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**THE BENEFITS OF EXAMINING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE WITH A
CRITICAL LENS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

by
Nicole Stamato-Pasaniello

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Reading Education
at
Rowan University
February 10, 2020

Thesis Chair: Valarie Lee, Ed. D.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my loving husband, Ben. Thank you for your constant support throughout this process and helping in any way that you can.

Abstract

Nicole Stamato-Pasaniello
THE BENEFITS OF EXAMING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE WITH A
CRITICAL LENS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
2019-2020
Valarie Lee, Ed. D.
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to analyze the ways second grade students respond to multicultural literature when using a critical literacy approach. Three different multicultural text were chosen that contained familiar and unfamiliar social and cultural topics for students to discuss in a literature circle setting. Their conversation, questions, and connections to the literature were studied and analyzed for trends and evidence of change in students' beliefs and cultural and social competence.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Vignette

Book bins lined my guided reading table as I flipped through my assortment of books in my classroom library. Throughout the years, I have always been very proud of my growing collection of books, ensuring that I kept an eye out for any good and cheap finds wherever I went. My students always enjoyed picking new stories each week and sharing the details with me or their classmates. As I stared at my collection, a stunning realization began to sink in: did I ever consider the characters or content in these stories? As an elementary teacher for several years, I have always taught in diverse neighborhoods, with students of many different backgrounds and cultures. I tried to ensure I had books that discussed different holidays, or books to read during Black History Month, but was my library truly representative of the diversity within my classroom? Even after identifying the “multicultural” books in my classroom library, did these stories give my students an opportunity to learn and think critically about different cultures and societal issues?

So many of the “multicultural” books in my library followed the same, “happy ending” format. These stories would discuss a hardship a particular group of people faced, and how in the end, everything worked out perfectly and justice was served. Many of these stories painted white people as the savior and barely gave credit to anyone else for the success of the culture or background. I can remember reading a story to my students about Harriet Tubman and her fight to end slavery, and the look of astonishment

that came across many of my students' faces as they realized there was no "white superhero" in this story.

I realized that my lack of education of different cultures and issues within society was preventing my students from becoming global citizens, unaware of the realities in our world. My reservation from teaching these different stories came from years of believing that "I didn't see color" and that by ignoring these stories, I was teaching tolerance and acceptance to my students. As a white educator, I was always worried about the conversations or questions multicultural books would spark, or if my students would view me as the enemy. I can remember a compare and contrast lesson I taught my first year teaching, and the nervous feeling that came upon me as one of my African American students pointed out that she was Black and I was White. Why did this make me feel so uncomfortable? She was right. Yet, so much of my previous teacher education told me to not address race within the class, so I brushed it off, replying, "We don't see color in this room."

The world does see color. According to Joseph, Viesco, and Bianco (2016), "By taking a different and implicit form, today's racism is easy to overlook, especially by those who are not negatively affected by it". The colorblind mentality so many educators are taught to adapt in their practice attempts to ignore the racism still in our society and schools (Joseph, Viesco, & Bianco, 2016). So much of American history is centered around segregation and problems among citizens regarding cultural or background differences. None of these problems were ever solved by ignoring the differences or pretending the problems weren't really there. Why did I feel as a teacher that I was properly training the future of America by teaching them to ignore race or culture? New

education and the knowledge instilled from reading Gloria Ladson-Billings, Paulo Freire, and Sonia Nieto challenged my teaching. I then realized that my job did not end with teaching writing or math skills and strategies, but also included instruction that promoted socially aware and culturally competent individuals (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Story of the Question

The continuation of my education in a master's degree program solidified my understanding of the importance and need for including multicultural literature and literature that explored and analyzed cultural and social issues in our society. These ideas and strategies are critical in today's classrooms, yet little is evident in the classroom and instruction, particularly reading. Elementary students are usually thought of as too young, and not mature enough to handle stories that challenge societal norms (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005). Elementary students are also considered unable to challenge text and critically think about the story or its audience.

My need for multicultural texts continued to grow as I examined my classroom library. Many of the books that I had fit your typical classroom mold. Most of the human characters in the books in my library were white and I didn't have many books that provoked critical thinking or examined different cultures of societal norms. The multicultural texts that I did purchase for my classroom focused on "feel good" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469) stories and rarely discussed struggles these cultures still face today. When looking at my classroom, the gap between the rich diversity of my students and the lack of diversity present in text was alarming. It was then I decided that I wanted to integrate multicultural literature into my literacy instruction to provoke critiques and develop critical thinking skills in my students.

Statement of the Problem

The research question that shaped my study examines what happens when second grade students use a critical literacy approach to analyze multicultural literature during literature circles. Diversity within schools has created a continually changing ideology of incorporating culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) or culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) instruction. “For more than a decade, anthropologists have examined ways that teaching can better match the home and community cultures of students of color who have previously not had academic success in school” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 466). Although many institutions claim to include diversity within their curriculum to ensure the success of all students, many simply add a small number of “multicultural” texts to classroom libraries or discuss different holiday celebrations in December (Nieto & Turner, 2012). Paulo Freire’s work (2000) challenged traditional education and paved the way for other theorists to identify the lack of diversity and social critique within school curriculums. Lisa Delpit’s study (1988) of the culture of power and silenced dialogue in schools identified how students of color were not included within the culture of power, or white, middle-class education. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) studied culturally relevant pedagogy and ways to change teacher education to ensure the inclusion of culture and issues in society within the classroom. Billings’ development of culturally relevant pedagogy stemmed from the deficit ideas that many had of students of color and their lack of success in traditional schooling. Ladson-Billings’ work connected with Delpit’s concept of the culture of power and teaching students of this specific power. Ladson-Billings advocated for students succeeding in school while “maintaining their cultural identity” (1995, p. 476). The creation of students who are not only academically

successful, but critique and plan for social action is another large part of culturally relevant pedagogy. Sonia Nieto's work with multicultural education outlined how school can be used to teach students of all cultures the rules and guidelines present in education and also welcome and incorporate cultures, languages, race, etc. in the curriculum (Nieto & Turner, 2012). Nieto and Billings both agreed that in order to include multiple cultures and backgrounds in the classroom, educators must make themselves parts of the community and truly understand the students they teach.

“Through carefully selected and shared literature, students learn to understand and to appreciate a literary heritage that comes from many diverse backgrounds” (Norton, 1990, p. 28). Books provide an opportunity for students to learn more about their culture and heritage and strengthen a deeper understanding of one's self. Multicultural literature can also provide students with the opportunity to learn more and build their background knowledge and understanding of different cultures and societal issues. Multicultural books present diverse stories and problems in the world in a familiar format that can be used to expose children of a young age to what seems to be “more mature” topics and concepts. When reading multicultural literature in the classroom, students “gain understandings 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). Children spend a majority of their life in school and develop their basic understanding of the world based on the education they receive. Including multicultural literature into the curriculum provides students with opportunities to broaden their understanding of the world. It is also important that educators examine the authenticity of the text they use in the classroom to ensure the stories being presented are

free from racial stereotyping or inaccuracies. Holland and Mongillo (2016) warn “it is not enough to include *high quality* literature from various cultures into the curriculum; teachers must also learn how to recognize *authentic* multicultural literature” (p. 18). When used in the classroom, the stories presented in the text will help shape the students’ knowledge of cultures and backgrounds and begin to shape the cultural competence (Gladson-Billings, 1995) within that student.

Reading these books and discussing their features in a small group with fellow students allows students to build on their understanding while interacting with each other while responding to the text. Robinson (2013) suggests that students “need to be provided the opportunity to practice using language to construct and deconstruct concepts while interacting with others” (p. 43). Students bring their schema and culture with them and each student gains a different understanding of the text based on their background. The conversation that occurs among students within these literature circles provides students the opportunity to learn from one another and build on their prior knowledge.

When students interact from one another while examining multicultural literature, they develop and identify connections between them, the characters, and other students and examine differences in their culture or background (Robinson, 2013). This continues the social and cultural growth of the student. “Critical pedagogy and multicultural literature should provide the opportunity for children to respond to text by helping them make those connections and disconnections that reveal common emotional responses while respecting our distinct cultural values” (Robinson, 2013, p. 45). Critical literacy strategies allow students to identify discrepancies within the text, or question the story to build their understanding and critically analyze the story presented. This, in turn, teaches

students to not accept something as is, and to use questions to promote a society that is constantly shifting for the better. Critical literacy identifies the cultural power within our society and promotes students to question this and how this affects others within our society (Creighton, 1997). This framework also “challenges teachers in their selection and presentation of materials to students” (p. 440). Teachers must also think deeply and analyze the text they use to teach multicultural education and question the story presented and characters within the text. Utilizing critical literacy strategies with multicultural literature encourages students to “take an active role in questioning both the texts themselves and the beliefs and personal experience they bring to them” (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005, p. 259).

