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# Critical Literacy and Read-Alouds for Social Justice Instruction in Primary Education

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CRITICAL LITERACY AND READ-ALOUDS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE INSTRUCTION IN

PRIMARY EDUCATION

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Literacy Education

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ABSTRACT

Paul, E. How can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read alouds to teach social justice to young learners? (2020)

Primary-aged children undergo extensive cognitive development. During these years, children's estimation of self-worth and value goes under significant development and by age eight, children express whether or not they like themselves. As advocacy for social justice such as the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements gain momentum, adults must determine how and when to have courageous conversations with children in which they support children's pride in their own identities, disrupt pre-prejudices, and develop their skills to critically evaluate the world around them for justice. This capstone analyzes current literature surrounding critical literacy, read-alouds, and social justice through picture books to help answer the research question: *How can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* The culminating project demonstrates how these elements can be used in a social studies curriculum for first grade learners. Final reflections upon major learnings, the literary analysis, and this project make evident the viability of critical literacy instruction via interactive read-alouds and social justice in picture books for primary aged children.

DEDICATIONS

To My Parents -

Thank you for supporting me throughout this journey. I could not have done it without your constant support and encouragement. I am grateful to you for allowing me to solely focus on my academics these past two years and encouraging me to follow my passions. Without you, this would not have been possible.

To My Students Past, Present, and Future -

You are my purpose and drive. I hope each of you feels celebrated, validated, and affirmed as you enter and exist within our classroom, and leave our classroom empowered. You motivate me to continue to learn, grow, and reflect upon myself as a human being and educator. Together, we can help affect the change we hope to see in the world!

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**CHAPTER ONE**

*There's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom. – Paulo Freire*

**Introduction**

Primary education plays a significant role in children's lives. Within the formative schooling years, children learn how to adapt to a formal school setting, determine their attitudes towards learning, and develop their identities as learners, readers, and individuals. As young learners enter their kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, teachers play a vital role in each child's schooling experience. Depending on the teachers these children encounter, students may or may not learn to critically engage with the world around them. A socially, culturally, linguistically, and developmentally responsive educator has the ability to empower children as well as develop critical and empathetic learners.

As such, societal norms, spread through textual information in the world today, offer up ideals for who kids can and cannot be, "who they should and should not be, as well as what they should and should not do or think" (Vasquez, 2017, p. 177). Multimedia, pop-culture, and school curriculums are just a few examples of mediums that implicitly inform children what is valued, important, and accepted in the society they live. Unless children are taught to critically evaluate the status quo, they may unknowingly buy into social norms, whether just or unjust, determined for them by the dominant narrative or perspective. In fact, it is of utmost importance to educate children in the primary years due to the cognitive growth that occurs between the ages of five and seven. The development of children's brains during this time affects their understanding of other people's perspectives as well as their understanding of self (Copple, 2013, p. 266). It is the role of education to empower and teach children, not marginalize and silence, as they develop their individual identities and values. As members of a global society with a future duty to

participate in civic life, children must be prepared to make informed decisions as they engage with the world around them (Vasquez, 2017, p. 177). As teachers navigate these important notions within their classrooms, they must reflect upon the inclusion of critical literacy and social justice issues in the mandated curriculum.

With these considerations in mind, teachers have a civic and ethical duty to provide students with the tools to critically evaluate their world and develop empathy skills. Through my personal and professional experiences in education, I came to the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?*

The research in this paper analyzes the methodology and instructional practices that are most effective in teaching social justice issues to primary-aged children. Through my review of literature, I aim to discover the critical literacy and read-aloud components necessary to effectively create a social studies curriculum that is built on the foundations of social justice.

**My Personal Experience**

As a child, my understanding of the social constructs of the world was shaped by what I learned and observed from my family, community, teachers, and mainstream pop-culture. My ideologies and beliefs were vastly in sync with my family and peers and were rarely questioned or challenged. My family consisted of my father, mother, and sister – all of whom are Native-English speakers, Christian, and white. For the most part, my suburban community and school population reflected this same personal identity. I cannot recall having a teacher of color until my senior year of high school or an interaction with someone outside my linguistic group until after college. One might say I lived in a homogenous, monotonous bubble. I was grossly unaware of

social issues affecting society outside of my bubble - and I was comfortable and complicit with the way things were.

Then, I went to college at a private, Catholic institution. For a couple of years, I was perfectly content – until I entered coursework for my education degree. It began with a required field experience in a Hmong charter school, where many students were refugees escaping persecution in their native country. Most of the students I worked with in that setting did not speak English, were a part of a lower socio-economic class than my own, and were likely experiencing some level of culture shock. I can recall my reaction when I learned some of these students were sent to Minnesota without their parents and some had never used a toothbrush. My experience with these children broadened my perspective of the world. I was shaken by the challenges and adversities that these first-grade students had already experienced in life, while I had been clueless about the experiences of others in my broader community. This experience sparked a change in me and caused considerable personal growth within my understanding of privilege. Thus began my personal journey of broadening my world lens and challenging my understanding of the society in which I live.

Following college, I sought experiences that would allow me to empathize and critically evaluate the social norms and constructs that would effectively make me a better educator. I realized that in order to do justice to my students' educations, I needed to become more culturally and socially competent. I was fortunate to have the resources to purchase or borrow books such as *The Hate U Give*, *Pachinko*, and *The Late Homecomer* – books that gave me a world view from the perspective of someone experiencing society differently than I.

