the importance of facilitating deep discussion to help build understanding of self, others, and the world around us.

Our world is ever changing, sometimes quickly due to influences like a pandemic, or slowly as with our climate. What is similar is that these changes impact all of us, albeit in different ways based on our own personal views and perspectives. We believe books can be the vehicle that brings us together, helping us consider these shared experiences (and some with which we might be personally less familiar), so we can start the conversations that can feel too big to tackle. As we share research, theories, and instructional strategies, we also share memories, experiences, and perspectives. All of this has led us to the creation of this book, a book that brings together the power of children's literature and that of courageous conversations.

This book was conceived with the idea of encouraging and assisting the adults who courageously enter conversation with children on tough issues. We believe these conversations are vitally important to children's development. We also believe that carefully curated and

sequenced sets of outstanding diverse books combined with specific activities, discussion prompts, and guidance can help those conversations to begin.

## DISCUSSING CHALLENGING ISSUES WITH CHILDREN: WHY DO IT?

Between the ages of 5 and 12 years old, children undergo major cognitive, social, emotional, and physical changes, which are highly influenced by their environment and relationships with significant adults, such as parents and teachers. Early on, children begin to observe and internalize what they experience within various contexts, including the home, neighborhood, and school. Within these microsystems, they also begin constructing fairly complex narratives about selfhood, understanding where they fit within a social hierarchy, and defining a sense of justice (right/wrong, good/bad). For most children, a major part of growing up involves wrestling with infinite questions related to who they are and will become. Children must negotiate complicated interactions with friends, family, and teachers; within these relationships, they are tasked with defining their personal values and meeting multiple relational expectations. While there are other major sources of influence, much of these identity-formation processes take place by observing how people around them interact and treat each other. One of the consequences of disruptions in schooling (such as during the pandemic and rises in chronic absenteeism) is that students do not have the benefit of being together with other people their age and with caring educators and other school personnel. Students who feel emotionally supported by their teacher report being more motivated and having more positive classroom experiences (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012).

Additionally, Generation Z or iGen, including children born between roughly 1997 and 2012, and the current Generation Alpha or Gen Alpha (around 2010 to the present), are growing up in a fast-paced technologically driven era. Socialization within such a digitally mediated society can be overwhelming for children, as they are forced to sift through unrelenting and sometimes contradicting information. Often, kids' first exposure to social issues (e.g., sexuality and racism) and the initial narratives they create about themselves are facilitated by the internet. Via online platforms, children test the bounds of social rules, try on various personas, and create social networks. While there are some benefits to these online activities, results of longitudinal studies with iGen participants also show a significant link between screen time and mental health disorders; since the invention of the smartphone, rates of adolescent depression and anxiety have increased significantly (Twenge, Martin, & Campbell, 2018). According to the National Survey of Children's Health Data reports collected from parents of children ages 6–17, anxiety diagnoses increased nearly 20% between 2003 and 2012 (Bitsko et al., 2018). Direct explanations for this significant spike in anxiety among youth are unknown; however, experts identify a range of potential correlates including economic volatility (Rajmil et al., 2014), the rise in school shootings wherein lockdown drills are now considered routine (DeVos, Nielsen, & Azar, 2018), academic pressures starting as early as kindergarten (Bassock, Lathan, & Rorem, 2016; Pope, Brown, & Miles, 2015), and cyberbullying (van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Gen Alpha looks to be even more influenced by the roles of technology in their lives,

in addition to being a generation with higher ethnic and racial diversity, more diverse family structures, and higher economic inequality, bringing to the forefront more social issues as well as increased use of technology and its related positive and negative effects. Although daunting to consider these social issues in totality, it is important to contextualize today's social realities as we work to increase awareness of the current adults who assume responsibility for helping today's children cultivate social and emotional well-being.

