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**AFFIRMING RESPECT AND KINDNESS WITHIN A CLASSROOM
COMMUNITY THROUGH DISCUSSION AND MULTICULTURAL
LITERATURE**

by

Angelica Gitter

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

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my daughter Malina, may you always feel empowered by your curiosity and flourish in your magic.

Acknowledgments

Words cannot express my gratitude and appreciation for my husband. Calvin, you are a critical component of my success. You continuously push me to the best I can because you genuinely believe in me. These past two years in this program, paired with Covid and starting a family have not been easy. Yet, through every hard time, you continued to fill all of my gaps and the completion of this journey would not be possible without you. Thank you for setting my alarms after I have fallen asleep at my computer, doing the laundry as it piled up, wiping my many tears, and never letting me stop regardless of how many times I wanted to. You were unwavering in your support and this accomplishment is a reflection of our teamwork and love. I am so grateful for you.

Malina, my sweet girl. You are my new purpose and everything I do has more meaning because I know you are watching. I hope to always show you that you can be strong, intelligent, and soft all at once. You are the only one who can define yourself. I love you and I am so proud to be yours. Thank you for making me your mama.

My family, thank you for your encouragement and help in cheering me on as I complete this major accomplishment. Thank you to my parents for instilling a strong drive and foundation for achievement. Harlow, you remind me every day to be strong, you motivate me to always keep going, I love you!

Last, I feel it is important to acknowledge myself. It is not often that I give myself credit or grace, but after the past few years, this is due. I am proud of myself for not giving up, despite the many obstacles and circumstances. It has not been easy, but as cliché, as it is, it is all worth it. Just do us a favor and sit in this accomplishment for a while.

Abstract

Angelica Gitter
AFFIRMING RESPECT AND KINDNESS WITHIN A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY
THROUGH DISCUSSION AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE
2021-2022
Valarie Lee, Ed.D
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this research was to investigate how students in a third-grade classroom can engage with multicultural texts and learn about cultures that are different from their own. Furthermore, it investigated the impact of multicultural literature on respect and kindness in a classroom community. Throughout the four-week study, students read twelve different multicultural texts and engaged in classroom discussions during Morning Meeting. Students participated in group discussions expressing their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs related to the context of the books read. The strategies used for this qualitative research were questionnaires, teacher observations, and whole group and small group discussions. Finally, analysis of the data revealed several themes related to kindness and respect. Students fostered connections with other students and showed acceptance of diverse cultures. Other revealed themes included, cultural identity, empathy, bridging school and home life through the use of the Funds of Knowledge survey (González, Moll, and Amantito, 2005) to gain a deeper understanding of student cultural background and the need to integrate multicultural literature into established curriculum across content areas. The implications for educators include exposing students to multicultural literature combined with a scaffolded discussion to further students' knowledge and understanding of the diversity within the world around them.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Vignette

“*You're on mute*” is a statement that will forever send a shiver down my teacher spine. In teaching both hybrid and virtual, it felt as if my lessons have become lost in translation but also lost the opportunity for my students to grow in their community, socialize and create friendships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, children have been isolated from others and taken out of the school environment where they are normally given chances to meet others and grow both academically and socially. If the isolation from friends and family has not been enough of a burden on our minds, the political weight has become astronomical. If there is a word to describe the past year it could be simply summed into, *heavy*. Pandemic stressors, COVID variants, vaccination rollouts, political turmoil, elections, culture wars, oppression, discrimination, and country division are all forefront occurrences. Of specific importance were the cultural wars taking place in every community. In the summer of 2020, when the world was screaming for others to act, I fell vocally quiet, but my mind became rampant with questions. What was my action? Where do I begin? What could I do? As a white female, what could I do other than listen, observe, learn, and reflect? Upon my reflection, I found that my voice is not in a vapid Instagram post soon to be buried by the next picture of my daily life or even on the front lines of a protest, but my personal platform lies within my classroom.

Flash into my current classroom. My reading mini-lesson has concluded and students are moving about the room into their book bins and then their independent reading spots. I walk around the room observing the reading habits of students who are

quick to get settled and others who take a little more time. I sit down beside a student and begin conferring with him about his book.

Mrs. G: Tell me about the book you chose to read today.

Student: I am reading *Dog Man Fetch-22*.

Mrs. G: What made you choose this book?

Student: I like the pictures and the colors. I think that it is funny too.

Mrs. G: Do you see yourself in this book?

Student: What do you mean see me? He is a dog.

Mrs. G: Does anything in this book remind you of yourself or your family?

Student: No, not really. I just like these kinds of books.

I pause in our conference and then span the classroom. The other books that I see are similar to this child's book selection. I then look to the front of the room where I display focus books for the month. I choose these books based on the curriculum, monthly holidays, or even national day themes but not one of them projects culture or even diverse skin tones. At this moment I realize that my classroom library needs a major audit and is falling very short of a crucial purpose. Simply put, I need to do better in my classroom. My classroom, *my* classroom, where I decorate the walls to build comfort, educate students of all races, build relationships, and influence the minds of twenty-three ten-year-old students is where my power lies. How do I navigate this influence, maximize my impact, and most importantly limit my bias? Literature. Books are the vehicle and the answer. It is clear that multicultural literature plays a significant role in elementary education. The purpose of this study is to provide students the opportunity to explore, engage, and discuss multicultural literature. As a result, it is hoped that students will start

to become more accepting of diverse cultures and set out ways to show respect and kindness to others in their classroom and community.

Story of the Question

Upon reflection on my own experiences with cultural differences, I am brought back to a little girl in her second-grade classroom staring at two colored crayons. The projected activity was to create a drawing of yourself from summer vacation. When it came time to color ourselves, my teacher placed two crayons on my desk, a brown and orange. She did not explain anything other than using one for your skin tone. I vividly remember looking at my hand and saying “I’m not orange” and since it was the end of summer and I had enjoyed the sun, I chose the brown crayon. I am white and that was definitely not the correct choice, however, I didn't know better nor was it explained to me. In retrospect, I am confused and embarrassed. Was my teacher afraid to talk about race and cultural identity? Why was I left to figure it out on my own at the age of seven? How could this situation have been different if my teacher took the moment to speak with me individually? She could have helped me to understand that my skin tone could be achieved by using the orange crayon and lightly shading my face. Or, could we have looked deeper into the crayon box together and have found a shade that I felt represented me best? I use this memory as a lesson in my current classroom where my students are always given this opportunity to decide their coloring choices. I make it a concrete point to have multicultural crayons, markers, and construction paper in the classroom so students always feel seen and represented in their work.

While that was my earliest memory of cultural identification, I do not recall other chances to explicitly learn about others in my classroom. Of course, we learned about

Martin Luther King and in high school, we had a day where everyone brought in food from their culture. However, other than those instances, I do not feel I have had the opportunity to study culture, mine or others, and understand the cultures within my community. It has not been until my own teaching experience that I learned about multicultural literature. Reading multicultural literature can help students who are unfamiliar with other cultures and help build background knowledge that is required for promoting respect, awareness, and acceptance of diverse cultures. As the nation increasingly becomes more diverse, providing multicultural literature to students will give them the opportunity to be more understanding and accepting of people from diverse backgrounds (Martinez, 2012).

Analyzing my curriculum, I am again faced with missed opportunities for fostering cultural diversity. We have been fortunate enough in the past to be provided with boxes of books from our district, this year they were labeled “multicultural.” I excitedly opened the package to find book club sets of chapter books, picture books, and even a few leveled readers. What I did not find were connected lessons for each text or their rationale. Therefore, if you were not a teacher who wanted or was able to read each new book, create a specified lesson or take the time to find where they can connect to the curriculum, these new and influential books stayed in the box, in the back of the room collecting unnecessary dust. While I did not naturally have the time, I had the drive. The drive to create exposure for my students because I know it matters and that they will be better individuals because I did this for them. Therefore, I created a unit of study centered around discussion and reading and asked the question of the impact these two variables will have on each other.

Statement of Research Problem and Question

The research question I plan to investigate is how do culturally responsive practices within morning meetings affirm respect and kindness in a classroom community? The goal of this research project is to help support and discover that making connections, modeling behaviors, and learning about various cultures is a valuable way to promote cultural diversity interactively. This past year has hindered children's ability to act together, socialize and connect with their peers and there is a need for explicit and fostered instruction on how to come together as a classroom community. The increasing diversity within the nation and its schools poses serious challenges as well as opportunities (Gay, 2000; Hawley & Jackson, 1995). Though there have been findings of academic regression, Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, and Viruleg, (2020) surveyed 16,370 parents across the United States and found that "35 percent of parents said they were very or extremely concerned about their child's mental health, with a similar proportion worried about their child's social and emotional well-being. Roughly 80 percent of parents had some level of concern about their child's mental health or social and emotional health and development since the pandemic began" (p. 4).

Moreover, in today's climate, students need tailored instances that introduce, share, and immerse themselves with cultures and recognize how diversity can enhance their understanding of others. This will in turn promote respect, kindness, and empathy, strong and necessary components of any community, not just a classroom. Portes (2005), defines equity as "all groups of citizens having comparable school learning outcomes regardless of cultural history, gender, or ethnic background" (p. 11). Moreover, inequity in education represents not only school-specific issues but also a social issue that is

halting progression for students and communities. Specifically, a major inequity within literacy is the access and utilization of multicultural education to affirm diversity and inclusivity. This choice of inequity came on the heels of a deep reflection of my personal privileges, teaching, and cultural imprint. We are living, raising children, and educating children in a world that is centered around the media. While this access can be beneficial, it is also a source of turmoil and unfiltered exposure. More recently, there has been great backlash and halts of progression in many states that are working to control history and silence controversy. Many states have protested the teachings of *Critical Race Theory* in their schools. “The core idea [of Critical Race Theory] is that race is a social construct and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies” (Sawchuck, 2021, p. 3) Specifically, Senate Bill 3 in Texas, seeks to strip required lessons on people of color and women from “critical race theory” law. This is just a reminder of the slow process of equitable change.

One way to combat this backlash and progress towards change is to do so through literature, as multicultural texts can bring traditions, celebrations, and cultural uniqueness to our classroom. During the study, students will participate and be introduced to a variety of multicultural texts, discussions, scenarios, and learned behaviors that will help the students to build a united and kind group.

Students will learn to socialize through guided and modeled Morning Meeting practices. Carter (2006) promotes that, “socialization as racial and ethnic beings begin early in life, and much of this socialization occurs during the compulsory years of schooling,” (p. 304). She suggests that since socialization in school is so crucial to the

development of tolerance and understanding, teachers should become responsible for fostering these moments throughout the school day. Morning meetings can set the stage for a successful social environment in the classroom that will positively affect the students' behavior, academic work, and overall outcomes outside of the classroom and in the community.

Further, literature can be the catalyst for addressing individual needs and exposing students to various cultures. Teaching multicultural literature is more than recognizing heroes and holidays of cultural groups: transforming instruction that focuses on decision-making and social action skill-building is a critical component as well (Logan, Watson, Hood, & Lasswell, 2016). When students have a strong understanding of diverse cultures, they can develop empathy, and the ability to find shared ideas and goals with people that may be different (Dessell, 2010). This allows the classroom to develop into a community of students who may be diverse but come together to find similarities and celebrate differences. When reading multicultural literature in the classroom, students “gain understanding about different beliefs and value systems. They develop social sensitivity to the needs of others and realize that people have similarities as well as differences” (Norton, 1990, p. 28)

When the world was witnessing the aftermath of George Floyd's death, I stopped everything and listened. I was not able to be present in peaceful marches to express my solidarity, therefore, I had to dig deeper and question where my impact truly lies? Through this reflection, I found that my impact lies within my classroom, within the walls of my homes, within the words I speak, and within the actions I model. This sparked a fire in me to ensure I put action to my stance and knew that the way to do this

was to bring these issues into my classroom, where students can learn about critical and cultural events through books, stories, and videos and have a safe space to listen, question and understand. My experience as a student and an educator has brought me to this point of contention where I strongly believe that every student deserves and needs to be provided with opportunities to read and discuss multicultural literature. Exposure at an early age can help students to find their own cultural identity and embrace the diversity and cultural differences of others. Building background knowledge and providing safe chances to discuss the question can have profound effects on children's social and mental development. Literature can begin this journey for many children.

