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**TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN KINDERGARTEN TO REDUCE BIAS IN  
CHILDREN**

by  
Deanna M. Villari

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Reading Education

at  
Rowan University  
January 7, 2021

Thesis Advisor: Valarie Lee, Ed.D.

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my girlfriend, Jenna. During the past two years, I have dedicated many hours to this degree and this program. Thank you for always pushing me to be the best student I can be and for always celebrating all of my accomplishments, but also being there through the tears and struggles. I worked double the amount, for you and us, and I cannot wait for what is to come in the future. I love you.

I would also like to dedicate this to my Mom, Dad, sister, and brother. Thank you for always pushing me to put 110% into everything I do. I knew growing up that education meant a lot to our family, and I appreciate you all instilling that in me from Day 1. Even though my Dad is no longer with us, I know that he is so proud and smiling down from heaven. Thank you all for being an amazing support system. I love you.

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I would also like to thank my new school and my new principal. I did not think it was possible to change jobs and relocate in the middle of a pandemic. However, my new school welcomed me with open arms and I learn more and more every day. To my students in Room 208, I know this school year has not been easy, with constantly shifting from in-person instruction to remote learning, but your flexibility has inspired me to work so much harder.

To the five ladies that I have been working very closely with throughout the end of this program, I am so happy we could lean on each other for advice and support. I hope we can keep in touch, because I have learned so much from you and your teaching style. Thank you for welcoming me into your life.

## Abstract

Deanna M. Villari  
TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN KINDERGARTEN TO REDUCE BIAS IN  
CHILDREN  
2020-2021

Valarie Lee, Ed.D.  
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to understand what happens when students in a Kindergarten classroom participate in learning about social justice to create a culture of empathy. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) serves as a theoretical framework for implementing mini-lessons using the 2020 *Teaching Tolerance's Anti-Bias Framework* and social justice standards to create an inclusive kindergarten environment. The objective was to increase engagement in the classroom and create a more positive and comfortable environment for students during play group and class discussions around picture books. Qualitative research was used in this study, which focused on read-alouds, class discussions, and student activities. Audio recordings, surveys, a teacher's research journal, student artifacts, and student interviews were collected and analyzed based on data analysis. The use of culturally relevant texts and class discussions encouraged students to learn more about each other's cultures on a deeper level and build rapport with each other in the classroom. Using students' background knowledge along with multicultural picture books and teaching anti-bias mini-lessons, students were more engaged and able to think deeper when trying to relate to someone who may seem much more different than them.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	v
List of Figures .....	ix
Chapter I: Foundations of the Study .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Story of the Question .....	2
Purpose Statement.....	6
Statement of Research Problem and Question .....	9
Organization of the Thesis .....	9
Chapter II: Review of the Literature .....	11
Theoretical Framework.....	12
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy .....	12
Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.....	13
Schema Theory .....	13
Funds of Knowledge & Family Literacies .....	14
Funds of Knowledge .....	14
Knowing Your Students.....	14
Reader Response Theory .....	15
Sociolinguistic Theory .....	16
Critical Race Theory .....	16
Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards .....	17
What is Implicit Racial Bias? .....	17
Multicultural Read-Alouds and Anti-Bias Lessons .....	18

**Table of Contents (Continued)**

Books are Windows & Mirrors ..... 18

Responses to Multicultural Literature..... 19

Classroom Discussions ..... 20

Creating a Culture of Empathy ..... 21

    Practicing Kindness ..... 21

    Antiracism & Social Emotional Learning..... 22

Conclusion ..... 23

Chapter III: Research Setting and Design..... 24

    Research Paradigm..... 24

    Procedure of the Study ..... 25

    Data Sources ..... 28

    Data Analysis ..... 30

    Context..... 31

        District..... 31

        School ..... 32

        Participants..... 33

    Conclusion ..... 33

Chapter IV: Findings of the Study ..... 34

    Current Curriculum and Context ..... 35

        Context..... 36

    Pre-Assessment of Racial Bias ..... 38

    Students’ Current Cultural Knowledge..... 39



## Table of Contents (Continued)

Identity .....	39
Students' Response to Diversity .....	44
Connections.....	44
Recognizing Unfairness .....	48
Racial Injustice.....	48
Speaking up With Courage .....	52
Action.....	52
Conclusion .....	60
Chapter V: Conclusions .....	61
Summary of the Findings.....	61
Conclusions of the Study .....	62
Implications.....	65
Limitations .....	67
Suggestions for Future Research .....	68
Final Thoughts .....	69
References.....	70

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Accessible playground.....	29
Figure 2. Adaptive swing seat.....	29
Figure 3. Classroom 208 Setup at Wilson Elementary School in Gateway, NJ .....	36
Figure 4. Pre- survey of students’ feelings towards social justice .....	38
Figure 5. Mia’s drawing (10/12/20).....	43
Figure 6. Charlotte’s picture is on the left. Liam’s is on the right. I dictated their speech bubbles for them.....	48
Figure 7. Cover of the text <i>All Are Welcome</i> .....	55
Figure 8. Charlotte’s drawing .....	56
Figure 9. Emma’s drawing.....	57
Figure 10. Sawyer’s drawing .....	58
Figure 11. Lucas’ drawing .....	58
Figure 12. Post survey of students’ feelings towards social justice.....	59

## **Chapter I**

### **Foundations of the Study**

As a social process, reading is used to establish, structure, and maintain social relationships between and among people. As a linguistic process, reading is used to communicate intentions and meanings, not only between an author and a reader, but also between people involved in a reading event” (Bloom & Green, 1984, p. 395).

#### **Introduction**

“Beep beep beep, beep beep beep, beep beep beep...” The timer went off, the students' eyes widened, and everyone knew that after math class, it was time for lunch and recess. The schedule was similar each day and according to Lucas, lunch and recess was his favorite time of the day, and most students in my class would agree. The students sat up straight with their hands folded, because they knew that I always called the quietest table to line up first. Lucas looked at the other students at his table and then he looked up at me. His table, the red table, was able to line up first. Sawyer sighed loudly so that Lucas could hear. Sawyer was at the blue table and was noticeably upset that his table did not get called first. Eventually, all four tables were called to get their lunch and everyone was equally as excited the weather was sunny and warm enough to play outside on the Wilson School playground after they were done eating.

All of the children sat down at their seats and excitedly opened up their lunch boxes to see what their mom or dad packed them for lunch. “YES!” Lucy exclaimed as she opened her thermos to find chicken nuggets and even a ketchup packet on the side. “Woohoo!” cried Matthew as he opened up his container to find macaroni and cheese.

Lucas was just as excited, he opened up his lunchbox with the same reaction. “Eggy bread...my favorite!” Sawyer was sitting next to Lucas, looked over at him and without hesitation replied, “Ew that looks gross.” Lucas could not contain his embarrassment, and sank low in his chair when other students tried to peek in his lunchbox. The subject quickly changed, but Lucas’ feelings did not. He kept his lunchbox closed and ate another snack he had, but did not touch his eggy bread for the rest of the period.

Kindergarten chatter continued with knock knock jokes, along with children laughing and singing, and watching their favorite “Blippi Educational Videos” on YouTube. There was an advertisement on YouTube about Christmas, which caused Lucy to shout out, “I’m decorating my house for Christmas this weekend!” Matthew said, “My Christmas tree is already up in my house and it has so many lights on it!” Lucas was deep in thought. He had heard of the holiday called ‘Christmas’ before, but he did not have a Christmas tree in his house, nor did he ever get one. When observing Lucas’ face and actions, it was clear that he so badly wanted to join in on the conversation, even though he had nothing to share about a Christmas tree.

As I listened to these students during lunch duty, I came to a realization that something had to be done about the conversations students have with each other and the way they interact.

### **Story of the Question**

I graduated from West Chester University in 2016 with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and Special Education. Many of my field experiences while at West Chester were in varied settings, including general education field placements in Upper Darby, Media, Phoenixville, and Villanova, PA. I was working with diverse

students each semester. In my special education field, I was placed in autistic support classes, behavior management classes, and also learning support classrooms to strengthen my experiences as a student teacher. After I graduated, I accepted a kindergarten position in the Philadelphia School District. I taught in a very diverse school: more than 90% of my class spoke a language other than English in their household and less than 25% of my class went to preschool each year. According to measures of standardized testing, the students were achieving at a very low level and my class count was up to 30 each year. One-hundred percent of the students were entitled to free breakfast and lunch which was served every day. I did have an aide, but she was only in the classroom for half the day. Some of the languages spoken included Vietnamese, Laotian, Spanish, Khmer, Karen, Burmese, Nepali, and Pashto.

Throughout my four years teaching in the School District of Philadelphia, I feel like I learned so much about myself. Coming in, I felt as though I was unprepared to understand the diverse cultures of my students and address the implicit biases that were right in front of me. I needed to learn more about how to create an inclusive classroom. I was curious about how to guide children when they were having conversations about their culture and how to encourage curiosity about those who are similar and different from them. I felt as though children as young as five and six-years old did not know how to interact inter-culturally because of their implicit bias that may have gotten in the way. These implicit biases may be thoughts they are unaware of that they have developed at home. And there was, without a doubt, a gap in my own understanding.

After analyzing these situations and thinking about the students I have taught and worked with throughout my teaching career, I began to question my teaching methods. In

looking closely at students' conversations, I was frustrated with how they responded to students who were different from them. Many students laughed or made rude comments that made other students upset and/or discouraged. After these comments were made, I could imagine that it made these students feel like they were not a part of the classroom community. I wanted to find a way to make sure everyone was participating and everyone felt safe in their classroom environment. Students need to be comfortable in their school environment because ideally that is where they spend the most time during the week. I have noticed that when students are playing with their peers and talking to each other without guidance from a teacher, most of them do not know how to react when they are presented with a life experience that is unlike their own.

My experience in Philadelphia started me thinking and I knew I needed to do something, but I was not quite sure what that was. I did, however, start to become more aware of the way children interacted with each other. Previously, I felt like I would ignore conversations that my students had with each other because 1) I was too busy catching up on other things like paperwork and grading while my students had free time and 2) I did not really know what to say. Students typically engaged in these conversations when the teacher was not involved. I was very determined to find a solution. As I entered Rowan's Summer Reading Clinic this past July, the capstone field experience for my Master's degree, I began diving deeper into theories such as Bartlett's Schema Theory, Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory, Au's Sociolinguistic Theory, and Ladson-Billings' application of Critical Race Theory to education. Learning about these theories put me back into my Philadelphia classroom environment. I wondered how these

theories would affect my teaching as I took on a new job placement in September of this year.