## Why Do We Care About Social and Emotional Competencies?

Social and emotional development, broadly defined, involves children's ability to positively build relationships with peers and adults, understand others' emotions, and regulate their feelings and behavior. Across a lifetime, these social and emotional skills serve as a foundation for success in learning and maintaining healthy relationships. More and more, classroom educators have begun to recognize the importance of teaching the whole child, considering students' emotional, cultural, social, familial, and salient aspects of their identities as integral parts of academic success. Teachers and parents are key individuals in this developmental journey who provide affective roadmaps for children, leading by example and intentional engagement. Over the past two decades, classroom teachers have been at the forefront of addressing the complexities of children's questions about who they are and their readiness to explore identity. For example, students as young as 9 ask themselves questions like "Why do I act differently in different places?" or "Why am I forced to be someone I'm not?" or "Why am I so afraid to share my ideas?" (Kauffman & Short, 2001, p. 1). Resistance to engage in meaningful discussions about identity and controversial social issues often comes from adults who believe children are too young, not ready to talk about things like discrimination or war, do not know how to facilitate tough conversations, feel overwhelmed, or have not confronted their own emotions or opinions about specific topics. Imagine you are a teacher in the following classroom scenario:

> Yesenia, an 8-year-old child in your third-grade classroom is an extremely diligent and friendly student. She has a lot of friends, does well in all academic areas, and is considered a leader among her peers. Over the last 2 weeks, however, Yesenia has been quiet, looks sad, and has participated less in classroom discussions. When you ask her how she's doing, she shrugs and replies, "Fine." After talking to the school counselor, you learn Yesenia's father and uncle were recently deported to Guatemala by ICE. Apparently, there have also been a few playground incidents with sixth-grade boys chanting, "Go back where you came from," which have led to fights between students.

As you read this scenario, what kinds of feelings come up? What are your initial thoughts? What do you believe are your responsibilities? As a teacher, how might you respond—with Yesenia or with your entire class? If you feel like you are a deer in the headlights, you are not alone. Many adults are at a loss for how to discuss such socially charged topics or were taught that any type of conversation about politics, religion, race, and the like is taboo. For many parents and teachers, addressing any of these questions with children is not a simple task, as it requires several important considerations. These include (1) knowing the appropriate terminology to

engage in these types of conversations, (2) understanding how to include students from varying backgrounds, (3) appreciating students' emotional thresholds, and (4) identifying "stuck points" that may influence how a topic is discussed (e.g., personal opinions about specific issues). However, the benefits of helping students develop social awareness and emotional competencies outweigh the challenges. By promoting meaningful discussions about hard topics, we better prepare youth for attaining positive educational outcomes and relationships as well as developing ethical responsibility for themselves, peers, family, and community.

The old adage "It's not just what you say, but how you say it" provides a great starting point for engaging in meaningful conversations with children. In each of our chapters, we provide guidelines for the content, including types of questions and focus topics. We also offer some tips on *how* to bring these conversations up as well as keep them going. Research indicates that it is not merely the quantity of time we spend conversing with children, but also the quality of those conversations that lead to positive cognitive, social, and emotional development (Romeo et al., 2018). Children's literature is a particularly useful tool for adults and children to begin having these meaningful conversations. Books provide an ideal context for children and adults to talk about things, which are often difficult to confront head-on.

## Where Do Teachers and Other School Professionals Come In?

Thinking back to your own childhood, you may remember specific events that still evoke intense feelings. Perhaps these are painful memories of being bullied or excluded by peers. Maybe it was that horrible time in your life when a beloved family pet died. Ideally, you were able to share what you were going through with a loving adult who sat and listened. We also recognize that for many, these conversations did not happen, as children can find it hard to open up to an adult by saying something like, "It made me so sad when they called me those mean names. I feel so lonely" or "It's so unfair Daisy [the cat] got sick and had to be put down. I'm angry!" Despite how many times we coach children to "use your words," for many under the age of 10, there is a lack of the emotional vocabulary or communication skills to verbally process difficult feelings. Young children's developing brains also can prevent them from completely regulating their emotions on their own (see the Pixar movies *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* for great examples). Additionally, a child's home environment and the psychological health of their family are crucial factors in emotional development.