Organization of the Paper

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter two of this study provides a review of literature encompassing the use of multicultural literature, facilitating discussion in a morning meeting setting using the scope of a culturally responsive pedagogy, and the formation of a classroom community centered on diversity and based on respect and kindness. Chapter three explains the design and context of the study, the population of students used, as well as qualitative research methods used to analyze the data presented. Within this chapter, there is an explanation of the multicultural text unit and how each lesson will be exposed to the students. Chapter four reviews and analyzes the collected data and provides a detailed description of the findings. Chapter five concludes the research study by discussing the limitations and implications. In addition, the final chapter provides suggestions for further research promoting student affirmation of culture using multicultural literature and morning meeting opportunities.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

The increasing diversity within the nation and its schools poses serious challenges as well as opportunities (Gay, 2000). Despite the influx of awareness of diversity, racism and intolerance continue to exist. Teaching children about diversity is crucial, but not always easy. According to McKibbin (2008), “Teachers have an obligation to engage in opportunities to learn about different cultures and must consider these values when planning lessons and classroom structure. Moreover, curriculum and materials should acknowledge the life experiences and background of all students so that instruction can be built on a firm foundation” (Septor, 2019, p. 20). The world needs this and future generations of children to be globally-minded. It needs children who are not just tolerant of others who are different but move further in acceptance and ultimately affirmation. Culturally Responsive (Gay, 2010) and Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) have created a platform for educators to place equity at the forefront in their classrooms. The question posed for this study asks, how do these practices within morning meetings affirm respect and kindness in a classroom community?

The research reviewed in this chapter includes: (a) culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy; (b) morning meeting and the responsive classroom; (c) the importance of student discourse; (d) multicultural literature in the classroom; (e) influence of teacher bias; (f) and the measurement of respect and kindness.

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy

Culture is explained as a complex constellation of values, mores, norms, customs, ways of being, ways of knowing, and traditions that provides a general design for living, are passed from generation to generation, and are used to give meaning and order to all lives (Howard, 2010; Gay, 2010). Culture is central to student learning. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2010) creates an optimal learning environment for students as it acknowledges and utilizes students' identities, experiences, and backgrounds to pilot instruction. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using multicultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is endorsed that “academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and learned more thoroughly” (Gay, 2002, p.106). These essential components make up the unique demographics of a classroom and should be utilized by educators and administrators to set the standards of the school. Culturally relevant teachers exhibit common traits that include a “passion for teaching, seeing their relationships with students as equitable and fluid, and the understanding that “knowledge is continuously recreated, recycled, and shared by the teachers and the students” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 163). Fluid relationships between teachers and students mean that there is always space for new knowledge, understanding, and perspectives. Relationships are not stagnant and set at the beginning of the year; instead, they are ever-evolving and influenced by the events, cultures, and ideologies of the people around them. In culturally relevant classrooms, the bonds created between the teacher and students are developed to build a community of learners that encourages

students to work and learn collaboratively (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The power and influence of a nurtured, established, and genuine relationship between a teacher and a student cannot be overstated.

Educators can help to promote both the Culturally Relevant and Responsive Models within the classroom. Ladson-Billings' (1995) pivotal study, *Toward A Theory Of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, investigated what makes a successful teacher of African American students. Within her research Ladson-Billings explores culturally relevant pedagogy influences and terminology. Effective findings promoted collaboration and strategies to promote success and achievement for students within their classroom. These strategies range from immediate implications to gradual and goal-setting strategies. Examples include learning to say a student's name correctly, labeling items or signs in the room with all languages spoken by students, having accessible multicultural texts available, learning about students' cultural histories, engaging in family outreach, engaging in the community, and learning the language of the students. These culturally driven models directly relate to 21st-century learning. Activities, lessons, and engagement fostered through a culturally responsive viewpoint prepare students to become critical thinkers, innovators, and problem-solvers in today's society. One such structure that can be utilized is morning meetings, an excellent tool to provide a safe space for students and teachers to learn about and explore different traditions, discuss cultural topics in a safe space and work to build connections.

Morning Meeting and the Responsive Classroom

Morning Meeting is a key component of the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching. "The Responsive Classroom approach is a widely used, research- and evidence-

based approach to elementary education that increases academic achievement decreases problem behaviors, improves social skills, and leads to more high-quality instruction” (Responsive Classroom, 2013, p. 1).

The Responsive Classroom is informed by the beliefs of seven basic tenets.

1. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum
2. How children learn is as important as what children learn
3. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction
4. There is a set of social skills that children need to learn and practice in order to be successful. They form the acronym CARES-cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
5. We must know our children individually, culturally, and developmentally
6. Knowing the families of children we teach is as important as knowing the children
7. Teachers and administrators must model the social and academic skills that they wish to teach their students. (Kriete & Bechtel, 2002, p. 4)

In the early elementary years, children are beginning to segregate and include or exclude students based on race and differences. Edmonds et al. (2008) demonstrate that relationships and friendships are established between children based on the similarities between them. Educators need to give students every opportunity possible to engage with one another and discover the similarities they may have with their classmates. Hosting daily Morning Meetings in the classroom helps to build a safe and encouraging environment where community, trust, and respect flourish. Through this process, social and emotional intelligence begins to develop, and the students start to practice and use 21st-century skills in their academic work and social relationships. Morning Meeting sets

the tone for respectful learning, trust, cooperation, problem-solving, and a sense of community in the classroom. *The Morning Meeting Book* (Kriete & Bechtel, 2002) presents a structured morning meeting to be held daily in classrooms that would help build community in the classroom.

Morning meetings and class discussions will allow students to see similarities and differences between their peers. This could be small or large but as educational facilitators, it is imperative to acknowledge these contrasting and similar findings and not silence them. Perhaps the discovery of these harmonies will allow students to understand their classmates and empathize with those classmates who may be different from themselves. Building connections can help students find compatibility while acknowledging their differences with pride. The goal is for students to understand that they possess an individual identity within the whole of the classroom.

Facilitating and setting time for consistent Morning Meetings is an investment that is repaid throughout the school day and school year. “The sense of belonging and the skills of attention, listening, expression, and cooperative interaction developed in Morning Meeting are a foundation for every lesson, every transition time, every lining-up, every upset and conflict, all day and all year long (Kriete and Bechtel, 2002, p. 3). As many teachers will attest, the time put into setting routines and establishing a classroom environment at the beginning of the year can set the tone for the remainder.

Why Student Discourse Matters

With the power of the teacher-student relationship comes the power of conversation. Student discourse is an imperative factor in creating a cohesive and

progressive classroom community. Conversations “within the structured safety of Morning Meeting, allows learners to put forward what conclusion they know, pose questions and venture possible interpretations” (Kriete & Bechtel, 2002, p.16). When opening the line of communication and discussion, “a healthy exchange of ideas may include opposing viewpoints, it is necessary to create a classroom community that is inclusive and supportive of all its members” (Sanchez, 2008, p. 53).

The Facilitate–Listen–Engage (FLE) model (Meltzoff,1994) is a progressive and highly responsive approach for teachers to utilize when constructing a classroom community and engaging students in discourse:

In this model, which can be applied to multiple content areas and across various grade levels, the teacher, serving as the *Facilitator*, intentionally plans lessons, engaging students in discourse. Classroom members then participate in the *Listen* phase in which teacher and students cohesively exchange information through bidirectional communication. In the *Engage* phase, the teacher purposefully provides opportunities for students to engage in rich discussions which stimulate the development of community (Lloyd, Kolodziej, and Brashears, 2016, p. 291)

During Morning Meeting, and using the FLE model, teachers provide students with the time and space to discuss ideas openly. During these discussions, the teacher may begin by modeling and having more control over the conversational flow. As the weeks progress the goal for discussion is to move students away from asking yes or no questions and keep the momentum towards conversations. Routman (2005) contends that “students learn more when they can talk to one another and be actively involved” (p. 207).

Students work to ask clarifying or follow-up questions that hold their classmates accountable for talking back and continuing the dialogue.

Educators hold great efficacy within their platform that acknowledging best practices within teachable moments is crucial. “Teachers must elucidate the cultural values and racial and cultural differences that underlie the behavior of characters in the work, challenge stereotypes, and engage students in cultural discussions. Teaching multicultural literature will help students discuss these differences and enhance cross-cultural understanding” (Dong, 2005, p. 59). Higher-order thinking, critical questioning, and analysis of multicultural literature are effective ways of affirming diversity and can be attributed to social and cultural development.

Multicultural Literature in Classrooms

Nieto and Bode (2012) strongly promote making education inclusive for all and they are unwavering that “a multicultural approach values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection, and action” where “students are empowered both individually and collectively to become active learners” (p. 41). Through a Culturally Responsive classroom model equipped with teacher modeling and the use of multicultural literature, students will learn how to engage in critical discourse and foster conversations within the morning meeting setting. Short (2012) stated, “reading literature and listening to stories encourage readers to put themselves in the place of others, to use imagination to consider the consequences of their decisions and actions” (p. 13). Further, multicultural literature that permeates instruction needs to be filled with books that are mirrors, windows, and doors for students. Deemed by Rudine Sims Bishop (1990):

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p.1)

Within this study, students were asked if they “see themselves” in any of the books within the classroom library. To some students, this is an arbitrary or unobtainable question. When explicitly taught or introduced, this notion of literature being mirrors, windows, and doors directly relates to a child’s ability to interact with a text and either form a connection or an understanding. Both are intricate components of a child’s identity and cultural development.

Further, multicultural education comes on the shoulders of many significant theorists and is continuing to change and evolve with the current events of government influence and cultural impact. When discussing such a topic, influential names such as Sonia Nieto, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Paulo Friere, Lisa Delpit, and Katherine Au are just a few to be cited for their remarkable impact on literacy inequities within race and culture. Nieto (2012) describes multicultural education as a “process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students” (p. 13). Importantly, it challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination. It aims to endure and affirm the

diversity of students, their teachers, and the community. Nieto was specific in the nature that her idea of diversity is not singular to race, yet includes ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial, economic, sexual orientation, and gender identity. An important concept in reforming educational barriers is having multicultural pedagogy permeate instructional strategies, resources, and curricula. To understand the needs within a school, education should be infused with vigorous family and community interactions. Further, Paulo Friere's (1972) use of "critical pedagogy is a forefront philosophy that strongly focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change" (as cited in Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 15). Reflection and praxis, the blending of theory and practice, are important components of teacher quality. As educators, it is important to read, study, and call upon theories in your everyday practices. The blending of theory and practice is a buildable tool to ensure that your teaching has a strong foundation backed by research, and is meaningful, adaptive, as well as progressive. These ideas will be unpacked under the influence of teacher bias as it relates to exposing cultures, and student differences and acknowledging own preferences in teachings.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that teacher education can address the challenge of closing the achievement gap through the following two avenues: "(a) by providing all teachers with a stronger preparation for teaching students of diverse backgrounds and (b) by recruiting prospective teachers of diverse backgrounds" (Au & Blake, 2003, p. 198). Educators need to tailor their instruction so that students have access and exposure to the culture so that they can overcome the low expectations that many in society have for them. This can shift the notion of the "achievement gap" (Delpit, 2012) to the "opportunity gap" (McClellan, McKnight, Isselhardt, and Jeffries,

2018) where the focus is not on what students *cannot do*, but rather, on what they are *not given*. “The term opportunity gap refers to the ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students” (2013, The Glossary of Education Reform, (McClellan, McKnight, Isselhardt, and Jeffries, 2018 p.3). On the other hand, achievement gaps are focused on “outcomes; the results of the educational system, with metrics like standardized test scores, grades, course-taking, and graduation rates.” While both have influences on race, socio-economic standards, and other cultural factors, the opportunity gap is the input of the system whereas the achievement gap is the output. Green (2000) stated, “We want our classrooms to be just and caring, full of various conceptions of the good. We want them to be articulate, with the dialogue involving as many persons as possible, opening to one another, opening to the world” (as cited in Nieto & Bode, 2018, p. 259). The idea is to not artlessly learn information about other cultures for the simple knowledge but to take in the details, digest, question, and respond. These responses, breed open minds, acceptance of differences, and the ability to see beyond the basic understanding of diversity. In closing, the use of multicultural education theories with authentic multicultural literature can create opportunities for connections that can ultimately affirm diversity and inclusivity.

