Announcing the 2015–2016 Alan C. Purves Award Recipient
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The 2016 Alan C. Purves Award Committee

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The Alan C. Purves Award Committee is pleased to announce this year’s award recipient, Denise Dávila, for her article, “#WhoNeedsDiverseBooks?: Preservice Teachers and Religious Neutrality with Children’s Literature” (which appeared in Volume 50, Number 1, of Research in the Teaching of English, pp. 60–84). The Alan C. Purves Award is given annually to an article in RTE that holds significant implications for informing classroom practice and is likely to have the greatest impact on instruction and classrooms. As in most years, our decision was not easy. The pool of fifteen articles that we reviewed included many strong pieces that addressed urgent current issues in literacy instruction, such as debates over argumentative writing; globalization, migration, citizenship, and cosmopolitan pedagogies; language ideologies; the voices of marginalized students; and the longitudinal effects of poetry workshops on the agency and identities of urban youth.

Within this strong pool, Dávila’s article, “#WhoNeedsDiverseBooks?”, stood out to us as a model of the kind of rigorous and socially relevant literacy research that could impact both practice and policy, particularly as it offers a close read and nuanced argument related to larger discussions and topics that are currently happening in the field. “#WhoNeedsDiverseBooks?” focuses on a central concern of many teachers and researchers in English language arts: diversity and representation in literature and literature instruction. But Dávila’s article addresses an aspect of multicultural literacy that has not gotten much recognition at the same time that it has become increasingly critical in the current political climate of the United States and other countries: the issue of religious diversity and representation. Dávila’s article addresses the important question: how can ELA teachers cultivate religiously pluralistic thinkers through the teaching of literature? The article documents her study of 79 preservice teachers’ responses to the representations of religion and culture in the picture book memoir In My Family/En Mi Familia.
by Carmen Lomas Garza. In her analysis, Dávila delves into three important and related questions: (1) how likely were the preservice teachers to include children’s books with representations of religious diversity?, (2) How would they discuss such books with their students?, and (3) What social discourses would they use to interpret such books? Every aspect of the scholarship represented in the article was noteworthy: its strong theoretical grounding, its original and relevant topic, its focus on equity and nondiscrimination, its methodological rigor, its significant findings, and the clarity of its writing.

Dávila’s article is grounded in the concept of religious neutrality, the notion that neutrality requires the inclusion of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives in schools for the purpose of educating future citizens for a religiously diverse society (global and national). Though in practice many schools interpret the First Amendment as requiring schools to avoid any discussion of religion, the First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” suggesting that all religions should be treated equally. As Dávila points out, neither the First Amendment nor the long-standing interpretation of it as requiring the separation of church and state implies that discussion of religions should be avoided in schools. In fact, Dávila argues, religion and spirituality are inextricably intertwined with culture and identity for many people, herself included, and thus represent important and underrepresented topics in scholarship and instruction on multicultural literature and diversity.

How, then, do teachers approach teaching about religion as related to teaching about culture in multicultural literature instruction? Dávila responds to this question by studying 79 predominantly White, preservice teachers’ responses to depictions of religion in In My Family/En Mi Familia. The committee was impressed with Dávila’s clear and detailed research methodology, which adds to the power of her findings. Her analysis of the preservice teachers’ responses demonstrated a careful, systematic approach to qualitative research and also a detailed, insightful analysis of multiple themes in the data. Dávila shares with her reader the three-stage coding process she engaged in (basic themes, organizing themes, global theme) and the rationale, frequency, and tacit stances/beliefs of these themes, such as viewing Garza’s family’s beliefs as irrational or believing discussions of religion in schools are risky and inappropriate. Although Dávila cautions against generalizing from her study to all preservice teachers, we viewed it as a strength that her study included more participants than most similar studies in ELA and pinpointed themes and beliefs across a wide population of preservice teachers. Although the article focused on one specific religious tradition, Dávila also explicitly linked this specific religious tradition to her own background, and therefore her own positionality as a researcher.

Dávila found that most of the preservice teachers (77%) indicated that they would use In My Family/En Mi Familia in their classroom to support awareness of cultural diversity, but far fewer teachers (26%) indicated that they would address representations of religion in the book, suggesting instead that they would skip
or skim the sections of the memoir that referenced religious beliefs and events important to Garza and her family. Teachers gave various reasons for their reluctance to discuss religion, such as the age of their students, the reaction of parents, and whether their students identified with Garza’s Tejano-American cultural background. Dávila wisely notes that “skipping over” the portions of the book that reference Garza’s family’s religious beliefs and practices does not reflect religious neutrality; rather, this instructional strategy “minimizes the religious perspectives that were relevant to Garza’s family and provides little opportunity for readers to critically discuss” the author’s choices of illustration titles (“The Miracle” and “Guadalupe”) (p. 74). The committee appreciated the careful discussion of the limitations and possible damage that taking a “no religion” approach could cause in ELA classrooms. Furthermore, a large percentage of the preservice teachers (22%) described “facts” that they would teach about Catholicism and people of Mexican heritage that were inaccurate or stereotypes. Dávila discusses the ways in which some of her participants exoticized, othered, and voiced deficit views of the culture and religion represented in the text.

In light of her findings, Dávila argues that including multicultural books such as *In My Family/En Mi Familia* in the ELA curriculum is not enough. As some of her participants’ comments reflect, teaching about representations of religion in literature in ways that silence, other, or inaccurately portray particular religions can do more harm than good. Dávila argues that without foundational knowledge of world religions and how to talk about them in connection with cultures, teachers will not be able to support children’s multicultural religious literacy in pluralistic societies.

The committee thought that Dávila’s article would be likely to have the greatest impact on educational practice because of its timely topic, application to multiple grade levels, careful methodology, and strong argument about the relationship between teaching about religion in literature and “preparing young people to be pluralistic thinkers in a global society” (p. 60). The committee also believed that Dávila’s article could have a strong impact on practice in a broad range of contexts. The question of how to represent and discuss religion is an issue that extends across K–college literacy classrooms at a time when religious diversity is increasing in schools. We also felt that this article would lend itself to rethinking specific practices around not only the selection of texts for their representations of diverse religious cultures and identities, but also what conversations are invited into the classroom. As it was for us, we felt that the Dávila piece would be useful in helping teachers more directly consider the role of beliefs and stances when it comes to teaching about religion in literature in thought-provoking and perhaps troubling ways. Finally, in terms of writing style, the committee thought that the article would be accessible to teachers at all levels of K–college education and to teacher inquiry groups with its clear writing, detailed descriptions, and direct responses to current issues in education and politics.

We wrote this award announcement shortly after President Trump issued a plan to build a wall on the US-Mexican border and an executive order to ban
immigrants from six Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. In light of these actions, the implications of Dr. Dávila’s study for teaching, learning, and democracy are even more critical. As school districts across the country take measures to protect immigrant and refugee children, and as educators battle misperceptions of religions such as Islam, Dávila’s study suggests the important role that multicultural literature instruction could play in preparing all children to better understand and appreciate religious pluralism and the role that religion plays in many families and cultures.

It is our hope that “#WhoNeedsDiverseDooks?: Preservice Teachers and Religious Neutrality with Children’s Literature” will both be widely read and inspire other literacy researchers to study how diverse religious traditions can be taught in ELA classrooms to better prepare students for a culturally diverse world.