The infusion of multicultural literature into my classroom has become a crucial part of my instruction to ensure my students feel represented within my class, and learn about other cultures and backgrounds through the transformative use of literature. Teaching my students to approach this literature with a critical literacy lens not only prepares them to become critical readers, but critical members of our world. By instructing to not always accept what is presented and develop critiques and connections to deepen understanding and promote future change, I can feel more confident about preparing culturally competent (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and socially knowledgeable students. My work with multicultural text serves to change the way I view educating about different cultures and backgrounds and also how younger students respond to this literature. “The instructional approaches and the culture that children experience in these settings play a major role in shaping their emerging identities as cultural and literate beings” (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005, p. 258).

Chapter two outlines the researchers and studies that shaped my research and assisted in developing my curriculum for my students. This chapter discusses the several theories that formulated my thinking and the themes that connected this research. Chapter three examines the design of my research, the context of the community, school, and classroom, the procedure of my study, and the data I collected and how it was analyzed. Chapter four contains my results and recurring themes throughout the study and how they connect with the instruction. Chapter five outlines the conclusions and implications of this study as well as suggestions for future research.

Chapter II

Literature Review

“Developing understanding of our literary heritage whether it is European, African, Native American, Hispanic, or Asian is one of the most important tasks for educators. Experts in multicultural education frequently emphasize the importance of using literature to increase cultural awareness.” (Norton, 1990, p. 28)

As classrooms continue to grow and include more and more students from a variety of diverse cultures and backgrounds, the need for education and curriculum that supports and encourages deep understanding and critical analysis, or utilizing critical literacy skills such as critiquing the narrative or author’s purpose and developing connections to the text, of different cultures and our society is more needed than ever. The use of multicultural literature within the classroom allows for students to learn about and appreciate different cultures while developing a stronger understanding of diversity and give the tools to question and tackle societal norms (Norton, 1990). According to Norton, “Multicultural literature also teaches students different geographical and historical locations and events and develops skills to construct critiques and call to action for social change” (p. 28). Approaching multicultural text through a critical lens allows the reader to analyze the text and develop critiques for the story. It also encourages connections to society and challenges to established norms: “By using multicultural books that truly promise pluralism and by helping students read the world by reading the words, teachers expand their students’ abilities to develop their critical thinking” (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010, p. 116). The critical literacy approach when tackling

multicultural literature prepares students to critically analyze their world and question society to move towards cultural change for the better.

This chapter identifies the theories that shaped this study, including critical literacy theory and multicultural education. The definitions for these theories are provided, along with their connection to the framework of this study. Through a review of the literature, the importance of implementing critical literacy instruction in elementary schools is discussed and how multicultural literature can be used to teach these strategies by outlining and examining empirical studies that utilize this ideology.. The research on the importance of high-quality literature is reviewed and the importance of using literature circles in the elementary grades is outlined. The chapter ends with the supports that need to be in place to ensure that analyzing multicultural literature through a critical lens is successful within the classroom.

Critical, Multicultural, and Culturally Responsive Frameworks

Paulo Friere believed that, “To teach is to create the possibility for students, while developing their curiosity and making it more critical, to produce knowledge in cooperation with teachers” (2014, p. 24). Critical pedagogy encourages students to not accept the world as is, rather with the guidance of teachers, use their education to work towards social change. This pedagogy encourages students to think critically about concepts and challenge dominant beliefs and ideologies formed from the culture of power (Delpit, 1999). Research on the implementation of the use of critical pedagogy with multicultural education (Robinson, 2013) indicates that students can identify connections and disconnections with other cultures, races, or economic statuses while developing social awareness and raising questions and concerns of social and political equity.

According to Nieto (2009), multicultural education argues for the inclusion and education of all backgrounds and cultures evident in our pluralistic society. “When positive attitudes and behaviors concerning difference are in place, school, and teachers can then create conditions for robust learning” (Nieto, 2012, p. 6) The multicultural approach to education welcomes and celebrates all by the inclusion of language, traditions, and ways of life. into the classroom. Multicultural education also focuses on the idea of creating global citizens, working towards social equity. The goal of multicultural education is to provide diverse students with successful education that provides tools for success while challenging the culture of power education traditionally in today’s schools (Delpit, 1999). According to Parkhouse, Lu, and Massaro (2019), “Multicultural and intercultural education has also had a second, complementary goal: to reduce inequitable academic outcomes among groups” (p. 416). Multicultural education supplies the foundation for classrooms that celebrates its diversity and utilizes it within instruction, while promoting social and culturally competent students.

Culturally responsive education also works to include all cultures within the classroom into the curriculum to provide the most chance for success in today’s diverse schools. “Schools and teachers who have adopted a culturally responsive pedagogy have the ability to act as change agents in their schools to help bridge the divide and encourage more equitable schooling experiences” (Griner & Stewart, 2012, p. 586). Work with culturally responsive pedagogy, including Gloria Ladson-Billings’ ideology of culturally relevant pedagogy, developed the idea of promoting education that was inclusive of the diverse cultures among the students while also “developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that schools perpetuate” (1995, p. 469).

The use of critical pedagogy with multicultural literature encourages students to analyze and question sociopolitical issues and presentations of cultures, ethnicities, or groups of people in text. Multicultural literature allows students to experience cultures similar and different from their own through a variety of texts available in the classroom (Robinson, 2013). It also gives students the opportunity to respond to text and critically analyze its central message and theme. Robinson (2013) states that students learn about other cultures and backgrounds through “socialization,” and multicultural literature provides the lens for students to gain insight about the world around them.

The Importance of the Critical Literacy Approach in Elementary Schools

Elementary or primary schools are typically shaping tools for students’ construction of ideologies surrounding culture, diversity, race, and socioeconomic status (Creighton, 1997). These schools are sometimes students’ first exposure to people from different cultures and backgrounds other than their family’s. Holland and Mongillo (2016) believed that “elementary teachers have the greatest opportunity to foster the development of positive, healthy, attitudes towards others in their students” (p. 18). The way teachers address multicultural instruction and critical thinking skills shape the way students look at the world they live in. Elementary school provides a foundation for how students will view and accept others and develop connections and disconnections with diverse individuals.

Elementary classrooms are areas where multicultural literature can be used with a critical approach to better understand cultural and ethnic differences (Holland & Mongillo, 2016). Multicultural literature is an excellent tool when teaching critical literacy skills because it provides a familiar structure for students to practice questioning

and developing critiques for text that examines another culture or background. Using a critical lens when reading multicultural literature helps students develop social awareness, critique and engage emotionally with text, and create connections with multicultural themes (Robinson, 2013). Different cultural problems or societal issues are presented in multicultural literature and allow for the reader to question the author's intention, the story presented, or the story untold while reading the text. According to Calderwood et. al (2010), critical literacy gives students the framework to approach multicultural literature and not read it purely for comprehension and application of reading skills, but also examine and questions its structure and meaning in connection with society and cultural norms and topics

When using multicultural literature within the classroom, it is important to remember that young students are mature enough to handle and discuss cultural and societal issues. Researchers studying critical literacy pedagogies with elementary students (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005) found that elementary students were able to grasp complex issues in multicultural literature and use critical techniques with these texts. Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018) suggest that “elementary students can grapple with these concepts if provided with the necessary scaffolding” (p. 65). Providing younger students with support and using a familiar tool in grade-level texts, elementary students can begin their critical education early and begin to read to critically analyze text. “Critical pedagogy brings to the classroom an awareness of the structure of cultural systems and positions of power therein, and of ways in which they can positively or negatively affect groups or individuals” (Creighton, 1997, p. 439).

Teaching Critical Literacy Skills Through Using Multicultural Literature

Multicultural literature can be used to approach different social and cultural topics with all ages. It provides a medium to learn about and discuss diversity. Books are a familiar tool for students in elementary school. Books are used throughout the school day, and by the end of kindergarten, most students know how books work and use these tools to learn. These texts can introduce students to stories that challenge traditional history and textbooks and provide students with a lens to critically the history presented and the effects of the narrative (Demoigny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018). Multicultural text presents stories about cultural or societal differences or issues with language that students are familiar with and characters that students can make connections to.

Multicultural picture books can be used with younger students to present multiple perspectives and challenges “monocultural education” or education and curriculum that “are primarily representative of only the dominant culture” (Nieto, 2009, p. 2). The connection of the text to an illustration allows for students’ deeper understanding of an event and the development of more descriptive details (Demoigny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018). This type of multicultural literature provides high student engagement and is a shorter way to practice and apply critical literacy skills. “While the stories rarely had happy endings where all of the problems were solved, they did leave readers thinking about fairness and what could be done differently?” (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005, p. 258). Multicultural picture books or read aloud allow students to focus solely on critiquing and dissecting the text and not worry about accuracy while reading. Students from a variety of learning levels and reading abilities are invited to participate which allows for a variety of inputs and responses when analyzing the literature.

