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## Good things: an original picture book

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**Integrative Master's Project: Independent Study**

***Good Things: An Original Picture Book***

Maryah Greene

Bank Street College of Education

2020

*Good Things*

**Maryah Greene**

**Abstract**

The research collected in this study aims to support students, teachers and parents on their journey of building a relationship with houseplants. Whether in a classroom, at home or in a work space, a relationship with a houseplant should be one that is intentional, personal and provides an opportunity for growth both physically and mentally. The following research aims to support this belief while also supporting students, teachers and parents through the creation of the original book material, *Good Things*.

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## **Rationale**

My love for plants isn't something that always existed. Thinking back to my childhood, I can not directly pinpoint one moment in which I discovered a love for planting seeds, watching things grow or being outside more than the average kid. I enjoyed being outside, imagining making mud pies with friends and coming back into the house more messy than when I left. As much as I wish I could remember a specific instance in which I fell in love with nature, I can not remember a time in which I developed a love for plants more than any other living thing.

Looking back, I do however remember exercising my gift of empathy at a much younger age than most of my peers. It was something my mother pointed out to me as I got older. From not being able to choose which parent I would ride home with from school with fear that the other parent would be lonely or “playing school” with the kids in my neighborhood to help them with their homework. Empathy plays a role in my work as a plant doctor, stylist and educator. Although the three feel like very separate entities, they are all very much what drive my desire to create an outlet and classroom culture that priorities mess, observing growth, and values process.

Teaching adults how to plant and keep their houseplants alive is a job that allows me to join someone on their journey of learning something new. This journey began for me when I moved to NYC in 2017 and began decorating my first apartment. I spent time and money curating a space that supported my newly sprouting love of caring for plants while also considering a reasonable budget. However, it was after a month that I found that my houseplants were either successfully thriving or dying a miserable death. I spent

endless hours trying to figure out why one plant was doing considerably better than one that was placed in the exact same corner and receiving the same amount of water. After disposing of an overwhelming majority of my dead plants, I made the decision to try again but be a bit more purposeful in my purchases. I pondered whether I might have purchased a “bad” plant, went to an inconsistent plant shop or if I simply didn't have a green thumb.

After making the official decision to start over and become more meaningful about my plant purchases, I found myself talking with local plant shop and nursery owners about different plants and the basic care and needs associated with each plant. Up until this point, the idea that different plants have various needs when it comes to amounts of water, lighting, and pruning was a foreign concept. I soon came to the realization that there was learning to be done if I was going to be successful at curing the space that I intended with the plants that I wanted. Overtime, it became clearer that I had gained an abundance of plant knowledge and that my newly purchased house plants were thriving as a result of my newly found interest and understanding in basic house plant care. As I became more familiar with New York City and began making friends, I was often asked to decorate and curate others' spaces while relying on my new repertoire of plant knowledge. It was in 2018 that I officially put a name, Greene Piece, to my business and began monetizing my passion for making plant care accessible and affordable to everyone.

I teach people about their house plants for the same reason that I knew I wanted to be a teacher. It's personal and it leaves a lasting impact on a life, regardless of how small or large.

I teach for the "AH-HA" moment that occurs when someone realizes they've been watering their plant too much or too little. I teach for the "lightbulb moment" that occurs when someone realizes that the death of their plants is not a result of lack of care but rather a lack of light in their space. I teach for the feeling of gratitude that I experience every time someone realizes that there's no such thing as a green thumb and instead, just knowledge about light and water mixed with a little bit of confidence. It is this same confidence that I hope to instill into children through this book.

The opportunities for an immersive and kinesthetic experience when planting a seed or potting a plant are undeniable. I believe that plant care goes a step further for students from all walks of life, but especially those who experience trauma and day to day economic hardships outside of the classroom. For the child who is in charge of taking care of their younger brothers and sisters, the child who moves from one apartment to the next and for the child who yearns for stability in their home: The act of watching a plant grow can serve as a stable, controlled and personal relationship.

Scholar, Judy Daniels(1992) explores the sizable numbers of homeless children attending elementary schools in The United States. As of 1998, the exact number of homeless people is still difficult to calculate accurately but estimates suggest that there are approximately 2.5 million people unable to secure housing in the United States and children comprise about one-fourth of the total homeless population in this country

(Daniels, 1992). For some children, school serves as a reprieve from some of the day to day difficulties associated with homelessness and the family dynamics associated with it. Daniels(1992) suggests that attending school can provide a sense of normalcy for at least 6 hours per day as their basic and most fundamental needs are being met such as attending school breakfast and lunch programs, developing the feeling that they are in a safe environment and interacting with peers. In knowing this, educators are presented with the opportunity to create a classroom space that not only supports learning but they are urged to take on the even heavier step of crafting a safe space that supports mental and emotional security for children that may not experience this in their day to day lives. I am not suggesting that repotting a houseplant will serve as a magical moment for a child that will make the stressors of poverty and homelessness disappear. However, I am suggesting that educators are faced with the opportunity to not only create a challenging and meaningful curriculum that fits the needs of children within a classroom, but they are also afforded the opportunity to lead activities that support mental health and the emotional needs of children in their class.