Furthermore, I was extremely fortunate to have the financial means to begin traveling the world. In one of the most educational and memorable experiences of my life, I found myself as a

linguistic and racial minority in South Korea and Japan. At times I found myself struggling to communicate in airports and stores, receiving strange looks on subways, and on a couple of occasions, getting ignored due to what I perceived as my *American-ness*. In contrast, my travel companion and best friend, who happens to be Korean, felt empowered and confident. In these instances, I could not help but wonder: could this be what some of my students and families experience in Minnesota?  If so, how do I educate each of my students to contribute to a society in a matter that is inclusive, empathetic, and cognizant of experiences and perspectives other than their own?

All of these experiences have culminated in the realization that my formative education years, from kindergarten to high school, vastly underprepared me to live in a global society such as the one we live in today. If I have learned anything from my own experiences, it is that a singular perspective is not enough when preparing students to contribute to society once they become adults. Students must be exposed to experiences and perspectives outside their own, and be taught how to critically evaluate the world around them so that they have the tools necessary to empower themselves to challenge the status quo.

**My Professional Experience**

My inspiration for this capstone question is rooted deeply in my personal experiences as well as in the students that I have served and will serve in years to come. In my current professional setting, my students come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. They represent more than seven ethnicities, six languages, as well as various religions, exceptionalities, economic classes, and family make-ups. The vast majority of my students experience the world through a lens very different from the one in which I was raised. As I consider the unique needs and diverse backgrounds of each child I interact with, my graduate

coursework has taught me that I must first critically evaluate my own biases as well as the bias in the curriculum and content I teach in order to avoid the single-story. All students deserve a curriculum that represents their interests, reflects their identities, and encourages them to consider the experiences and perspectives of others, not just those of their teacher. Furthermore, students deserve learning opportunities that empower them to advocate for justice. When I consider my current student audience, I cannot fathom any child growing up in a society in which they feel unsafe due to the color of their skin, unheard because of the languages they speak or undervalued due to their gender identity. If anything, I have learned that I must advocate for younger generations, and I can do that by helping students develop the tools necessary to question the current state of our society in the hopes of making the world a more fair and just place.

Another factor in this capstone question is embedded in my district's adoption of AVID: Association via Individual Determination. My district has placed a strong emphasis on professional development within the implementation of AVID K-12 over the last four years. AVID places emphasis on equity, teacher effectiveness, leadership, and student learning (AVID, 2020). As a part of our training, I was introduced to critical literacy practices. Our district AVID coach guided us toward creating content and instruction that is responsive to social issues from a critical lens. These professional development sessions allowed me to discover how social justice could be presented to primary-aged learners while encouraging deeper levels of thinking and rigor. As a result, I began looking for ways to incorporate children's literature and content selections for my students that were framed upon social justice. This interest eventually became interwoven with my professional development that occurred as a result of my graduate programming and coursework.

A third inspiration for this research question stems from my experiences at Hamline University while taking a Critical Literacy course during the summer 2019 semester. During my coursework, I was challenged to confront and analyze the multiple perspectives of individuals in the context of a singular scenario – whether it be in the context of photographs, videos, articles, or literature. I was also given the daunting mission of challenging my white privilege as a result of the multimedia and texts provided as part of the curriculum. As a result, I began to more thoroughly reflect upon my implicit biases and their effects on my pedagogy. I found myself constantly wondering: whose narrative am I unknowingly promoting and whose am I leaving out?  I became increasingly aware of how my instructional practices impact young learners. By the end of the semester, I vowed to become an even more thoughtful and educated teacher in the efforts of creating a socially just classroom experience for my students. I began by becoming more knowledgeable and mindful in my text selections for my students and by applying the most basic critical literacy practices in read alouds as I could. Quickly, I realized that I needed to conduct more research and acquire more information to be effective for my students.

The final factor in this capstone question is the current state of literacy in my professional setting. This past year, my district adopted a new literacy curriculum. Each grade level has a teacher piloting the new curriculum, with the intention of all teachers implementing the system in the fall of 2020. When implementing a new curriculum, our district places a strong emphasis on fidelity which could ultimately result in a lack of responsiveness to student cultures, interests, and experiences. Due to the potential lack of flexibility to make responsive text and content selections as well as critical literacy exploration in the English Language Arts curriculum, I hope to create opportunities for students to evaluate social justice topics within other content areas in the school day.

**Curriculum Project Goal**

The goal for this curriculum project is to use critical literacy and read-aloud best practices as the framework to develop a social studies curriculum built on social justice topics for primary-aged children. I am hoping to uncover strategies and practices that allow each student to critically evaluate the experiences of others in juxtaposition with their own in an effort to support independently formed opinions and beliefs regarding society and the world. Additionally, as a result of my personal experiences with critical literacy, I am curious about its application with the youngest elementary learners in curriculum and instruction. Therefore, I would like to unearth best practices for developing critical literacy curriculum and instruction. Finally, I would like to uncover best practices within elementary read-alouds for delivering social justice content.

First, I review literature covering critical literacy theory as a lens to implement social justice instruction. Next, I analyze read-aloud best practices as a way to implement critical literacy practices. Lastly, I research the selection process for children's literature with social justice topics. Through these three themes, I unearth the most current research that is necessary for creating an effective social justice curriculum for young learners.

**Chapter Summary**

My personal and professional experiences with critical literacy and social justice have led me on this journey towards creating a curricular experience for primary-aged children that empowers and emboldens each to develop their individual identities and values, and ultimately advocate for justice. Often, I hear primary-grade teachers feeling confused regarding the content they should be delivering to young children: how do kindergarten and first-grade teachers develop critically and socially conscious individuals as well as foster identity development when the primary-grade content is vastly the development of rote skills?  While these skills are

important, I believe that kindergarten and first-grade are imperative years for children's identity and empathy development. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for primary-grade teachers to reflect upon current pedagogy and curricular content in order to assist children in their growth and development in these areas. When prescribed language arts curricula do not enable flexibility in content selection, teachers must identify other curricular areas in their day when these important topics and skills can be taught. Through research and this project, my goal is to use critical literacy and the elementary read-aloud as the framework to develop a social studies curriculum built upon social justice for primary-aged children.