As I considered my new job placement, I was motivated to bring these new understandings to the classroom. I am still teaching kindergarten, but in the Gateway Public School District in New Jersey (The name of the school, town, and school district have been given pseudonyms in this study). Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has caused many hardships for people around the world, my new school, Wilson Elementary, gave parents two choices: Students could either come to school fully in-person or receive instruction fully online. I am teaching fully in-person and I currently have ten students. None of these students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Three of my students speak another language at home, including Hebrew, Bulgarian, and French. The other seven students classify as white/Caucasian and speak English in their household. I realized that regardless of location, all schools have children from different demographics and backgrounds and it made me reflect and wonder about my students' conversations in the upcoming year. Derman-Sparks & Ramsey (2005) discuss the importance of Critical Responsive Pedagogy and anti-bias education for white children in predominantly white environments. Many teachers "understand that a false sense of racial superiority is isolating and damaging and poorly prepares white children to function in a diverse society. Recent examinations of how whites create and perpetuate racism, and how they can work to combat it, underscore the potential benefits of teaching white children to value diversity and to identify and resist racism" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005, p. 20). My goal was to prepare young children and open their minds and hearts to

interact with each other in a way that practices empathy. The only way to do this was to create an opportunity for them to do so.

My experience in Philadelphia, the summer reading clinic, and my current job placement has led me to this research study and how to reduce bias in young children to create more inclusive environments that are centered around empathy. My goal is to prepare young children for these types of interactions in order to create meaningful discussions that they could participate in too, regardless of their background or demographic. I want to create a classroom each year where all students feel comfortable participating and could relate to curriculum and activities presented. Would reading multicultural picture books, teaching anti-bias lessons, and guiding class discussions help me reach my goal? This is how my study began.

### **Purpose Statement**

The main purpose of this research is to look at past practices that theorists have discovered about Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and see how they can be related to creating an inclusive kindergarten environment. The idea came about to help students feel more comfortable talking about where they come from, instead of not participating in a play group or class discussion. The objective is to increase engagement in the classroom and create a more positive and comfortable environment for students.

This research study is based on the 2020 *Teaching Tolerance's Anti-Bias Framework*. *Teaching Tolerance* includes lessons and learning plans that focus on diversity and respecting each other's differences. The social justice standards that are a part of this framework provide guidance for teaching students at their individual grade



level and provoke discussions surrounding issues of racial injustice. Their website, Tolerance.org states the following:

The Social Justice Standards are a set of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes divided into four domains--Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action (IDJA). The standards provide a common language and organizational structure: Teachers can use them to guide curriculum development, and administrators can use them to make schools more just, equitable, and safe. The standards are leveled for every stage of K-12 education and include school-based scenarios to show what anti-bias attitudes and behavior may look like in the classroom. (Social Justice Standards, 2020).

Students are taught under these four categories--Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action--and their anchor standards and domains. These are taught through mini-lessons on social justice, including scenarios and discussion questions so that teachers can help guide students as they respond and challenge them to reduce prejudice inside and outside of the classroom. "Prejudice reduction seeks to minimize conflict and generally focuses on changing the attitudes and behaviors of a dominant group" (Social Justice Standards, 2020).

Another main purpose of this study is to create a more culturally responsive classroom (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study reflects a culturally responsive classroom because it helps create a space where all students can thrive while strengthening their social skills. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that "Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students

must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). Bringing out the strengths and personal experiences of students will be sure to create a positive classroom culture where students are comfortable in their own skin.

This research will focus on multicultural read-alouds and meaningful class discussions and guide students when they are conversing on their own. The purpose is to help young children address racial and social injustice through picture books. Picture books are more than just stories; they are a way for students to make connections to themselves, their own personal lives and experiences they have lived through. Discussing culturally relevant texts with students can affect children’s cognitive development and the way that they react with other students. Participating in teacher think-alouds allow students to create their own meaning from texts in a way that relates to them. Teaching through a social justice lens and talking explicitly about race leads teachers to ask themselves: “Who is being included in my lessons? Who is being excluded? Whose voices are not being heard?”

Allowing students to recognize their own biases and teaching them how to counteract those biases will undoubtedly create a more racially just classroom space. According to the Perception Institute (2017), “Thoughts and feelings are “implicit” if we are unaware of them or mistaken about their nature.” In order to develop this greater racial awareness, Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2016) can be extremely useful. Critical Race Theory connects to my purpose in that, “A CRT perspective on the literature is akin to applying a new prism that may provide a different vision to our notions of school failure for diverse students” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 215). Everyone

should be comfortable in their own space no matter what part of the classroom they are in. Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is a framework that shows how important it is to include students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences into the classroom curriculum and throughout the school building as a whole.

### **Statement of Research Problem and Question**

A problem in classrooms today is the lack of Culturally Responsive Pedagogical curricula and instruction. A disconnect exists between the diversity of our students and how that diversity is represented in instruction. Many students today are coming into schools knowing several languages. Students are coming in with many rich cultural experiences, some of which were developed in another country. Student engagement and motivation can decrease, however, in a classroom setting where the instruction does not integrate these experiences. It is the job of the teacher and professional educator to not only provide direct instruction and teach students, but create a classroom environment where students can learn, flourish, and make mistakes without the feeling of shame or embarrassment. The research question that drives this study is: What happens when students in a kindergarten classroom participate in learning about social justice and creating a culture of empathy? How do picture books and anti-bias lessons impact how children can create stronger relationships between their peers?

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The following chapters outline the organization of the thesis. Chapter II focuses on the review of the literature. Topics include: funds of knowledge, family literacies, social justice standards, and culturally responsive teaching. Chapter III discusses how data was collected, sources of information, and how a qualitative approach was best for

this study. It also discusses the research design and methodology for the study. Chapter IV explains the data that was collected, analysis of that data, and findings that were discovered. Chapter V includes a summary of the findings, what conclusions were found in the result of the study, limitations, and implications for the field of future research.

## Chapter II

### Review of the Literature

As a society and within our educational institutions, discussions about bias, diversity, discrimination, and social justice tend to happen in middle and high schools. We've somehow decided that little kids can't understand these complex topics, or we want to delay exposing them to injustices as long as possible.

However, young children have a keen awareness of and passion for fairness. They demand right over wrong, just over unjust. And they notice differences without apology or discomfort. (Spiegler, 2016)

Teaching towards a curriculum rooted in social justice is a popular topic among educators who want to promote a culturally sustaining academic space for students. Chapter II presents empirical studies and journal reviews that encourage this idea of a multicultural classroom environment. First, culturally relevant and culturally responsive classrooms and how that can affect a positive school experience for students as young as kindergarten is discussed. Linda Hogg's Funds of Knowledge theory (2012) is used to show how giving students control of their learning by incorporating family literacy practices can increase students' engagement in the classroom. The use of multicultural read-alouds will be discussed in order to promote rich classroom discussions surrounding the topic of racial injustice. The next section focuses on the *Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards* and how anti-bias mini-lessons and the four domains -- Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action (IDJA) promote a more unbiased and safe school experience for children. These experiences that students have in the classroom can

strengthen their abilities to see the differences in others in order to value the concept of fairness and racial injustices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.** In Gloria Ladson-Billings' seminal piece (1995), she described Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement, but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). Ladson-Billings (2014) proposed the theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy through multicultural literature to ensure that all students are being represented appropriately in the classroom and they all have an opportunity to grow through a cultural lens while learning about bias and diversity. When teachers are working with students of color, many of them focus on a "deficit perspective" (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Ladson-Billings (2014) argues, "Instead of asking what was wrong with African American learners, I dared to ask what was right with these students and what happened in the classrooms of teachers who seemed to experience pedagogical success with them" (p. 74). Culturally relevant pedagogy falls under three categories: "academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). In this theory, *academic success* is described as:

The intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences. *Cultural competence* refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures or origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture. *Sociopolitical*

*consciousness* is the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze and solve real-world problems. (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75)

**Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.** Demonstrating Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy within and outside of the school community embraces this idea of cultural equality. Django Paris (2012) builds upon Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Paris (2012) emphasizes that, “culturally sustaining pedagogy works to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). Culturally sustaining focuses on classroom procedures and lessons that students can relate and respond to. The cultural experiences of students offer opportunities of a diverse society inside a classroom where these experiences are built into the curriculum. It is essential for students to be taught to respect and embrace each other’s differences rather than to fear cultural differences.

**Schema Theory.** A central tenet to culturally responsive pedagogy is the connection to students’ schemas and experiences, while centering those experiences in classrooms. Bartlett (1932) introduced *Schema Theory* which is based on a cognitive learning theory. “People have schemas for everything in their lives including people, places, things, language, processes, and skills. For example, people have schemas for their grandmothers (everything they know about their grandmothers) and going to restaurants (everything they know about all the restaurants they have ever visited and learned about)” (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 51). People understand what to expect and the procedures of going to restaurants because of their schemas. When asked about the way to approach going to a restaurant, most people may say things like “You have to go

to the host/hostess stand first and ask if there is a table available. When you are seated, a server will come over to you and take your order.” Some people may say something completely different, but everyone’s schema is useful during class discussions.

Everyone’s schemas are unique and personal to them, which is why when students bring their own schemas to the classroom, the learning opportunities increase and students are able to learn not just from the teacher, but from each other.

### **Funds of Knowledge & Family Literacies**

**Funds of knowledge.** Bringing the funds of knowledge of students into a classroom environment is a way for teachers to tap into the experiences that students have outside of school. Children do not come to kindergarten with a blank slate. Many of them have had a plethora of rich experiences during their toddler and preschool years.

Although the term "funds of knowledge" is not meant to replace the anthropological concept of culture, it is more precise for our purposes because of its emphasis on strategic knowledge and related activities essential in households' functioning, development, and well-being. It is specific funds of knowledge pertaining to the social, economic, and productive activities of people in a local region, not "culture" in its broader, anthropological sense, that we seek to incorporate strategically into classrooms” (Moll et. al, 1992, p. 139).

Inviting students to openly talk about their culture by using their funds of knowledge is an encouraging way for them to understand each other’s differences.

**Knowing your students.** To investigate the impact on culturally relevant pedagogy, Clark and Fleming (2019) created a study in which thirteen preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers brought culturally relevant texts into the classrooms. Many children



that these teachers were working with came from different sociocultural backgrounds who lived in a large urban area. They state, “Findings from teacher observations suggest that reading and discussing CRTs with children from nondominant social backgrounds can tap into children’s capacities and experiential knowledge in ways that promote reading engagement and comprehension development” (p. 23). Experiences that students have can be welcomed into the classroom through discussions, allowing students to connect their experiences to academic content. With ample background knowledge, students become engaged and are more inclined to participate. It is important to select texts based on what they know about their students. This plays a crucial role in growing children’s cognitive thinking and communication skills, aiding their ability to make meaning from texts. It is important to analyze how children interact with texts and increase their development of new pedagogies.

**Reader Response Theory.** Louise Rosenblatt’s Reader Response Theory (1982) has influenced this study in a way where students can have multiple perspectives when interacting with a text. Students can use their schema, or background knowledge, to make connections with the text and create their own “reading experience.” Rosenblatt (1982) states, “The reader, bringing past experience of language and of the world to the task, sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl” (p. 268). Reading is unique and individual to each student, depending on their personal experience to the text they are reading. There is not one general interpretation for each text that is read, Rosenblatt believes everyone's interpretation is different, based on the experiences you have had as a reader. Rosenblatt’s theory is connected to this study because children will develop different stances after listening to

read-alouds and participating in class discussions. “As students grow older, sharing of responses becomes the basis for valuable interchange. Discovering that others have had different responses, have noticed what was overlooked, have made alternate interpretations, leads to self- awareness and self-criticism” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 276).