Hilda Taba's, *A Teacher's Handbook to Elementary Social Studies: An Inductive Approach*, examines the educational objectives behind meaningful and productive curriculum. She shares five main goals that serve as values and principles that educators can rely on when deciding on a meaningful curriculum to support the learners in their classrooms. Taba(1971) essentially finds that meaningful experiences, "help students understand the nature of the society in which they live by seeing something of the nature of its parts while also comprehending something of its patterns as a whole" (pg. 9).



Giving children access to starting a relationship with a houseplant through thoughtfully curated curriculum and supportive literacy will not only support student's understanding of nature and the processes associated with it but it will also enable them to start making connections to their outside world. Whether it is exercising patience as they watch their plant grow, begin perfecting a regularly scheduled routine for watering their plant or doing regular check-ins on the plants within a child's classroom, each of these experiences supports pattern making and will later serve children as they become members in the society in which they live.

Another two of Taba's(1971) suggestions for educator's values and principles in educational experiences suggest that they should "help students understand themselves and their fellows as completely as their individual capacities commit" and "help students become committed to improving the quality of the life in which they share in the society, to contribute eventually to the improvement of men everywhere..." (pg.9). As the demand for more intentional environmentally conscious practices increases, generations to come will be faced with the responsibility of taking on this challenge. As educators it should not only be one of our top priorities to support children's understanding of themselves and the role that they play in a larger society but also create an environment that is reflective of the same work they will one day be faced with. This starts with putting an emphasis on creating a physical space that supports asking questions, inquiry, and experiential learning. The responsibility of caring for houseplants and is just a starting point for ways in which educators can begin this project.

The ideas of normalcy, consistency and structure can all be found in the repetitive demands required to keep a plant alive. The relationships that my former students and clients have developed with their houseplants is often one that resembles a love for a pet or even a living person. It is through this book that I hope to give children access into starting a relationship with a houseplant. This relationship will act as a sense of peace and consistency, something that not all children have the luxury of experiencing in classrooms and/or at home.

Research has found that hands-on and creative activities within the classroom can serve as an outlet for children with kinesthetic learning needs. Whether it means potting a plant from one pot to the next, planting a school garden, or wiping down a plant's leaves. Maxine Greene (1984), an educator from the Teachers College at Columbia University highlights the importance of this idea. She shares that, "Many of us, looking back, can remember the feel of clay in our hands, the pleasure of painting yellow suns and green grass (or blue, or purple), the joy in pretending to be a witch or a lion or a king" (pg. 127). As progressive education moves towards more interactive and immersive experiences, it will always be important to rely on a reference point for which current educators experienced their most meaningful and influential moments in classroom spaces. Regardless of a child's specific kinesthetic learning needs, it is crucial for educators to understand that a sense of meaningful interaction must be attached to learning if it is to have a long lasting effect on a child. Greene(1984) goes on to mention that the main point of experiential learning and artistic expression are meant to "awaken persons to a sense of presentness, to a critical consciousness of what is ordinarily

obscured” (pg.132). Every child in the classroom comes from a different background, neighborhood, socio-economic class and experiences the same 24 hours in a very different way than another child. An activity such as repotting a plant is an opportunity to support groundedness and present-being that serves as an escape from any of the complexities or stressors that exist outside of the classroom.

Very often, educators rely on creating a dynamic curriculum rooted in reading through a list of literature and exposing children to various multimedia with hopes of promoting a space for organic exposure to a new topic. Greene(1984) pushes that “For teachers, the obligation is to teach persons how to notice what is to be noticed without imposing alien readings or interpretations” (pg.132). The goal for this children’s book is not to serve as another piece of literature that acts as a snapshot into what it’s like to work with plants or see them grow. Rather, it is an opportunity that *gives children access into starting a relationship with a houseplant.*”

More than just covering children’s everyday kinesthetic needs, plant care teaches children responsibility, patience, goal setting and relationship building. Classrooms are a space in which teachers have the opportunity to teach responsibility through a series of actions such as cleaning up messes, turn taking and meeting deadlines for academic work. Whether engaging in a hands-on repotting workshop or choosing to bring plants into the classroom create a more aesthetically supportive environment, children are given the opportunity to engage in opportunities of relationship building and responsibility for their space and the community living within it.

The survival of a plant depends on individual and or collective responsibility by a class to ensure that the plant receives water and light on a regulated schedule. Student's are not only held accountable for the growth of their plant, but they are also urged to communicate with others about ensuring that a plant's health is maintained. Relationship building is also a skill that coexists through plant care. My client's and student's relationship to their houseplants grow each time they fulfill one of it's needs or experience growth with their plant. Children are given the opportunity to name their plants, watch it as it grows, sheds, and goes dormant during winter months. All of these actions are representative of things that occur in human relationships and will serve as reinforcement for children of all ages.