This capstone project seeks to answer the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* In chapter one, the context, rationale, and goal for the project is outlined. Chapter two consists of a review of the research literature for this project. This includes a thorough exploration of critical literacy theory, elementary read-alouds, and social justice in children's literature. In chapter three, I present an overview for the method in which I created the project, a project description, an overview of the audience and setting, as well as a timeline for how it will be completed. Chapter four shares my personal reflections regarding this project and research and concludes this capstone.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Literature Review**

*The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education. – Martin Luther King, Jr.*

**Introduction**

Between the ages of five and seven, children undergo significant cognitive development. During the primary-age years, children's estimation of self-worth and value becomes more realistic, and by age eight, children can verbalize whether or not they like themselves – and how much (Copple, 2013, p. 266). It is during this time in which children begin to compare themselves with peers as well as apply knowledge they receive from adults to form their self-concept (Copple, 2013, p. 266). In addition to the cognitive development that occurs, children also develop pre-prejudices from a young age (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 28). Children pay attention to subtle cues from adults and draw conclusions that may form inaccurate ideas, stereotypes, and attitudes about human identities (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 28). The information and exchanges that children have in early childhood can affect life decisions and values; therefore, the interactions which children have during these years have the potential for long-term consequences and effects.

From a critical literacy perspective, the world is viewed as a socially constructed text in which no text is ever neutral (Vasquez, 2017, p. 3). Every message that is conveyed carries a perspective that is meant to sway its audience a certain way. Critical literacy is meant to focus on social issues such as race, class, and gender – which are just a few of the socially constructed concepts used by children to form their self concept. For this reason, it is important for social justice topics to be embedded into the daily school routine. Critical literacy and read-alouds are optimal venues for implementing such topics with young learners. This is especially imperative

due to the current state of the education system: in order for students to be successful, they must often assimilate to the formal school setting - such as understanding and complying with the invisible curriculum. Therefore, teachers must reflect upon their instructional practices in order to create experiences for students which include courageous conversations and critical literacy practices, allowing students to explore social issues through various perspectives. Unfortunately, many of the resources necessary for effectively implementing social justice instruction are not embedded in prescribed curriculums adopted by many schools. Teachers seeking to incorporate social justice education in their classrooms must do the labor themselves. In order to develop a social justice curriculum built on the foundation of critical literacy and read alouds, one must analyze the importance of critical literacy theory, elementary read-aloud best practices, and the implementation of social justice topics through children's literature. With this in mind, we ask the question, *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?*

First, this literary analysis examines critical literacy theory. Next, it analyzes best practices for elementary read-alouds. Lastly, this chapter examines social justice topics in children's literature. Each of the elements in this literature review provides the foundation for a social justice curriculum that utilizes critical literacy and read-aloud best practices as its base.

## Critical Literacy Theory

Many literacy experts have explored critical literacy theory over the years. While critical literacy does not have a set definition or normative history, many critical theorists hold similar foundational beliefs that guided critical literacy instruction (Vasquez, 2017, p. 3). Critical literacy experts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2017) agreed that knowledge is socially constructed and neutral texts do not exist; therefore, the implementation of critical

literacy must focus on issues of power and provide students with opportunities to challenge existing structures of inequality and oppression (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 15). Furthermore, critical literacy experts viewed students as active participants in the reading process as opposed to passively accepting the text's message (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 14). Together, teachers and students engage in critical analysis; however, critical literacy theorists (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2105; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2017) advocated for taking critical analysis a step further by incorporating action into critical literacy practices. Experts agreed it is not enough to analyze text because analysis does not cause readers to participate differently in the world, this is caused through taking action for justice (Vasquez, 2017, p. 13).

**The Foundations of Critical Literacy**

The current beliefs regarding critical literacy theory can be better understood by first examining the foundational ideas presented by Paulo Freire. In the 1970's, Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - a book considered by experts in the literacy field (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) as one of the foundational texts of critical pedagogy. Freire (2014) challenged the narrative character of teaching, which he referred to as banking education, in which teachers deposit information to students. In this narrative, teachers acted as knowledgeable beings who bestowed knowledge upon "those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 2014, p. 996). Direct instruction without the opportunity for dialogue or discussion would be characteristic of narrative education. Freire found this problematic and viewed banking education practice as integrating oppressed citizens into the structure of oppression (2014, p. 984). He rejected the banking concept of pedagogy and proposed liberating education, or problem-posing education, a pedagogy framed on acts of cognition. Within Freire's (2014) problem-posing framework,

teachers and students adopted new roles in which they were "jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 1120). Problem-posing education is revolutionary, affirming, transformative, creative, and demythologizing; it "regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality" and causes those involved to become critical thinkers (Freire, 2014, p. 1171). This transformative notion of learning allowed individuals to co-create and co-construct knowledge through identifying injustices and participating in dialogue. Through Freire's (2014) research and ideology, which was developed over fifty years ago, critical literacy theory and practices were formed.

**Critical Literacy in Practice**

Freire's (2014) foundational research and ideology paved the way for many literacy professionals (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2017) to develop current critical literacy practices. While much of Freire's work was implemented with adults, current researchers have worked to translate his vision to meet younger audiences. Over the last forty years, researchers have developed dimensions of practice, lesson frameworks, instructional strategies, and activities to be used as a means to implement critical literacy. Researchers (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2017) believed key components such as textual resources, critical stance, and critical practices were most important to consider while creating critical literacy instruction.