Stories provide substance to begin questioning and analyzation of narrative. Multicultural literature works well with critical literacy strategies because it allows for stories that represent diverse cultures and backgrounds. This type of literature can encourage students to read between the lines and look for missing stories or accounts. Critical literacy provides the framework for students to become more inquisitive individuals that do not accept society as it is.

Using Literature Circles to Practice Critical Literacy Skills

Literature circles provide students a small group instructional experience when exploring, reading, and analyzing text. “By incorporating multicultural literature and discussions into classrooms, students can appreciate and develop a deeper understanding of not only their culture, but the culture of others” (Wiesendanger & Tarpley, 2010, p. 111). Literature circles allow students to interact and discuss text, while connecting stories to their own experiences, or learn about new experiences from other students. Literature circles can be used to analyze and tackle issues, such as poverty or racism, as they serve as a platform for students from diverse backgrounds to share their prior knowledge and build of one another on these topics. Literature circles provide a safe environment for students to share their ideas and interpretations of the text (Wiesendanger & Tarpley, 2010). This confidence can also promote risk taking when analyzing the text, including developing critiques and critically discussing the story. “Literature circles encourage authentic student-led discussions and interactions rather than the prevalent, teacher-centered, question-and-answer exchanges” (McCall, 2010, p. 153). When students participate in literature circles, they share their understanding of the story and look to fellow students for clarifications of misconceptions.

Qualitative studies (McCall, 2010; Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011) found that when using literature circles with elementary students, small groups that include heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping of students provide the framework to study multicultural literature. To prepare students for the effective use of literature circles, setting up roles for students are key to ensure they understand what to look for in the text. The roles can remain traditional, such as text-connector or summarizer, or they can be specific to ensure students are analyzing specific components of the story. “As students focus on key concepts and themes in texts, which can be developed during student-led discussions, they must think critically about the meanings in the text and communicate their understandings to other students” (McCall, 2010, p. 154). Communication is vital for students participating in literature circles because it ensures students are able to share their thoughts regarding the text and shift their understanding based on their interactions with other students.

While literature circles have many benefits when critically analyzing text, several issues could prevent this tool from being most effective for students when studying multicultural literature. When working with younger students, multicultural text that explores holidays or food can be used at first to introduce students to different cultures and backgrounds. As students become more comfortable with multicultural text, it is important that deeper text that explores critical issues is used to practice critical literacy skills. Wiesendanger and Tarpley (201) warn that “if the program does not eventually include a deeper understanding of ethnic content, then multicultural education remains superficial” (p. 112). Leland, Harste, and Huber (2005) found in their study of first grade teachers that educators were unsure of students’ ability to grasp difficult cultural and

societal concepts at a young age, but were also surprised with their ability to analyze and critique such text and use it in connections cross-curricular and outside the classroom to work towards changes to improve society. When teaching critical literacy skills to younger students, they begin to “take an active role in questioning both the text themselves and the beliefs and personal experiences they bring to them” (p. 259)

Although literature circles can be a safe place for students to interact when studying multicultural literature, power imbalances can exist among the group during discussions. Heterogeneous grouping can allow for students of higher ability to position themselves above other students (Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011). Too much freedom and not enough interjection for teachers can allow “discussions to reinforce stereotypes rather than engage students in democratic practices” (p. 15). If the traditional model of literature circles is used and students are left alone for discussion and interpretation, students may be unable to move past their personal experiences of that topic and critically analyze the story. In Thein, Guise, and Sloan’s (2011) study of students utilizing literature circles to promote discussion of multicultural text, they found that providing students with specific critical strategies and equipping students with tools to help attain these skills provides for a deeper analyzation of the literature and ensures that preconceived knowledge is challenged within the groups during discussion.

To ensure literature circles are effective for elementary students when studying multicultural literature through a critical lens, several actions must be taken by the teacher to promote authentic and meaningful instruction. Researchers (Thein, Guide, and Sloan, 2011) found that modeling expectations and ensuring students understand how to appropriately discuss text is important to ensure students understand the roles they play in

literature circles. The use of high quality literature that explores diverse topics and issues gives students the opportunity to explore multicultural literature that promotes critical analysis. The traditional literature circle model may not be completely appropriate for multicultural literature, so observing students' conversation and providing probing questions to ensure the conversation is meaningful and utilizes critical literacy skills in an important role for the teacher (Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011). Students may be unsure of what to specifically critique of question in and about the literature, power struggles may exist, or challenges to prior knowledge and education may not be developed. In their study of literature circles, Thein Guise, and Sloan (2011) found that providing students with specific roles or tools to promote the critical analysis of multicultural text can "elicit critical rather than personal experiences" responses when discussing text. By providing students with support when using literature circles to critically analyze multicultural text, teachers can be sure that this method supplies students with a framework to challenge their thinking and build new knowledge of other cultures and backgrounds.

The Importance of Authentic and High-Quality Multicultural Literature

Multicultural literature is an effective tool for the instruction of critical literacy skills among elementary students. The analysis of authenticity and examination of the text before implementing it within the curriculum is crucial to ensure accurate representation and creation of discussions and critiques. Teachers play a large role in multicultural education by ensuring the texts they use and the stories they present are factual and are free of stereotyping and inaccuracies. Examining multicultural literature for authenticity before is it used allows educators to "closely examine how representative the texts of students' gender and cultural experience, how recently they were produced,

whose voice is reflected, and how they were selected” (Creighton, 1997, p. 441).

Teachers can examine and analyze multicultural literature for its literary quality and historical accuracy, portrayal of lifestyles, success, individuals, and cultures, along with the dialogue being used and the author’s background and culture to determine the authenticity of the text (Holland & Mongillo, 2016).

Several books that teachers may consider multicultural could have underlying themes, including assimilating diverse cultures to American culture and the dominance of American culture over other backgrounds (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010). Teachers should not only examine the text for what is written, but how it is interpreted and who the text is speaking to and about. Texts that contain messages of assimilation and importance of dominant culture can be used to “direct students to attend to larger units of the text” (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010, p. 116). Critical analysis of these stories examines what cultures are being pushed towards Americanization and what part of that culture is being silenced and why.

“When selecting multicultural literature, teachers might consider whether the text will allow underrepresented students to see themselves in the literature and whether it will provide new cultural, social, and political perspectives to students who are from the dominant culture” (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010, p. 116). Authentic multicultural text that promotes learning with all students provides accurate representation of a culture that allows students from that culture to connect with the story, while educating students of other cultures accurate representation of diversity within the classroom. Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018) found that multicultural literature can provide elementary students with multiple viewpoints from traditionally silenced topics and promote critique of the

narrative and who it represents. “Critical literacy encourages students to question power and to recognize that no text is neutral” (Demoigny & Ferrars-Stone, 2018, p. 66). Critical literacy skills provide the framework for students to question literature for authenticity and representation by analyzing the story being told, who is telling the story, and what voices are silenced.

Supports for Multicultural Instruction

There are a variety of variables that need to be in place “to implement multicultural education thoughtfully and comprehensively” (Banks, 2013, p. 34). These include the school culture and politics, the diversity within the school, the support for teachers and staff, the teaching styles, and community outreach. Definition of critical thinking, not only for students, but also staff, to ensure everyone is in agreement of ways that text can be critically analyzed and that the most effective instruction is provided. This includes outlining what critical thinking looks and sounds like (Cooper & White, 2012). A qualitative study that analyzed how multicultural literature was viewed by elementary teachers (Holland & Mongillo, 2016) found that teachers must have passion for utilizing multicultural literature to develop critical literacy skills. Teachers should share their passion with students for understanding diverse cultures and develop critiques and discussion to change and produce a more inclusive society. Teacher training is important to ensure teachers have the skills and tools necessary to implement critical literacy within the classroom. Critical analysis of teaching and personal understandings before learning ways to include critical literacy within the classroom provides a platform for teachers to explore their preconceived notions and challenge them for the better of the students. The authors (Holland & Mongillo, 2016) found strong support from leadership

is key to ensure that teachers are given the tools to implement critical literacy and multicultural education, alleviate confrontation fears, and connect to the community through instruction. Teachers must not be afraid when tackling literature that is unfamiliar or uncomfortable. “If teachers are too fearful to discuss such important multicultural topics such as sexual orientation during read alouds, when a ‘teaching moment’ arises, then they are teaching our children, our students, our future leaders of society to be fearful of uncomfortable topics” (Holland & Mongillo, 2016, p. 23).

Studying multicultural text through a critical literacy lens should not stop with literacy, but can be extended interdisciplinary and used to promote critical thinking throughout students’ education. According to Holland and Mongillo (2016), “multicultural texts should be naturally integrated into the curriculum where students are exposed to diversity as a regular part of their education and not just ‘hailed out’ for special holidays” (p. 26). This exposure continues to build on Ladson-Billings’ (1995) development of cultural competence among students and promotes continued challenging and questioning of what students are presented to work towards improvements and pluralism within our society. This instruction encourages teachers to support their students’ cultures within instruction and implement critical pedagogy to encourage students to challenge dominant culture for social change (Robinson, 2013).