Rather than talk it out, children often show us through action. For example, a child who is experiencing intense bullying at school may lash out toward their siblings at home. The expression of grief for a young child can include a range of behaviors, such as withdrawal from activities they used to enjoy, increased crying or tantrums, intense fear of leaving the house, and catastrophizing about all the worst (and unlikely) possible life events. For other children, difficult feelings may emerge as physiological complaints, including stomachaches, headaches, trouble sleeping, bed wetting, and restlessness. Broadly, these emotional, cognitive, and physical manifestations are a child's way of saying, "I'm having a really hard time and need help." For many of us working in classrooms, we know how challenging it can be to know how and when to intervene when we notice students' high emotional needs. There are also times we are overwhelmed by the extent of trauma some of our students have undergone. Sometimes it is too much to hold.

Educators play so many roles in students' lives, which extend beyond the traditional definitions of your professional title. We know many of you have worn various hats, resembling something more like a close aunt or uncle, mentor, coach, and even a mental health counselor. A common thread through all of these roles, however, is one of a caring adult. Each new school year, you are lucky to get to spend an intense amount of time with a specific group of kids who are going through a lot—emotionally, physically, cognitively, and socially. And you also get to help them figure out a lot of this by being a consistent person in their lives who notices when they are not their usual selves, provides them with a rich emotional vocabulary to talk about hard things, and normalizes their full range of emotions ("It's okay—everyone cries because crying is a part of being human").

In the following chapters, we provide you with some starting points to initiate *and* maintain courageous conversations with your students about difficult-to-discuss topics. A major message we want to illuminate here (imagine a large flashing neon sign) is that you do not have to be an expert on all of the tough topics children confront in order to talk about them. What's *most* important is that your students know their opinions, feelings, and endless questions about racism or gun violence or other topics matter. Their feelings are welcome in your classroom and you are going to be one person helping them explore these feelings in ways that instill respect and empathy. Remember, you are not alone when helping your students explore their feelings, grow in their empathetic responses, and develop respect. The children's books that line the shelves of your classroom, office, school, and local library are here to aid you in this process.

## WHY CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS STARTING PLACES FOR CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS?

Discussion around books begins at a very young age. Many caregivers and family members engage babies in lap-sharing of stories as early as infancy, using the soft lull of a story to settle their little one to sleep, or the excitement of a sturdy board book to engage together in shared interaction and the start of early language learning. The first American Academy of Pediatrics' policy statement on literacy promotion, released in 2014 and updated in 2024, led to increasing numbers of pediatricians across the country talking about reading aloud during well-baby checks, and even providing books for their young patients, while early childhood centers and Head Start, local public libraries, and other public and private education or child-serving institutions do the same with story-time programs and literacy-based preschool activities. By the time they enter elementary school, many children are well versed in the idea of discussing the stories that have been read aloud to them and sharing thoughts about the actions of the characters within them.

Books offer a certain advantage over other technological resources in encouraging discussion in part because they foster oral communication between the adult and children and have built-in personal interactions. Children thrive when the person reading aloud to them engages them with the reading at some level, from encouraging the naming of familiar objects, to pointing out a funny or unusual illustration or part of the story, to making connections to the child's world. This sense of reading as a collective and shared experience follows the children

into elementary school, where small-group and whole-class discussion of read-aloud continues. Television shows, movies, computers, and tablet games do not necessarily carry this embedded sense of community, in part because they can be experienced by a child without the adult presence to read and communicate the words of the story. Even audio books and ebook apps suffer from this lack of shared experience because the children can experience them without the presence of another human. While outstanding children's programming and technology often encourage participant interaction, it is not inherently responsive at the same level.