*Personal and Cultural Resources*

Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) identified personal and cultural resources as the mediums that students and teachers utilize to create the content of the curriculum. Resources can include "personal experiences; social issues books; popular culture and media; websites; home literacies; textbooks; oral text; competence in a language other than English; student desires and

interests; and community, national, and international issues" (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 776). Sometimes, daily procedures and interactions can become the foundation for which curriculum to be developed. If students find justice issues within the politics of everyday life, it can become a curriculum resource. The resources that are used for content creation can be pre-designed, but may also be organically interwoven or included in instruction based on the events and occurrences that happen in the daily lives of students (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 1392).

### *Critical Social Practices*

This component of critical literacy involves "specific social practices that students and teachers engage in as they create critical curricula" (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 782). Research by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) synthesized four dimensions of critical social practice: disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical, and taking action (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 793). These dimensions are intended to be tools in planning curricular engagements, however, it must be noted that they are interrelated, with one dimension being insufficient without the others (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 793).

**Dimension 1: Disrupting the commonplace.** In the first dimension, a critical viewpoint requires individuals to step outside their usual modes of perception and comprehension in order to use a new lens to understand an experience (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 793). Language of critique can be used to ask probing questions that disrupt what is seen as 'typical' or 'normal' as well as questions whose interests and narratives are being served in juxtaposition with the voices that are being silenced (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 793). Another component of disrupting the commonplace involves analyzing how cultural and historical

influences and events have shaped current aspects of life. In application to the classroom setting, teachers that practice critical literacy invite students to analyze classroom and environmental texts by questioning the authors' intentions and what the author wants the reader to believe (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 814). Teachers also encourage students to analyze how media and texts alter "collective perceptions, responses, and actions" (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 814).

**Dimension 2: Considering multiple viewpoints.** Individuals are constantly creating judgments about events in order to determine what is right and just, however, these judgments are often formed from our individual perspectives. Critical literacy asks individuals to attend to experiences and texts from personal experience as well as from others' viewpoints. Teachers applying dimension 2 of critical social practices will ask students to consider multiple viewpoints in order to gain deeper understandings of current issues being discussed. Teachers will also seek out texts that give voice to individuals who have been silenced or marginalized (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 866). Therefore, a critical literacy curriculum aims to honor differences rather than conformity.

**Dimension 3: Focusing on the sociopolitical.** While creating critical literacy curriculum, teachers must be aware of the sociopolitical systems and power relationships that occur within every teaching episode (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 887). Teachers applying critical literacy perspective first need to analyze how language can be used to maintain power and dominance, how non-dominant groups can gain access to dominant forms of language without devaluing their own, how diverse forms of language can be used as cultural resources, and how social action can change current discourses (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 887). Lessons and curriculum must be planned with conscious thought towards how privilege, status, and

oppression impact the instruction. A critical literacy advocate would support students as they study power relationships and as they "explore resistance, dialogue, and debate as tools to engage in the politics of daily life" (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 866).

**Dimension 4: Taking action to promote social justice.** This dimension calls individuals to action. Following the participation in the first three dimensions, students are shown how to use their voices to evoke social change in the world. Taking action to promote social justice can materialize in the form of "personal narratives, counter-narratives, letters, essays, reports, poems, commercials, posters, plays, and webpages" as well as the collection of "data to explain, expose, and find solutions for real-world problems" (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 908). The fourth dimension asks for individuals to express their critical understandings to promote messages of justice and democracy.

Additional theorists in the field have used these four dimensions, in addition to Paulo Freire's ideologies (2004) to refine guiding principles for critical literacy instruction. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) used the four dimensions as a basis for creating four guiding principles:

- Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action: this principle outlined praxis, a term defined by Paulo Freire as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it," for the purpose of relieving inequity and injustice. (p. 15)
- Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity: this principle emphasized the use of problematizing a scenario by examining the complexity of a situation.

- Critical literacy strategies are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used: this principle argued that techniques that promote critical literacy cannot be "exported to another setting without adapting it to that context." (p. 15)

- Critical literacy disrupts the commonplace by examining it from multiple perspectives: the final principle is intended to help students question both the author's intent within a text as well as the information presented in order to expand thinking and uncover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings. (p. 16)

McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) Principles of Critical Literacy incorporated essential understandings and beliefs about the power relationship between the reader and the author in order to ensure readers are active participants in the reading process by questioning, examining, or disputing (p. 14). These principles are meant to be used by educators throughout the planning and implementation processes of critical literacy instruction in addition to educators having an understanding of the four dimensions of critical literacy (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 17).

### *Critical Stance Cycle*

Critical literacy practices encourage the implementation of critical stance, which is the attitudes and dispositions of individuals that enables one to become critically literate. Vasquez (2017) stated that critical literacy is "a frame through which to participate in the world," and not simply an add-on (p. 3). Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) expanded on this idea by presenting four components for adopting a critical stance: consciously engaging, entertaining alternate ways of being, taking responsibility to inquire, and being reflexive (p. 929). Critical stance is viewed as a cycle through which individuals must constantly revolve. It is important to note that the critical stance cycle is an imperative piece in curriculum design and development, especially when developing questioning and discussion guides. However, it is also a cycle in which

individuals must strive to participate within the implementation and participation of lessons and instruction. Consciously Engaging entails thoughtful responses, being mindful of the language used in discourse, and being actively aware of the various options in interpretations, responses, and actions (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 1062). Entertaining Alternate Ways of Being assists participants to become accustomed to feeling uncomfortable and taking risks, while using that tension as a resource. The reader creates and tries on new perspectives and discourses. Taking Responsibility to Inquire requires the reader to understand that all knowledge is constructed from a perspective, and that no text is neutral. This requires readers to focus on problem-posing as opposed to problem-solving so that students become participants in learning as opposed to consumers (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 1076). Being Reflexive asks readers to be aware of personal complicity in maintaining systems of injustice. Students are reflexive by questioning practices, utilizing self and others to grow and outgrow, and by renaming and re-theorizing (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 1076).