**Sociolinguistic Theory.** Another sociocultural theorist that has impacted this study is Kathryn Au. Au was greatly influenced through the Sociolinguistic Theory and a social learning perspective. Social interactions with and between students creates a positive classroom environment and honest relationships with students. The purpose of this research study is to view reading, writing, and class discussions as “cultural events” as Au would say. “If minority children are not given the opportunity to become proficient in responding in mainstream contexts, they may be permanently handicapped educationally, socially, and economically... The ultimate goal, then, is to be able to create culturally appropriate instructional events for minority children.” (Au, 1980, p. 93). It is essential to provide print-rich environments and classrooms filled with language so that all students have multiple opportunities to flourish, not just minority children.

**Critical Race Theory.** Critical Race Theory, which Gloria Ladson-Billings applied to education, is a theory that focuses on addressing diverse learners in a classroom and sustaining an environment that embeds students’ cultures. Teaching through this idea encourages teachers to advocate for equity and multiculturalism within a school and throughout a community. Theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings argues that the Critical Race Theory is a view that the education system is set up to keep white people in a place of power and African Americans in a place where they are meant to fail. Ladson-Billings (2016) states, “A CRT perspective on the literature is akin to applying a new

prism that may provide a different vision to our notions of school failure for diverse students” (p. 215). Change in school curriculum must come from looking at it through a social justice lens. Critical Race Theory is connected to this study because of the importance of including student’s cultural backgrounds and recognizing implicit racial bias in an early childhood setting.

### **Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards**

Using *Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards* to teach anti-bias lessons helps promote rich classroom discussions about diversity. Tolerance.org states, “The Social Justice Standards are a road map for anti-bias education at every stage of K–12 instruction. Comprised of anchor standards and age-appropriate learning outcomes, the Standards provide a common language and organizational structure educators can use to guide curriculum development and make schools more just and equitable” (Social Justice Standards, 2020). Listening to stories through a critical literacy lens demonstrates the importance of not shielding children from injustice and to learn about it instead. Children as young as five-years-old can identify differences between racial and ethnic groups and some white children automatically prefer playing with other white children. “The good news is that bias can be unlearned or reversed if we’re exposed to diversity in a positive way” (Spiegler, 2016).

### **What is Implicit Racial Bias?**

According to the Perception Institute (2017), “Thoughts and feelings are “implicit” if we are unaware of them or mistaken about their nature. We have a bias when, rather than being neutral, we have a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people.” In kindergarten, this may look like white children preferring to play

with other white children. Adults and also children have stereotypes about others that they may not even realize. This study looks at teaching mini-lessons and incorporating read-alouds that align with *Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards*. Neitzel (2018) argues that “These implicit biases influence individual behaviors and decision-making, which can result in inequitable outcomes for different groups” (p. 233). Many studies today are starting to emerge surrounding the topic of implicit racial bias in the early childhood years. Neitzel (2018) states, “In fact, changing the atmosphere within a program is one of the most significant ways that administrators can reduce the effects of implicit bias in an educational environment” (p. 234). Neitzel strongly believes in having open discussions about race in an early childhood environment. “Having these types of discussions helps teachers understand implicit bias and how their unconscious beliefs and attitudes play a critical role in their interactions with young children, particularly related to how they provide discipline” (p. 235).

### **Multicultural Read-Alouds & Anti-Bias Lessons**

**Books are windows & mirrors.** It is essential to bring the language and cultural experiences of students into a classroom environment. One way to do this is through multicultural picture books and read-alouds. Rudine Sims Bishop's (1992) work emphasized the importance of incorporating stories that are windows and mirrors for students. It is important for children to see themselves and make connections with the books that they read, but it is also important to educate children about lives that are different from their own. These are called “window books.” Window books give children a new outlook on the experiences other children may have with literature. Classroom libraries and teacher read-alouds should be filled with books that are mirrors and

windows to all students. To investigate this, O'Donnell (2019) interviewed a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in Illinois and discussed her opinion about these forms of books and she stated her goal is to, “equip her students with the critical thinking skills they need not only to make meaningful connections to the texts that they read but also to articulate how these connections help them grow as readers” (p. 18).

**Responses to multicultural literature.** “Using multicultural literature in the classroom has become a focus in recent years as classrooms have become more diverse” (Colby & Lyon, 2004, p. 24). This is making teachers aware of how essential it is to incorporate multicultural literature in the classroom. It is important for students who are marginalized and also students of color to make text-to-self connections in order to participate in the meaningful discussions that occur in the classroom. Colby & Lyon (2004) created a “more formal study examining our students’ responses about using multicultural literature in the classroom” (p. 24). Response papers were collected from 100 student-teachers who were participating in elementary education courses. Findings included that “it was evident that many had not, until this point considered the dilemma that children of color face in regard to having access to appropriate literature and an environment that acknowledges and celebrates diversity in the classroom” (p. 25). Other themes revolved around students finding themselves and opening their minds to a deeper understanding of the significance of multicultural literature. Students are asked to read many stories throughout the school year, and if students from underrepresented cultures cannot relate to situations found in these stories, they will become less motivated to read and disengaged. In this study, “our students realized that not only would literature reflecting a diverse society motivate many students to read, but also, literature carefully

selected to represent our diverse world can help students better understand the principles of tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity, and respect for all” (p. 27).

Mantei and Kervin (2014) focused their study on the question, “What text-to-self connections do children make between the almost wordless picture book *Mirror* and their own funds of knowledge through their visual art creations?” This study included three cohorts of students aged 9-10 in Australian primary schools. The researchers argued that students should be able to reflect on picture books by creating visual art. Art is a powerful tool for a way for children to make personal connections to the text. If authors create visual art through picture books, then students can create visual representations of their responses to the text. Mantei & Kervin (2014) stated that “A funds of knowledge lens was used to analyze the representation of students’ out-of-school lives and experiences within artworks” (p. 76). They found that wordless picture books force students to use verbal expressions about an author’s artwork. Following this, “The opportunity to gain insight into students’ FoK was achieved through their reading, sharing, connecting with and responding to the picture book through visual artworks as part of the literature circle” (Mantei & Kervin, 2014, p. 89). As one can see, students’ funds of knowledge inform classroom cultures in many different ways and illustrations in children’s books can connect to them.

**Classroom discussions.** The theoretical framework centered around constructivism focuses on students’ prior experiences and bringing them into the classroom to support students making personal connections through read-alouds and classroom discussions. Student choice and control can create many opportunities for students to gain alternative perspectives after meaningful discussions occur. Rosenblatt’s

Transactional Theory (1982) states that learning is based upon experiences with literature that revolve around oral socialization. What is a text without creating meaning from it? Engaging students in academic discussion that focuses on reading being a two-way process between a reader and the text gives readers a chance to bring their own experiences to the conversations. These conversations that students hear from other students can influence their thinking and understanding around any given topic. Rosenblatt (1982) states, “The words in their particular pattern stir up elements of memory, activate areas of consciousness. The reader, bringing past experience of language and of the world to the task, sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl” (p. 268).

A case study investigated a kindergarten classroom in Korea that examined kindergarteners’ literary discussions about racial diversity during read-alouds. The participants included twelve 5-year-old students and looked at how they responded to picture books with African American characters. “Reading literature should be used to provide a chance to explore real-life problems and critically analyze all of the differences children encounter on a daily basis” (Kim & Wee, 2016, p. 402). The researchers found that when discussions surrounding the topics of race occurred in the classroom, children were given opportunities to explore racial diversity and “reading multicultural literature helped the children develop and practice their racial language and literacy skills” (p. 402).

### **Creating a Culture of Empathy**

**Practicing kindness.** One way to combat implicit racial bias in kindergarten is by teaching social justice mini-lessons through an empathetic lens. By building empathy,

students will respond to similarities and differences of others in a more positive way. One of the read-alouds selected is titled *I Am Human: A Book of Empathy*. Students will be encouraged to explore the definition of kindness by showing empathy to understand someone else's feelings. A theme of empathy is consistent throughout this study because of the opportunities students will have to learn and practice kindness in order to be more open to academic experiences. A study by Bouley & Godfrey (2008) at Connecticut University argued, "Whole group read-alouds of children's literature proved to be an effective tool to help students take the risk of confronting and knowing their own personal views and then make powerful connections to those of others" (p. 33).

**Antiracism & social emotional learning.** Many school districts are turning to curriculums based in social-emotional learning. Others have critiqued this approach as its impact on children of color. Weaver (2020) investigated antiracism in social-emotional learning. Weaver (2020) explains that social-emotional learning teaches "mindfulness, resilience, and grit." He argues that, "Some educators believe that mastery of these traits can guarantee a student's success. But what they overlook is that every Black parent is painfully aware of: a Black child can do every single one of these things perfectly and still not make it home."

"Stay calm, don't make any sudden moves" (Weaver, 2020).

"Even if provoked, don't get angry, be respectful" (Weaver, 2020).

"Regardless of how they treat you, remember you have worth" (Weaver, 2020).

"Do what it takes to get back home" (Weaver, 2020).

In building students' empathy and social learning, it is critical that educators acknowledge that this does not mean they are necessarily taking an anti-racist stance; in



fact, the tenants of this approach could end up further stigmatizing children of color. Teachers who are proponents of teaching through a social justice lens and culturally responsive instruction acknowledge that these curriculums do not go far enough to reduce implicit bias and reduce racism.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this study is to create a classroom community that focuses on collaboration and a chance for students to create stronger connections between their peers. Focusing on how students view the world through a social justice lens and by bringing their funds of knowledge into the classroom can reduce bias and make students more aware of diversity. When students understand the differences of others, they become more confident in gaining problem solving skills that will help them in the real world. Through this research, children will be encouraged to ask questions and think deeply about their culture and family traditions while developing a passion of fairness for each other.

## **Chapter III**

### **Research Setting and Design**

Education does not change the world. Education changes people. People change the world. (Paulo Freire)

#### **Research Paradigm**

The methodology for this research study is a qualitative approach to collect data about teaching social justice in a kindergarten classroom. The goal is for students to participate in meaningful classroom discussions about social justice and implicit racial bias. The study included multiple teacher read-alouds and think-alouds to provoke thought and follow-up activities so students are able to express themselves on paper using their art boxes. This qualitative research study occurred in a natural classroom setting. “Qualitative research allows for flexibility and adaptability when undertaking research, so a study can be adapted and tailored in response to emerging issues, problems, or trends” (Government of New South Wales, 2020). Qualitative research focuses on “thoughts, feelings, opinions, and/or experiences of individuals, groups, and communities” (Government of New South Wales, 2020). It includes a collaboration between participants and the researcher. Qualitative research is best for this study because lessons taught are infused into the curriculum and the research topic being studied refers to the “how” and “why” students are interacting with social justice in 2020. Thomas (2003) states, “Many researchers are likely to find using a general inductive approach more straightforward than some of the other traditional approaches to qualitative data analysis” (p. 1). An inductive approach, like in most qualitative research

studies, recognizes patterns in the data that is relevant to the proposed research question or topic.