Furthermore, books for young children commonly focus on the themes closest to their daily lives: family relationships, feelings and fears, and friendship (Galda, Liang, & Cullinan, 2017). They frequently involve regular routines and childhood milestones, allowing children to explore a particular adventure or milestone first as an observer. Watching Mo Willems's characters Elephant and Piggie, for example, work out how to share their play with another friend in *Can I Play, Too?* (2010) or learn to have patience in *Waiting Is Not Easy!* (2014) can help a child think about their possible reactions in similar situations. Stories about the first day of school, about the arrival of a new sibling, and even about everyday routines such as getting a haircut and going to the park are used by adults to introduce and discuss these events before they happen, and often later enjoyed by children because they mirror experiences with which they are familiar.

The prevalent use of stories for young readers in this way suggests a natural segue into using picturebooks with children to discuss issues that can be more challenging to comprehend. Children's authors and illustrators recognize this. Alongside books about first trips to the dentist sit texts that attempt to illustrate the grief over death and loss, provide context for situations such as family separation and even war, and acknowledge the fact that the world and life within it can be a confusing, and often terrifying, place. The best of these books avoid being too didactic and instead get to the core of the big emotions that swirl around the complex questions that children ask as they seek knowledge, understanding, and a sense of their role in the world. With many children already familiar with sharing their reactions to characters and stories within picturebooks, these beautifully rendered and thoughtfully written books offer caregivers and educators ways to gently enter into natural conversations on topics they might avoid otherwise.

## Safe Way to Gently Open the Window

Books can offer a way to start. Books frequently are the mirrors where children find reflections of their life experiences, the windows through which they begin an understanding of others. The "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" metaphor, originally coined and introduced by scholar and educator Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop in 1990, centers on how children see themselves within stories and learn about others, and focuses on the need for a much more diverse portrayal of characters within children's books so that all children have the opportunity to see themselves, their families, and their communities in books as well as step into the worlds of others.

This metaphor is vitally important to remember as we suggest using picturebooks to open challenging conversations with children. First, because it is a reminder about the portrayal

and representation of the children within the books themselves. Despite many industry initiatives started around 2015 (see, e.g., the work of We Need Diverse Books over the last several years, or the publishing industry surveys sponsored by publisher Lee & Low), the diversity of characters in children's books in the United States remains woefully unrepresentative. While the number of children's books published yearly with a person of color in a primary character role has increased from the dismal amounts recorded in the past decade (e.g., approximately 15% in 2015), they are still problematic; the most recent statistics report only approximately 40% of children's books published in 2023 have a person of color in a primary character role (Cooperative Children's Book Center [CCBC], 2024; Huyck, Dahlen, & Griffin, 2016). Taking into consideration that teachers and school and public libraries do not always have the newest titles to offer readers, it is easy to see that the books teachers are using do not fully represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States youth population. Particularly as we consider using books as entries into conversations about more complicated topics, it is imperative to have a strong collection of books that offer ethnically diverse protagonists in a large range of settings so that children can both more easily identify with situations by seeing themselves represented and see children from different backgrounds than their own. This helps present the universally challenging nature of these topics. In the search of educators for "just the right book" to use for a particular topic, sometimes the importance of attention to diversity gets left out. It is essential that this not happen.

Second, Bishop's metaphor helps us to remember part of the purpose that children's books hold—this idea of opening the door and peering in at someone else's story. Books invite us to imagine ourselves in new worlds and situations and think about our reactions. Readers instinctively evaluate the actions and emotional reactions of protagonists as they read; thus, discussions about characters' actions are an easy start to thinking about how one might react to a challenging situation. These conversations sometimes allow children, and adults, to consider the topic one step removed from experiencing a real-life event, before gently transitioning into discussing the messiness and reality of personal experiences.