### *Instructional Strategies*

Within critical literacy instructional application, experts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vaszuez, 2017) suggested various frameworks. McLaughlin and DeVoogd proposed a four-part framework in which singular lessons should be constructed. The elements of a lesson included engaging students' thinking, guiding students' thinking, extending students' thinking, and teacher reflection (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p, 41). Engaging students' thinking involved activating prior knowledge and creating interest in the text by introducing and setting a purpose. Guiding students' thinking required implementing problem posing and alternative perspective strategies (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, 41). These activities promoted critical thinking and engagement with the text. Extending students' thinking occurred during the last stage of the

lesson for students. In this part of the lesson, students extended their understanding by taking action based on the critical discussion that took place. Lastly, the reflection process asked teachers to analyze what was taught, why it was taught, how the lesson went, how students reacted to the content, and how to further critical learning (McLaughlin, 2014, 41).

Vasquez (2017) shared a different framework for implementing critical literacy instruction called *lingering with a book: six sessions for working with a social issues text* (p. 23). The intention was to provide students ample time to engage in thoughtful discussion by extending interactions with a text across numerous days and activities, although all six sessions may not be utilized for each text (Vasquez, 2017, p. 23). The six sessions outlined by Vasquez (2017) included session 1: read-aloud, session 2: picture walk, session 3: small-group conversations, session 4: whole-group meeting, session 5: choose an illustration, and session 6: notebook writing (p. 33). Through these six sessions with a social issues text, the teacher allowed students to revisit a text, make more connections, and utilize different lenses to read those texts which in turn allowed students to engage in numerous opportunities to revise and refine their thinking regarding various issues, topics, and events (Vasquez, 2017, p. 31). This framework also allowed teachers to support students in taking action regarding connections or understandings that occurred as a result of critical analysis (Vasquez, 2017, p. 32).

**Lingering**. One important strategy used by critical literacy theorists is lingering. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) identified lingering in a text as rereading texts, writing about texts, and interpreting meaning with the intention of constructing deeper understanding and insights (p. 2242). Lingering in text, which requires more than simply listening to a story, involves providing students a chance to view different perspectives and elicit critical thinking (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 2264). Vasquez (2017) also advocated for lingering in texts

(p. 31). Vasquez's (2017) research argued that offering numerous interactions with a text provided students more critical opportunities to make connections, apply different lenses for reading the text, and time to revise and refine thinking surrounding different issues, topics, and events (p. 31).

**Problem posing.** Another literacy strategy that can be applied to all forms of personal and cultural resources is problem posing. This strategy occurs after reading, viewing, or discussing the resource at hand. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) developed a list of questions that can be used to incite critical analysis:

- Who is in the text/picture/situation?  Who is missing?

- Whose voices are represented? Whose voices are marginalized or discounted?

- What are the intentions of the author? What does the author want the reader to think?

- What would an alternative text/picture/situation say?

- How can the reader use this information to promote equity? (p. 41)

Table 1 shows classroom activities, adapted and designed by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), that can be utilized to implement problem posing with students (p. 42).

Table 1

*Problem Posing Activities*

| Activity | Brief Description |
| --- | --- |
| Connection Stems | Prompts that provide a structure to make connections while reading narrative and informational texts:<br><br>That reminds me of…<br>I remember when…<br>I have a connection... |
| The Rest of the Story | Encourages students to use background knowledge to examine what is missing or |

| | underrepresented in a text in order to research a new perspective. |
|---|---|
| Switching | Asks students to imagine an alternative version of the story by switching one of the following: gender, theme, setting, body-style, clothing, emotion, ethnic/race, language, or relationship/organization. |

Table 1

**Alternative perspectives.** This strategy is utilized in an effort to prompt students to explore various viewpoints or narratives that may be missing or silenced in a text. These characters or individuals can exist within the story or event, but can also be individuals that are absent from the text in order to promote critical discourse. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) proposed and adapted a number of classroom activities that can be used to help learners engage with perspectives other than the one being presented in the resource; these strategies can be reviewed in Table 2 (p. 49).

| Table 2 | |
|---|---|
| *Alternative Perspective Activities* | |
| Activity | Brief Description |
| Alternative Texts | Readers represent a perspective that is different from the one being presented. |
| Character Substitutions | Readers replace an existing character with a new character that has a different personality. |
| Character Perspectives | Readers examine the motives of different characters in order to reorient the story to fit the motivations or desires of one character. |
| Juxtapositioning | Students examine two texts that have been written about the same topic in order to analyze author bias. |
| Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits | Readers examine two points of view. Both perspectives may be represented in the story |

| | or one may be silenced or missing from the text. |
|---|---|
| Theme Based Focus Groups | Students investigate bias and critically analyze how authors view events from different points of view. |

Table 2

**Summary**

Research shows that critical literacy theory is an important practice to implement in classrooms, especially in the development of critical thinking skills, empathy, and social justice. Critical literacy enables students to become active participants in the construction of meaning and knowledge, regardless of students' age. The incorporation of critical literacy into classrooms also creates opportunities for students to learn about social justice issues, affirms individual and social identities, develops empathy, and increases critical thinking skills at a developmentally appropriate pace. The research in this section also made evident that critical literacy theorists rely heavily on resources such as texts to guide discourse and discussion. This capstone asks the question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* The following section explores read-alouds as a literacy practice that optimally serves the implementation of critical literacy in elementary classrooms.