Influence of Teacher Bias

One of the most powerful predictors of student learning, more than any other factor, is teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, 2009). Teachers hold great power and influence upon their population

of students, which is why they must be knowledgeable of their own biases. Nieto (1992) expresses that “to affirm diversity educators are responsible to look honestly at the assumptions on which we base decisions and possible stereotypes we are projecting due to hidden biases” (p. 34). Nieto was specific in the nature that her idea of diversity is not singular to race, yet includes ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial, economic, sexual orientation, and gender identity. An important concept in reforming educational barriers is having multicultural pedagogy permeate instructional strategies, resources, and curricula. To understand the needs within a school, education should be infused with vigorous family and community interactions.

Staff professional development is the catalyst for improving the quality of America’s teachers (Kent, 2004). Continuous support in an ever-changing field helps keep educators progressive and qualified. However, many teachers feel unprepared, apprehensive, or unknowledgeable about utilizing multicultural literature in their classrooms. Teachers will feel more comfortable and confident implementing multicultural literature in their classrooms when they receive support from the administration. Holland and Mongillo (2016) suggest elementary school administrators promote multicultural literacy rather than imposing district mandates; by doing this school administrators might build trust, understanding, and respect between themselves and teachers. Administrators and district personnel should provide authentic continuing education opportunities tailored to the demographic needs of the community. Banks et. al (2001) promotes that continuing education about diversity is especially important for educators because of the increasing cultural and ethnic gap that exists between the nation’s teachers and students.

The Multicultural Education Consensus Panel (2001) findings describe ways in which educational practice related to diversity can be improved.

Principle 1: Professional development programs should help teachers understand the complex characteristics of ethnic groups within U.S. society and how race, ethnicity, language, and social class interact to influence student behavior. (Banks et. al, 2001)

With these opportunities, it would be more likely to assure equity in teachers and more awareness for teachers to reflect on their biases within the classroom. Schools should invest first and foremost in professional development that educates and supports educators to host Morning Meetings in their classrooms to establish and foster environments of community and social and emotional growth. Dessel (2010) argues that teachers need to take on the responsibility of exposing children to diverse cultural and educational practices to offer them a vast perspective and ensure that they gain an appropriate understanding of different cultures to help them avoid discrimination and stereotyping. Banks et. al, (2001) state:

An important goal of the schools should be to forge a common nation and destiny from the tremendous ethnic, cultural, and language diversity. To forge a common destiny, educators must respect and build upon the cultural strengths and characteristics that students from diverse groups bring to school. At the same time, educators must help all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become participating citizens of the commonwealth (p. 7).

While this may add another hat on the head of educators the return is worthwhile and ever-giving. Children are excellent imitators; therefore, it is imperative that educators develop a level of self-awareness, and become worth imitating.

Measurement of Respect and Kindness

This study sets to inspire and instill respect and kindness in elementary students. To do so, one must question, what do respect, and kindness look like within a classroom community? To start, one would need to understand the meaning of respect and kindness and how they can be identified within such a setting. Respect is a challenging word to define in a simple matter. “Perhaps the reason it is so difficult to define is that it can mean different things to different people, depending on whether it is being used as a verb or as a noun, on the person’s cultural background, and the context in which it is being discussed” (Spagnoletti & Arnold, 2007, p. 707). Cultural norms for respect can vary greatly between different demographics. For instance, Japanese culture puts great weight on taking off shoes before entering as a sign of respect for their home. Whereas, in other cultures, people wear shoes at home without taking the act into consideration of respect.

Moreover, kindness has a less intricate definition and is not as easily skewed by cultural norms. The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation (2015) deems kindness as, “a natural quality of the heart, expressed through an act of goodwill and reflecting care for self and others” (p. 2). Kindness can come naturally, and it also can be taught to children through modeling and consistent acknowledgment of the idea. The benefits of teaching kindness spread into the mental and social makeup of an individual. Dr. Robert Roeser, Professor of Human Development and Psychology at Portland State University states that “teaching kindness can improve a child’s happiness, health, self-esteem, concentration,

grades, sense of belonging, acceptance of their peers, and appreciation of their circumstance” (The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015, p. 2). Kindness matters and it is an integral component of a person and classroom community.

Further, teachers need to allocate explicit time to reinforce this notion as kindness needs to be demonstrated, mirrored, and reinforced in children. Through morning meetings students learn to demonstrate kindness and respect by maintaining eye contact, actively listening to their partner, and learning to greet each other. Another example tied to promoting cultural awareness and kindness is learning how to say hello in various languages. This could connect English Language Learners to the classroom community and broaden the affirmation of language differences and social connections among all students. Research on prosocial behavior, behavior that is intended to help others, conducted with children has found “that being kind increases popularity and our ability to form meaningful connections with other people. Being well-liked is an essential factor in the happiness of children and it was demonstrated that greater peer acceptance was achieved through good deeds” (Layous et. al 2012, Currie, 2015, p.12). Kindness and respect have rippling effects on child development, classrooms, and communities.

When evaluating the culture of a school, it is important to look at its core beliefs. In many of these beliefs or mission statements, it can be found that “student citizenship, prosocial behavior, and kindness are often the cornerstone of educational institutions” (Binfet and Passmore, 2019, p. 23). However, one can question, what actions, programs, or daily activities are in place to promote such ideologies? Morning meetings are excellent vehicles to work on these principles while simultaneously transferring power to create these tenets onto the children. Alan November, an educator, and leader in

technology education promotes that students need to feel purpose in their work and need to feel like contributing members of a community. He states the “importance of shifting the roles and relationships in the classroom to empower students and give them purpose” (Tedx Talks, 2011). Classroom communities thrive when students are acknowledged as contributing members who feel seen, validated, and taken care of. As educators, we should always be reflecting on ourselves and our practice to ensure we provide our students with authentic, unbiased, intentional, and culture-centered learning opportunities. Small practices that are instilled at early ages will set the foundation for years that follow.

Chapter III

Research Design/Methodology

"Research is a process of discovering essential questions, gathering data, and analyzing it to answer those questions" (Hubbard and Power, 1999, p. 1). Although there are various types of research, which can take a variety of shapes and forms, the ultimate goal of the research is the same: to investigate and answer critical questions which have enticed one into research in the first place. The paradigm used for this particular study is qualitative research, and more specifically, qualitative teacher research.

Qualitative Research

The research methodology for this study is a qualitative approach. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), "The qualitative researcher's goal is to better understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p. 38). Within this type of approach, the researcher seeks to acknowledge, explore and inquire about the natural patterns within development rather than manipulate or control variables.

This study is designed to see how utilizing a culturally responsive classroom model will provide students with chances to connect with their classmates and promote kindness and respect for diversity. The data collected will include student surveys, investigator observations and field notes, and audiotapes of participant small group and whole group discussions. All data will be able to be collected through the researcher's classroom. Materials for the study will include twelve multicultural picture books. The study is designed to see how the integration of multicultural picture books can foster

discussions of identity and culture. As well as observe how culturally responsive techniques within morning meeting model and promote respect and kindness for others.

Participating parents were given a *Funds of Knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, 2005) survey to complete prior to the study beginning. This survey helps teachers to engage with families outside of school and provides contexts of their family life, culture, home values, and particular funds of knowledge to apply in the school setting. This survey provides insight into languages spoken at home, holidays celebrated, views on social and academic standards, upbringings as well as community practices.

Next, a teacher observational journal was used throughout the study to collect data and record findings after the discussions. Other instances of note that were observed throughout the day separate from morning meetings were also recorded in the teacher observation journal. The teacher used a tape recorder app to record the discussion with students and later transcribed the findings into the journal.

Procedure of Study

The conclusive motive of this study was to build a solid foundation for a classroom community within this third-grade classroom. Components of such fall under pillars of respect, kindness, communication, building connections, sense of identity, sense of a whole, social skills, and communal growth and development. Each parcel can be encompassed and explicitly fostered through the use of consistent and intentional morning meetings. Further, the inclusion of multicultural literature paired with discussion enhances the connections between student identity and community. This research project will help support and discover that making connections, modeling

behaviors, and learning about various cultures is a valuable way to promote cultural diversity interactively.

Throughout the study, data was collected to determine the impact of using multicultural picture books to introduce and expose students to various cultures and viewpoints along with student discourse as a means of reflection and connection-making opportunities. Bishop (2019) describes these opportunities with literature as necessary as it, “transforms human experience and reflects it to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (p. 9-12). The investigator will share the findings with peers to develop a more culturally relevant curriculum that integrates cultural diversity into instruction and promotes respect and kindness.

The Morning Meeting format runs in two parts: Part One is a teacher-led multicultural text read aloud paired with a whole class question and/or discussion. Here the teacher calls all students to their morning meeting reading spot where they all sit on the carpet together and the teacher sits in her reading chair at the front. This routine is set and completed each day to show familiarity, consistency, and predictability. Solidifying these variables sets a calm tone and gradual easement into the morning. The teacher then reads a book from the unit stopping periodically to explain, note importance, draw attention, or check-in for understanding. With the conclusion of the text, the teacher then poses a question for students to share ideas, discuss with a neighbor, connect to themselves or reflect silently. There are no expectations to share unless done so willingly.

Part Two is a student-led section of morning meeting that highlights the learning of social cues, norms, and skills. Names are drawn randomly from a “spin the wheel”

digital format. The student leader then takes the teacher's chair at the front of the room and asks students to move into their morning meeting circle. Students transition from their previous row spots and move into a circle safely sitting criss-cross, knee to knee, not in front nor behind, the person sitting next to them. From here the student leader calls other students in pairs by their names in the middle of the circle. The pair of students stand in front of each other to say good morning. Students in the middle of the circle work to maintain eye contact with their partner as they say good morning using their partner's name. Students are encouraged to use a strong voice to build confidence and to make sure that their partners can hear them behind their masks. Students are then asked to provide an internal or external compliment. To start, students could share external compliments for their partners as they were still getting to know them. Then, a month into school, the focus is switched to internal compliments so students can draw on positive affirmations for their classmates. This helps to build connections and foster friendships through positive talk. To close their interaction the student leader chooses a safe idea of either an air high-five, elbow tap, fist bump, or toe tap. For example, an exchange can sound like

Student Leader: "Next into the middle is Michael and Sarah."