Conclusion

Critical pedagogy promotes students to challenge their world and question and critique while teachers guide students towards cultural pluralism (Robinson, 2013). Critical pedagogy provides the framework for critical literacy strategies and critique literature for a deeper understanding. Students who approach a text with a critical lens

“take an active role in questioning both the texts themselves and the beliefs and personal experiences they bring to them” (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005, p. 257). Picture books serve as an age-appropriate tool for elementary students to be exposed to and develop critical literacy skills with due to their illustrations and shorter narratives. The examination for ideologies present in these texts is key to ensure that teachers are providing their students with authentic, high-quality literature. Multicultural education strives to create an environment that is inclusive of all cultures and utilizes these cultures to shape the curriculum to ensure success for all students, regardless of background (Parkhouse, Lu, and Massaro, 2019). Multicultural literature that has underlying messages of assimilation can be analyzed using critical literacy strategies to identify the message within the text. “It is crucial that our students learn about history through multiple perspectives and with a critical lens to seek a more complete understanding of our past” (Demoigny & Ferrara-Stone, 2018, p. 1). Using multicultural literature to teach critical literacy skills can provide instruction that can be used in a cross-curricular fashion. This type of text can provide multiple experiences and stories for historical events and strengthen students’ understanding of history. Although instructing critical literacy skills using multicultural literacy requires many supports to ensure it is effective, teachers can control some of these variables including teacher passion, knowledge of a variety of cultures, ensuring students are provided with authentic, high-quality literature, and providing multiple perspectives.

Chapter III

Research Design/Methodology

The methodology for this study is qualitative in nature that utilizes observations, interviews, and analysis of student work to determine how students respond critically to multicultural literature. This relativist study takes a constructivist stance (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), analyzing the interaction between students when reading and discussing multicultural literature, their critiques and views of this literature, and the changes made in initial beliefs. The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine students' beliefs and views, analyze their ability to discuss cultural issues, and dissect their interpretations of multicultural literature. This study is also designed to analyze students' ability to apply critical skills when discussing text with other students.

Quantitative data in education often centers around test scores that drive future instruction, but qualitative data allows teachers “a more organic and complexly instructive way to articulate and explore their searching questions about practice and pedagogy as it applies to their immediate classrooms” (Klehr, 2012, p. 122). A qualitative framework allows for more constructivist approaches for collecting data in response to my questions with multicultural literature, including teacher journal, observation notes, student critiques, and student work. According to Klehr (2012), “Qualitative methods offer a strong complement to numerical measures, allowing one to more comprehensively study how teaching and learning happen in dynamic classroom contexts” (p. 123). Since the study is occurring within one second grade classroom, a qualitative approach allows me to study interactions on a smaller scale and the ability to adjust to quickly-changing situations. The qualitative framework provides an outline to study and address problems

and inquiries within the classroom while constantly evolving and creating new inquiries to continue to improve instruction.

This research qualifies as teacher research as it is being conducted within the confines of a second-grade classroom by the students' classroom teacher (Cashmere, 2004, p. 2). The inquiry was developed with the students and curriculum in mind, and data sources were created to be used within the classroom during the guided reading period. This study analyzes the outcome of students and teachers working together to analyze and critique multicultural literature (Cashmere, 2004).

The teacher research in this study qualifies as qualitative as it is an analysis of constructed student responses and critiques to multicultural literature that is continually changing in response to teacher observations. "Teacher research has the primary purpose of helping the teacher-researcher understand her students and improve her practice in specific, concrete ways" (Cashmere, 2004, p. 4). The data collected in this study serves to analyze the attempt to utilize multicultural literature, to develop culturally relevant pedagogy within the classroom, and to analyze the implementation of critical literacy techniques when studying these texts.

Procedure of Study

This study began with the analysis of my classroom library. Before I began collecting data, I went through the many books in my library and identified the number of books already in my classroom that were deemed "multicultural." I also examined these texts for authenticity or underlying racial stereotypes. I observed student interaction and analyzed their responses when we used these books as the whole group read alouds or if students checked these out of my library for independent reading. To understand my

students' prior knowledge of the topics that would be discussed in the books for this study, I first had them complete a knowledge rating tool that had the students rate their understanding of poverty, segregation, and cultural name identification. I allowed the students to talk while completing these in their small literacy groups and observed and documented their conversation. The study was explained to parents during Back to School Night, including the texts that would be used, the format for instruction, and the reasoning behind my study. This also allowed the parents to ask any questions about the study before signing the parental consent forms.

For this study, I chose three books, *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi, *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Pena, and *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson. These books were not a part of my classroom library, and I implemented reading these books to the students in small groups during our literacy center time as part of guided reading instruction. The student would respond to these texts by asking questions or developing critiques for the story while also making connections to the topics of these books. *The Name Jar* was chosen due to the plot of this story and the girl wanting to choose a more "American" name to fit in with the students in her class. Many of the students in my classroom have names that come from their home culture and differ from the "traditional" American names. This book was chosen to promote connections while reading to understand and critically analyze the text. *Last Stop on Market Street* is a book that deals with poverty, which is a topic that most of my students are unfamiliar with. This book was used in this study to expose my students to new topics and promote discussion and critiques around poverty and how it is displayed in the story. *The Other Side* is a story surrounding segregation, which my students have some background with,

but more with “feel good” curriculum and stories of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. The book was used to expose my students to a different viewpoint of segregation and spark conversations about the way white and African American people are represented in this text.

Week one began with reading *Last Stop on Market Street*. Before reading, we took a picture walk through the story and discussed predictions for the text and bus transportation in bigger cities. I also provided instruction on asking questions while reading. I modeled creating example questions to instruct this strategy by recording questions about the illustrations of the story and promoted students to also develop questions before reading to practice this skill. I then read the story to the students and had them record questions for the story as I read on a worksheet to discuss after reading. When I finished reading the text, I facilitated a conversation among the students regarding the plot of the story and where the boy and his grandmother were going to ensure the students understood the meaning of the story. Students then chose two questions from their recording sheet to discuss with their group. Again, I facilitated a conversation among the students as they asked their questions to the group and other students supplied their answers and opinions about the story. I intervened when necessary to ensure students were receiving factual answers to the text to deepen their understanding.

In week two, we read *The Name Jar* and the students developed connections to the text while reading the story. To begin this lesson, I instructed students on making connections and the different types of connections, including text to self, text to text, and text to world. I also posed a question regarding how students feel when people are unable

to correctly pronounce their name to promote connections to the story before reading. I then read the story to the students as I had them record their connections to the text on their student worksheet. These questions were discussed as a small group in literature circle format. Students shared their connections to the story as other students responded or added to their notes. Students were also encouraged to add to their connection sheet as they listened to other students' responses.

Week three combined the two strategies taught in the previous weeks to practice critical literacy skills while examining *The Other Side*. Both strategies, including questioning the text and developing connections to the story were discussed to ensure students understood how to properly use these instructional techniques. I then read the story to the students and paused several times while reading to have students record questions about the text or connections to the story. Again, the student notes were discussed after reading among the students as I observed. I also encouraged students to add to their note taking sheet as they listened and added to fellow students' responses.

The final week was an informal assessment of student learning and their growth from reading these different texts. The lesson began with a quick discussion of the three books used during this study and the topics discussed in these stories. After reviewing the books, the students completed the knowledge rating tool again as I observed their answers and conversations while answering. I also had students develop final questions after reading these three books and any other connections they are able to make. The student responses were discussed again in a small group to analyze the growth of the students and what they took from the stories. I gave students their original knowledge

rating tools from the beginning of the study and encouraged them to note the changes in their background knowledge and what caused these changes throughout the study.

Data Sources

Qualitative data shaping this research was collected from small groups of students in a diverse second grade classroom. The students' initial understandings of themes and cultures present in the selected texts were collected and analyzed to identify students' prior knowledge before the study. Throughout this study, a teacher journal was used to document responses and thoughts toward lessons and teacher notes were utilized to document conversation among students during lessons. Students were observed during their literacy center time, but connections to the texts or themes throughout other disciplines were also noted. Surveys before and after instruction allowed for an understanding of growth and knowledge of themes depicted in the texts. Students completed Graphic organizers to record their connections or questions for the stories. These organizers were also used to assist students when discussing the literature.

Data Analysis

The data that I collected for this study helped me analyze how students are comprehending the multicultural literature, applying it to today's world, and analyzing the text for the author's presentation, the story being told, and the representation of the main characters. According to Shaghoury and Power (2012), "Looking closely at our data can give us a reality check on what's really going on in terms of our students and their learning" (p. 136). To understand the learning that was occurring during this study, discussions and graphic organizers were analyzed using a coding system to outline engagement, connections, and ability to utilize critical literacy skills, including

questioning the text, while emerging ideas or thoughts were noted to observation notes to drive future analysis. These concepts were predetermined before coding results, but also allowed for emerging concepts based on the results of the data. Knowledge rating results were graphed to identify thoughts before and after the study to analyze trends, similarities, and differences among the data. To ensure the validity of the qualitative analysis, trust was built, the culture of the classroom was examined and understood, and the teacher drove the conversation to ensure it was relevant to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Trust was high among students and researchers, and the conversational skills of the students were well known before analyzing conversations. Triangulation, as Creswell and Miller (2000) describe, “is where researchers search for convergence among multiple sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). Discussion notes, graphic organizers, and knowledge surveys were studied to ensure the validity of emerging themes and to drive topics to identify when coding data.