<div align="center">

**Elementary Read-Alouds**

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Reading aloud is one of the most important activities for developing successful readers. One of the primary goals of early literacy is to help young learners comprehend and enjoy texts - and there are numerous benefits to reading aloud to children. By age 2, children who were read to by adults on a regular basis had greater language comprehension, larger vocabularies, and higher cognitive skills than children who were read to less often (Gambrell, 2015, p. 4). Additional benefits of the read aloud include empathy instruction, exposure to events and

individuals that readers do not typically encounter, broadening imagination, discovering texts that may otherwise go unexplored, and viewing situations from various perspectives (McCaffrey & Hisrich, 2017, p. 99).

In addition to the numerous academic benefits of reading aloud to children, Sharroky Hollie identified reading aloud as a culturally and linguistically responsive practice (Hollie, 2018, p. 150). As American Public Schools become increasingly rich in diversity, with projections of 55% of all students representing racial and ethnic minorities by the year 2027, it is vitally important to validate, affirm, build, and bridge students' social and cultural identities to their school environments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Hollie stated that reading aloud is "the cultural complement of storytelling for many students" (Hollie, 2018, p. 150). Furthermore, the setting in which reading aloud often occurs, with students congregated to listen to their teacher, can build community and enforce important classroom norms and traditions (Hollie, 2018, p. 149).

**Interactive Read-Alouds**

Fountas and Pinnell (2017) defined the interactive read-aloud as an event in which students engage in discussion with others regarding a text they have heard read aloud or have read independently (p. 3). All students, regardless of grade level, need to "listen to and comprehend age appropriate texts in a variety of genres and increasingly complex texts within those genres" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 12). The interactive read-aloud experience provided numerous benefits to students including developing academic language, drawing attention to important features of text, engaging all of the strategic actions for comprehension, and developing fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 12). When students were released from decoding a text and were able to become immersed in the oral reader's fluency, phrasing, and

stress, students were given a rich opportunity to engage in higher levels of comprehension in thinking and talking about texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 12).

Literacy experts noted that the interactive read-aloud experience applied meaningful discussion to teach for comprehension with texts that children may not yet be able to read conventionally by themselves (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 13). In order to implement such an event, the teacher is required to prepare students to engage in thinking, talking, and writing about the content presented in the texts selected (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 13). This happened when teachers facilitated comprehension and enjoyment of reading by engaging students in pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Gambrell, 2015, p. 88). Based on the notion of pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities, Fountas and Pinnell (2017) outlined a structure for interactive read-aloud integration that involved thoughtful text selection and preparation, opening, reading aloud with embedded teaching and text talk, discussion and self-evaluation, record of reading, and an optional written or artistic response (p. 13).

### Text Selection

Quality texts are of utmost importance to an effective and engaging read-aloud experience. Through the selection of excellent texts, teachers have the ability to help students "explore topics related to social studies, the environment, and people of the world;" examine a range of social issues; explore different cultures and kinds of family life; learn about human problems; and learn about history (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14).

Gambrell noted that while selecting texts, "an important dimension in supporting young children's literacy development is providing a wide variety of high-quality texts that are at the appropriate levels of listening and reading difficulty, and of high interest" (Gambrell, 2015, p.

93). Texts also need to provide students with opportunities "to engage with texts across a wide range of narrative and informational genres" (Gambrell, 2015, p. 18). In addition to selecting texts based on genre and complexity, teachers should select texts based on the story problems, characters, content, and topics in conjunction with consideration of the students' age group, backgrounds, languages, cultures, experiences, and interests (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 12). Therefore, teachers should always read and analyze texts prior to reading aloud to students to ensure the text is thoughtfully matched with students' needs and interests (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14).

Another important element for teachers to consider when selecting texts for an interactive read-aloud is the inclusion of texts that are authentic and relevant to student experiences (Hollie, 2018, p. 145). Teachers must seek texts that are inclusive and authentic so that students do not perceive any culture or human experience to be "non-essential, unimportant, and lesser-than" (Boyd, 2015, p. 379). This must also be considered so that children who exclusively see themselves in the books read to them do not come to the conclusion that individuals different from themselves are not worthy of appearing in texts (Boyd, 2015, p. 379).

Lastly, teachers can select quality interactive read-aloud texts that are intended to be read repeatedly (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 655). These texts are often referred to as mentor or anchor texts, with the intention of serving as a foundation text alongside other texts to enhance complex thought around critical themes (Zimmerman, 2016, p. 41). Rereading a text "provides young readers and pre-readers with more opportunities to develop language and comprehension on a deeper level" (McCaffrey & Hisirch, 2017, p. 99). Laminack (2019) noted additional benefits to rereading texts such as assisting students in developing deeper understandings of what

has been read, increasing students' fluency which in turn allows for greater comprehension of what has been read, and increasing the depth and sophistication of classwide discussion (p. 48).

*Preparation*

Prior to reading to children, Fountas and Pinnell (2017) noted the importance of analyzing text prior to reading aloud to students (p. 14). The thorough analysis prior to reading aloud allowed teachers to create a plan for using the text including points and elements within the text to pause for brief discussion (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14). Furthermore, teachers must curate carefully crafted questions at selected key places within a text in order to elicit deeper levels of thinking (McCaffrey & Hisirch, 2017). One strategy proposed to ensure deeper levels of understanding occurs is by utilizing sticky notes within a text, prompting the teacher to pause to make comments or questions to ensure the interactive read-aloud is effective (Fountas & Pinnell, p. 13).