This research study took place in a small classroom environment where student interactions were encouraged. Many professionals in the field of education use qualitative research when conducting a research study because it allows teachers to reflect on their own teaching and interact with students in a meaningful way. In order for this to occur, researchers are encouraged to form positive relationships with their participants. In a kindergarten classroom, interaction between students is of utmost importance. Children do not learn by receiving information, but rather they learn through interaction with their peers (Au, 1980). By recognizing and discussing each other's similarities and differences, students construct meaning about society and culture. When teachers create opportunities for students to connect lessons to their personal experiences, they become more motivated to engage in their process of learning. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because Luis C. Moll et. al (1992) argues how "specific qualitative methods of study influenced not only the nature of the information collected from the family, yielding data about their experiences and funds of knowledge, but provided them with a more sophisticated understanding of the student, his family, and their social world." (p. 137).

### **Procedure of the Study**

This study was conducted for approximately eight weeks from October to December. Data was collected during the social justice mini-lessons which occurred for about 20 minutes several times per week. These mini-lessons occurred in the afternoon

before dismissal and they were referred to as “Afternoon Meetings”. The procedures of the study are outlined below:

- Week 1: Parents and students came into the classroom for a meet-and-greet. The research study was explained to parents. Parents signed an addendum and consent form which allowed student data to be collected by using interviews, surveys, audio recordings, observations, and student artifacts.
- Week 2: Students were interviewed one-by-one. They were asked a series of questions and the researcher wrote down notes to each question asked. The interview included some open-ended questions, but also questions that required students to point to a green happy face, a yellow middle face, or a red sad face. An example question was, ‘How do you feel about reading in school?’ Students were expected to point to one of the faces. All questions asked were according to reading and writing motivation scales and students’ funds of knowledge.
- Week 3: Rules and procedures were discussed as to how students should act during Afternoon Meeting mini-lessons at the end of the day. Students were reminded to listen actively, make eye contact with a student if they were talking, and to raise their hand if they wanted to share something.
- Week 4: Multicultural texts were used throughout this week. The researcher focused on topics such as students’ physical features and how they look similar and different to their peers. The teacher completed a think-aloud while reading the story out loud to the class and asked higher-order thinking questions throughout the text. Students participated in an active discussion and then completed an organized activity after where their thoughts were communicated through a

drawing. The teacher collected the students' artifacts and discussions. A teacher journal was used throughout the lessons.

- Week 5: Multicultural texts were used throughout this week. The students discussed the question 'Where are you from?' and were encouraged to go beyond physical features, while looking at the deeper meaning of family. The researcher focused on students' backgrounds. The teacher completed a think-aloud while reading the story out loud to the class and asked higher-order thinking questions throughout the text. Students participated in an active discussion and completed an organized activity after where they communicated thoughts through a drawing. The teacher collected the students' artifacts and recorded discussions.
- Week 6: Multicultural texts were read which emphasized that it is okay to be different and how it is a beautiful way of life. The teacher completed a think-aloud while reading the story out loud to the class and asked higher-order thinking questions throughout the text. Students participated in an active discussion and then completed an organized activity after where their thoughts were communicated through a drawing. The teacher collected the students' artifacts and recorded discussions.
- Week 7: This week, the social justice standards were used to teach anti-bias mini-lessons. Students participated in turn and talks, reflections, and discussion questions where they agreed or disagreed on a topic. The *Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework* was used to guide instruction. Class discussions were recorded.

- Week 8: Students were given a survey about their attitudes and feelings about learning what makes us different from each other and how that can be celebrated. Read-alouds by using multicultural picture books and class discussions continued. Anti-bias mini-lessons also continued.

### **Data Sources**

Data collected for this study included classroom observations of student interactions with different picture books included in the mini-lesson every day. Most of the picture books were about racial inequality, celebrating our differences, and learning about what makes each student special. I also presented different scenarios to the students where they had to turn and talk and agree/disagree to certain statements. During these class discussions, I wrote down notes in my journal as the students talked. On days when my journal was not in front of me, I listened to students' conversations and how they interacted and responded to one another. It was essential for me to listen to conversations that were happening in a naturally occurring environment.

A second data source I used was audio recordings from class discussions. Audio recordings allowed me to facilitate the discussion more and engage in the conversations. A third data source included digital tools and technology. My Promethean Board was used to project videos to the whole class along with discussion prompts and anchor charts related to the *Teaching Tolerance's Anti-Bias Framework*. A scenario would be presented on a slide and students were encouraged to think, turn, and talk about the answer to the question. An example of two pictures that were displayed on the Promethean Board before a read-aloud are featured below (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Students were asked what they think the ramps and the swing are used for.



*Figure 1.* Accessible playground



*Figure 2.* Adaptive swing seat

A fourth data source was student interviews. I met with students one-on-one to dig deeper into their funds of knowledge along with reading and writing motivation questions. We also discussed what literacy looks like in their households. Student responses were recorded on individual questionnaires that I printed and filled out while the interview was occurring.

A fifth data source was student work samples. After each read-aloud or mini-lesson, students were given an activity to express their thoughts on paper using whatever

materials they had in their art box (most students used a pencil and crayons). These activities were based off of the read-aloud. Some included a graphic organizer where students had to draw pictures and some papers were just blank and students were encouraged to respond however they preferred.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began as I listened to audio recordings, read over my teacher researcher's journal, and studied student artifacts to recognize patterns that fell under the four categories of the social justice standards--identity, diversity, justice, and action. The process that I used to help these themes and categories emerge was an inductive approach. According to David R. Thomas (2003), "The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (p. 2). I felt as though this approach was best for my research study because the research objectives were closely related to the findings that were constructed from the data collected. From data analysis, it was clear to create a hypothesis from inferences made from observations.

Data from students in a kindergarten classroom was analyzed to look for patterns and emerging beliefs about funds of knowledge, culturally relevant topics, and evidence of a more inclusive classroom environment. When analyzing the data and strengthening the four themes, "triangulation" was used. Lisa A. Guion (2002) states, "Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies" (p. 1). The themes that I have found are strong themes because I have seen them across different data sets. I saw these themes in audio recordings, student interviews, student



surveys, and observation notes in a teacher researcher's journal. Student artifacts provided a visual representation of how students viewed themselves in the world around them. Artifacts provided an excellent resource for students to use during share time, so they were able to elaborate on their thoughts while using their paper as a springboard. Audio recordings were also used to identify patterns from the social justice standards. The themes that I noticed when analyzing data included how students identify with their social identities, how they respond to diversity, how they recognize unfairness, and how they show empathy when others are treated unfairly.

### **Context**

**District.** The Gateway Public School District is located in Northern Jersey (all names are pseudonyms). This small city lies along the Hudson River. Washington Street is home to many eateries, bistros, luxurious condominiums, upscale shops, and boutiques. Frank Sinatra Drive is named after the singer who was born in this small city in North Jersey. This city is considered part of the New York metropolitan area. Gateway Public School District includes three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school as well as several charter schools. The public schools in total include approximately 3,000 students. In reference to state testing scores, approximately 30% of students are proficient in math and 54% are proficient in reading. Programs offered in the Gateway Public School District include PreK, special education, gifted and talented, and AP courses in the high school.

The ethnic groups in this city in North Jersey include approximately 71% identifying as white/Caucasian, 12% as Hispanic, 9% as Asian, 2% as African American, and 6% as other.

**School.** This study took place at Wilson Elementary School, one of the three public elementary schools in a small school district in North Jersey. This school includes over 700 students in grades PreK-5th grade and over 100 staff members. According to state testing scores, approximately 45% of students are proficient in math and 58% are proficient in reading.

Wilson School begins each day at 8:15 am and ends at 3:00 pm. This includes about six hours and 45 minutes of scheduled activities for the students. A typical day includes social studies, math, lunch/recess, language arts, specials, and science. Every classroom has a new Promethean Board and each student in grades 3-5 has a personal Chromebook that they are allowed to take to and from school. Specials include multicultural theater, music, art, and physical education. Students have one of these classes for 45 minutes each day. Students were coming to school fully in person, except for October 22nd through November 6th and from November 23rd through December 4th because of a few positive COVID-19 cases in the school. Other than these dates, all students in the school that selected on-site learning were there every day. Parents were also able to select virtual learning for their child, and there are certain teachers in the school that just teach children who are fully virtual. There was no hybrid learning at Wilson School this year.

Wilson School has a very involved Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) group. The PTO is known for holding fundraisers and making sure the school is connected with the outside community. The PTO brings parents, teachers, and families together by offering help and support throughout the school year and beyond. The PTO just created a

recent fundraiser where they sold Wilson lanyards for students to use as a mask holder in school.

The demographics of the school include approximately 52% of students identifying as white/Caucasian, approximately 31% identifying as Hispanic, approximately 9% identify as African American, and approximately 8% identify as Asian or “other.” About 36% of the student body qualifies for free/reduced priced lunch.

**Participants.** The ten students participating in this study are in kindergarten and are five- and six-years-old. Ten students were asked to participate in the study and all ten returned consent forms to use their data in the study. There are five girls and five boys. All of the students identify as white/Caucasian; however, one of those students speaks French at home, one speaks Hebrew, and one speaks Bulgarian. None of these students receive speech and language services or any special education services. All of the students are at or above grade level in literacy. All students participate in class discussions and mini-lessons and all were told about the research study and what it will entail throughout the fall. Each of my students agreed to participate in activities by raising a show of hands in the beginning of the study.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter IV focuses on the data that was collected throughout the research study. Common themes were identified that were revealed through the data.

## Chapter IV

### Findings of the Study

When my daughter was 3 years old, I taught her the word *stereotype*. She was just beginning to string words together into sentences, had determined that pink was definitely not her favorite color, and asked (demanded, actually) why all the “girl stuff” was pink and the “boy stuff” was blue. Because there’s no 3-year-old version for a word describing why colors are gendered in our society, I figured that planting the seed might yield fruit soon enough. And somewhat surprisingly, I was correct. (Spiegler, 2016)

This chapter focuses on the data collected during an eight week study that explored what happens when students participate in mini-lessons surrounding the topic of racial bias and social justice. Culturally relevant teaching was implemented during a structured block of time that included a read-aloud, discussion question, and class activity. I was looking at the impact on student engagement when discussing topics that were relevant to students and their families. In the past, it was difficult for students to relate to the curriculum due to the disconnect to the world around them. Teaching students about social justice in a way that was “kindergarten friendly” and meaningful to them allowed them to discuss topics that may not be normally brought up in a classroom setting filled with 5 and 6-year-olds. Chapter IV outlines the themes, patterns, and trends from the data collected in the study, including student artifacts, class discussion, and multicultural read-alouds.