Humans have an innate desire to care and be cared for. The relationship established with a plant is one that I've seen change lives for the better. Through learning it's needs, likes and dislikes, plant parents of all ages are given the opportunity to enter into a relationship that teaches patience, accountability and responsibility. My goal is to make easing into this relationship more accessible and attractive to those that may not have experienced the joy of plant parenthood. It is the same reason that I started my business, Greene Piece and saw an opportunity for everyday teaching in the lives of adults and children. The fear of the unknown is one of the many reasons that I've found clients hesitate towards taking on a relationship with more than one house plant. The first experience that they had was either a negative one or one that lacked support and proper guidance. Like any newly learned skill or new relationship, the hardest part is beginning.

The goal of this book is to acknowledge this idea and provide support and comfort to those who are considering taking that first step.

### **Child Development**

“To be eight is to be inventive and creative, full of energy, curiosity, and imagination, always in a hurry to try the next new thing-or to create the next new thing themselves” (Wood, 2017, p.85). The years leading up to third grade can be represented as individual stepping stones toward encouraging growth and confidence into thinking outside of the box and indulging in the results of trying something new. The topic of indoor growing and houseplants is one that enables children to engage in a curiosity-filled experience that is dependent upon everyday elements such as water, soil and sunlight. Not only are third graders moving toward a more independent method of learning and exploring, they are also moving toward learning in a collaborative setting and relying on their peers to make similar explorations.

The collaborative dynamic that exists within a third grade classroom is one that validates individual thought and ideas while also praising the ability to share one’s knowledge and ideas with the people around them and in their community. According to Chip Wood (2017), “Social studies and science projects feed eight-year olds’ growing awareness of the wider world” and not only provide them with new experiences but exploring and “moving around with classmates and clipboards” (p.85). The idea of a field trip is one that will always be held sacred within an elementary school classroom and any children’s book that has the ability to transport a student into another frame of mind or

push them try a hands on activity with basic essentials such as soil and water is one that will fulfill a third grader's craving for exploration.

Independent reading is another skill that increases in importance as children move into third grade. According to Taberski (2000) "Children learning to read are active agents, initiating and assuming responsibility for their learning" (p. 3). More than just settling for a "just-right" book, children are given the opportunity to engage in reading that interests them and answers their many questions and ponderings that may not be explored within a classroom's curriculum. Whether it's exploring non-fiction texts to reading picture books that serve as a window into another person's life, third graders are using literature as a means for making sense of their ideas and providing more context to the smaller random facts of knowledge that they might have about a particular topic. More specifically, when it comes to working with house plants and growing greenery within a space, eight and nine year old children who see the simplicity and deferred gratification in watching something grow may be inspired to take on a project that gives them an excuse to get messy and check-in on their experiment on a daily basis. From starting from seed, watching a new leaf unfurl or watching an everyday houseplant flower during the spring, plants have the ability to keep up with the third grader's high demand to see change and make sense of what they are observing.

Chip Wood (2017) also shares the responsibility that teacher's and grown-ups share in eight and nine year old's exploratory processes. He shares that, "Such surprises and change-ups represent the sort of adult sensitivity that matters so much to eights. They need parents' and teachers' appreciation of their exploratory excitement, patience and

gentle harnessing of their energy...” (Wood, 2017, p.86). Eight and nine year old’s craving for parent and teacher support is often masked by their increasing desire for independence and self-exploration. It is true that children in third grade are moving towards a more independent method of learning but it is a misjudgement to believe that parent and teacher involvement is not a crucial component of what drives their desire to explore and share their findings with the people closest to them. A children’s book that illustrates the close bond between family or people within a community while a child is engaged in an experiment such as watching a houseplant grow is a piece of literature that will serve as reminder for teachers and parents that they are welcomed in indulging in this creative experience with their children/students. According to Gunning (2010), “the teacher and the student create an experience story together” while engaging in learning strategies such as Writing Aloud or read-alouds (p. 479).

Children's books that serve as a mirror and a window to a third grader’s interest will always support child exploration. “When our students ask questions and search for answers, we know that they are monitoring comprehension and interacting with the text to construct meaning, which is exactly what we hope for in developing readers” (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000, p.82). As third graders develop into more independent readers, they will be challenged with the ability to not only find a book that supports their current level of reading, but also to find stories that meet the demands of their “high energy”, “moral sense and interest in fairness” and “surprises”.

## Literature for Children Review

The literature used for the creation of this book encompasses a range of children's books. From urban gardening to outdoor exploration, the inspiration for this project was pulled from the following author's ability to share stories of everyday experiences, near and far. Some stories will serve as windows into another world, culture or while others will serve as a reflective mirror highlighting the elements that make us who we are. The following literature review is divided into four main categories: Getting Started, Family Relationships, Re-Imagining Everyday and Patience & Perseverance.