Students in the middle: "Good morning Michael. Good morning Sarah. Michael, I think you are a kind friend. Thank you, Sarah, I like how hard you work in Math. Have a good day today. You too." *Air high-five* and then the students return to their seats in the circle.

Students sitting in the circle are expected to sit silently, watch the interaction, and demonstrate respect as good audience members. After each student has been chosen to go into the middle the student leader then chooses a discussion question or a would you

rather. This is set to build communication skills. Students will take turns in the circle answering the question and providing an explanation if necessary or desired. In around-circle sharing, everyone has an opportunity to respond to the student-driven prompt. Audience members are again asked to show respect by looking at the speaker, listening, and trying to identify connections with their peers' answers. Connections are signaled with the “me too” hand gesture. Heavy modeling of roles, behaviors, and expectations was completed from the beginning of the school year. Students were then given more autonomy over customizing parts of the greetings, and questions. From here the teacher’s role fades into background participation during Part two of the morning meeting.

To close the morning meeting and signal our shift into our next academic learning period the following line is recited. “Morning meeting is now over, let’s go forth and...” together as a class students clap twice and shout “BE KIND!”

This study took place over the course of four weeks. Morning meetings are held during the first period of each day lasting 40 minutes. There are ten goals for implementing Morning Meeting within our classroom:

1. Build classroom community
2. Learn how to greet someone
3. Learn how to have good eye contact
4. Use a strong and confident voice when speaking
5. Work through various social scenarios
6. Develop an understanding of diversity and cultural differences
7. Develop social and communication skills
8. Demonstrate how to show respect

9. Build connections with classmates

10. Help build self-identity while being part of a whole unit

To begin my research I asked my students to walk around the room and look at the pictures they see and the books in our library. Students were asked to complete a pre-assessment survey to gauge their initial understanding of identity, ideas of respect, and degree of cultural knowledge. Students then completed a pre-assessment to collect data on their perception of the classroom, their peers, teacher, and themselves. Students were asked ten questions (Appendix) and they answered by coloring in the YES or NO box pertaining to the question.

After observing the population of my class and assessing the data from my pre-assessment. I felt that exposure to different cultures, holidays, and diverse traditions is of great need. Ten multicultural texts were used within the unit of research. These texts were chosen for reasons of authenticity, and relevance, as well as a way to introduce topics for discussion of inclusivity and affirmation of diversity. Before reading each text, students viewed the cover, and title and predicted the text. As the unit progressed, students were asked if the presented text could be connected to a previous one. Further, as I read the text aloud, I stopped frequently to ask the students questions related to the text checking for comprehension. The unit of texts and their purpose are explained below.

The first week of texts included the books, *The Name Jar*, *The Name Change Machine* and *I Love my Hair*. The theme of this week was to gain a personal perspective of ourselves and what makes us unique, our names, and our appearance.

The Name Jar written by Yangsook Choi is about a young girl, Unhei, a Korean immigrant that struggles with her identity because she doesn't feel she fits in, as she

doesn't have an American name. Her classmates leave a jar filled with name suggestions on her desk but none of the American names feel right to Unhei. When a friend from her class takes the time to learn about her Korean name, he helps her to realize that she should be proud of her Korean name, and she decides it's the best name for her. This book explores the experience of a child immigrant, learning to accept and value her cultural identity in a new land. This book provides a window into Korean culture as well as a mirror to children who feel different because they carry a culture that differs from that of their peers. This text was chosen to kick off the unit because it helps students understand the importance of their name, having someone say it correctly, and being proud of it. After reading the text, I gave students homework where they had to have a conversation with their guardians about their "name story" and to be prepared to share it the following day.

The Change Your Name Store, written by Leanne Shirliffe, is an imaginative story about a girl named Wilma Lee Wu, who does not like her name, so she goes to the *Change Your Name Store* to get a new one. With the help of an eccentric and unique named store owner, Wilma begins to search for new names. With each new selection, Wilma is transported to the country from which the name originates. Each name indicates a different nationality, and she finds herself in each country, including France, Bahrain, Belize, and Kenya. This book lends an opportunity for cultural conversations and building pride within a culture. The discussion question for this text was "why is it important to understand your name story and where it came from?" I also asked students if they liked their names and gave them an opportunity to explain why.

I Love My Hair written by Natasha Tarpley is a story about a girl named Keyana who does not like it when her mama brushes her hair, it hurts and sometimes she wishes it were different so it didn't hurt so much. Her mom tells her how amazing her hair is because she can wear it in so many different styles, like an afro, cornrows, or even braids with colored beads. Keyana realizes how cool all of these styles are and finds great pride in her hair and loves it! This book is an excellent choice to show readers what any young African American girls go through when brushing and styling their hair. Readers can also learn that differences that need to be respected come in the forms of our skin color and even our hair. This text further promotes the importance of being open to learning about your culture. The discussion question for this text was "What is your favorite part about your hair?" This then led to a discussion about our hair differences in our class and how we style it.

The second week of the unit included the texts, *In My Mama's Kitchen*, *Those Shoes*, and *Last Stop on Market Street*. This week's theme centered around finding connections between each other and our cultures. Students also learned the lesson of needs vs. want.

In My Mama's Kitchen written by Jerdine Nolden is a collection of short stories that relate to family unity and togetherness with the setting of each story involving the family kitchen. This picture book is about the celebration of African American life and the bonds that unite all families, generation after generation. Students learn that the heart of the home is the kitchen where everything stems from. We celebrate, cook passed-down recipes, and even do our homework here. After reading, students were prompted to discuss or identify a connection between their culture and the home. The teacher asked,

“Who cooks in your home?” “When family comes over where does everyone gather?”
“What is your favorite meal that your mom/dad/grandparent/etc., cooks?”

Those Shoes written by Maribeth Boelts is a key mentor text for teaching wants versus needs. In the story, a young boy, Jeremy, is seen dreaming of “those shoes” that everyone is wearing. His grandmother, who is his guardian, tells him that “there is no room for want, only need and what you need are new winter boots.” Jeremy is so determined to get these shoes that he squeezes his foot into a too-small pair he found at the thrift store. When he realizes that hurting his feet is less important than having the latest shoe, he sees an opportunity to help a friend in need. This story lends itself to many opportunities for students to create connections. In doing so, the students were asked “what is something that you really *want* but realize you do not *need* it?” A follow-up question was, have you ever donated something of yours to others?”

Last Stop on Market Street written by Matt De La Peña, takes place on a rainy Sunday morning, where the main characters, CJ and Nana leave the church for their weekly visit to the soup kitchen. As they wait for and ride the bus through their urban neighborhood, CJ shows his displeasure with what he sees as unfair. As he questions Nana with thoughts such as why they don’t have a car like his friend, Colby or an iPod like the boys on the bus, and why they have to go to such a dirty neighborhood, Nana teaches him to appreciate what they have and see the good and beauty that exists all around them if you choose to look with a different perspective. This story offers an authentic representation of a diverse, urban setting that challenges the reader to recognize the value of community over materialism and recognize the beauty of a diverse world.

The discussion question for this text was “How can we show appreciation for the things that we have compared to the things that we want?”

The third week of texts included *Binny’s Diwali*, *Suki’s Kimono*, and *Lailah’s Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story*. These texts were chosen to highlight the specific cultures present in our classroom and to expose students to different perspectives while fostering chances for connections.

Binny’s Diwali written by Thirty Umrigar, an Indian American writer who was born in Mumbai and immigrated to the United States when she was 21 is the first book in this series tailored to my students’ cultures. While my class is diverse, the majority of students within the school are Indian and celebrate Diwali. Our district recognizes this day as a cultural celebration and there is no school that day as a sign of acknowledgment. In this text, Binny is happy but nervous to share her holiday with her classmates. After taking a few deep breaths, she talks about the fireworks that light up the sky, the delicious foods, such as pedas and jalebis, and the clay lamps called diyas. Her classmates are wrapped up in her presentation about her traditions and Binny feels proud of her culture. This was a key story to teach my students about Diwali and allowed for my students who celebrate to chime in and share their personal experiences. The discussion questions paired with this text were “what is something new that you learned about Diwali?” and “Can you find any similarities between Diwali and your own celebrations?”

Suki’s Kimono written by Chieri Uegak is a story of a young girl named Suki who wants to wear her favorite blue kimono on the first day of school. It was a gift from her grandmother, and it holds special memories the two shared together. Once she arrives at school, her classmates begin to tease her about her kimono. When it came time to share

about their summers, Suki told the class about how she attended street festivals with her grandmother and danced in her kimono. Through her retelling of the events, Suki gets swept away in the memory and she begins to sing and dance for her class just as she did at the festival. Her class bursts into a celebration for Suki. This text teaches readers the importance of learning about other cultures and not passing any form of judgment. The many themes evident in this text include individual expression, confidence to be who you are, admiration for a grandparent, pride in your heritage, and dignity in the face of ridicule. Here readers can see the tenacity of a young girl who doesn't shy away from those that begin to tease her, but instead shines bright with confidence because she loves her heritage. Students were prompted to discuss "what part of their culture are they proud to represent?" This could include clothing, music, colors, dancing, or anything that comes to mind as they talk about their traditions.

Lailah's Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story by Reen Faruqi, is about Leila, a Muslim girl who recently immigrated to the United States and is fasting for the first time during the month of Ramadan. Although she is excited and proud, her feelings quickly change at the prospect of lunchtime at school. She worries that her teacher and classmates in the US don't know about Ramadan, and she is unsure of how to tell them. With the help of the school librarian, Leila finds a way to express her feelings in writing. She composes a letter and a poem for her teacher. Leila is delighted by her teacher's response and is excited to share her poem with the class. This is a wonderful story that addresses immigration to a new land, the Muslim culture, and the acceptance of cultural diversity. It is free of stereotypes and builds Muslim pride while giving non-Muslim children insight into an important Muslim tradition. The discussion question for this text was set

to help students find connections between their cultures. Many Indian holidays, Catholic and Ukrainian traditions, or beliefs have diet restrictions. The students were asked, “Does your culture or traditions that you celebrate have any dietary restrictions?” “How could you help your friends to understand your viewpoint or food differences?”

The fourth and final week’s read-aloud texts included *Pink is for Boys*, *Pinky Promises*, and *The Day You Begin*. These texts pushed the gender stereotypes present within our society and set the tone for our inclusive and identity-driven classroom community following the unit.

Pink is for Boys, a stereotype-pushing book written by, Robb Pearlman, “rethinks and reframes the stereotypical blue/pink gender binary and empowers kids-and their grown-ups-to express themselves in every color of the rainbow” (Pearlman, 2018, p. 1). Each page in the text showcases color and encourages boys and girls to identify what they like based on their feelings and ideas and that color does not belong to a certain gender. The characters in the book are relatable along with the circumstances of playing baseball, liking unicorns, and racing cars. The discussion question that followed this text was “what is your favorite color and why?” Also, “do you believe that the certain colors of your clothes, toys, books; or even crayons only belong to boys or only to girls?”

Pinky Promises, is a book written by Elizabeth Warren, a former presidential candidate and current senior senator of Massachusetts. She writes about the main character, Polly, who is strong, smart, and capable, however, whenever she tries to do something, she is told “*That’s not what girls do.*” “Then one day, Polly goes to a rally to meet a woman who's running for president, and they make a pinkie promise to remember all the things that girls do. (Warren, 2021) Polly takes this promise and applies it to

challenges she faces at school, playing soccer, and even when she runs for Class President. The theme of this book is bravery, empowerment, and tenacity. The question to begin our discussion was “how did this book make you feel?” The follow-up question was “Have you ever been told you couldn’t do something because of your gender?”