## **Current Curriculum and Context**

Prior to this study, I had never taught a social studies unit or experienced a literacy curriculum that was rooted in *Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards* (2020) or anti-bias lessons. The standards are rooted in four domains: identity, diversity, justice, and action. Activities, read-alouds, and class discussions were based off of these four categories. There are no other classrooms in the school that focus on this framework. It is not rooted in either the social studies or literacy curriculum. The social studies curriculum at Wilson School is called "Move This World." This curriculum is social-emotional based and teaches students how to recognize their own emotions, along with other people's emotions to build healthy relationships between themselves and others. One of their key tools, the "Emotional ABCs," presents students with one emotional word per letter of the alphabet. Many people believe that social-emotional learning is the key to building empathy and engagement in the classroom.

I connected the social justice standards to the curriculum using a mini-lesson framework through read-alouds of Scholastic texts, specifically those they showcased this year in their "Celebrating Diversity" section. It was on the front of all of their printed magazines and was always the first thing you saw when logging onto their website. Scholastic called upon teachers to "build an inclusive bookshelf". Categories included: Uplifting Stories, Celebrating the Season, Friends & Family, Fantasy & Adventure, All About the World, Anti-Racism, Black History, Black Voices, and Black Heroes. These kindergarten friendly texts were the backbone of the mini-lessons for this study and were the inspiration for rich discussions on racial equity, empathy, and social justice issues.

**Context.** With this being a particularly different beginning of the school year than usual, the procedures and routines that are typically developed took longer than usual, which was expected. Some new procedures included the rules regarding masks and protocols in place when eating lunch or snack. Each student had a divider at their desk, which I was worried would limit student discussion. Figure 3 below shows what my classroom looked like during the study. There are no carpets or areas for centers. Most objects that have been used previously are pushed to the outside of the classroom. Students at Wilson Elementary in Gateway, NJ were strongly encouraged to stay in their seats at all times and only remove their mask when they were eating lunch or having a snack.



*Figure 3. Classroom 208 Setup at Wilson Elementary School in Gateway, NJ*

I noted this in my teacher research journal after the first few weeks of school and fully in-person teaching:

Students in my class came back on Monday, September 21st, which just marks about two weeks in person so far. I have a pretty small classroom and it is filled with ten kindergarteners every day. The students get their temperature checked every day and their parents fill out a COVID-19 questionnaire on the student information system. Children are not allowed into the building until this COVID-19 questionnaire has been completed. There have been multiple students every day that are left outside of the building (with administrators and support teachers) patiently waiting for their parents to fill out the survey so that they are allowed to come into the school building. (Research Journal 10/5/20)

### **Pre-Assessment of Racial Bias**

Before my culturally relevant and responsive mini-lessons began, I created a survey to assess students' feelings about fairness, equity, and social justice (Figure 2). Students agreed or disagreed to statements that were read aloud, while they kept their heads down on their desk with their eyes closed. If students agreed with the statement, they gave a thumbs up and if students did not agree with the statement, they gave a thumbs down. This same survey was also administered at the end of the study.

I created the survey items based on *Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards*. The purpose of the survey was to assess students' perceptions surrounding the theme of social justice. The pre-survey showed that many students had not thought much

about racial injustice and some of them were even confused by my questions and what was being asked.

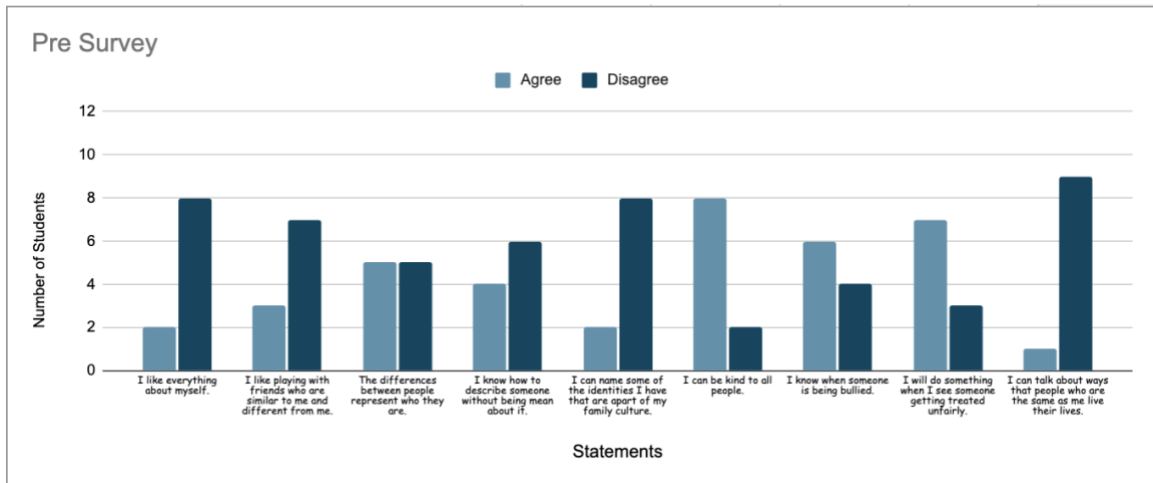


Figure 4. Pre- survey of students’ feelings towards social justice

The layout of this study focused on the four sections of the *Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards & Domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice, & Action*. The statements in Figure 4 each fall under a specific domain according to the *Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards*:

1. I like everything about myself. (Identity)
2. I like playing with friends who are similar to me and different from me. (Diversity)
3. The differences between people represent who they are. (Diversity)
4. I know how to describe someone without being mean about it. (Diversity)
5. I can name some of the identities I have that are a part of my family culture. (Identity)



6. I can be kind to all people. (Diversity)
7. I know when someone is being bullied. (Justice)
8. I will do something when I see someone getting treated unfairly. (Justice)
9. I can talk about ways that people who are the same as me live their lives. (Identity) (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

Students' responses indicated that they can be kind to all people and they know when someone is getting bullied and they will do something about it. I noticed that their weaknesses fell under the "Identity" domain. They had trouble agreeing with the statements that included naming identities that represented their family culture, liking everything about themselves, and talking about ways that children who are similar to them live their lives. This told me that my goal was to focus on bringing positivity into our classroom and framing mini-lessons around encouraging students to be proud of who they are and not treating others differently if they are not like them. This falls under the anchor standard of identity and diversity. Regardless of results, students were taught about each domain and a read-aloud, class discussion, and activity was paired with each mini-lesson.

### **Students' Current Cultural Knowledge**

**Identity.** Identity is the first anchor standard that is a part of the Social Justice Standards. The domains for this section are listed below.

- Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

- Students will develop language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will recognize that people’s multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

In the first mini-lesson, my class as a whole focused on this section: Identity. We read stories that encouraged students to be more confident and proud of who they were as individuals. Two read-alouds that influenced my class the most were: *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold & Suzanne Kaufman and *The Skin You Live In* by Michael Tyler and illustrated by David Lee Csicsko. *The Skin You Live In* is a children’s picture book that shows themes of friendship and strengthening your self-esteem. It is a nursery rhyme that displays social concepts to all cultures and includes characters of many different skin tones. Before I read *The Skin You Live In*, a discussion about the color of our skin took place. These anti-bias lessons were taught at the end of the day during our “Afternoon Meeting.” During all of the lessons, the ten students sat in their seats behind a divider and wearing a face covering. Administration did not allow carpets in classrooms or for students to gather close together for a discussion. All students had to sit in their seats and

raise their hand if they wanted to participate. Captured below is an audio recording before the read-aloud took place. All student names have been given pseudonyms in this study.

- Miss Villari: Today boys and girls, we are going to read a very special story called *The Skin You Live In*. We are also going to be focusing on the color of our skin and why it is so important for our body. Does anyone know how skin helps our bodies?
- Noah: (Noah raises his hand to be called on). To protect us from getting hurt
- Benjamin: (Benjamin raises his hand to be called on.) So people don't see our skull
- Amelia: (Amelia raises her hand to be called on). Skin always heals us. If we fall down and get a booboo, our skin will always come back, even if we are bleeding.

(Audio Recording 10/12/20)

These types of responses were very predictable. It was interesting to see how Noah was the only one that raised his hand after I asked the question, but as soon as he answered there were four more friends who raised their hand after him. When starting this lesson, my goal was to have the students focus on their skin in the anticipatory set and even the skin of others around them. I then asked the class to agree or disagree with the next statement. They all put their heads down on the desk and stated that if they agreed with my statement to show a thumbs up, and if they disagreed with my statement to show me a thumbs down. I stated, "The color of my skin and the skin of other people around me is either black or white." There were ten students in my classroom at this time, and nine of them showed me a thumbs up. I told them to put their hands down and open their eyes and the story was read aloud to them next. I made sure to tell them to pay close attention to the skin of all of the characters in the story. While I was reading the story, Emma

called out abruptly and said, “My friend looks like that picture because his skin is darker than mine.” I stopped on page 10 and stated, “I want everyone to look at this little boy’s face, does anyone notice little dots?” “FRECKLES!!!” Benjamin shouted. I realized that they were already focusing on the different shades that skin color can be and how each is very different. After the story was read I projected a color wheel on my Promethean Board for all students to see. This color wheel was not filled with rainbow colors, but instead shades of brown. The following responses show how our class discussion and read-aloud altered their thinking.

Miss Villari:            Okay boys and girls I am going to ask you a similar question I asked you before I read the story. (I held up a black crayon in my hand and a white crayon. I walked around the classroom and held these crayons right outside of their cheek.) Is everyone’s skin either black or white?

The students did not raise their hand after this question was asked. Instead, they shouted out a collective: “Nooooo!!!”

Miss Villari:            What color is your skin then? It’s not black...it’s not white...

Amelia:                    (Amelia rummages through her crayon box and then raises her hand to be called on.) My skin kind of looks like this color. (Amelia holds up the peach colored crayon.)

Miss Villari:            Excellent! It is interesting to me that you did not pick up the white crayon or the black crayon. Can anyone else find a crayon in their crayon box that is a shade of brown? It can be light brown, it can be dark brown, or it can be a color closer to yellow. Hold it up when you find it!

(Audio Recording 10/12/20)

By this point, many students were holding up crayons that were different shades of brown. Crayola sells a multicultural crayon pack that I purchased for each of my students. The colors in this pack include: apricot, burnt sienna, mahogany, peach, sepia, and tan.

The students were introduced to these new colors and I encouraged them to keep them in a special place at their desk. I told them that whenever they had to draw a person, to use their special multicultural crayons.

Next, students were instructed to use their multicultural crayons and draw a picture of themselves and one other student in the class. There were five shades of brown on the board: light, peach, tan, light brown, brown. Students were expected to look at their own skin, and the skin of a friend, and then draw each person using a multicultural crayon. Figure 5 shows Mia's work that she completed. Mia expressed that she drew Emma on the left and herself on the right. She explained that Emma had tan colored skin and she had peach colored skin herself. All ten children that are a part of this study are White, but many of them recognized different shades independently.