## The Power of Perspective and the Value of Story

This invitation of books to encourage empathy with characters highlights the power books hold to build perspective and, ultimately, deeper understanding. As children's literature researcher Laura Apol (1998) once explained, "Children's literature is a form of education and socialization, an indication of a society's deepest hopes and fears, expectations and demands" (p. 34). Examining a set of children's picturebooks that represent several different perspectives can help readers identify and better understand many of the cultural, political, and economic aspects to a social issue. This can lead them to think about how to respond and to understand these issues in ways both similar and different from the various viewpoints in the books, as well as to build more empathy for different ways of thinking overall. The offer of varied perspectives combines with books' promotion of the rich imagination of young readers and, ultimately, adds to readers' growth of a broader view of the world (Frye, 1970; Nodelman, 1996, 1997). Perhaps award-winning author Christopher Myers (2013) captures it best: "Books allow us a bird's eye view of our own lives, and especially how our lives relate to those lives around us" (p. 11).

**No Book Stands Alone**

An outstanding book by itself will not necessarily broaden your students' perspectives and develop their tolerance, respect, and understanding of others. The discussion around the reading is key, as well as the placement of that book within a larger set of texts. Reading a *set* of purposefully sequenced, outstanding, diverse titles that offer various viewpoints helps to encourage automatic comparison, but without conversation that comparison might not include a growth in perspective taking and deep understanding. Conversation with the sequenced reading is necessary.

As we think about your use of this book to help you with the children in your lives, we return to Bishop's famous piece "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" (1990), where she ended her essay by writing:

> Those of us who are children's literature enthusiasts tend to be somewhat idealistic, believe that some book, some story, some poem can speak to each individual child, and that if we have the time and resources, we can find that book and help to change that child's life, if only for a brief time, and only for a tiny bit. On the other hand, we are realistic enough to know that that literature, no matter how powerful, has its limits. . . . [Literature] could, however, help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards difference. (p. xi)

# YOU ARE NOT ALONE: YOU, BOOKS, AND OTHERS

Teachers can't do it all, try as they might. A broader community that fosters working across fields and disciplines within and outside of a school is critical for teachers to get the support they need, even when they are armed with outstanding books.

**Help within the School Building**

Let's start with the individuals within a school with expertise assisting with students' social and emotional well-being. These include the counselors, social workers, behavior specialists, and school psychologists. While these professionals all have different roles, they all work with individuals and groups and can share helpful tips and techniques on how to approach sensitive topics. This group of professionals can be counted on to provide assistance in how to build a caring environment allowing students to safely express their own views, leading to a caring classroom and school community. They are trained on how to do this, and on how to respond to students who feel threatened or marginalized. Additionally, these individuals often work with other mental health professionals outside of the school and may be able to suggest additional resources on a particular issue or topic. The specialized training of these individuals makes them an invaluable asset and teachers can receive great assistance from such colleagues when addressing sensitive topics with their students.

There is great benefit in including these individuals who have the training to support social and emotional development. However, they are not the only people within the school who can assist teachers. Other professionals within the school include the special education

teacher, speech language pathologist, and librarian. The special education teacher and speech language pathologist have experience supporting students who struggle with academics, emotions, and speech and language issues. These professionals have expertise in working directly with students who often encounter negative experiences in school due to their differences. Similar to counselors, social workers, and school psychologists, these professionals frequently have contacts with agencies and professionals outside of the school, making them another valuable resource for teachers seeking help as they address sensitive topics.

Librarians can also be a wonderful asset for teachers. As both unique school professionals and specialty teachers, they have expertise in working with children as well as identifying appropriate books, movies, websites, and local connections on certain topics. They also tend to know all the students in the school at some level since they interact with every classroom in the building. Thus, they are often tuned into what resonates with students in the community and can narrow the search for an appropriate resource much faster than if the teacher were doing it alone.

## Resources beyond the School Walls

Outside the school is also a large network of resources for teachers. Local public libraries often have information on authors and guest speakers who are available to come talk to classes. Local advocacy groups that focus on certain topics frequently offer resources specifically for children, such as community counseling centers with a focus on addiction or incarceration. Many of these agencies focus on the family, meaning they are likely to have expertise in assisting children who are innocent bystanders to the stressful situations that teachers may address in their classrooms and can provide additional help.