The Day You Begin, written by Jacqueline Woodson is the final multicultural picture book within the unit. This text was chosen as the finale book because of its strong theme of bravery and identifying your differences. The main character in the book overcomes the feeling of walking into a room and noticing that there isn’t anyone quite like her. She is timid to take the first steps to getting to know others and let them know her, but through her courage and bravery, she celebrates her differences and how they make her unique. Diversity creates a world of people who are interesting, and who offer an abundance of talents, gifts, and strengths. Without diversity, we would all be the same and that is not the goal. The discussion question is driven from the text used to close this text and round out the entire unit of study was “what makes you so fabulously different?”

Context of the Study

Community

This study was conducted at Brookside Elementary School in Monroe Township, New Jersey. Brookside is a one-story building housing students from third to fifth grade. About 417 students attend this school located within this suburban community. Brookside is one of eight schools within the Monroe Township School District accumulating 6,895 students. The district’s minority enrollment is 60%. Also, 4.0% of students are economically disadvantaged. The student body at the schools served by Monroe Township School District is 42.6% White, 3.7% Black, 45.5% Asian or Asian/Pacific

Islander, 6.8% Hispanic/Latino, 0% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. In addition, 1.3% of students are of two or more races, and 0% have not specified their race or ethnicity. (US News and World Report, Education K-12, 2019) Additionally, 49% of students are female, and 51% of students are male. At schools in Monroe Township School District, 4.0% of students are eligible to participate in the federal free and reduced-price meal program and 0.9% of students are English language learners. (US News and World Report, Education K-12, 2019)

School District

The district’s mission statement is “The Monroe Public Schools, in collaboration with the members of the community, shall ensure that all children receive an exemplary education by well-trained, committed staff in a safe and orderly environment.” There are three goals for the 2021-2022 school year. Goal one is to “engage the school community in the development of a strategic action plan for Monroe Township School District.” Goal two is to “develop a referendum project by working with the community using the latest enrollment projections to address student growth.” Finally, goal three is to “revise as necessary and execute the MTSD Restart and Recovery Plan for the 2020-2021 school year. This will include meeting all health and safety requirements in NJDOE The Road Back document, assessing all students and addressing learning needs, and incorporating social-emotional practices to support students, staff, and families.” (Monroe Township School District Homepage 2021-2022)

School

This research study took place in a third-grade In-Classroom Resource room at Brookside Elementary School. There are 23 students in the classroom, however, due to

parental consent, 14 students were authorized to participate in the study. Seven of the students that participated in the study were boys and seven were girls. Of the fourteen, nine students are White and five are Indian. Five of the students within the study have classified learning disabilities and receive accommodations within the classroom.

Students are classified with Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity, and Selective Mute and one student has an additional classification of Oppositional Defiant Conduct Disorder. For this study, these students were positioned closer to the teacher during the read-aloud and were monitored during the morning meeting, greeting portion, and discussion.

Table 1

Participants

Student:	Demographics	Age	Gender
Brian	White	9	Male
Ivaan	Indian	8	Male
Divit	Indian	8	Male
Joseph	White	9	Male
Sarika	Indian	9	Female
Arhaan	Indian	8	Male
Christina	White	8	Female
Robert	White	8	Male
Mirza	Indian	8	Female
Zoya	Indian	9	Female
Drew	White	8	Male

Student:	Demographics	Age	Gender
Amelia	White	8	Female
Jaya	Indian	9	Female
Susan	White	9	Female

Note. All names are pseudonyms to protect student privacy.

Students

Brian is an eclectic student who brings personality and curiosity into our classroom. He questions everything and shows unwavering confidence in his ideas at a young age. *Ivaan* is a kindhearted member of our community. He can be quick to see the negative in certain situations but has shown great interest in his classmates and building friendships. *Divit* is funny, creative, and easygoing. He is mood-driven but works hard when he feels cared for and confident. *Joseph* is quiet and reserved in initial interactions. However, when comfortable and feeling safe to express himself he lets his fun and goofy personality shine. *Sarika* is a strong-willed girl who is finding her way of maintaining leadership qualities without being bossy. She is assertive, knowledgeable, and likes to help and teach others. *Arhaan* is an intelligent young boy who loves to read. He will finish his work and instantly pick up a book to dive into. He is social and likes to work in groups. *Christina* carries the weight of her emotions each day. She works to regulate her feelings and express herself in a collected manner. She is incredibly kind and always wants to make sure everyone is included. *Drew* is a strong-minded student who is quick to question and sometimes resist. He wants things done his way and voices this with conviction. Nevertheless, when time is taken to have dialogue and talk through the conflict, he will often understand. *Amy* is a bright and assertive student who holds herself

to high standards for academics and behavior. *Jaya* is a shy but bright student who speaks softly but likes to participate in classwork. Finally, *Susan* is a very soft-spoken individual who is helpful, kind, and responsible. She is quick to become emotional when feeling misunderstood or unable to express herself.

There has been a sizable impact on student behavioral norms and educational progression due to COVID-19 and Virtual Learning. The last time this group of third-grade students had a full, uninterrupted year of in-person learning was in kindergarten. According to statistics, Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, and Viruleg, (2020) found that “by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, students were on average five months behind in math and four months behind in reading (p.5)” When our school first shut down in March of 2020 for the “two weeks of lessening the curve” students were given pre-assigned work to complete virtually. Students and teachers did not return to school for the rest of the school year and all learning was completed synchronously on the computer. To begin the 2020-2021 school year in September, all learning was virtual with a teacher instructing students live on Zoom. Students were instructed and completed work with a teacher in the morning session and then assigned asynchronous work in the afternoon. By mid-April, Monroe School District offered hybrid learning, where a rotation of students would come into school for in-person learning and others could continue to virtual learning. The rotation consisted of several students coming Monday, Tuesday, and every other Wednesday with the other group coming into school Thursday, Friday, and every other Wednesday. Finally, by September 2021, Monroe Schools was no longer offering virtual learning as an option and classes resumed in person with the strict safety mode driven into place. In alignment with the goals set forth by Monroe Township Public

Schools to execute MTSD Restart and Recovery Plan, the Whole Child Committee and Social-Emotional Learning Committees have been created and work to provide activities and workshops for both students and teachers during the school year.

Further within the thesis, specifically Chapter Four, I will analyze the collected data from observations, discussions, and surveys. I will then discuss the results of my research and conclude my presentation and implications of the study in Chapter Five.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis / Findings

Introduction

The data collected throughout this study assisted in my understanding of how culturally responsive practices within morning meetings affirm respect and kindness in a classroom community. The goals of the study were to expose students to multicultural literature and build a classroom community based on respect and kindness. Throughout this study, I used a variety of data collection tools, including initial knowledge of cultural awareness survey, post-assessment of knowledge survey, audio recordings of classroom discussions, and teacher-research notes. When analyzing these tools, several themes were apparent throughout this study including the importance of background knowledge and understanding of cultural identity, establishing connections between the students and the text, how teacher facilitation affects understanding, the critical discussion between students, and how a student's bias affected cultural perceptions.

Initial Knowledge Survey

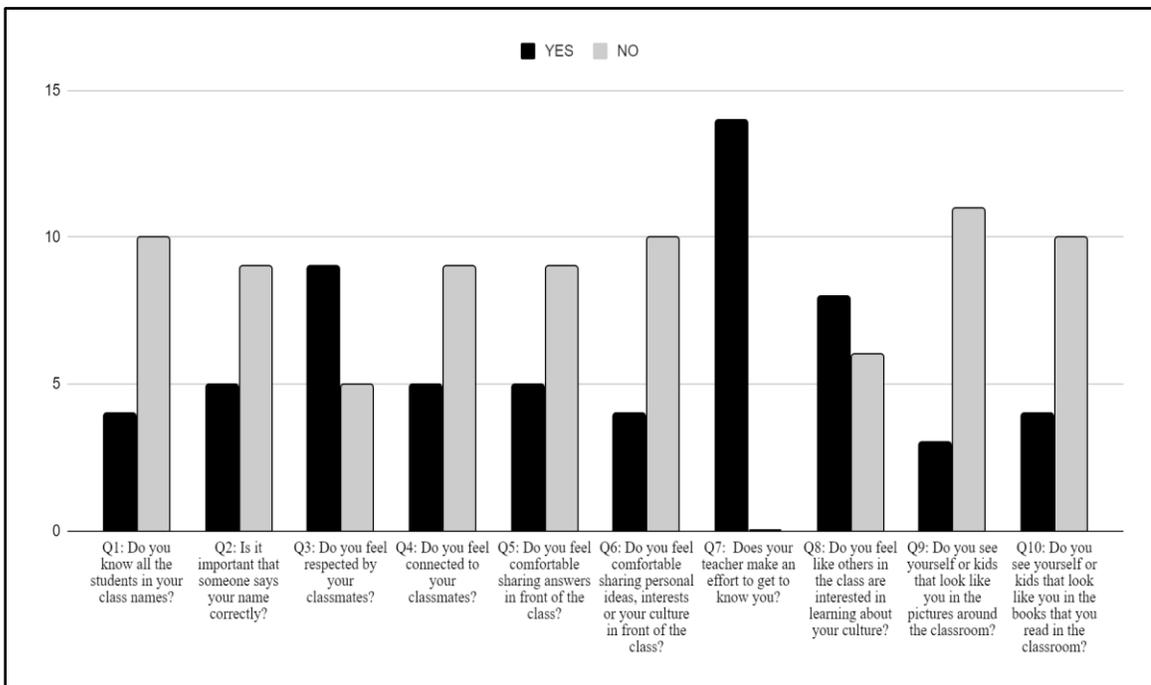
To begin the study, students completed an initial survey to assess their prior knowledge, and personal feelings and assess how much they notice about cultural topics that will be discussed in the study. Before the study, I predicted that students would have a very low perception of themselves in relation to seeing kids that look like them in the books or pictures around the room. From sitting with students at the beginning of the year the idea of "seeing themselves" seemed foreign and confusing. Students thought that they were to physically see a picture of themselves in the book and not in relation to what they look like, based on their race, or cultural background. I did, however, think that students

would emphasize the importance of pronouncing their names correctly. I made this prediction based on the diversity within my classroom, where nine of the fourteen participants have names representative of their culture. I also predicted that students would feel comfortable sharing their personal ideas, interest, and cultures in front of the class because at this age level students are normally very quick to want to share or add in stories that relate to them.

During our first meeting, I had students complete the initial knowledge pre-survey. Fourteen students in total completed the survey. Below is a chart of the student responses to each question. Fourteen students in total completed the survey (Table 2).

Table 2

Initial Knowledge Pre-Survey



When analyzing the responses from the knowledge pre-survey, some of my predictions were confirmed, while others were not. As predicted, students had a lower response to seeing themselves or kids that look like them in the pictures around the room or the books in the classroom library. When asked what that means, students responded:

Ivaan: None of these books are about me, how can I be in them?

Sarika: There aren't any pictures of kids in the room, I don't get it.

Arhaan: What do you mean see me?

Mrs. G: Do any of the kids in the pictures or drawings look like you?

Arhaan: No, I only see a picture of a boy and he is lighter than me.

I also noticed that there were low positive responses to students feeling connected to their classmates. This made me wonder if students know what a connection is? Or do students know how to identify or make connections?

Sarika: What do you mean connected? Like we are all in the same class?

Mrs. G: Would that be something you both have in common?

Sarika: Ummmm, yes?

The student's uncertainty was understandable and enlightening, sparking interest in how this study will create connections with the students.