Coding engagement, connections, and critical literacy skills students used allowed for specific concentration on how students applied critical literacy skills to multicultural literature. Any aspects of conversation not included in the coding was noted in observational notes to identify trends or how prior knowledge affected students’ understanding. Data was analyzed regularly to keep research fluid and adapt to emerging concepts noted during the meetings (Shaghoury & Power, 2012). Additional aspects were added to the coding sheet after analyzing data, to ensure new trends were accounted for and analyzed within the study.

Context

Community. Central School is located in a suburban area of Central New Jersey.

This public charter school admits students from three surrounding areas, including two suburban towns and one urban city who are chosen from a random lottery drawing (Table 1).

Table 1
Context of Population

Town	Population	Education	Median Household Income	Gender	Racial Breakdown
1	62,300	93% - High school degree or higher	\$91,072	51% Female 49% Male	36% Caucasian 46% African American 14% Hispanic 22% Asian
2	40,742	89% - High school degree or higher	\$83,205	52% Female 48% Male	36% Caucasian 18% African American 19% Hispanic 25% Asian
3	54,500	60% - High school degree or higher	\$40,428	51% Female 49% Male	23% Caucasian 13% African American 53% Hispanic 10% Asian

School. As of 2018, Central Charter School served 475 students from K-12. Of these 475 students, 85% are bused in from Town 1, Town 2, or Town 3. The average attendance rate is 96%, with only 4% experiencing chronic absenteeism. (NJDOE) According to the NJ School Report Card, 26% of Central’s students are considered economically disadvantaged and qualify for free or reduced lunch. The demographics of the school include 38% of students identified as Asian, 27% African American, 17% Hispanic, 13% White, and 3.4% identify with two or more races. Of these students, 78% speak English at home, 2.3% speak Gujarati, 2.1% speak Turkish, 2.1% speak Telugu, and 8% speak another language not listed. Central does not currently have any students who are homeless.

Central School provides many additional free and paid programs. Breakfast is offered to all students every morning, including free or reduced breakfast for certain students. Lunch also is served and reduced or free for qualifying students. After-care is offered after school for an additional fee until 6 pm. Eighth period (2:25-2:55) is considered the “activity period.” During this period, students participate in free clubs, including dance club, Lego club, and readers’ café. These clubs rotate throughout the grade level. The classroom teacher offers tutoring in small groups for at-risk students several days during the week. For the middle and high school students, the student chooses clubs and sports are also available, including basketball and volleyball.

Parental involvement is generally very high at Central. There are many different ways parents can stay involved in their child’s education and Central encourages parents to constantly stay in contact. Mass emails, newsletters, and the Genesis parent portal allow teachers and parents to communicate throughout the year. The elementary teachers

use Class Dojo, an app that allows parents and teachers to communicate using their computers or smartphones. The teachers also use Genesis to input grades. This program also allows parents to view grades, make dismissal changes, or leave notes for administrators.

As of 2018, Central school employs 47 teachers and 4 administrators. According to the NJDOE, these teachers had an average experience of 4.6 years in public school. The teachers also have a variety of education levels including 55% have a bachelor's degree, 40% have a master's, and 4% have a PhD. The teachers have a 97% rate of attendance and there is a 10:1 ratio with students. Professional development provided by the school is done during "summer institute," or two weeks before school begins. During this institute, new teachers receive training in balanced literacy by the district's literacy advisor. Professional development is offered 3-4 times during the school year. Administrators will alert teachers of professional development opportunities that will be paid for, but it is a volunteer basis. Money is allotted in the current budget for teachers who wish to continue their education or seek out other professional development opportunities.

According to the 2017-2018 NJ School Report Card, Central's student body is composed of 7% students with disabilities. All of these students are in mainstream classrooms and receive accommodations. Central does not currently have any full day, self-contained classrooms. School wide, 83% of students met or exceeded expectations on the PARCC Assessment in English Language Arts/Literacy. Of these students, 69% were economically disadvantaged and 31% had a disability. For the math portion of

PARCC, school wide 68% of students met or exceeded expectations. For passing students, 37% were economically disadvantaged and 10% had a disability. (NJDOE)

Classroom. My second-grade classroom this year includes 19 students, and one student who pushes in during math and math centers. Of those 19 students, 10 are female and 9 are male. The racial background of my classroom includes 12 Asian students, 5 black or African American, one Hispanic, and one white or Caucasian. I currently have one student with an IEP for learning disabilities, and another student currently going through the testing process. The student who pushes in during math also has an IEP for Autism and ADHD. Two of my students receive instruction through the ELL program, one primarily raised speaking Spanish and the other speaking Turkish. Two of my students also attend a pull-out speech program twice a week for about 45 minutes. I do have an in-class support teacher with me for a majority of the day to assist with small groups during instruction.

Central's elementary school follows a balanced literacy approach which includes reader's and writer's workshop, word study, and integrated literacy into other content areas. The math program is Everyday Math and requires students to not only complete a mathematical procedure, but also explain and discuss their learning. Guided Reading is offered during silent reading or literacy centers and teachers are provided with a Scholastic Guided Reading Library. These texts are also used to evaluate students' reading levels using Scholastic's Running Record system. Teachers are given a basic classroom library and students also access digital literacies and texts using tablets and Chrome books. To extend literacy education, teachers and students have access to Reading A-Z and I-Ready on tablets and Chrome books.

The students in my class exhibit a caring and friendly classroom environment and there are rare cases of students not getting along or having disagreements. The students have small groups of friends that they primarily stick with during class, but also have little difficulty when partnered or grouped with other students outside of their “clique.” The class does get to play with the other second grade students during recess and enjoy mixing with the other classes. During instruction, the students are regularly grouped in homogenous and heterogeneous grouping and typically work well together during group work. I use “student leaders” during various times in our day, including centers and independent work and the students enjoy helping others in the classroom.

In the next chapter, the thoughts and ideas present with students, before, during, and after reading the multicultural literature while using critical literacy strategies are defined and examined to identify themes and trends present among the students. Understandings and critiques of social or cultural aspects or plot points in the text are studied and response to literature is analyzed to understand the effects of using multicultural literature in the elementary classroom.

Chapter IV

Findings

Introduction

The data collected throughout this study assisted in my understanding of what happens when a critical literacy approach is used to analyze multicultural literature with second grade students during literature circles. Throughout this study, I used a variety of data collection tools, including initial knowledge rating surveys, graphic organizers for students to record connections or questions for the text, audio recordings of literature circle discussions, and teacher-research notes. When analyzing these tools, several themes were apparent throughout this study including the importance of background knowledge for high engagement and text analyzation, how discussion strengthened the students' critical comprehension of the text, the prior knowledge students had and how that affected their understanding and critiques, and literature circles helped improve critical literacy skills.

Initial Knowledge Rating Survey

To begin this study, students completed a knowledge rating tool to assess their prior knowledge of the topics that will be covered and discussed throughout the study. Before completing the survey, I predicted students would have the most background knowledge and strongest response to cultural names and difficulty in pronunciation. I made this prediction due to the diversity within our class, including eleven of my nineteen students being first-generation Americans and thirteen of my students having names representative of their culture. I also predicted that students would have some background knowledge of segregation and civil rights issues as I know this is a topic my

school discusses throughout all grades during Black History Month and around Martin Luther King Jr. 's birthday.

During our first meeting, I had students complete the knowledge rating tool. Not only did I observe and note student answers and responses to the survey, but I also noted any side conversations and connections students made while completing this tool. Below are the total and type of responses for each question. Eleven students in total completed the survey (Table 2).

Table 2

Initial Knowledge Rating Tool Results

Statement	Not at all	A little bit	I know but can't explain	I know and can explain
I know what <i>segregation</i> means.	3	2	4	2
I know about civil rights and people not having the same rights.	2	4	4	1
I know that people were treated differently because of their skin color.	1		5	5
I know families have different amounts of money.		3	6	2
I know some people cannot afford certain things.		1	5	5
I know that money affects how and where people live.	3	4	3	1
I know some people do not feel confident about their names.		2	2	7
I know some people have names from the country their family came from.	1	2	1	7
I know how someone's name may affect how they are treated.		2	4	5

When analyzing the responses from the knowledge rating tool, some of my predictions were confirmed, while others did not. As predicted, there was a high response for having a great deal of knowledge regarding confidence with names and cultural implications on names. When students were completing this portion of the survey, several shared personal connections with these statements, including not feeling confident with their name or the difficulty others have had when pronouncing their name:

Aaira: I remember that before kindergarten graduation, Ms. S couldn't pronounce my last name and kept asking me how to say it so she wouldn't say it wrong."