In addition to preparing for reading and analyzing a text prior to instruction, teachers conducting interactive read-alouds must be cognisant of other important elements that are critical during interactive read-aloud and literature discussion. Fountas and Pinnell (2017) compiled a list of considerations for teachers use in order to ensure students are constantly expanding their thinking:

- Keeps in mind the systems of strategic actions that readers must use;
- Knows the text deeply and understands its dempands and the opportunities it provides for new learning;
- Provides conversational leads to focus students' attention;
- Models and demonstrates behaviors that help students achieve better understanding;

- Asks students to share their thinking in a focused way;

- Prompts students to listen to and respond to one another rather than always being the center of the conversation;

- Keeps the conversation grounded in the text;

- Turns the conversation back to students, asking for deeper thinking;

- Requires students to be accountable for their comments, asking for more than opinion and asking for evidence from the text or personal experience;

- Gives feedback to students on what they are learning and the kinds of thinking they are doing;

- Asks students to self-evaluate their conversations about the text. (p. 19)

### *Opening*

One component of pre-reading that should be applied to an interactive read-aloud lesson is conducting an opening or introduction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14). The purpose of an opening is to peak students' interest in the text, provide background information that may be of importance for comprehension, as well as sharing the names of the authors and illustrators, or connecting the text to other books that are familiar to the students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14).

### *Reading Aloud with Embedded Teaching and Text Talk*

Within the read-aloud session, teachers should demonstrate outstanding oral reading, stop at preplanned spots for brief discussion, and encourage practices for students to engage in discussion with peers so that all students are provided an opportunity to share their own ideas about the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14). The purpose of these brief discussions is to develop expertise for the final discussion (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14).

***Discussion and Self-Evaluation***

Experts (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015; Vasquez, 2017) believed that reading or listening to a story is not enough to elicit critical thinking. Vasquez (2017) stated that texts are "useful as tools to do critical literacy work only insofar as they can be vehicles for discussing issues of power and control" (p. 35). Discourse and talk within discussion about texts allow for the construction of meaning and differences in thought, which ultimately provides a richer, more critical learning experience (Vasquez, 2017, p. 35). Therefore, discussion is a critical element for the interactive read-aloud experience. Teachers should use discussion as an opportunity for students to offer and hear different perspectives as well as inspire new questions and ideas for consideration (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 2242). Fountas and Pinnell (2017) expanded on this notion, stating that interactive read-aloud and literature discussion are rich in text talk (p. 15). Text talk is defined as "shared talk in which students examine ideas and think about narrative, expository, or poetic texts" with the intention of providing opportunities to think about texts in new ways (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 15).

Peer discussion is especially important to text discourse. Gambrell (2015) shared that peer discussion enabled students to develop shared meanings that deepened their understanding of a text as well as increased the development of comprehension and composition of literacy )p. 51). Text discussions helped students co-construct the meaning of texts as well as develop cognition such as building persuasive abilities (Gambrell, 2015, p. 51). Peer discussions also offered opportunities to "prompt students to state their positions, challenge thinking through counterarguments, acknowledge examples of good arguments, and model sound reasoning processes" (Gambrell, 2015, p. 51). Discussions ultimately enhance engagement, understanding,

and internalization of knowledge necessary to engage in challenging tasks that students will encounter on their own (Gambrell, 2015, p. 51).

### *Record of Reading*

In order to support students' memory of reading, Fountas and Pinnell (2017) advocated for teachers to keep a visible list of texts used for interactive read-aloud for students to refer (p. 14). The list is intended to be a reference for students in the scenario that they want to write about the text, identify the text for genre, or use it as a resource for building connections across minilessons (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14).

### *Written or Artistic Response*

Another post-reading component that can be used alongside literature discussion is writing or drawing about the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 14). Written or artistic response provides another opportunity for students to share connections, opinions, and questions with peers (Vasquez, 2017, p. 30). In the sharing process, students could revise their writing topics, stances, or ideas as they reflected upon the stances and ideas of their classmates (Vasquez, 2017, p. 31). However, Fountas & Pinnell (2017) do not encourage having students write or draw about text after every interactive read-aloud because it may detract from the enjoyment of the text as well as the dynamic nature of the interactive read aloud instructional context (p. 14).

### Summary

The research surrounding interactive read-alouds suggests that it is an effective mode for incorporating critical literacy. Both critical literacy and interactive read-alouds emphasize the value of teacher preparation as well as discussion and text talk as a means of constructing meaning. Both encourage student voice and participation as an important component of interaction, with teachers alternating between guiding text discussions and taking a more passive

role while allowing students to expand and share their thinking.  The literature surrounding interactive read-alouds supports the question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* Given the value of the interactive read-aloud, the next section will provide research regarding how to select children's texts that explore social justice themes in order to implement critical literacy instruction.

## Social Justice & Children's Literature

Books can be transformative. Children shape their view on the world in part due to the books they read, with young children being the most impressionable (Boyd, et al., 2015, p. 379). For a child, the words and illustrations in a picture book can affirm and provide comfort in connection to their lived experiences. Books can also provide an ongoing way for children to learn about diversity and fairness (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 44). As a result, books are one of the most vital components to implementing critical literacy instruction.

For primary-aged learners, picture books are of utmost importance. Scholars have studied student response, understanding, and interpretation of picture books for many years (Pantaleo, 2017, p. 156). Due to the multimodal nature of picture books, McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2014) found that the combination of illustrations and written words encouraged "readers to understand the text on several different levels" (p. 55). Picture books enabled students to read clues in illustrations that ultimately enrich the understandings of stories (Pantaleo, 2017, p. 156). Pantaleo also found that picture books and illustrations elicit students' esthetic understanding and critical thinking (2017, p. 166). In fact, picture books enriched student responsiveness and increased their "ability to comprehend, interpret, and systemically analyze what they see" (Pantaleo, 2017, 557).