*Figure 5.* Mia's drawing (10/12/20)

Based on students' artifacts, I noticed that students were not using the colors black or white, but instead were so intrigued by all of the shades of brown. Before this lesson, the only color in that wheel I showed was 'brown.' At the end of the lesson, students were reminded that every person's skin serves the same purpose: to protect us and keep us safe. I reminded my class that the color of their skin may be different from their friends, but that does not mean we cannot play with them. We can all be confident and content in the skin we live in.

### **Students' Response to Diversity**

**Connections.** Diversity is the second anchor standard that is a part of the Social Justice Standards. The domains for this section are listed below.

- Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

- Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

Mini-lessons under this domain centered around making connections and building empathy. A scenario presented itself on Monday, November 9th when a new student came to Room 208. She had just arrived from another country. My class is a very close, tight-knit group of ten students. Throughout the Fall season, we were operating fully in person except for three weeks in between September and December. I tell my class all the time that they are my second family. The students are always sharing the activities and events that their parents plan for them outside of the school day and on weekends. All of the students in my class are fluent in English, even if it is not their first language, except for this new student. Emma and Charlotte, two girls in my class, became very close to this new student even though they could not communicate with her fully, because she spoke Spanish. The ESL teacher met us on the playground one day to take the new student for a session. Emma and Charlotte were so confused and upset that their ‘friend’ was taken away from them at recess. They could not understand the reason why she had to go with another teacher. I repeatedly asked Emma and Charlotte why they were upset and what they were thinking. Instead, they ignored me and sat on the blacktop for the rest of recess with their jacket hood up and their head down to their chest. They were so distraught that they would not talk to me for the rest of the time we were outside. This scenario undoubtedly affected them.

Based on this scenario, I selected the read-aloud *I am Human: A Book of Empathy* written by Susan Verde and illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds. *I am Human: A Book of*

*Empathy* is a children's picture book that encourages children to be the best version of themselves. It discusses the good things and bad things about growing up and that even when you make mistakes, there is always a way to overcome them. I wanted my students to understand more about sharing different emotions and ways to cope with others who may be sad, scared, frustrated, etc. Below is an audio recording from October 19, 2020.

Miss Villari: Good Morning boys and girls. Today, we are going to read another story to help us learn more about each other and make some connections. I noticed that sometimes, our new student in the class leaves our room to go to another teacher for a bit. Does anyone know why she leaves our room?

(No one in the class raised their hand).

Well, she leaves our class because she is learning English as a second language. Her other teacher helps her learn new words so that she can communicate better with me and with all of you. The title of the story we are going to read today is called *I Am Human*. Miss Villari was kind of sad when our new student had to leave our classroom. I was hoping she could stay with us all day! Was anyone else feeling a certain emotion?

Emma: (You could tell Emma had some time to gather her thoughts between now and recess. She raised her hand in the air.) I was sad because I made a new friend and then I had no one to play with.

Charlotte: (Charlotte raised her hand right after Emma.) I was sad too because we were playing house and she was the Mommy and then there was no Mommy.

(Audio Recording 10/19/2020)

During the read-aloud I noticed that all students were focused deeply on the pictures. The illustrator created these pictures to be simple and kid-friendly. It almost looks like a child drew a few of the pages. In the story, Susan Verde states, "I can be fearful of things I don't yet understand and timid to try something new." Matthew calls out, "I was scared



of jumping off a big diving board once, just like that one.” Lucas shouts, “Me too!” After analyzing these responses, it seemed as if students were digging deeper into their emotions and how they feel during different situations. I asked the class if anyone else noticed that Emma and Charlotte were upset during recess and none of them responded. I continued to say that it is important to pay attention to other people’s feelings or emotions because we may be able to help them in some way.

Miss Villari:           When we understand the way someone feels, we are showing empathy. Someone who is kind, shows empathy. Today we are going to work towards being our best kind selves.

(Audio Recording 10/19/2020)

The story *I am Human: A Book of Empathy* was read aloud after this class discussion. After the read-aloud, I told the students that we are going to come up with ways to show empathy. I asked the class if they could think of something that they are afraid of. We made a list on the board. Some of the most common answers included thunderstorms, snakes, swimming in the deep end, bad dreams, and getting shots at the doctor. I then proceeded to ask different questions as the whole class brainstormed.

Miss Villari:           What could you say to someone who is afraid of bad dreams?

Noah:                   (Noah raised his hand) I would tell them, “It’s okay, it’s just pretend.

Emma:                  (Emma raised her hand). It will be alright. I go to get my Mommy when I am scared, maybe you can do that.

Miss Villari:           That is great advice Noah and Emma! What could you say to someone who is afraid to go to the doctors?

Amelia:                (Amelia raised her hand). I would say “You will get stickers and a lollipop.”

Lucas: (Lucas raised his hand). Be brave! It's not scary. Just try it.

Miss Villari: Those are great answers as well!

(Audio Recording 10/19/2020)

Based on these responses, I knew that the students were ready for their independent activity. The students were then asked to create their own drawings of something they are afraid of. In Figure 6 below, Charlotte and Liam both drew pictures of themselves swimming.

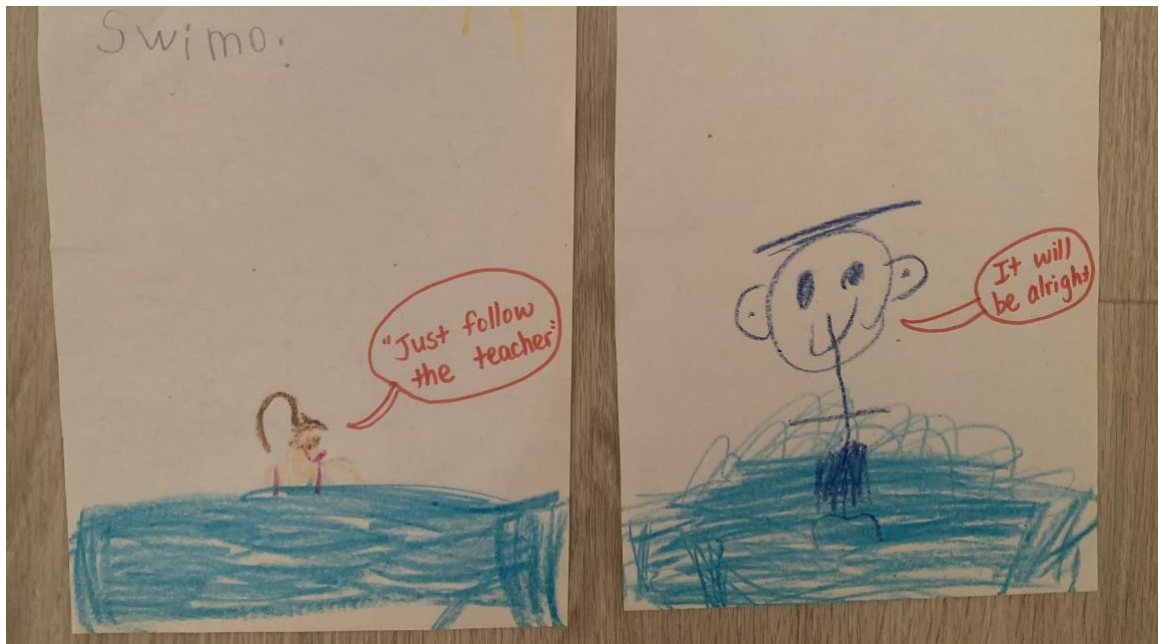


Figure 6. Charlotte's picture is on the left. Liam's is on the right. I dictated their speech bubbles for them.

### Recognizing Unfairness

**Racial injustice.** Justice is the third anchor standard that is a part of the Social Justice Standards. The domains for this section are listed below.

- Students will recognize stereotypes and relate to people as individuals rather than representatives of groups. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will recognize unfairness on the individual level (e.g., biased speech) and injustice at the institutional or systemic level (e.g., discrimination). (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

On October 26th, I chose to bring students' connections to our discussions after our unit on empathy. In Gateway, NJ, there are a plethora of parks in just under two square miles. Some of the most popular include Columbus Park, Shipyard Park, and Church Square Park. Many parks in Gateway are very accommodating to all types of children. I started off the discussion by projecting a picture of one of the playgrounds that the children are very familiar with. The photo was zoomed in on the ramp that was a part of the park. I asked my class what they thought the ramp was for. Their answers to this question are listed below:

Matthew: (Matthew raised his hand.) Strollers.

Liam: (Liam shouted out.) Skateboards.

Mia: (Mia shouted out.) Roller Skates.

Sawyer: (Sawyer shouted out.) Riding your bike

(Audio Recording 10/26/20)

I was surprised at these answers. Not one child said “wheelchairs.” The students in my classroom do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Their parents are extremely involved in their education and it is obvious that they care for their children. From the lens of privilege, it seems as if most students do not have experiences with people of differing abilities. I want my students to reflect on the topic of ableism and how all students, especially those with disabilities, should have the same opportunities that typically developing students have. I feel like privilege sort of erases that curiosity and reflection piece. My goal throughout this research project is to make students more culturally aware and be more curious. My goal was for students to reduce their bias and become less judgmental.

Another example of bias occurred during recess when students were picking teams to play soccer. The boys automatically wanted to be together on a team because Sawyer said out loud that “boys run faster.” It is important to discuss and create mini-lessons about these types of comments instead of just ignoring them. I truly think pointing these things out in their surroundings will challenge them to ask more questions and be more curious. Maybe a few girls in our class are faster runners than boys? I am currently thinking about a mini-lesson that I can create that teaches students about women track runners in the Olympics. (Research Journal 10/26/20)

The read-aloud that followed that discussion was titled *Ron’s Big Mission* written by Rose Blue and Corinne J. Naden and illustrated by Don Tate. *Ron’s Big Mission* is a

story about a boy who has big dreams about becoming a pilot. He often watches planes fly in the air. One day, he goes on a journey to the library which is close to his house in South Carolina and decides to check out a book about pilots. One of the librarians tells Ron to give his book to someone who has white skin to check out the book because people who have brown skin are not allowed to take books home, they are only allowed to use them in the library. Ron refuses to follow this rule and takes the book up to the checkout counter himself. He even stands on top of the counter until he gets his way. His mom and a police officer eventually show up and Ron officially receives his first library card so he was able to check out a few books and take them home.

The students and myself participated in a silent journal activity. The prompt was, “What lesson did Ron teach us?” The students were given 15 minutes to silently record their response on paper. They were instructed to either draw a picture, write a sentence, or they could do both. The transcription from their responses is listed below. After the timer went off, students were encouraged to share their responses if they would like:

Miss Villari: Before we share our responses, boys and girls, I just want to remind you that this story was not written this year. This story happened about 60 years ago. 60 years ago, things were very different than they are now. In the story, *Ron’s Big Mission*, Ron was considered a hero because he worked to change the library system and make the neighborhood a happier place. What else did you write about that you learned from the story?

Mia: (Mia raises her hand to answer the question.) Ron can tell his friends that they can go get books from the library now too.

Lucas: (Lucas raises his hand to answer.) Does that mean anyone who has brown skin can go into the library now to bring a book home?