Vinay: So many people say my name different ways, I don't really care anymore how someone says it."

Akshaj: Most people can't say my name right which is kind of annoying. wish that people would say my name right the first time."

The students also had many connections to share regarding how their culture affected the name they were given and what their name means according to their culture.

Aaira: I am named after my grandma. She has a name kind of like mine, you just say it differently in my language.

Akshaj: My name means king in my parents' language!

Demoy: The name my dad gave me is Jamaican and almost the same as my uncle's!

The students seemed very proud that their name matched the country their family came from and were able to develop connections to other students' cultures with understanding

that many cultures have meaning behind their names and their name was chosen because of that meaning.

Although I predicted that students who have some background knowledge in segregation, many students selected “Not at all” for knowing what segregation meant. The majority of students also selected “A little bit” for understanding civil rights, but did have a stronger response for knowing that skin color affects how others are treated. When analyzing my observation notes for that discussion, I did note that I was unsure if students understood the terms “segregation” and “civil rights” and if this affected their answers. I also wondered if students misunderstood the statement about people “not affording certain things” as while answering this question, students shared times in their lives that parents did not buy them certain things because “they didn’t need it,” not because they did not have enough money. Other questions about money and poverty elicited data that showed no trend or majority in answers. Little connections or discussion occurred when responding to those statements.

When analyzing the data from the initial knowledge rating tool, I was able to obtain a better understanding of the schema the students would be bringing to our meetings and how it may affect their understanding of the literature. Diverse cultures and cultural identifiers, including names, were areas students had the most background knowledge. Students showed some understanding of segregation, but had little to no understanding of poverty and how money affects daily life. These themes matched well with the demographic of my classroom and shaped the way I approached the texts used in this study.

Schema

When analyzing the data from the initial knowledge rating tool, most students demonstrated the most background knowledge in cultural diversity and the role culture can play in names. This large amount of background knowledge affects how much students were engaged when reading the text. When we read the text, *The Name Jar*, I decided to use a graphic organizer that required students to record connections that they developed to the text. Students furiously scribbled down connections and questions for the text while reading and I observed all students recording connections on their organizer. The level of engagement was high throughout this lesson, due to the background knowledge and personal connections the students had to the main character in the story, including moving to the United States, and others not being able to pronounce their names. When first introducing the text, the students discussed their initial connections, including reading this book before, or reading a book very similar to it:

Demoy: I read this book in first grade! It is about a girl with a hard to say name.

Vinay: Yeah, she has a name that comes from China I think. It's hard for people to say so she tries to change her name to an American one.

Rhea: That's like my friend who uses a different name because her real name is too long.

Lamia: This kind of sounds like the story, *My Name is Yoon*.

It was evident the importance of background knowledge when critically analyzing multicultural literature when studying the data from *The Last Stop on Market Street* and *The Other Side* as well. The statements regarding segregation and civil rights produced

the second highest amount of schema when analyzing the results from the initial knowledge rating tool. Although students were unsure of the terms “segregation” and “civil rights,” they were able to confidently discuss the themes present in *The Other Side*. The background knowledge students had produced positive results for the conversation surrounding this text, including connecting the time period and issues in the text to prior knowledge from lessons on segregation in social studies and other books on this topic. Again, when reading each page, I stopped to discuss any connections or questions students developed for the story, and at least one student was able to share each time, which stemmed from conversations about the characters in the text or the themes present in the story. When reading *The Other Side*, the students realized that the time period was similar to the time period of Martin Luther King Jr. and made several connections within the text and their prior knowledge:

Vinay: I wonder if these people knew who Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks were.

Tamia: I bet they do, they’re mad like them.

Leanne: It’s weird that the other black kids do not want to play with the white person though, that’s not like Rosa Parks. She wanted everyone to get along.

Lamia: Yeah, that is weird, they seem like they do not want things to change.

Students’ background knowledge was again crucial in ensuring students had high engagement and critically analyzed the literature.

The topic students had the least amount of background knowledge was poverty and how money affects living, which was most evident in their responses to *Last Stop on Market Street*. Students had little or no knowledge of poverty and the importance of money for survival, which correlated with the demographics of the classroom. This, in turn, affected how well students understood the story or were able to develop critiques for the themes presented in the text. Many of the questions students asked about the story were about details that did not affect connections to diversity or equity, including the why did the illustrators make those pictures or what was Market Street? Several students could not understand why he did not just buy a car and no one had any idea what a soup kitchen was. I noticed that because students had little understanding of economical differences, their engagement was not as high and students did not spend much time discussing what was occurring in the story. I had to intervene much more during their literature circle discussions and ensure conversation stayed on topic, which showed that students were not comprehending this text as deeply as they did others.

When asking students to explain why the boy was riding the bus or visiting a soup kitchen, student responses were surprising with the lack of knowledge of economical differences.

Caleb: I think he's riding the bus because his family might not know how to drive or his grandma might be too old.

Tamia: I just don't understand why they don't buy a car, that's what the boy wants.

Leanne: Yeah, a car would be a lot better because you would have to share the ride with everyone else.

When asked what a soup kitchen was and why someone would need to visit one, below are responses:

Vinay: I think it's like a restaurant that serves soup.

Aaria: Maybe somewhere that has good for a lot of people.

Lamia: I think it's somewhere that has cheap food, like fast food.

Mira: Yeah, like a McDonalds or something.

Critical Discussions

The original goal of my study was to analyze the graphic organizers I created for students to record their connections and questions for the text. As I began to meet with my groups, I realized that more of the learning was occurring from the discussion that the organizers sparked, and not necessarily the organizers themselves. The conversations that followed completing these organizers and discussing the text in a small group setting proved to be most valuable when analyzing how students made meaning and critically analyzed the story. When I first analyzed the graphic organizers, I noticed that some students were able to record notes that included deep thinking and critical analysis of the text, while other students wrote quick questions that scratched the surface of the text or were not even able to finish their writing. For example, one student asked why the boy in *The Last Stop on Market Street* was upset that he did not have a car and why might their family not have one, while another student asked why the pictures were drawn so differently. Another example of difference in critiquing the text occurred when analyzing *The Name Jar*. A student with a higher reading level created a question about the text asking if the author was Korean also and if they experienced someone having difficulty pronouncing their name firsthand, while a student with a lower reading level asked why

they girl had a block in her pocket. Reading levels and writing ability played a large role in the effectiveness of the organizers. Although the organizers were not a useful tool to record data during this study, they proved to help guide conversation and discussion, which yielded more critical responses to multicultural literature.

Discussions based on the graphic organizers were effective ways to ensure comprehension and promote critically analyzing the story. Students were able to listen to other students' ideas and thoughts and respond with their connections and critiques. Discussions allowed students to bounce ideas off one another and use their peer's responses to strengthen their comprehension. Many times, students would share their questions or connections to the text and this would spark other students' responses which helped promote critically analyzing the story.

Caleb: I was wondering why the black people were mean to the white girl when she asked to play?

Tamia: I think it's because they are never nice to the black people so why should she be nice to them?

Aaira: Yeah, I think the black people might be scared of the white people so maybe that's why they are mean so they don't get hurt or something.

Vinay: It's just weird because I don't think Clover wants to be mean, but she's not sure what she's going to do.

The importance of discussion during literature circles proved to be the most influential way students comprehended and analyzed the stories. Students challenged or questioned each other to deeply comprehend the themes in the stories.

Connections with Characters

Discussions not only assisted in comprehension, but helped students connect with each other and discover similarities among cultures. When analyzing the discussions between students, I noticed that many times students developed connections to the main characters. Akshaj, a boy of Indian descent, connected deeply with the frustration of the main character in *The Name Jar*. He spoke about how “no one can ever say his name” and how “I was scared moving to America and leaving my grandparents.” I noticed that his connections encouraged his engagement and critical thinking when analyzing the story. The small group discussions helped students discover connections to the story they did not think of originally. After Askhaj shared his connection to Unhei, Aaira, a girl originally from Pakistan also shared that she was “so scared when I moved to America because I couldn’t understand anyone.” These literature circle discussions also assured that students identified similarities among cultures and issues individuals face. Regardless of culture or background, students would agree or share similarities constantly during discussions and always build on each other’s responses. After reading about Unhei in *The Name Jar* visiting a Korean store, the students connected among visiting cultural supermarkets, regardless of their culture:

- Akshaj: I sometimes go to this supermarket that has a lot of Indian foods and stuff that you can only get in India.
- Regina: Same! Our store is far away, but it has different fish and stuff.
- Aaira : Yup, my family goes to a special place to get halal food, especially for holidays and big days.”