Connecting with outside resources should start with those individuals we have already identified within the school. Meeting with school professionals one-on-one, or calling for a meeting with everyone, can provide teachers with ideas for how to approach their class on a particularly sensitive topic. Having a meeting with multiple school professionals provides an opportunity for them to share what they know and help the teacher prepare what they need to be successful in supporting their students.

## Including Families and Caregivers

Involving families and caregivers requires thoughtful planning by teachers. It is important to inform them about sensitive topics discussed in class, allowing for open communication and support. Teachers can assist caregivers by sharing practical tips and resources to aid children at home, whether through letters announcing upcoming units or hosting informational sessions at school. Collaborating with school professionals and external resources can enhance planning and ensure effective family engagement. Given the sensitive nature of these topics, it is crucial for teachers to rely on experienced professionals who can provide additional support and guidance to families beyond school hours. Furthermore, it is imperative that school leadership, including the principal, is informed and supportive throughout the process, as they may be the first point of contact for concerned caregivers.

# STARTING THE CONVERSATION:
## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We hope you are becoming eager to begin courageous conversations with your classes and start using this book. While this type of instruction is based on our professional knowledge and expertise, it also has roots in our personal experiences that have led us to be willing to try out these discussions ourselves. We hear the questions from children and want to help educators to open conversations. We, too, have made many mistakes and often are not sure how to respond to our own children, the children in the schools with whom we work, and our education and psychology undergraduate and graduate students. But we know that the first, and most important, step is the courage to try.

Thus, we designed this book to help support educators in starting this work. It is a self-contained resource to both provide scripted lessons in complete units that you can implement directly in your classroom, and to give you the more general tools to engage with your students around these difficult topics, especially when you are stuck in the moment and do not know what to say. We aim to help you feel more comfortable with a state of being uncomfortable!

Chapters 3–11 offer thematic book sets of carefully curated, purposefully sequenced, high-quality diverse picturebooks with detailed plans for using these titles to introduce the topic, widen third- through sixth-grade students' perspectives surrounding it, and engage them in meaningful discussions and activities that deepen understanding. See Figure 1.1 to learn about the guidelines we followed in selecting outstanding children's picturebooks for each of the thematic book sets found in Chapters 3–11.

The discussions and activities meet national guidelines for the English language arts and social and emotional learning and are suitable for intermediate classrooms and can extend into middle school classrooms as well. (The individual Common Core standards met by each unit are listed for grade 4, as a representative sample, at the end of each chapter. The individual standards for grades 3, 5, and 6 can be found via the QR code that appears with the grade 4 standards.) Each thematic book set unit is designed for approximately 1 hour of instruction per day across 8 to 9 classroom days (approximately 2 weeks of school). Some days might involve more or less instructional time. We encourage you to make adjustments and accommodations if you have students in your classroom who are just beginning to read and write or have difficulty with these tasks (e.g., you might eliminate the requirement of having students read aloud by maintaining a policy that any student may choose to pass when it's their turn if they wish or allow students the option of drawing instead of writing). To lessen any possible stigma for those students who need accommodations, give all students these same options. Finally, we encourage wait time between using the thematic book set units to let children process new information; our recommendation is no more than one unit per month. The nine thematic book set units offered in this book could work well for the duration of 1 school year.

A rich Appendix of Reproducible Materials—with planning checklists, permission slips, reflection pieces for the teachers' and students' well-being, and pre- and post-evaluations—complements the chapters and includes items designed for use in each thematic book set unit. These materials will aid you in making sure that safety nets are in place for your discussions, including setting ground rules, knowing when to stop discussions, and considering when to

What makes a "good" book? This is a question that has been discussed for years. In the field of children's literature, we acknowledge that what one reader considers a favorite ("the best book I've ever read!") might be disliked by another reader. While the field recognizes the power of personal preference, it also reaches beyond and considers quality when selecting and evaluating children's books.