### I. Getting Started

Gholz, S. (2019) *The boy who grew a forest*. Sleeping Bear Press.

The Boy who Grew a Forest follows the story of Jadav who takes on the responsibility of planting trees to regrow his home island after deforestation affects his home. The author creates a story that prioritizes responsibility and civic duty, regardless of how young Jadav is. My goal is to use this story to shape the idea of a call to action or responsibility after presenting the narrative of a story.

McQuinn, A. (2014). *Lola plants a garden*. Charlesbridge.

Lola Plants a Garden follows the story of a child named Lola who is inspired to create a garden after reading a poem about her favorite character Mary, who starts a garden. After Lola's mother reads the poem to her, Lola goes to the library to collect books on gardening, creates a plan and asks for her mother's help in choosing a space and creating the garden. The book's illustrations are painted



with a mixture of pastel colors that include scenes from Lola's home, the garden store and her garden. The illustrations also include close-ups of transitional scenes such as making a purchase, making a list & planting the first few seeds. This book's illustrations are used as a guide for relying on pictures as a method for moving the story along between scenes as opposed to explicitly writing out each scene. It is also a direct example for pages in which both pictures and words aren't always necessary for giving the reader context. While some pages rely on one image without any text, others include both which makes parts of the story repetitive.

## **II. Family Relationships**

Cherry, M. (2019) *Hair love*. Kokila Press.

*Hair Love* is one of the first books to accurately represent the black female experience of doing hair. The author does this through the relationship of a father and daughter as they endure the ongoing challenge of doing Zuri's hair. Zuri initially takes on the challenge herself as she begins experimenting with different natural hairstyles and even becomes enamored by the idea of adding heat to her hair, as most black girls eventually do. Matthew Cherry's ability to create a lived yet taboo experience through a series of pages while still making it appropriate for children of all ages serves as an example of how I hope to incorporate real life experiences into my children's book. The lived, black, female experience of going through a natural hair journey is something that starts at a young age, yet it isn't explored in too many children's books, especially with the role of a present black

father. I hope to use Cherry's work as an example of a relationship that can exist between a father and daughter while also incorporating ways to embody a commonly lived experience into a children's book.

Rockwell, A. (2018). *Hiking day*. Aladdin

*Hiking Day* is written in first-person narrative and follows the story of a young girl and her family getting ready to take on a hike. The story begins at home as she looks out her window and describes her excitement of climbing what "looks like a mountain" with her family. They pack their gear, shoes, and essentials and start out on the hike together coming across different types of wildlife and nature. The illustrations are a mixture of sketches combined with a more concentrated water-color technique. The trees, leaves and other foliage are a mixture of greens, oranges, and yellows throughout the story. This book serves as a great example for incorporating a family experience with nature. However, I'm hoping to create a closer connection between the characters through their experience with nature. Rather than simply describing the physical experience of taking in nature, my goal is to incorporate the emotional input and output of caring for green life with loved ones.

Woodson, J. (2013). *This is the rope: A story from the great migration*. Puffin Books.

*This is the Rope* follows generations of Woodson's family by incorporating a multi-use rope that exists throughout different points of each generation. The phrase, "This is the rope" is repeated throughout the book and used as a symbolic representation of the link between each generation. The painted illustrations

include pictures of Woodson's family and scenes from the different places that each generation migrated to. The text includes different features such as bold and italicized to emphasize words like "back home". This book is referenced as a representation of symbolism that can exist across a story to combine larger themes such as family and generational influence. The story also highlights the importance of tradition and relationships within families regardless of how far apart they are.

### **III. Re-Imagining Everyday**

Boss, S. (2018) *Up in the leaves*. Stirling Children's Books.

*Up in the Leaves* follows the adventure of Bob as he explores Central Park through the use of his imagination. Bob uses his telescope to rediscover many of the day to day things that he sees in the city but find a way to make a new discovery out of them. Although the plot of the story doesn't necessarily follow a deeper narrative, the author does a great job of using language as a descriptive element to make day to day city experiences more exciting and rediscoverable. The author's description of the "fluffy" trees in Central Park and the sparkles from buildings gives the city a new importance that Bob hasn't seen before. I'd ideally like to use this book to find a way to incorporate descriptive language into describing day to day scenes that city children might encounter as they venture into planting and growing.

Ghigna, C (2012). *Little seeds*. Capstone.

*Little Seeds* is a short story that follows the process of a child planting seeds to start a garden. The story introduces commonly used tools and vocabulary necessary for understanding outdoor gardening. The illustrations include scenes of children picking up their tools each time a new one is introduced in the text. The story includes short phrases and sentences with a very minimal plot. However, the illustrations are useful in exemplifying ways to introduce a scene with minimal text. The pictures are strong enough to support the story as a wordless book.