Amelia: (calls out) Yes, now anyone can go to the library!

Miss Villari: You are absolutely right. Ron believed that everyone should have equal rights. Equal rights means no one is discriminated against. Discrimination is when a group of people or even just one person, is treated differently than everyone else. Did anyone else learn anything from the story?

Benjamin: I think the story means that you have to be nice to everyone.

Charlotte: Ron taught us that anyone can take library books home.

Lucas: (Calls out.) Yeah I don't think that's very fair if one person can't take home a book, but someone else can.

(Audio Recording 11/2/20)

This was interesting to me because I felt as though my class had very little knowledge on the way people of color are treated differently. All of my students in my class are white so I felt as though our unit on racial injustice was the one of the most important. Our closing discussion focused on brainstorming a list of ways of how we know when a child is being treated unfairly. Amelia said, "Someone might be on the playground and look upset." Benjamin also raised his hand and stated, "One time I saw someone on the ground and he was crying and that's how I know someone was being mean to him." These comments stood out to me because children can be very observant and my goal was to make sure students were recognizing unfairness and how bullying can negatively impact students. The next standard focuses on ways we can take action when we see someone who is not being kind.

### **Speaking up with Courage**

**Action.** Action is the fourth anchor standard that is a part of the Social Justice Standards. The domains for this section are listed below.

- Students will express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when they themselves experience bias. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will recognize their own responsibility to stand up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will speak up with courage and respect when they or someone else has been hurt or wronged by bias. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will make principled decisions about when and how to take a stand against bias and injustice in their everyday lives and will do so despite negative peer or group pressure. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)
- Students will plan and carry out collective action against bias and injustice in the world and will evaluate what strategies are most effective. (Social Justice Standards, 2020)

After focusing on “Justice” and some of the stereotypes that are a part of different groups of people, we completed a unit on “Action” and things we can do to express empathy for those who are being mistreated. The title of this unit was “All Are Welcome.” I started out by introducing the read-aloud and the theme for the week. The main read-aloud is titled *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold and illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman. *All Are Welcome* is a *New York Times* Bestseller. In this story, diversity and inclusion are things to recognize and honor. *All Are Welcome* displays a school setting where children are learning about each other’s culture and traditions while being celebrated and loved. Each part of the school building welcomes all students. Below is a transcript from an audio recording.

Miss Villari: Today we are going to read a story that discusses many things we have been talking about recently. The story is called *All Are Welcome*. I just want everyone to look at the pictures of the story as I complete a picture walk. I am not going to say anything, I just want you to use your eyes and observe the pictures. At the end of the picture walk I am going to ask you what you think the title, “All Are Welcome” means.

(Miss Villari completes a picture walk now.)

Noah: (Noah raises his hand to answer the question.) I think that the sign “All Are Welcome” means that everyone can come)

Mia: (Mia raises her hand to be called on.) I think it means that no one is excluded.

Miss Villari: Oooo “excluded.” What does that mean? Does anyone know what it means if someone is excluded?

Amelia: (calls out) I think it means that someone can’t come.

Sawyer: (calls out) Is it like you are not invited to the party?

(Audio Recording 11/2/20)

Based on the conversation, I was starting to realize how much information can be collected just from illustrations in the story. I made sure to point this out to students by saying, “Boys and girls, I didn't even read the story yet and look at how much information we already gathered from the book. I can only imagine how much more information we will get after I read the words” (Audio Recording, 11/2/20). After the story was read, we looked more closely at the illustrations in the story and had a class discussion on how the characters in the story celebrated each other’s differences.

Liam: I noticed that everyone had a different lunch when the kids were sitting at the lunch table.

Matthew: I noticed that everyone has a different family.



(Audio Recording 11/2/20)

I made sure to emphasize that no matter where you are or what you are doing, everyone is always welcome.

I projected a picture of the cover of the book on my Promethean board and encouraged my students to look at all of the children and see how they may be similar and different from each of them. They were told to look at their hair, what they were wearing, and the color of their skin. Below is a picture of what the cover looks like:

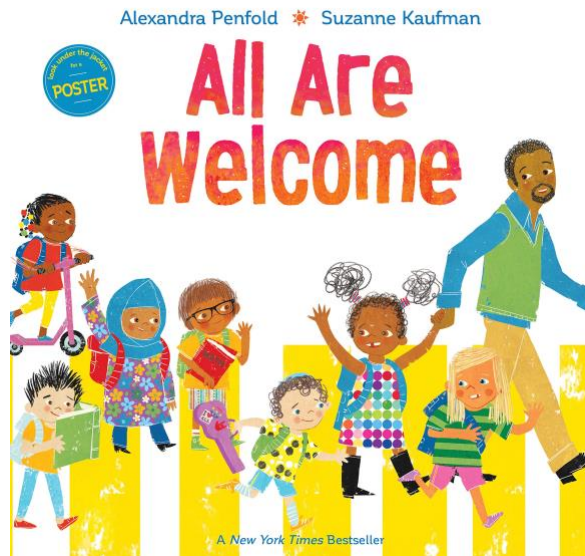


Figure 7. Cover of the text *All Are Welcome*

When asked about their thoughts, they responded with the following:

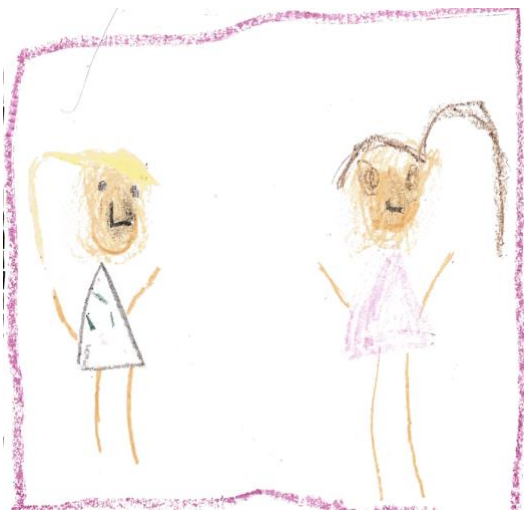
Noah: That little boy has glasses just like me!

Liam: One of them has the same hair color as me.

Charlotte: I have a rainbow polka dot dress just like that little girl.

(Audio Recording 11/2/20)

The students were then expected to put their thoughts on paper. They had to fill in the sentence stem: “We are friends, but love that we have different \_\_\_\_\_.” Figure 8 below was completed by Charlotte. She told the class during share time that her and the other girl she drew had different clothes on, but they were still playing together. Figure 9 below was completed by Emma. She told the class during share time that her and the girl she drew had different hair. The class was reminded at the end of share time that it is important to celebrate how we are different from each other and recognize how we are all still like a family.



*Figure 8.* Charlotte’s drawing



*Figure 9. Emma's drawing*

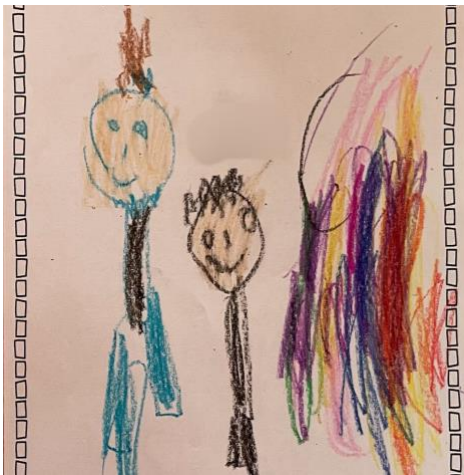
It is so interesting to me looking into the artwork that students have completed this year. In every picture they draw of a character or person, they are wearing a mask. This is most of my students' first official year in school. They will only ever associate their kindergarten class with wearing masks.

(Research Journal 11/2/20)

In Figure 10, Sawyer stated that he drew his friend who has brown eyes, and himself who has green eyes. In Figure 11, Lucas drew a picture of him and his Dad and he shared that their hair is very different from each other.



*Figure 10. Sawyer's drawing*



*Figure 11. Lucas' drawing*

At the end of this unit, students were told that sometimes people are mistreated because of the way that they dress or the way that they look. I had my class imagine what it would feel like if they were the only one not invited to a birthday party or the only one in our class not invited to a playdate. We have to practice as a class speaking up for what we think is right, especially if it hurts someone else's feelings. We brainstormed ways to

do this. Some examples we came up with were making sure everyone has someone to play with at recess, telling an adult if they feel like someone is being bullied, and making sure if someone says something that you do not like, to tell them why it hurts their feelings.

The same survey that was given in the beginning of the survey, was also given at the end of the study. The results are displayed in Figure 12:

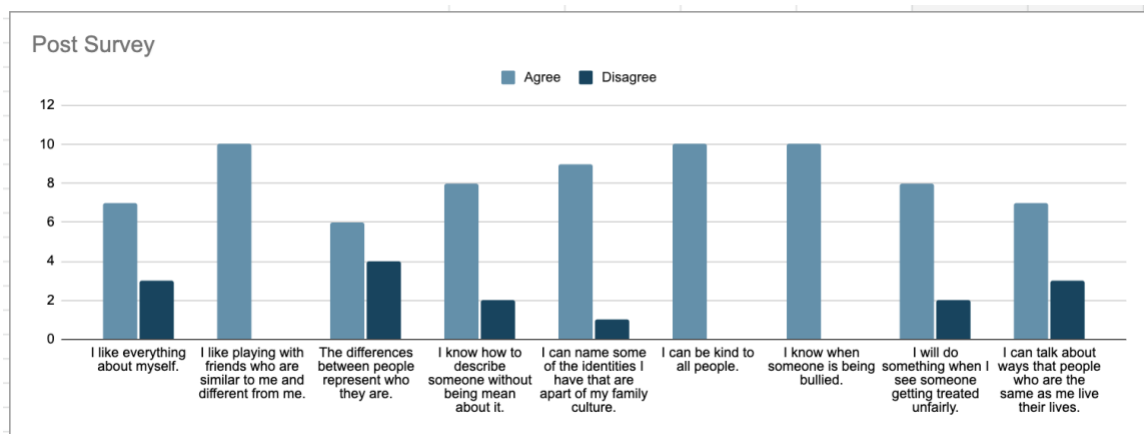


Figure 12. Post survey of students’ feelings towards social justice

I noticed that the students’ strengths included that they can be kind to all people and they know when someone is getting bullied and they will do something about it, just like in the pre-survey. There were a few more statements that changed drastically. All students agreed with the statement, “I like playing with friends who are similar to and different from me” instead of only three students in the pre-survey. Another statement included, “I can name some of the identities I have that are a part of my family culture.” Only two students agreed with this statement in the beginning of the survey. Something we can still dive deeper into is the statement “The differences between people represent

who they are.” I feel as though my students may not have fully understood this because the results were about the same. This information told me that using multicultural picture books and using an anti-bias framework during literacy has positively impacted students.