Although I predicted that students would respond positively to sharing their ideas, they instead responded more negatively to feeling comfortable sharing answers in front of the class and sharing personal ideas or cultural interests. Further data implications within the study can assist with understanding this notion and how the effects of new knowledge can change these recordings in the post-survey.

When evaluating the data from the above survey, I was better able to obtain an understanding of students' biases and what they are bringing to each morning meeting and discussion. Their schemas include knowledge of diverse cultures, knowledge of respect, and high levels of feeling that their teacher makes an effort to get to know them. This is a solid base for feeling safe in a classroom and openness to exposure to new things. These themes shaped the way that I approached the text units and discussion questions used in the study.

Cultural Identity

When analyzing the data from the initial knowledge survey, most students at first did not know the names of all their classmates and also did not put importance on others pronouncing their names correctly. This made me question if students understood how much culture encompasses areas of their lives, like their names. Culture can play an important role in an individual's name, origin, meaning, and pronunciation. This was an essential launching lesson as the majority of my students have names originating from the Hindu culture. When we read the text, *The Name Jar*, students were guided on the lesson of the text and how to make connections. Student ideas of the text lessons included:

Amy: I think the author wrote this so that we know how to like our name because it can mean something important to our families.

Christina: You should feel proud of your name and you should feel special to have it.

Robert: It is OK to not like your name at first, but you should ask about it before you try to change it.

To follow the discussion, students were given a homework assignment to have a conversation with their families to find out their name story. Students went home and asked the following questions, "Where did my name come from," and "What does my

name mean.” The next day during our morning meeting, those that wanted to share, reported the following:

Jaya: My parents asked our God to choose my name. We have I think eight Gods. So they prayed to them and he chose my name. My name means progress.

Mrs.G: What does the word progress mean to you and your family?”

Jaya: Umm, I think my mom said it means to try hard and keep going forward, like go to good things.

Jaya and her sharing had a further influence on another child in the class who was shy to share his story. He first explained to me that he did not want to share because his name has to do with his religion. He didn’t know if he could talk about religion in school or if he wanted to share that with his friends. After Jaya told her name story, Drew wanted to share his and did so proudly: “My mom got my name from the Bible because we love our God. He does everything for us. We pray to him every night.” This was a critical response from Drew and a clear breakthrough, a sign of effectiveness so early in the study. After hearing another person share about their religion, this student then became comfortable enough to do so on his own. Additionally, it is interesting to note that this student did not know he could talk about his religion in school. Thus, the impact of creating a safe and open sharing experience can lead students to feel confident and empowered within their cultural identity.

Cultural identity and the effects of student schema further affected students' understanding of multicultural literature and their ability to create connections. Students who were more aware of their culture were beginning to share more and show deeper understanding. As students were beginning to ask questions to their parents or guardians, their cultural identity was becoming stronger as they understood more about themselves

and their families. This notion solidified as the units progressed and the exposure to other cultures became more frequent fueling interesting discussions among students.

Forming Connections

When analyzing the discussions between students, I noticed multiple times that students began to develop connections to the main characters within the text. My classroom demographic is highly populated by Indian students who celebrate Diwali. The text *Binny's Diwali* was a key text within the second-week unit that highlighted the specific cultural holiday of Diwali celebrated by seven out of fourteen students participating in the study and sixteen out of twenty-three students in the class. This unit was designed to expose students to different perspectives while fostering a chance to form connections. The engagement was very high throughout this lesson due to the personal connections the students were making to the main character and the events in the story:

Mirza: Diwali! This is *my* holiday! Diwali is the best it's so much fun!

Jaya: I celebrate Diwali too and my mom said we need to start getting ready. We have a lot of people at my house.

With every page turn, the students seemed to be sitting on their knees bouncing up and down excited to be reading about their holiday. They were proud and added so many affirming details and elaborations. Pride was a very evident theme throughout this lesson and fueled many ongoing conversations. After one student shared a connection the next was ready to jump right in.

Jaya: My mom and auntie clean everything in the house for two full days and we can't touch anything, we have to be really clean and careful.

Sarika: My favorite part is making the rangoli with my mom, it takes us a

long time and I like to make mine look like a flower.

Arhaan: Jalebis!!! It's so delicious!!

Robert: What are jalebis?

Arhaan: It is a sweet that we have in India and you put syrup on it. It's so good!

Further, this unit facilitated the notion of making connections between cultures and holidays. Students began to realize that the differences between other cultures, their traditions, and their beliefs are not that broad. Students started to express similarities and say phrases like “we do that too!” This was a tipping point within my research where students began to open their perspectives and build bonds with each other by sharing their personal and cultural identities.

Mirza: Fireworks are my favorite part of Diwali!

Brian: I love when I watch the fireworks on The Fourth of July!

Joseph: You said your mom makes pedos, my mom is known for making seven different kinds of fish on Christmas Eve when my family comes over. I don't eat all seven of them though.

Christina: My nonna makes the best pasta sauce and she taught my mom. My mom is going to teach me she told me.

Students were beginning to draw lines in their minds that connected them not only to the characters in the text but to their classmates sitting in the circle with them. This becomes clearer when analyzing the post-survey results. Students were given the same questions and format of the Initial Knowledge Pre Survey at the end of the study. Results of the post-survey indicate major shifts in cultural identity and acknowledgment of classroom community (Table 3).

Table 3

Initial Knowledge Post-Survey

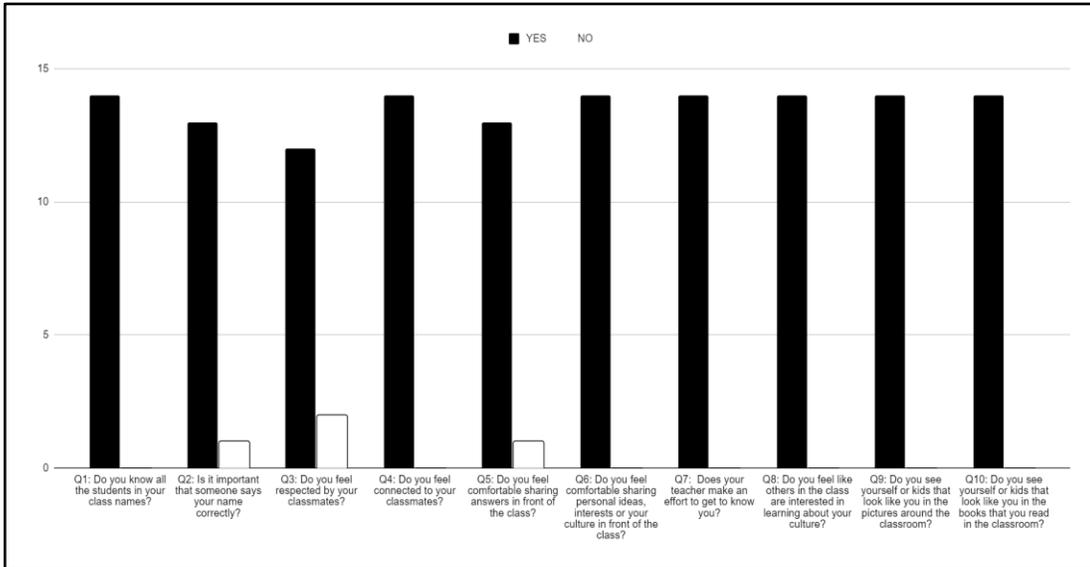
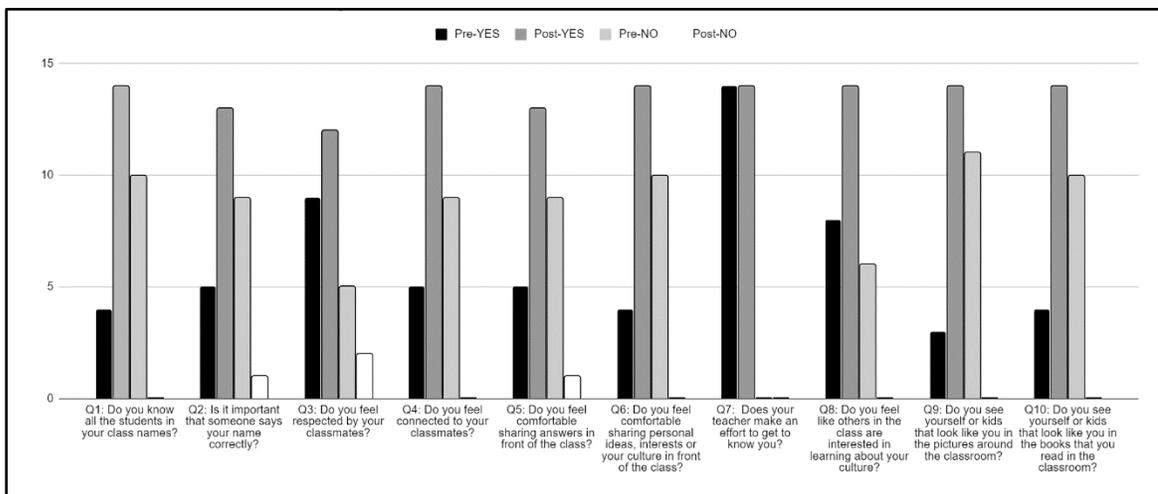


Table 4 shows all data from the pre and post-survey together where changing trends can be more visually significant.

Table 4

Initial Knowledge Combined Pre and Post-Survey Data



Across all ten questions, students most likely answered YES in the post-survey, a significant change from the pre-survey. More students reported the importance of saying their names correctly from the initial survey at the beginning of the year. The impact came from the lesson using the text *Name Jar*, where students learned their name story and that it is not impolite to tell another person how to pronounce your name when done in a teaching way. It is also evident that students strongly feel respected by their classmates, where all fourteen participants reported that they were comfortable and felt open to sharing their personal ideas, interests, or cultural beliefs in front of the class. In the Pre-Survey, only four students reported they were comfortable with ten “no” statements insinuating that most students were not comfortable. The pre and post-survey results show the same response for question seven. When asked if students feel that their teacher is interested in learning about their culture, all students stated “yes”. This is substantial that students came into the school year feeling this way and it is maintained through the study. This could be attributed to the community and types of teachers hired within the district that students feel welcomed and safe in their classrooms. Moreover, fourteen students reported that they feel connected to their classmates, whereas only five students felt that way at the beginning of the unit. This proves that the exposure, analysis, and discussion of multicultural texts have helped students to form bonds with each other fostering respect and building a classroom community. Further, by the end of the unit, students clearly felt seen by their peers and teacher. Fourteen out of fourteen students reported that they feel like their classmates are interested in learning about their culture, they see themselves in the pictures around the room and they identify with characters in the books within the classroom. As stated earlier, students were perplexed by “seeing

themselves” in pictures and books. From the units, students became aware of the books that were mirrors, windows, or sliding doors:

Zoya: This book is a mirror, right? I see myself because I celebrate Diwali and make rangoli!

Brian: The book *Last Stop on Market Street* would be a window because I don't go to the soup kitchen, but I was able to see how CJ had to and how it made him feel.

Students were forming connections between the text and each other. Engagement shifted as they were beginning to know what to look for in terms of windows and mirrors.

Students were noticing characters in books that matched their cultures, reminded them of their families or traditions, and taught them something new that broadened their perspective.

Teacher Facilitation

A goal of this study was to expose students to multicultural literature to measure the impact it would have on building a classroom community. The teacher was the guide as the literature was the vehicle for learning about diverse cultures and demographics. Each text unit was carefully curated and accompanied by predetermined discussion questions. At the beginning of the study, the questions were given, and students looked to me for acceptance or acknowledgment of their answers. Teacher facilitation started at the beginning of the unit as a heavy modeling practice, demonstrating accountable talk and prompting. As the units progressed, the power was shifted to the students who became responsible to initiate discussions and maintain conversations. Teacher interaction was utilized to stimulate student interaction, dialogue and check for understanding of the textual messages. It is evident that without consistent teacher modeling and prompting during units one and two, students would not have had the experience and knowledge of

how to facilitate a conversation with others. Early interactions consisted of single-answer questions without further engagement.