Hibbs, G. (2018) *Errol's garden*. Child's Play International Limited.

*Errol's Garden* is the story of an inner city child named Errol who looks to start a garden when she realizes she is limited by space. The story takes place in an urban area as she soon finds that the best place for her to start her garden is on the rooftop of her building. Once she begins planning the idea and gaining the interest of the people within her community, she soon finds that she had everything she needed to start her garden, even in an urban community. My aim for my children's book is to make it as relatable to children living in urban/inner city communities. Gardens are often seen as a luxury or a space that one has to travel far out to see. However, Hibbs finds a way to make the character discover the joy of creating something different while having the same intention. Because resources and people to build a garden are often limited in the city, I'm hoping to create a more realistic approach to getting the community involved when it comes to caring for the garden responsibilities.

Messner, K. (2015). *Up in the garden and down in the dirt*. Chronicle Books LLC.

This story explores the hidden world that exists beneath the ground that we live and plant on. Kate Messner zooms in on the lives of plants and animals that rely on what exists under the surface that we walk on. It follows the relationship between a child and their Nana as they explore the soil at the beginning of Spring. Illustrations include earthworms, roots, beetles & nutrients essential for the production of some of our most fundamental needs as living beings. The story also highlights the importance of the life cycle between seasonal changes and what this means for the living elements under the ground. This book is used as a reference for incorporating details about vital elements for houseplants such as soil, sunlight and water. Not only does this book make dirt, bugs and other outside elements approachable to the reader but it also incorporates human characteristics to each of the items found underground that we don't always get to see or watch grow.

Spiegelman, N (2020). *Lost in NYC*. TOON BOOKS

*Lost in NYC* follows Pablo's journey around the city after he becomes separated from his classmates on a school trip. After becoming unsure about how to find them again, he uses maps, landmarks and photos around the city to find his way. The photos are a combination of collage and real-life photography that organize the layout of the city. This book's use of collage and intentional way of organizing photos to accompany small amounts of text will be useful in the organization and progression of my story. Rather than creating a simple picture book or graphic novel, this book is useful as a sample of the page layout I am

looking to achieve. The story is also a great example of how an unexpected journey can lead you to learn so much more than one could have imagined.

#### **IV. Patience & Perseverance**

Cornwall, G. (2017) *Jabari jumps*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

*Jabari Jumps* is a picture book that follows the story of a child named Jabari who is optimistic about his first dive into the swimming pool. Jabari has a close relationship with his father who encourages and supports his journey of jumping off of the diving board, regardless of how often he may become discouraged. Jabari's and his father's relationship serves as an inspiring and encouraging narrative between a black male father and his son that doesn't always exist in children's literature. The author paints the picture of a supportive and present father without outlining or describing Jabari's father's qualities of fatherhood. Jabari's fears and hesitations are often met with his father's understanding and supportive nature, while also encouraging his son to believe in himself. My hope is to use this relationship to inform character development between my book's characters. The author's ability to show rather than tell the reader is ideally how I would like to set up the relationship between the father and son character in my story.

#### **The Original Material**

Synopsis: *Good Things* is the story of a young boy learning to care for his plants after the passing of his father. He experiences grief through his relationship with his father's plant

as he takes on the duty of caring for it alone. Along the way, he learns patience, failure, and compassion as he navigates the ins and outs of plant care.

**-Section I-**

**Page 1**



Text: We watered them on Sundays. Right before the game but after we came back from church.

**Page 2**

*[Image: Dad watering plants on the windowsill while son waters plants in the kitchen in the background.]*

Text: The one on the windowsill was his. The one in the kitchen was mine. But we always watered them together.

*Quote from Dad: "How are they looking over there? Any new ones comin' in?"*

**Page 3**

*[Image: Son watering plants in kitchen, with slight confusion on his face]*

*Quote from Son: "I don't know. They always take so long, it's hard to tell."*

**Page 4**

*[Image: Father walking over to join son.]*

*Text: But, he'd always remind me of the same thing. Every time.*

**Page 5**

*[Image: Father joins son watering plants in kitchen. Kid looking up at dad as dad looks at plant.]*

*Quote from Father: "Good things take time."*

**-Section II: After Dad Leaves-**

**Page 6**



*[Image: Child staring out window with his head and hands leaning on windowsill. Staring at family in suits and dresses. Funeral should be implied without explicit images].*

*Text: But one day, they both became mine. The one in the kitchen. The one on the windowsill.*

**Page 7**



*[Image: Son sitting on couch in front of windowsill with plants behind him. Son is looking at his siblings and family members doing other things as normal: Younger siblings playing on the rug, mother on the phone, grandma watching tv, older brother listening to music]*

Text: Grandma says he left them to me but I know it's because everyone else would forget about them.