The connections and identification of similarities proved to help strengthen their comprehension of the stories in this study. Students learned from their peers through discussion and were able to critically analyze the text. Students seemed surprised when sharing their connections that other students experienced similar experiences, regarding cultural food or celebrations, regardless of their family's background. Many times, a student would question a fellow student about their response to gain a deeper understanding of that child's background and to build a connection to themselves. After one of the students, Aaira, shared that her family has a special tradition of exchanging gifts for Eid, several students asked her questions and built a connection between her family's holiday, Eid, and the holidays they celebrated.

Vinay: Do they wrap the gifts or do you get money?

Aaira: Sometimes, I get both. Usually more money.

Vinay: Oh that's like me, I get money from my grandpa during Diwali.

Tamia: Yeah, and we get presents for Christmas.

Having a considerable amount of background knowledge before reading had positive effects for engagement and participation throughout the reading of *The Name Jar* and sparked rich discussion while reading the text. After reading each page, I would stop and allow students to share any connections they recorded to the text or any questions they had. Throughout reading, each time I stopped, several students had many things to share, including connecting to the main character in the story and her immigration to the United States and issues with others being able to say her name. The students' large amount of background knowledge for the topics in this text also had positive outcomes for critiques developed while reading this story. Tamia, a student of African American

descent, asked “Is the author Korean, because if not, how does she know how having a hard name to say feels?” This question sparked a discussion about how important it is that the author knows how the character actually feels in order for the story to feel “real.” The students also discussed how the author should be an immigrant as well in order to really share the feelings of moving to the United States from another country.

Lamia: I remember I read a book last year about moving to a new country and the author definitely never did that before because the book was too happy about moving and the character was not scared at all.

Aaira: I think this author moved to the US because she talks about how scared Unhei is, which is how I felt when I moved here too.

The Effects of Students’ Prior Knowledge and Beliefs

An aspect of the study that played a large role in the results and the ability for students to demonstrate critical literacy skills was the prior thoughts and beliefs students had regarding different cultures or socioeconomic backgrounds before the study. These thoughts and beliefs had some effect on each child’s ability to critically analyze text or connect with the characters in the story. Several times throughout the study, students had difficulty disconnecting from their prior ideas to view a text differently or understand the theme. Poverty and socioeconomic issues were topics students did not have much knowledge of before reading *The Last Stop on Market Street*. While reading the book, although I had students record their questions about the text on a graphic organizer, many of their questions focused on surface aspects of the text and did not analyze the theme or plot in the story. I used a group discussion to explain the meaning behind the text and

what a soup kitchen was. After asking students initially what a soup kitchen was, most students were unable to explain correctly what this was.

Regina: I think it is a place where you could buy soup.

Vinay: It is a place people go to buy different foods. They do not have much stuff though.

After explaining to students what exactly a soup kitchen was, many still were unable to grasp the concept. A few students thought these people just wanted free food, while others were able to connect the idea of a soup kitchen to the “place we donate around Thanksgiving.”

Students held on to prior beliefs when reading *The Other Side* by being unable to comprehend the story being written by someone not within the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988). In the beginning of the story, the white character asks to play with the African American girls and is told no. Several of my students did not understand why the girls said no and were surprised that the segregation was reversed. At the end of the text, I asked the students to explain which character was telling the story. About half of the students believed the white character was telling the story, which correlates with the typical multicultural literature students are exposed to.

Teacher Redirection

It was evident that teacher interjection was necessary during these literature circles to ensure the story was being understood correctly and if students need direction in their critical thinking. When students were unable to correctly define a soup kitchen and did not comprehend the idea of needing food, I posed questions such as, “Why would someone need to visit a soup kitchen?” and “What may happen in someone’s life to cause

them to need help like a soup kitchen?” My goal was to help students think more deeply about the characters in the text and connect these characters to our society. Some students were able to understand the topic more clearly with the use of clarifying questions.

Lamia: I think that sometimes people do not have enough money to eat and need to get something no matter what it is.

Akshaj: Sometimes you might lose your job or something and you need to get food so you can survive.

Teacher intervention was also used to stimulate students’ thinking and encourage them to think critically about the text. When reading *The Other Side*, I would guide student discussion by asking questions that challenged their prior knowledge of how stories are usually told. I asked students to explain why the story was different being told from the African American perspective and how the white character may tell the story from her perspective? Questions like that assisted in students thinking about how the author told the story and why the choice in characters was so important.

Rhea: I think that when you tell it from Clover’s way, you get to hear a side of the story that is different.

Leanne: Yeah, if you didn’t hear her story, you probably wouldn’t know how she felt during the story or if she wanted to play with the other girl.

Demoy: I think that if you told it from Annie’s view then you might hear about how she wants to play with the kids on the other side of the fence but they won’t play. That would tell you her feelings.

Challenging students' prior thoughts and beliefs helped change some students' thinking and encouraged them to practice critical literacy skills with multicultural literature.

Taking Risks in Small Groups

Many of my students have just begun using critical literacy skills when analyzing a text. Literature circles provide a stable environment for students developing and using these skills to deepen their understanding of the text and society. The small group was beneficial to all of my students throughout the study. Everyone was engaged and participated during the lessons. The small group was less intimidating for several of my students, and students who tended to not participate as much in the whole group setting had no difficulty sharing their thoughts and ideas during the discussions. The confidence that students had also was evident in their risk taking and their willingness to participate in the discussion or answer the question, regardless of if they were sure they had the right answer. Students seemed more willing to be incorrect and learn from other students when working in the literature circles. To identify the difference between engagement and participation, I tallied the amount of times the students participated in whole group class instruction, verses meeting in small groups. During the whole group, these students raised their hands or participated in instruction 67% of the time and more reserved students like Mira and Akshaj only attempted to participate 13% of the time. While in literature circles, all students participated 100% of the time. More accountability and having to participate in discussions promoted student engagement, and the reserved students contributed 85% during discussions.

The small group aspect of literature circles also had positive effects for the discussions that took place during our meetings. Students' confidence in sharing their

ideas ensured that the conversation was constantly going and I would sometimes need to end the discussion to continue reading or discuss another idea. Students used the literature circle setting to build off one another's responses and used other students' answers to change or modify their own. Many times, one student would share a connection or question that would spark another child's similar thinking and their shared idea would deepen the complexity of their understanding. When analyzing student responses and conversations, at least one student would build on a student's response or question, and 78% of the time, more than one student would add to another student's response. When analyzing the students' addition to initial conversation, 75% of the responses to other students' ideas were similar thoughts, feelings, and connections, 18% were questions for the student, and 7% were ideas that disagreed with the initial student response. When students shared similar responses, many of these responses were connections to themselves or their schema. When discussing *The Last Stop on Market Street*,

Caleb: I don't think that they have a car because they might not have a lot of money. I have seen movies and stuff where people who need money walk or take the bus.

Vinay: Yeah, I have seen movies like that too.

Tamia: I've read other books about people with no money and they take the bus a lot, or the train.

Students also questioned one another during the discussions, sometimes to clarify their response, or other times to gain more information. When reading *The Name Jar*, students had several questions for other responses when meeting.

- Tamia: Why do you have to go to a special store for food, why can't you just buy it from the regular store?
- Vinay: I know the Indian store has a lot of stuff in my mom's language so it's easier to read and find I think.
- Leanne: Do they have different types of food? What about snacks?
- Akshaj; Yeah, they have normal stuff from India and like special Indian stuff like fruits and stuff.

The discussions students had in the literature circles allowed them to learn from each other and understand diverse viewpoints. The students in my study came from a variety of cultures, and their schema helped other students in the group understand the literature differently or question the text in another way.

Literature circles were also a beneficial model for critical literacy skills in second grade because it allowed me to monitor the discussion and pose questions to guide conversation, if needed. As it was the first time for some of these students to tackle multicultural literature in a critical way, the ability to observe these small group discussions allowed me to assess how students were comprehending the text, what thoughts allowed them to come to that conclusion, and how other students' thoughts affected their thinking. The small group setting gave me the ability to guide the discussions and ask questions to trigger critical thinking to help strengthen their understanding and model how to use critical literacy skills. Literature circles gave me just enough control to ensure I was instructing students on how to critically analyze a text, but also allow their thinking to instruct each other.

Summary of Data Analysis

The results of this study correlate with my initial ideas that reading multicultural literature and discussion promotes cultural awareness and cultural competence among second grade students. Students not only gained a deeper understanding of our society and cultures within it, but connected themselves to characters in the texts based on similarities, regardless of cultural or socioeconomic background. Topics students had the most prior knowledge of, including discrimination and cultural identity, produced the most conversation and critical analyzation without teacher prompting. Unfamiliar topics, such as poverty and different living environments required more teacher probing and guidance to ensure students analyzed the story completely. Discussions were the best platform to ensure students not only understood the plot and themes, but broke down and reconstructed ideas presented in the story. Prior beliefs and thoughts affected how students approached text and what they assumed when first reading the story. Discussions in literature circles helped change initial beliefs and assisted in developing a deeper understanding for 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

Summary

The study of what happens when second grade students use a critical literacy approach to analyze multicultural literature during literature circles proved to identify several recurring themes within this classroom. Students' background knowledge and schema played a major role in how they comprehended the literature and their ability to critically analyze the text. Students showed some difficulty with releasing prior thoughts of topics they were unfamiliar with, and these thoughts sometimes affected their understanding of the literature. Group discussions and literature circles were an effective way to ensure engagement and promote students to take risks and critique the text completely. Although teacher discretion was necessary at some points to lead discussion, much of study showed that students-led instruction pushed all students to participate and critically analyze the text.