In general, a children's picturebook's "quality" is evaluated in at least three areas: literary merit, artistic merit, and consideration of cultural authenticity and representation. Educators often add an additional consideration around "fit"—considering if the book meets well with the purposes of its use in the classroom and considering the complexity of the book and the intended reader's reading level. For this book, we evaluated "fit" as meeting the particular purposes of use in our units focused on the topic and standards being met.

| **Fit for These Units** | ☐ Does the book address the topic in a genuine way? |
| | ☐ Does it respect the multifaceted nuances of the topic? |
| | ☐ Does it avoid didacticism, moralistic language, or overly simple "solutions"? |
| | ☐ Does it either center on one unique perspective or offer an array of perspectives in an authentic way? |
| | ☐ Is the book suitable for a read-aloud in terms of length and pacing? |
| **Literary Merit** | ☐ Is the language engaging and full of verve? |
| | ☐ Do the pace and pattern of the language used match with the topic and style of the book? |
| | ☐ Does the story contain strong characterization, avoiding one-dimensional characters? |
| | ☐ Is the plot plausible within the context of the setting? |
| **Artistic Merit** | ☐ Are the illustrations artistically excellent with technique and style appropriate to the text? |
| | ☐ Do the illustrations relate to the text in a meaningful way? |
| | ☐ Do the medium, technique, and style fit with the text? |
| | ☐ Do the design elements work to enhance meaning within individual illustrations and across the book as a whole? |
| **Consideration of Issues of Cultural Authenticity and Representation** | ☐ Are the author's and illustrator's expertise, qualifications, and attitudes related to the topic addressed in the book appropriate? |
| | ☐ Are stereotypes avoided in both the text and in the illustrations? |
| | ☐ Are the characters within the story as diverse as one would expect in any culture? |
| | ☐ Are the relationships between characters of different cultures portrayed authentically and accurately? |
| | ☐ Does the book seem accurate when compared to other similar books, to research, and/or to other knowledge? |

*Note.* Criteria adapted from Galda, Liang, & Cullinan (2017); Lehman, Freeman, & Scharer (2010).

**FIGURE 1.1.** Guidelines used for selection of picturebooks.

involve other professionals for help with students. They also guide you to meet the goals and purposes of the unit, evaluating the impact these are having on your students' social and emotional development. Additionally, any reproducible materials used in the unit, such as worksheets or writing templates, are available both in the end-of-book Appendix and on the book's companion website (see the box at the end of the Contents for details).

The thematic book set unit chapters are divided into four parts or sections reflecting the current major concerns of today's school professionals around children's social and emotional development, positive identity formation, and children's mental health. The first part, "Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Growth through Literature," features chapters on peer relationships (friendship and bullying) and grief and loss. The next part, "Supporting Children's Understanding of Communities through Literature," focuses on civic engagement and community population changes due to refugee situations. The third part, "Supporting Children's Positive Identity Formation through Literature," includes chapters on identity in the realms of race and ethnicity, gender, and ability. Finally, the fourth part, "Supporting Children's Mental Health through Literature," offers thematic units on beginning to understand anxiety and depression.

In each unit, we provide specific recommendations to help you facilitate the conversations about the specific topic. However, Chapter 2 reviews important overarching concepts to put in place in your classroom discussions *before you start* your first of this book's thematic book set units with students. After reading this chapter and Chapter 2 that follows, we encourage you to consider the priority needs for your students and select the individual unit with which to begin this work in your classroom.

Finally, it is important to note that these units are designed to facilitate discussions among all children about these challenging topics, fostering a broader understanding of commonly encountered issues. They are not meant to substitute therapy. These units aim to cultivate awareness and empathy. Initiating courageous conversations early in childhood can nurture children to become thoughtful and socially conscious adults.