### **Page 8**

*[Image: Plants on the windowsill glowing happily. Beyond the sill, leaves have fallen off of the trees outside, depicting the transition from Fall to Winter.]*

Text: They were just as he left them. Glowing in the windowsill, reaching for the sun. The smaller leaves resting on the bigger and the bigger ones showing off as they always do.

### **Page 9**

*[Image: Up close view of son's eyes fixated on a plant. Zoomed in on plant's stems and leaves]*

Text: I check on them every day. Check out their leaves, look for any new ones.

### **Page 10 (Broken up into 3 Images)**

*[Image A: Son watering plants. Different image on the TV since it isn't Sunday and football isn't on.]*

Text: I even give them some extra love before Sunday. Because I know they're missing him too.

*[Image B: Son watering plants again (wearing different clothing to depict different day of the week. Different image on the TV since it isn't Sunday.)]*

*[Image C: Son watering plants again (wearing different clothing to depict different day of the week). Different image on the TV since it isn't Sunday.]*

### **Page 11 (Broken up into 2 Images)**

*[Image A: Up close view of son's eyes fixated on a windowsill plant. Zoomed in on plant's stems and leaves]*

Text: I double and triple check. Just to make sure I'm not missing anything.

*[Image B: Son sitting on couch with watering can in hand, staring at plants from afar]*

### **Page 12**



*[Image: Son discovers a brown spot on leaf. Confusion and worried look on his face]*

Text: That's when I saw it. At first it was just on one leaf.

### **Page 13 (Broken up into 2 Images)**

*[Image: Son finds another brown spot on leaf]*

Text: But then it was on another.

*[Image: Son discovers more brown spots on almost every leaf. Confusion and disappointment on his face]*

Text: And another.

#### **Page 14**

*[Image: Son sitting on the front steps holding his dad's plant up to the sun.]*

Text: I moved it closer to the sun. To give it more love. It was still missing him.

#### **Page 15**

*[Image: Plant is returned to the windowsill. Son comes to check on the plant the next morning. It has gotten worse with crisping/yellowing leaves]*

Text: Soon, I began missing him too.

#### **Page 16 (Broken up into 3 Images)**

*[Image A: Next day is Sunday. Son sits watching the football game, and coloring.]*

Text: Dad was better at it. Besides, nothing ever grew. And this gave me more time to do other stuff.

*[Image B: Nana standing over son, observing him color. Plants are in the background on the windowsill]*

Quote from Nana: "Isn't today Sunday, your plants aren't going to water themselves?"

*[Image C: Son looking up at Nana resentfully while coloring]*

Quote from Son: "They're not mine. They're Dad's."

#### **Page 17**

*[Image: Nana and son looking at plants. Nana rests her hand on son's shoulder.]*

Quote from Nana: "I see."

Text: They looked over at the plants together.

**Page 18**

*[Image: Nana walks off while subtly dropping hint on her way out of the room]*

Quote from Nana: “Ya know, these days I have to remind myself: ‘good things take time.’”

**Page 19**

*[Image: Son looks away from plants with sadness and resentment].*

Text: But John didn't have time. “They’re too far gone” he thought.

**-Section III: Ending-**

**Page 20 (Broken into 3 Images)**

Text: John found other ways to be with his dad.

*[Image A: John & Nana cooking in the kitchen.*

Text: He helped Nana cook his favorite meals.

*[Image B: Nana sorts through clothes while John tries on Dad’s oversized shirt, tie & hat]*

Text: He helped her sort through his things. Some that were to be his one day.

*Image C: John on the front porch with Dad’s friends from the block. A few playing dominos, some playing cards, others chatting over music.*

Text: He spent time with some of the guys. His “uncles” are what dad called them.

**Page 21 (Broken into 2 images)**

*[Image A: Backlit image of John watching the game with the plant off in the distance on the windowsill. Plant isn't as brown as it was in previous images.]*

*Text: He even watched the Sunday night football game.*

*[Image B: Zoomed in image of plant on windowsill from previous image]*

Text: That's when he saw it.

## **Page 22**

*[Image: Close up image of John's face examining the plant. The dead leaves have fallen off into the soil and a new leaf is emerging out of the stalk].*

Text: It wasn't just a good thing.

## **Page 23**

*[Image: John walking by plant to check on it. Plant has new leaves and looks fuller]*

Text: It was the best thing that could have happened.

## **Page 24**

*[Image: Close up of plant flowering]*

Text: It just took a little bit of time.

## **Goals**

*Good Things* is the story of a young boy learning to care for his plants after the passing of his father. He experiences grief alongside his father's plant as he takes on the duty of caring for it alone. Along the way, he learns patience, failure, and compassion as he navigates the ins and outs of plant care.