Susan: Good morning, what is your favorite holiday?

Amy: Good morning, my favorite holiday is Christmas. What is your favorite food?

Susan: My favorite holiday is my birthday.

During the reading of *Lailah's Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story*, teacher modeling helped to show students how to ask questions to extend dialogue and transfer the responsibility of holding conversation onto them. The teacher-modeled talk was crucial for this transfer of authority:

Mrs. G: What is a question you can ask your classmate about foods they eat in their culture?

Jaya : What types of foods does your family eat?

Christina : We eat Italian food because my dad owns a restaurant.

Mrs. G: How can you get more information? What follow-up question can you ask?

Jaya: What kind of Italian food do you eat?

Christina: We eat pizza, chicken parmigiana, and pasta.

Mrs. G: Think of another question you can ask to get more information, think about traditions and culture.

Jaya: Does your mom cook the food to or just your dad?

Christina: My mom cooks too but my nonna is the one who taught my dad everything. My nonna is my dad's mom so that is why she taught him. My mom cooks too but my nonna's pasta is the best!

Jaya: My grandma is really good at cooking too and she taught my mom too!

Teacher support was helpful in this critical conversation but was not the main focus. By the end of their dialogue, the students were talking back and forth without any teacher support. This transfer of responsibility allowed these two students to get to know each other and form a connection over their grandma's teaching their parents' cultural dishes. The connections and identifications of similarities between characters, events, and their classmates proved to assist in strengthening the student's comprehension of the texts within the units. Students were actively learning from the text and their peers, fully embracing their stories and input, providing the students with ample opportunities to critically analyze the stories. Students were building friendships and bonds with their classmates as they realized they had shared experiences with cultural celebrations, foods, and familiar cultural connections.

Critical Discussions

Whole classroom discussions assisted students in interacting with the text, building comprehension, and providing students with the chance to connect with each other and discover similarities among cultures. When interpreting the observation data, I noticed that students were quick to make connections to the main character of the different stories. Critical discussions about multicultural topics were prominent within each unit. As I modeled how to facilitate conversations and accountable talk, students became more comfortable with sharing their ideas and grow confident in autonomy.

For instance, when reading the book *I Love My Hair*, students connected to the differing hairstyles showcased throughout the book. It was evident that the students learned that differences need to be respected and those differences can come in the form of skin color and hairstyles. Students became open to learning about other cultures and

how their hairstyles are unique to each individual. This led to a discussion about hair color and texture differences and how they are styled. Conversations were forming where students were beginning to ask more open-ended questions, clarifying questions, or even follow-up questions.

Robert: I don't like my hair, it doesn't look like anything. I wish my hair was like that. (Student points to Student B's hair).

Ivaan: Like my hair?

Robert: Yeah it looks so cool but I don't know how to do that.

Mrs. G: When you don't know how to do something, what can you do?

Robert: Ask for help?

Mrs. G: Right! What can you ask Student B about his hair?

Robert: How do you get your hair to be like that? Do you use gel?

Ivaan then went through his whole hair styling process of how he dunked his head under the water to get it all wet. Then he took a scoop of gel, put it on his hair and took a comb to smooth it over to the side. Robert was listening with intrigued eyes and was nodding in his understanding. Robert was guided on how to ask for help and how to ask questions when you don't know something.

Other discussions that were impactful on students' perceptions of multicultural literature occurred when reading the text *Last Stop on Market Street*. This text exposed situations of poverty and how money affected one's everyday life. Some students in the classroom were not familiar with what a soup kitchen was which sparked a discussion of what it was and why it would be needed:

Brian: Is it a place that only serves soup?

Susan: I think that they have more than that there because I know that

some people go there on a holiday to eat.

Brian: Well is it like a restaurant?

Susan: I don't know. Mrs. G can you get whatever you want when you go there?

Mrs. G: Typically no, a soup kitchen is a place that provides food for those who cannot afford food on their own.

Zoya: Well why can't they afford food?

Christina: Maybe their parents don't have a job.

Students were curious because they didn't know. They have never needed to utilize a soup kitchen before. This does not mean their families do not struggle financially, as some do in the community, these students are not aware firsthand. This discussion, while not specific to the characters in the text, was helping students to build empathy and understanding of the different socioeconomic backgrounds that can be in their own communities. Students were aware of certain correlations, such as, not having money from a job and needing to utilize a soup kitchen, however, they were not adept with did not have personal experience. When going further into the text, students began to question events:

Sarika: This is like *Those Shoes* because his nana said they don't *need* to have a car.

Jospeh: Yeah like how he didn't need the new shoes he needed winter boots.

Sarika: But they did need a car because since they didn't have a car they had to take the bus and be on it with other people.

Zoya: Yeah but the bus got them to their house so they didn't need a car

This conversation went on without any teacher interjection; students just started to talk aloud to each other and demonstrated questioning and analyzing the text to make

meaning. Having background knowledge before reading a text had positive effects on participation in discussions and engagement throughout the read-aloud. The student's schema also contributed to critical discussions of the text and at times sparked questioning and pushed perspectives.

The Effects of Bias

When analyzing my observation notes, it became clearly evident the importance of background knowledge and implicit bias when critically interpreting and interacting with multicultural literature. Throughout the entire study, there was very minimal if any "push back" or questioning when reading about or discussing different cultures. It seemed as if different traditions, celebrations, and ideas within culture were acknowledged with a foundation of respect. Students realized that everyone can celebrate something different and it is special to their family. Nevertheless, there was one instance when reading *Binny's Diwali* and discussing Indian food where a student commented:

Drew: Ew that just does not sound good at all. No way Ew!

Mrs. G: Think about your words and your reaction. Could it be hurtful to someone else? Remember, it is perfectly fine to not like a certain kind of food *IF* you have tried it before. You have to face something different. Your favorite food was once new to you.

Drew: Ughhh OK fine, but how would I try it I don't ever go to an Indian Restaurant we only eat Italian food.

Mrs. G: Right there, you seemed to have solved your own problem. Where can you go with your family to try Indian food?

Drew: An Indian restaurant?

Mrs. G: Exactly! Maybe you could even bring a friend so they can help you order something on the menu!

Sarika: I'll go with you!

This was an excellent teaching moment to talk about initial reactions to something different. When speaking of cultural differences or even meeting new people, food is safe. Everyone eats food of some kind every day, and most people have a favorite food. People connect over food, by sharing food, making recipes, or joining together to eat at the table. Asking others about their cultural foods is an excellent conversation starter, it opens up different pathways of conversation and opportunities to bond. Additionally, as in this instance, it is also important to validate the student's feelings in being apprehensive or unknowledgeable about a topic. Not liking a certain kind of food "IF" you have tried it allows one to make a statement of their preference and it can be done so without being hurtful or insulting. Here respect was affirmed, and perspective, dialogue, and understanding were shifted. Kindness can also be seen when a student volunteered to take the other to an Indian restaurant with their family. This was genuine and thoughtful, opening an opportunity to unite families and create a bond starting with food and a theme of curiosity and openness to new things.

However, the more interesting and "tougher" moments come when talking about gender norms. Together as a class, we read the books *Pink is For Boys* and *Pinky Promises*, and the comments during the read-aloud and our discussion were different than previous units, yet enlightening. Some boys, not one of the girl participants, had a harder time acknowledging that colors are not gender-specific and that they can like pink, purple, or even yellow:

Divit: Yeah, but my room will not be pink, no way!

Mrs. G: Does your room have to be pink?

Divit: No, but girls are the ones who can have a pink room not boys.

Mrs. G: Does the color pink only belong to girls? Does pink belong to only one gender? Or can boys like it, color with it, or wear it too?

Robert: I like pink, my baseball socks are actually pink.

After analyzing the text and explaining to students that colors can represent emotions, moods, and interests most students were beginning to recognize that colors do not belong to gender and that they are free for anyone to like or use. Certain students continued to struggle with their preconceived notions and were unable to grasp the concept. This was further seen in the unit while reading *Pinky Promise*. This book was about a girl being told she can't do something because she is a girl and turns into her doing all of these amazing things in fact because she is a girl. In the book, there was a soccer coach that the boys initially thought was a male coach because she had a "boy's haircut."

Mrs. G: What is a boy's haircut?

Ivaan: Short hair on top, buzzed on the sides by the ears like mine is.

Mrs. G: So you're saying I can't have short hair?

Ivaan: *Silent- no answer*

Mrs. G: Do I have to have long hair because I am a girl? Can boys have long hair?

Ivaan: I don't think that they should have long hair no.

Mrs. G: Do certain haircuts only belong to boys or girls?

Ivaan: No but I just don't like it.

Mrs. G: You are allowed not to like something, and when it comes to hair, you can not like the haircut that you have. But what if Mrs. G came into school tomorrow, and had short hair? Would you tell me that you don't like my boy's haircut? How would you feel if that happened to you?

Ivaan: No, I probably wouldn't tell you, but I still wouldn't like it

This interaction was interesting because I initially thought that many students did not know about other cultures or diversity. I thought I might see confusion when comparing traditions but their different opinions or comments do not arise in those types of discussions. Opposing viewpoints and comments have only been observed when discussing gender. This generated further questions about the relationship between culture and gender. I wonder how gender is related to cultural norms and are those kinds of stereotypes more "verbalized" to kids? When children are young and building their internal wiring for how they think about themselves and others it is crucial to promote and model inclusivity, openness, and acceptance.

Summary of Data Analysis

The results of this study confirm that reading multicultural literature and fostering discussions in a morning meeting setting, promotes respect, kindness, and cultural awareness amongst third-grade students. Students not only were exposed to various cultures within their classroom and beyond, but were able to make connections with the texts, characters, events, and their classmates to gain a deeper understanding of their classroom community. Topics that students had more background knowledge of, including personal holidays, foods, and traditions produced the most engagement and opportunity for connections and open dialogue. Unfamiliar topics, such as gender stereotypes or gender norms required more teacher facilitation, probing, and questioning for some students to open their pre-conceived perspectives. Prior beliefs and conceptions affected how certain students interacted and responded to a text. It has been found that discussions are excellent bridges to form connections, facilitating conversations where students take autonomy and ask questions builds authority and ownership of their

learning. Discussions assisted in connecting themes, and lessons and developing deeper understandings of multicultural literature.

Chapter five outlines the conclusions and implications of this study as well as suggestions for future research.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for the Field

Summary

The study of the impact of multicultural literature on respect and kindness in a classroom community yielded several recurring themes. First, students' background knowledge, cultural identity, and perspectives affected their understanding and interaction with the provided texts. Some students, specifically the boys, demonstrated difficulty disconnecting their instilled perspectives and prior notions when discussing texts that challenge gender norms related to color choices and hairstyles. It is important to note that this study was not set to change students but to measure the impact of multicultural literature. Change cannot happen in twelve weeks, but it can happen with repeated exposure, consistent conversation, and opportunities to challenge prior conceived knowledge. Critical discussions between students were essential in formulating connections and creating bonds to build an open and accepting classroom environment. Teacher facilitation and modeling were key in setting the framework for dialogue but were not vital to each discussion as the students began to demonstrate autonomy and facilitate conversations on their own.