### **Conclusion**

The findings suggest that when multicultural read-alouds, rich classroom discussion, and giving students opportunities to express their thoughts on paper are brought into instruction, students are more engaged and willing to participate. Continuation of these things will encourage students to be more culturally aware of the diverse world around them. The next chapter outlines conclusions and implications from the study. Suggestions for further research are also discussed in Chapter V.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions**

“Good Morning friends! We have been discussing a lot about similarities and differences between ourselves and other people in our class, in our school, and in our community. Our discussions in the beginning of the school year focused a lot on our physical features, but we have been diving deeper into our own thoughts. I feel like everyone here has learned something new about each other throughout the past few months. I want everyone to close their eyes for a minute, think of one friend in our class and something you learned about him/her and their family, that you may not have known the first week of school.” Everyone in the class was silent and reflecting. I feel like my class has transformed from September until this very moment. The conversations that I overhear during snack time tells me that they are truly more engaged than ever and want to create closer connections with each other. (Research Journal, 11/20/20).

This last chapter contains the summary of the findings, the conclusion of the study, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future researchers. This chapter ends with final thoughts.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to find out what happens when kindergarten students participate in mini-lessons surrounding the topic of social justice and how to reduce racial bias in children. To conduct the research, kindergarten students in a North Jersey Public School District were observed in a naturalistic setting. Student interviews, student surveys, student artifacts, audio recordings, and a teacher’s researchers journal

were used to collect data throughout the study. The findings suggest that when culturally relevant practices are included into class discussions, students are more engaged. The findings also suggest that when an anti-bias framework is used to guide mini-lessons, classrooms become more “just, equitable, and safe” (Social Justice Standards, 2020). Throughout this study, students’ social skills grew stronger, and students felt more inclined to participate to share their opinions or perspectives on certain topics. Findings also suggested that students can contribute their life experiences and views if a teacher focuses read-alouds on family literacies. These findings reveal a growing, positive culture of empathy in Room 208 this year.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

The main goal of the study was to analyze what happens when family literacies and multicultural read-alouds are incorporated into mini-lessons through a sociocultural approach. I wanted to know more about what biases children have developed during their first five years of life and how that affects the relationships between their peers and their teacher. I relied on the many empirical studies on culturally responsive teaching and teaching racial diversity through multicultural picture books to guide my methodology and my teaching. I picked texts based on events in my classroom and I did not just integrate their funds of knowledge, I also used read-alouds with themes of social justice and empathy to address real-time scenarios in the classroom.

When students’ family literacies and funds of knowledge were incorporated into the literacy curriculum, there were a countless number of topics that could be discussed such as learning about the groups that they identify with and respecting all people even if they are different from us. All of these students live very close to New York and are



surrounded by counties that are very diverse. Based on the demographics and social status of the students in Room 208, they are all given a plethora of experiences and participate in many activities outside of the classroom. The activities that students enjoy and the background knowledge that they have developed, has brought rich discussions to my classroom community. This study revealed some instances of children's biases or limited experiences, such as when the participants were unsure what a wheelchair ramp was. Incorporating multicultural picture books that represent characters that are similar to and different from them allows them to see themselves in the text, but also reflect on learning about someone else's experiences.

*Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards* have laid the foundation for age-appropriate activities for different grade bands. K-2 has a set of anchor standards and domains, along with grades 3-5 and 6-8. By creating this study, I have found that incorporating this anti-bias education surrounding the topics of identity, diversity, justice, and action gave students the knowledge and skills they need to interact in a diverse setting. While focused on these anchor standards and domains, students were presented with grade-level outcomes and anti-bias scenarios that presented students with opportunities to practice "anti-bias attitudes" (Social Justice Standards, 2020).

A conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that by teachers using multicultural picture books and incorporating anti-bias lessons, students will develop more confidence in class discussions and gain problem solving skills that will help them in the real world. Viewing read-alouds through a critical literacy lens and applying the lessons learned to real life experiences have promoted rich class discussions about diversity in this study. The literacy activities in this study encouraged students to create

solutions independently, instead of relying on a teacher to guide them through a discussion with their peers. An important conclusion is that children in kindergarten can engage in discussions more reflective of a conversation rather than a call, answer, and repeat form of discourse. Kim, Wee, & Lee (2016) argue that “Teachers should encourage young children to freely share their views about diverse social issues by creating a space where children feel secure in exchanging different views” (p. 416). Kindergarteners so heavily rely on adults in the classroom to solve every problem, and this study encouraged children to think independently.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that kindergarten children are not too young to learn about racial injustice. Educators should not be taught to shield children from injustice, but instead learn about it because by the time children are five-years-old and entering kindergarten, they can identify differences between racial and ethnic groups. For example, in early childhood, white children automatically show preferences to other white children. Spiegler (2016) argues, “We want to encourage children to notice differences because they do so naturally, yet at the same time, honor people’s identities without judging or discriminating based on differences.”

Gibson and Ewing (2011) argue that “engaging with the arts affords the making of real-world connections to personal experiences as well as to assumptions about events and happenings beyond the reader’s experience” (as stated in Mantei & Kervin, 2014, p. 78). This study has concluded that integrating students’ lives inside and outside of the classroom, through listening to read-alouds and connecting to one another, is imperative to creating meaningful literacy experiences in the classroom. Furthermore, when students have an opportunity to put their thoughts on paper through drawings, it gives them a

chance to “unzip their cultural backpack” (Summer, 2014). Teachers are responsible for unzipping these cultural backpacks that every student carries with them, and talk about race with students, which is exactly what the goal of this study aimed to do.

### **Implications**

Teachers need to consider the diversity of classrooms throughout the 21st century. Children are not focusing on the differences and similarities of the students who are sitting beside them. It is imperative that culturally responsive teaching methods are utilized in the classroom so students are able to understand ethnic groups that are different from their own.

This study can offer assistance to teachers who are trying to create an inclusive environment and it can improve classroom teaching in a variety of ways. Through the use of reading multicultural picture books and teaching anti-bias lessons from *Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards*, the climate of any classroom can be impacted positively.

Before the Reading Clinic this past summer, I would be the first to admit that I was not fully aware of the cultures and traditions that made up my classroom. The only culture I was really familiar with, was my own. Throughout this study, I have learned that the only way to truly connect with all students, is to know them on a deeper level. In fact, students spend more time at school during the week than they do at home. Imagine a learning environment where your cultural background was not included? Kathryn Au would undoubtedly argue that a student's culture is one of the most important parts of their literacy development. Students become more engaged and have opportunities to

succeed when they feel as though they can relate to what is being taught by speaking to it from a cultural perspective.

Teaching about implicit racial bias can be difficult for educational professionals because they need to have better training. It is challenging for many white educators to talk about race with students because of the little opportunities they have to practice these conversations. Neitzel (2018) argues, “Perpetuating a “color blind” perspective plays a significant role in the ongoing inequality in educational settings” (p. 235). In other words, many teachers, including myself before Summer 2020, have steered away from conversations about race because I simply did not know what to say. I am sure I can speak for many educators around the country that do the same exact thing, because they are not sure how to interact with students about certain topics. If teachers are given adequate professional development and training each year on “working towards eliminating the role of implicit bias” (Neitzel, 2018, p. 235), then teachers, students, and even administrators would feel more comfortable in an atmosphere where interactions are used to develop stronger connections and relationships.

Teachers also need to understand how to teach in a virtual environment. After what many teachers can say was an extremely unusual year, for many of us it was a learned lesson that we need to be prepared for either virtual, in-person, or a hybrid learning environment. Teachers can obtain knowledge and implement an anti-bias framework in their classrooms through training and professional development. Taking time to participate in sessions on building positive relationships in the classroom can only improve the culture of a school. Tolerance.org is a resource that administrators can use as there are countless opportunities to build a learning plan to teach about race. Some

resources include podcasts, webinars, self-guided learning, and even workshops where trainers provide on-site anti-bias training. I strongly believe this should be something that every school should explore.

### **Limitations**

During the course of the study, there were a few limitations that may have impacted the results. It may have been limited by the students in the actual study. There were ten white students who participated and each of them spoke English. Three of them spoke another language in their household: one spoke French, one spoke Hebrew, and one spoke Bulgarian at home and the rest spoke English. This study may have produced different results if there were students from a variety of backgrounds. This study only looked at students who were predominantly white. Derman Sparks & Ramsey (2005) argue that there is value in anti-bias education in white educational spaces. This “includes fostering children’s knowledgeable self- and group identities, empathetic understanding of diversity and skills for negotiating differences, critical thinking about stereotyping and prejudice, and standing up for oneself and others when discrimination occurs” (Derman Sparks & Ramsey, 2005, p. 22). There is importance in that, but future research may look at other populations.

There were also limitations in relation to COVID-19. There were plans imagined for this study that was not possible to implement due to restrictions during in-person learning. What was imagined consisted of students coming to a carpet to listen to a read-aloud and students participating in turn-and-talks where they would sit knee-to-knee to have a conversation. There were many restrictions this school year including no carpet time. Teachers were not allowed carpets in classrooms at Wilson Elementary and

students had to stay at least 6 feet apart from each other. When in the classroom, students were permitted to wear their masks for the whole school day, except when eating lunch and snack. Administrators did not want students out of their seats since each student had their own individual barrier. Brain breaks and story time did not look the same this year. These restrictions, without a doubt, limited the close relationships that I hoped to build while teaching about bias and empathy. In Ladson-Billings' 1995 study on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, she specifically stated, "The teachers kept their relations between themselves and their students fluid and equitable. They encouraged the students to act as teachers, and they themselves, often functioned as learners in the classroom. These fluid relationships extended beyond the classroom and into the community" (p. 163).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Further research on social justice standards and a classroom immersed in an anti-bias framework will be very helpful to future educators, especially with how the year 2020 can possibly affect students in the future. Students need to be connected and feel a part of something bigger than themselves, now more than ever. A suggestion for future research is to look at populations of students from different backgrounds and socioeconomic status. It may also be helpful to collect data from a whole year's worth of mini-lessons and read-alouds instead of just a few months. This study may also be conducted in any grade level or even mixed grade levels. One way to do this can be observing the way students interact with each other at lunch and recess since they are mostly with students who are from other classes and sometimes even other grade levels. Another suggestion for future research is for part of the study to be conducted in the

students' household. The researcher may find a plethora of information by performing home visits to create stronger connections.

Lastly, there needs to be more research in creating action plans for elementary schools. Administrators and teachers need to practice advocating for social justice in schools and communities since teaching about social justice often implies action. A future study may look at what can be done to help children take further action after social justice standards are applied.

### **Final Thoughts**

In closing, the importance and critical need for teaching about social justice is strongly valued in the field of Education today. Teachers need to better understand how to work with difficult conversations and students who feel disconnected. Incorporating students' culture and family traditions into literacy instruction will have lasting positive effects on students and their ability to create connections with others. Research has shown that a classroom filled with culturally relevant and responsive practices supports students in an engaging way. Teachers need to keep up with the growing needs of students each year. Throughout this study, I feel like I have been forever changed as an educator. I plan to continue my research in making sure my students each year feel welcomed and included. I can only hope that other educators will surround their students with multicultural picture books and an anti-bias framework to support and encourage a diverse classroom environment.

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