The original goals that this book set out to meet are rooted in relationship building, fostering exploration, examining empathy, and curating opportunities for kinesthetic experience for children. *Good Things* introduces the relationship not only

between a father and son but takes a deeper dive into their shared bond through their weekly tradition of checking in with their houseplants. One of the primary goals of this text is to share the idea that children can in fact develop relationships through and with nature, such as a plant in a home or classroom. The research stated in the rationale section proposed that the classroom often serves as one of the only safe spaces for children who are either living in poverty. Relationship building is a key skill and necessary part of attending school, but children experiencing the stresses of poverty or inconsistencies at home are more likely to struggle with this skill. *Good Things* aims to not only illustrate the importance of John's relationship with his father but it also looks to transfer this relationship into his care for his father's plant after his passing.

Death is often a difficult topic that educators, parents and caregivers struggle to take on. Not only is it an abstract topic that means different things in different religions and spaces but it is also often written off as an inappropriate topic for discussion because of its complexities. This is what makes the topic so interesting and mysterious to children in elementary school. The passing of John's father is subtly referenced through the illustrations and abstract wording on multiple pages of the story. However, it is through his newly expanded relationship with his father's plant and Nana that John is not only able to find comfort after his father's passing but he is also able to experience the emotions that are often associated with grief such as sadness, anger, loneliness, resentment and more. Grief and death are different for every child and this story serves as one child's experience navigating these extremely difficult and complex concepts.

*Good Things* presents an opportunity for exploring patience and observing. As referenced in the Child Development section of this study, Chip Wood (2017) shares that children around the age of eight and nine become increasingly more interested in experimenting, observing, and figuring out the world around them. This can exist through physical experiments, trying new things and even social engagement with other children or adults. However, children will sometimes find that their expectations or desire for instant gratification will be stalled by practicality, a change of heart or life-changes that are unexpected or out of their control. In Gaia Cornwall's *Jabari Jumps*, the main character's excitement to try diving off of the diving board for the first time is met with hesitation as he begins to feel fear and uncertainty. His father aids him in realizing that sometimes the unknown can feel like a "surprise" and the author uses the father's character to serve as a reminder that changing your way of thinking can make all of the difference in the world. The relationship with a houseplant is a complex one but fairly similar to that point of thinking in that patience and positivity can make all the difference in the experience of caring for it. Care for a houseplant cannot be measured with a mathematical equation that includes the right measurements of care, water, light, soil and love. Everyone's experience will differ and the beauty of one's relationship with their plant comes from this unique and intentional experience that is rooted in patience.

### **Applications**

**Part I:** On April 26th, 2019, I had the opportunity to read *Good Things* to my boyfriend, Chris' nieces, Azaelia and Sabina. Azaelia is 8 years old and Sabina is 6 years old. Because both of them have been spending an overwhelming majority of their time

inside due to the social distancing enforcements of the pandemic, they were overcome with immediate joy and excitement when I asked them if they'd be interested in a virtual story-time. Both of the girls are read two at least once per day by their mom, dad or teacher via Zoom.

Before reading the book, I first introduced it as a "story that means alot to me which is why I wanted to share it with people who mean alot to me." I asked them if they would allow me to not only share the story with them but also leave room at the end to hear what they thought about it and answer any questions they might have. Because this was my first time reading a story over Zoom, I asked them for tips about how their teacher normally holds story time over Zoom. Azaelia shared with me that her teacher normally reads the book "like she normally does but because there's so many of us, sometimes we have to put on the mute button." I reassured her that that sounded like a really smart idea but since there were only three of us, I'd love to hear their reactions throughout the story. Lastly, I shared that this story requires a piece of "extra-imagination" because the story only has three pictures. Their faces lit up with smiles after I mentioned the phrase "extra-imagination" and the youngest, Sabina shared, "we can do that".

As I began reading the story, the girls sat quietly and seemed to be looking around the room as if to use their imagination as I set the scene in the first two pages. I decided to show them the picture after reading the page with hopes that they'd create their own imaginary scene of what was happening in the story. I was able to hold up the illustrations via Zoom to give them a close up of each water-colored image. I kept this



same trend as I read through the book and there were a few instances when the youngest, Sabina spoke out loud. She shared things like, “It’s the plant” when the book referenced an item on the windowsill. One point that stood out to me in particular was the transition from the first part of the book to the second part in which John’s father passes away. Because this is not explicitly stated in the book and passively implied in the illustration, Sabina leaned over to her older sister and whispered, “Did he die?” and her sister responded “Yes, Sabina”, in a condescending, older-sister tone.

By the time I got to Page 9, Sabina interjected and said “Daddy has a houseplant in his office but I don't know if he waters it or if mommy does. Sometimes Victor [their dog] will scratch on the dirt and get muddy everywhere after he runs away.” This part of the storytelling experience sent a sigh of relief over me as I realized that Sabina was carrying out an important skill in which all good books should make you do: making connections. I asked her if she ever helped her mommy with watering the houseplants and she said “only one time because I was at home because I was sick that day.”