The results of the post-assessment indicated strong enhancements to students' cultural awareness of themselves and their classmates. It is also evident that students feel respected by their classmates, as all fourteen participants reported that they were comfortable and felt open to sharing their personal ideas, interests, or cultural beliefs in front of the class. Further, students reported stronger feelings of connection to their classmates. This indicates that the exposure, analysis, and discussion of multicultural

texts helped students to form bonds with each other fostering respect and building a classroom community. By the end of the unit, students clearly felt “seen” by their peers and teacher. Texts such as *The Name Jar*, and *Binny’s Diwali* yielded the most engagement due to the student’s ability to make connections based on their background knowledge. Students not only linked their names to their cultures but linked their learning to generating conversations with their families. This home-school connection helps to bridge the learning in the classroom and reinforce it at home where it can be expanded and enriched. During the study, students were also able to make text-to-self connections, specifically with the text *Binny’s Diwali*. This combined with the majority of my students’ personally celebrating not only allowed for lively contributions and affirmation of context but also provided opportunities for students to learn about their classmates.

Furthermore, the multicultural texts within the unit helped students to think critically and formulate discussions with their peers. *Lailah’s Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story* sparked critical discussions about personal interest, connections to traditional foods, and opening a dialogue about generational traditions that were apparent to each participant. Questioning the text was also evident when reading books like *Pink is For Boys*, and *Pinky Promises* that addressed gender norms and stereotypes, with the boys being more vocal in stating their preconceived knowledge of gender norms. Moreover, I observed that different traditions, celebrations, and ideas within the culture were acknowledged with a foundation of respect. Students realized that everyone can celebrate something different and it is special to their family.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that exposure to multicultural literature paired with opportunities for discussion increases respect and kindness between students forming an open and progressive classroom community. Nieto and Bode (2012) strongly promote making education inclusive for all and they are unwavering that “a multicultural approach values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection, and action” where “students are empowered both individually and collectively to become active learners” (p. 41). This study started with strong teacher modeling and facilitation and then gradually transferred power and responsibility to the students (Meltzoff, 1994). This affirmed the notion of community and supporting students by being able to converse with their classmates sharing their ideas and perspectives. Multicultural literature is the vehicle, the destination is up to the students. The daily read-aloud allowed students to interact with texts that they were not familiar with before. Short (2012) agrees that “reading literature and listening to stories encourage readers to put themselves in the place of others, to use imagination to consider the consequences of their decisions and actions” (p. 13). These are important components of a student's role in a classroom community.

The use of multicultural education theories with authentic multicultural literature can create opportunities for connections that can ultimately affirm diversity and inclusivity. Educators hold great power in bringing inequities to the forefront of their district and work to rectify them with administration, educators, and the community. “Teachers and administrators must model the social and academic skills that they wish to teach their students” (Kriete & Bechtel, 2002, p. 4). It is concretely understood that there are many hardships and obstacles in the way of making this an “easy” fix; however,

consistency and authenticity are solid principles to stand upon and start with. It has been found that student representation, identity, and acknowledgment of culture are linked to student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995). “The Responsive Classroom approach is a widely used, research- and evidence-based approach to elementary education that increases academic achievement decreases problem behaviors, improves social skills, and leads to more high-quality instruction” (Responsive Classroom, 2013, p. 1). In the present day, students need opportunities that introduce, share, and immerse themselves with cultures and chances to experience diversity to enhance their understanding of others. This will promote respect, kindness, and empathy, strong and necessary components of any and every community.

Additionally, I noticed that students were gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and their classmates as they were forming connections. It was not easy for students to make connections with each text or find what they shared in common with every other student. Perhaps some students are not able to simply notice similarities between other cultures or create connections. However, it can be taught to the students that even though you cannot find commonalities, you can still notice others, be friendly to everyone, make space for others’ ideas and beings, wish good things onto others, and lastly, empathize with everyone. Students were curious about unknown topics, such as soup kitchens. Discussions and learning how to ask questions were helpful to build empathy and understanding of the different socioeconomic backgrounds that can be in their own communities. Within the 21 st century, students are global participants in the current and upcoming events in their lives, it is important that they possess cultural awareness and sensitivity to navigate the unknown. Norton (2009) has discovered that

when students can relate global events to the themes, conflicts, and characterizations found in multicultural literature, it helps them to better understand current world issues.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was consistent time for teaching and collecting data. Since this study was an additional aspect that was incorporated into the mandated curriculum, this study had to be completed during a flex period. Flex period is a period in the day that is not assigned to a content area subject and can be utilized for other needs within the classroom. This period is also known as W.I.N, *What I Need* where students can work on differentiated materials or assignments based on their individual needs. This period is also the time-of-day students are pulled out of the classroom for interventions, related services, and counseling. Several times, the morning meeting was cut short or eliminated from our routine due to an extracurricular activity or change to the daily schedule. This affected consistent exposure and for the impaired units to be completed with completed fidelity. It is possible that with more time and opportunity for repeated readings along with the incorporation of different texts the discussions could have become more critical and some of the stronger biases could begin to shift.

To remediate, multicultural literature should become a central part of the school curriculum covered across all content areas. When permeated and woven throughout the day regardless of the subject, students can become fluid and fluent in affirming diversities among their community (González, Moll, and Amantito, 2005). I chose to create this unit with my students apart from the standard curriculum; therefore, those that were in my class benefited from the exposure. Adding these texts to the curriculum will give all the

opportunity to enhance their cultural identity and build respect for others, instead of the opportunity being subjective to the classroom teacher.

Another limitation was the effects of COVID and virtual learning. There was a week within the study that our district went virtual with the rise of COVID cases. Students and teachers completed the school day virtually and all instruction was conducted through Google Classroom and Zoom. Fostering discussions over Zoom or attempting to keep engagement was difficult. Students were distracted by being at home and were not as willing to speak up in whole group discussions. Students had trouble hearing each other and dialogue was often cut off or interrupted if too many students were trying to talk at once. The main goal of morning meetings is to build connections with classmates, learn to converse and formulate bonds based on shared interests or experiences. However, it was very apparent how virtually learning disconnects the students and creates issues for group discussions. Perhaps further research and collaboration with other educational professionals can generate a more sufficient and beneficial way to ensure students still can connect and feel like they are in a “*normal*” setting virtually.

Implications for Further Research

The analysis of the results of this study proved to identify areas that could be further researched to continue to develop this field. The units within this study were crafted by myself to create meaningful exposure to multicultural literature. Additionally, this study took place during my morning meeting period, which is not allotted universally to all educators. If this study were to be completed again, I recommend integrating the texts into the established curriculum across content areas. I also recommend continuing

the use of multicultural text throughout the entire year as continuous exposure leads to broader perspectives and opportunities for more connections and discussions. Allow texts to be read more than once, add new materials, and reflect. This will allow students to gain deeper comprehension skills for multicultural literature and continue to create an inclusive classroom community.

The findings of the study showed that students, especially boys, verbalized gender norms related to appearances. This prompted the questions for further research and questioning. How is gender related to cultural norms and are those kinds of stereotypes more "verbalized" to kids? Also, what are the long-term effects of multicultural literature and conversation on a person's cultural intelligence?

Implications for the Field

Exposing students to multicultural literature paired with opportunities to critically analyze and discuss will create a generation of children who are globally minded. The world needs children who are not just tolerant of others who are different from them but move further in acceptance and ultimately affirmation. Culturally Responsive (Gay, 2010) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) have created a platform for educators to place equity at the forefront in their classrooms. The use of picture books and daily read-alouds present an inviting and developmentally appropriate format to teach students about social and cultural topics that they can grasp and interact with. Discussions with teacher facilitation and prompting help students to feel comfortable and learn how to ask questions. Routman (2005) contends that "students learn more when they can talk to one another and be actively involved" (p. 207). To help establish strong discussion, teachers can provide students with visual cues, sentence frames for

questioning, opportunities to write before speaking, and opportunities for students to discuss with their peers before speaking in a whole group.

When opening the line of communication and discussion, “a healthy exchange of ideas may include opposing viewpoints, it is necessary to create a classroom community that is inclusive and supportive of all its members” (Sanchez, 2008, p. 53). Giving students a solid foundation in discussion skills will help students to feel comfortable taking risks and sharing their ideas. Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2011) share those educators should be active participants during student-led discussions thereby leading them with nonjudgmental language such as “I wondered” or I noticed”. These types of questions can direct students without imposing on their own thoughts and opinions or misshaping their own academic and cultural identity. Teachers should be conscious of how much they are talking during a whole group discussion, monitoring their responsibility and bias.

When discussions or instances of gender biases emerge, educators should be prepared to facilitate and correct them. Teachers can first, begin within and reflect on their initial bias. Teachers should use inclusive language, ensure standard expectations regardless of gender and be aware that all students are equitably included in discussions. Additionally, teachers should audit their bookshelves to ensure gender balance among main characters. "We need to look at the stories we are telling our students and children. Far too many of our classroom examples, storybooks, and texts describe a world in which boys and men are bright, curious, brave, inventive, and powerful, but girls and women are silent, passive, and invisible" (McCormick, 1995). From here, teachers can begin to

help students analyze texts through a critical lens to ensure authenticity and gender inclusiveness.

Further, teacher instruction must mirror the needs of the diverse classroom population. In order to build upon their own preconceptions, Fong and Sheets (2004) promote that throughout an educator's educational journey they must read diverse literature, seek out culturally inclusive instructional resources, and attend any and every professional development workshop that can further help open their own minds about multicultural literature. Educators should work to bridge the classroom to their school community and home life. Family inclusion can take place in the form of encouraging families to visit the school and share traditions of their culture or utilizing the Funds of Knowledge survey (González, Moll, and Amantito, 2005) to gain a deeper understanding of one's student's cultural background. Families have an abundant amount of knowledge that teachers can use to create family engagement opportunities. Finally, promote curiosity. Exposure alone can be a window into a new world for students but creating a community open to questioning and curiosity allows for stronger connections and understandings of others. Incorporating multicultural education and sharing practices into the classroom promotes affirmation of diversity and strengthens cultural identity.

Educators should strive to influence students who are comfortable being unique. These types of children understand at an early age that they are not like everyone else and therefore, do not expect others to be just like them either. Instead, standing within their identity they are able to *see* others, celebrate their uniqueness, and affirm their differences. The incorporation of multicultural literature needs to be explicitly taught and woven into the curriculum. Policymakers must work with district administration to

develop training and provide resources for teachers. School librarians must be utilized to work with teachers to “organize units that include culturally-diverse literature, teacher librarians and classroom teachers ensure that multicultural themes are woven throughout the curriculum. Once multicultural literature is seen as an integral component of the curriculum, libraries, and classrooms can become safe arenas for open discussions on culturally sensitive topics” (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995, p. 3). It is critical to have conversations with children about differences in skin color, beliefs, traditions, and other forms of diversity including cultural backgrounds, languages, disabilities, and sexual orientations. Conversations about diversity, continuing dialogue, and creating a safe space for sharing will equip students with the tools they need to make sense of the world around them and become active members in their ever-changing society.

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Appendix

Initial Knowledge Pre and Post Survey Questions

Question 1: Do you know all the students in your class names?

Question 2: Is it important that someone says your name correctly?

Question 3: Do you feel respected by your classmates?

Question 4: Do you feel connected to your classmates?

Question 5: Do you feel comfortable sharing answers in front of the class?

Question 6: Do you feel comfortable sharing personal ideas, interests, or your culture in front of the class?

Question 7: Does your teacher make an effort to get to know you?

Question 8: Do you feel like others in the class are interested in learning about your culture

Question 9: Do you see yourself or kids that look like you in the pictures around the classroom?

Question 10: Do you see yourself or kids that look like you in the books that you read in the classroom?