The results of this post-assessment showed growth with some topics, while others lacked change. After analyzing the results, I noticed more understanding in the areas of segregation and civil rights. Six out of the eleven students surveyed answered "I know but can't explain" and "I know and can explain" for the statements about civil rights and segregation compared to the three in the pre-assessment. Students also showed a deeper understanding of money affecting where and how someone lives with eight students choosing "I know but can't explain" and "I know and can explain" compared to four originally.

Although there was a progression of understanding in some areas, other topics remained the same as the pre-assessment. Culture representation and diverse name knowledge was just as high as it was on the original survey. Even though students demonstrated more understanding for how money can affect where and how someone lives, students still had little or no understanding of what it meant to be unable to afford certain things.

The Name Jar and *The Other Side* were favorites among the students, and the background knowledge students had of these topics helped promote more engagement while reading and a deeper analysis of the text. *The Name Jar* was a book that many of my students could connect with due to their diversity and differences among cultures. Students made many connections to this story, which aided in their high understanding of the theme. During this study, students were also able to make text to world connections, specifically with *The Other Side*. Many of the students expressed some prior knowledge of segregation and civil rights, and the students were able to connect with the character and think critically about the story presented. Additionally, the difference in narrative by presenting it from the African American character's point of view engaged students in thinking critically about the change in story depending on the narrator.

Furthermore, these books and critical literacy skills helped strengthen critical thinking and analyzation cross-curricular in the classroom. When students selected independent reading books throughout the study, students searched for more diverse texts and even requested books about segregation or cultures. Students were able to identify similarities in other texts to the characters from the books in this study. I also noticed that students were able to connect topics being discussed in social studies, heritage and

immigration, to themes present in *The Name Jar*. Questioning text also increased during this study. I created a place for students to hand-in questions about their independent reading books, and I noticed students critically analyzing and questioning the story, characters, and author.

Conclusions

The results of my study indicate that exposure to societal and cultural issues at a young age were beneficial for students in increasing their social awareness and cultural competence. According to Robinson (2013), “Young people need to experience literature that represents a variety of human experiences and emotions” (p. 43). Exposing younger students to diverse and multicultural literature allowed for students to use a familiar tool in picture books to learn about and critically analyze social and multicultural topics. Read alouds during guided reading allowed students to interact while listening to text that challenged norms. “Interactive reading of multicultural literature allows students to articulate and challenge their understandings of social phenomenon” (Robinson, 2013, p. 48). The interaction that occurred before, during, and after the read alouds provided a familiar structure for beginning to critically analyze multicultural literature. Students’ previous understanding of using their schema to develop connections while reading allowed for a deeper comprehension of the themes in the literature and connections to characters and authors.

Additionally, I noticed an increase in cultural and social awareness among students during this study. As Norton stated (1990), “Through carefully selected and shared literature, students learn to understand and to appreciate a literary heritage that comes from many diverse backgrounds” (p. 28). During this study, I noticed that students

used their cultural similarities to connect with the character or theme of the story and develop a deeper perception of the literature. Students became more inquisitive of other cultures and wanted to genuinely expand their knowledge to gain more understanding of diverse cultures. Exposing students to diversity and challenged social norms welcomed the beginning of students to challenge and push for change. Not only did I notice students questioning the text, but their original background knowledge. Critical literacy approaches allow for the beginning of teaching students to not only question the text, but their beliefs as well and how it affects their understanding (Robinson, 2013).

Literature circles provided an excellent starting point for students to begin practicing and utilizing critical literacy circles when examining multicultural literature. Literature circles promote more student-centered instruction, where students facilitate the conversation, rather than typical teacher-led lessons (McCall, 2010). I observed that students felt more comfortable in the small group setting and were more engaged and willing to share their thoughts and responses to the literature. By sharing experiences, prior knowledge, or understandings, students utilized interaction to learn and build schema and critically analyze the texts. According to Wiesendanger and Tarpley (2010), “the peer interaction helps children expand their knowledge base and develop their thinking, which are important prerequisites for understanding the text more deeply” (p. 111). The literature circles used in this study provided an adequate starting point for young students to begin experimenting with critical literacy skills.

Overall, this study was very informative in understanding how to include multicultural literature into the reading curriculum. Much of my findings correlated with other research on introducing culturally relevant pedagogy (Billings, 1995) into the

elementary classroom. Students utilized multicultural text to advance their academic achievement and learn to become more critical readers. The students' cultural competence grew, connecting similarities between themselves and the text and "expanding their knowledge to understand broader and cultural ways and systems of knowing" (Billings, 1995, p. 71). The connections students made helped strengthen their understanding and launched conversation to critically analyze the literature. Multicultural literature analyzed under a critical literacy lens promoted "students who can both understand and critique social order" (Paris, 2012, p. 94). The social issues in these texts assisted in students gaining a deeper understanding of social order and promoted critique and analyzation for change.

Limitations

Time was the largest limitation for this study. As it was an additional aspect, separate from the mandated curriculum, the study had to be completed during the guided reading time of the day. This meant that I only met with the students once a week for about twenty-five minutes each time. Several times, guided reading was cut from our day due to an extracurricular activity or change to the schedule. This affected how long I would be able to meet with the students during some weeks. It is possible that more time spent with each book would have yielded more critical analysis of the literature. As it was not part of the school curriculum, time was unable to be devoted to increasing schema before reading or extension lessons after reading. If more time was made available, more cross-curricular connections could have been developed to deepen the comprehension of multicultural literature.

Moreover, if multicultural literature was made a part of the school curriculum, all students would have been able to benefit from the lessons with the literature used during the study. Since the study had to be completed during guided reading, I only completed the lessons with my students reading above grade-level. This was due to having to work directly with students who need more assistance in decoding and word recognition during the guided reading block. Adding these texts to the curriculum would give all students the opportunity to critically analyze multicultural literature.

Due to lack of time, not all areas of critical literacy were explored or practiced to their full potential. Students worked with questioning the text and developing connections to the story and characters. Although they practiced with these skills, further critical analysis of the text including analyzing the author or the sources, and interdisciplinary connections would help solidify critical literacy skills. More practice with these skills would develop them more completely and allow for expanding students' schema and thoughts and beliefs regarding diverse literature. Allowing for more time and working multicultural literature into the reading curriculum would provide more opportunities to practice critical literacy strategies when reading multicultural literature.

Furthermore, time would allow for before and after reading activities to debunk preconceived beliefs and change students' outlook of society. Future completion of this study with more time would allow for more student interaction to alter initial thoughts and beliefs and continue to build more cultural competence among the students. Further research in how working with multicultural literature using critical literacy skills would give a better understanding of how students' prior understanding affects their comprehension. Also, future research in how more time with diverse text can affect and

change these thoughts may yield a deeper understanding of how multicultural text can be used in the classroom.

Implications

Implications for the Field

The analysis of my results from this study proved to identify areas that could be researched further to continue to develop this field. Time is the biggest concern and area that could have been developed further to yield more concrete results. If this study was completed again, I recommend weaving it into the established reading curriculum and continuing using multicultural literature throughout the entire year. More time with multicultural text would continue to build students' social awareness and cultural competence. Having more opportunities to utilize critical literacy skills with multicultural literature would allow students to develop deeper comprehension and critiques of the text and its sources.

Multicultural literature provides students with an opportunity to learn about different backgrounds or view themselves in literature and gain a deeper appreciation with our world. Students gain "cultural competence" (Billings, 1995) and open their understanding of the world around them. The use of picture books and read alouds presents cultural and social topics in a familiar format students utilize in their school day to concentrate more of their learning on the literature itself. Fictional characters and plot that includes factual evidence that supports the cultural or social topic of the book gives students an opportunity to analyze and critique cultural and social order within literature.

Exposing students to multicultural literature at an early age and teaching them to approach it using critical literacy strategies provides a generation of more culturally

competent and socially aware individuals. Literature circles allow for small group, student-centered instruction, where learning takes place among peers and critical analysis occurs through interaction. Students feel comfortable taking risks in small groups and have the ability to learn from student-led instruction. Our instruction must alter to ensure we are giving the best education to our diverse classrooms. Critical literacy using multicultural literature develops future individuals that are well versed in diversity and in the constant search for social good. This study shows that younger students have the ability to analyze and critique multicultural literature and comprehend the complex issues these texts presented. Elementary students have the capability of processing these topics and begin the transformation for a better future.

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