As I kept reading and moved into the section about John trying to add more water and adjust the sunlight on his father’s houseplant, Azaelia spoke out, “He probably needs to talk to it. Some people talk to their plants so he probably needs to talk to it.” This made me realize that this reaction was rooted in her not only making a connection but also considering all of the elements that go into keeping a houseplant alive. Some often believe that house plants just need water and sunlight but it was clear to me that Azaelia saw plants as living things that craved human attention and socializing. I don't know if I was necessarily expecting this outright reaction from a child reading the book because I

considered talking to a plant to be a complex adult experience that was rooted in deep relationship building. Looking back this makes me want to add a section of the story in which John attempts to revive his houseplant by having a small conversation with it. This conversation could either be between him and the houseplant or between him and his father who is symbolically represented as the houseplant.

Immediately after ending the story, Sabina interjected, “What happened to the plant?” and her older sister looked at her and back over to me as if she wanted to provide an explanation but was unsure about it, herself. Because the end of the book will heavily rely on pictures, I was forced to vocally illustrate the scene for them and tell them that the plant flowered at the end of the story. Some of the most memorable comments that they shared at the end of the story included:

- “He was afraid that it was going to die so he kept saving it and saving it and saving it until it finally was saved.”
- “He should have stayed on the schedule that his dad did. Because they did it on Sundays so if he did it the same way every time, it probably would have been happy and grown a lot more.”
- “Why did his dad die? Was his dad old?”
- “What happened to his house plant at the beginning of the first part?”
- “Is this your book that you made?”... “because of the plant in it and you work with plants.”
- “It was a little sad at first because his dad died and the plant started dying but he saved the plant in the end even though he couldn't save his dad.”

Overall, I'm extremely happy with the way that my virtual reading went. I was hesitant that reading it virtually would prevent the story from holding weight but I think my close relationship with each of the girls made up for the lack of in-person engagement. Some of the things that seemed to work in the story were the ideas of consistency as Azaelia pointed out that John would have had better luck if he followed his dad's routine. She was also able to point out that he never gave up saving it although I wondered whether or not she connected with the part of the story in which John began subtly resenting the plant when he told his Nana the plant wasn't, his and it was his dad's instead. I realize that I want to develop with part of the story further to make it a bit stronger. I want to make the feelings of imperfection, frustration and uncertainty clearer and easier to empathize with, since children their age are more likely to experience these feelings when they are trying new things.

Reading this story virtually with limited illustrations reemphasized the importance of illustrations in this book. I realized how important the illustrations were to the ending and wish that I had provided at least one or two from the end of the book. However, I'm excited to think that the book might have an even better ending when it's accompanied with images. One of the other parts of the reading that stuck with me was the part of the book in which John's father dies. I wasn't sure if the youngest sibling would be able to grasp that part of the story but it comforted me to know that she felt safe enough to quietly whisper to her sister to ask if she had interpreted it correctly. More interestingly, I couldn't help but to notice how uncomfortable Azalea was when she condescendingly responded "Yes, Sabina" to her younger sister. Their big-little sister dynamic is often at

the forefront when they are interacting and playing together but I found this reaction rooted in discomfort on Azalea's end. It was incredibly similar to the sort of whisper that parents do when they have to subtly and secretly explain something to their child that might be uncomfortable or inappropriate for the rest of the room to hear. Looking back, I wonder if this is a positive or negative experience that the book demands from young readers and whether or not it would be perceived positively by parents.

### **Reflective Conclusion**

*Good Things* is a story that can be read in a classroom that values honesty, asking questions and the importance of having a safe space for dialogue. Because of the story's intimate and personal plot, it can be read by teachers in a full class as long as a teacher is confident that the conversations about death, loss, grief, and perseverance are appropriate within a classroom. Based upon the outcome of my virtual reading, it can definitely be confirmed that this book requires a level of maturity and ability to reference abstract themes that may not exist in all children's books. However, with guidance and communication from parents, teachers can ensure that children are given the appropriate scaffolds and support to read through stories that will reflect emotions that they will one day encounter in the future if they have not already. For instance, teachers can send the book home for preview with parents and gather information or suggestions about how to best approach the topic of loss if it comes up in conversation.

Because a lot of the plot is told through the pictures rather than the text, it is important to consider the higher level of thinking that goes into making inferences and making connections through unspoken events. To support students with this, introducing

wordless picture books may provide practice in interpreting movement through a story's plot without relying on text to do so.

Individually, this book is also for a student who is experiencing loss and finding it difficult to work through and name the emotions they may be feeling. Loss is an intimate experience that looks differently for everyone. However this book shares the experience of one child as he decides how to channel his grief into an emotionally significant physical activity. This book can be used as a source of inspiration for children who are looking for an outlet to talk through their feelings or connect with a living item such as a houseplant that can serve as an emotional support.

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