While picture books offer numerous benefits to student learning, children's books also have the power to reinforce or undermine children's self concept, teach accurate or misleading information about people of various identities, and foster positive or negative attitudes about diversity (Derman-Sparks, 2013, para. 1). PEN America (2016) stated that children's books are potent cultural bellwethers that have the power to shape attitudes on a multitude of social, political, and moral issues (p. 4). Rather than silence and marginalize, picture books should be intended to "transcend boundaries, foster dialogue, and amplify unheard voices" (PEN America, 2016, p. 4). Ultimately, the picture book selections that teachers make communicate to children who and what is important and matters (Derman-Sparks, 2013, para. 1). Children construct identity through reading, everyday experience, and the conversations held with others – it is a social process in which books hold unprecedented power (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 89). Therefore, children's literature has the ability to support younger generations to reach higher levels of understanding and inclusion across social divides and can serve as a catalyst for acceptance (PEN America, 2016, p. 4).

McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2014) defined social justice or social action as a sense of fairness between people (p. 152). They advance the definition by advocating for social justice through critically analyzing texts by uncovering the "stereotyping of roles for gender, race, age, ethnic group, religion, national identity, and other categories so that we will not passively accept those stereotypes for ourselves or others" (p. 90). Social justice education also focuses on issues of power in order to problematize oppressed groups, with the intention of taking action (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 15). Therefore, social justice topics are thoughtfully selected within a literacy curriculum in order to disrupt the commonplace, consider multiple viewpoints, engage with social or political issues, and take action (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 55).

**Text Selection**

Critical literacy is founded upon the intention of comprehending at deeper levels in which students must think beyond the information on a printed page in order to critically analyze the author's message (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 13). In order to facilitate critical literacy, quality texts are essential. Texts act as the cornerstone in which to deliver critical literacy through interactive read-alouds. Therefore, in order for texts to meet the criteria for a quality critical literacy and social justice text, one must consider the four dimensions of critical literacy as well as social justice themes.

*Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy*

In the selection of critical literacy texts, experts (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014) agreed that reflecting upon the four dimensions of critical literacy is important. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) cited in their research that the four dimensions of critical literacy "are useful tools for planning curricular engagements" (p. 788).

**Disrupting the commonplace.** Books that disrupt the commonplace are chosen due to the content or tone of the text. Ideally, the content or tone causes the reader to confront a situation from a new perspective, which ultimately disrupts stereotypes or commonly held beliefs (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 55). Texts that disrupt the common place challenge the reader to become conscious of socially constructed norms held by society at large.

**Considering multiple viewpoints.** Books that consider multiple viewpoints aim to bring voice to individuals or groups that are silenced or marginalized (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 16). This can include viewpoints or perspectives within the text that are not explored as well as perspectives that are absent from the text altogether. These types of texts challenge students

to expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understanding while exploring experiences from another perspective (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 16).

**Social or political issues.** Critical literacy texts should also be selected for themes of social or political issues between individuals or in society. These texts might explore themes such as unequal power relationships, existing hierarchies, and social structures that maintain power for a selected group (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 887). Text that addresses socio-political issues enable teachers to guide students through investigating oppression and unjust power relationships that are maintained as part of the status quo.

**Action for social justice.** Texts chosen for critical literacy should also be selected for themes of action for social justice. Oftentimes, these texts come in the form of biographies of individuals who have taken action to achieve social justice (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2014, p. 58).

### Social Justice Themes

The books chosen for critical literacy instruction should address topics of social justice and equity. Derman-Sparks (2012) stated that early education plays an important role in creating socially just and culturally inclusive communities in which all families can raise their families in context to who they are (para. 2). Education has the ability to reduce racial and ethnic divisions as well as construct peaceful communities (Derman-Sparks, 2012, para. 3). Through picture books, this type of anti-bias education can occur by incorporating themes of social justice to engage children in dialogue that challenges constructions of power in society. Researchers advised teachers to be responsive in the selection of texts, meaning that picture books should be relevant to the classroom community as well as represent the diversity of society (Seidel & Rockney, 2011, p. 247). Derman-Sparks proposed that teachers should disrupt stereotypes

regarding themes such as cultural diversity, race, gender, economic class and fairness, abilities, and families (2013, para. 2). Interestingly, current research showed that there are disproportionate children's books being published by or about people of color and LGBTQ communities, thus limiting access to books that represent a wide range of human identities and experiences (PEN America, 2016, p. 5). Below is a list of themes outlined by Derman-Sparks (2013), with suggested picture books in which to apply critical literacy practices with primary-aged children (para. 2):

**Cultural diversity**. This topic "encompasses the specific rules and patterns of behavior, language, values, and world beliefs by various groups" (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 34). It is important to note that the cultural patterns practiced by individuals are not determined by one's ethnic group, rather they are determined by individuals in relation to their home cultures and the larger culture corresponding to the country in which they live (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 34). The following are titles of children's picture books that could be used to implement critical literacy for this theme in primary grades:

*The Proudest Blue* by Muhammad (2019)

*Bilal Cooks Daal* by Saeed (2019)

*The Name Jar* by Choi (2003)

*Fry Bread* by Maillard (2019)

*Festival of Colors* by Sehgal (2018)

*The Gift of Ramadan* by Lumbard (2019)

**Race.** Racialized identity is a different concept from ethnicity, culture, and nationality (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 34). The concept of race is a social and political construction and is not chosen by an individual (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 107). It is explained as "the way groups of

people are defined by the society in which they live and how other people treat those groups

because of those definitions" (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 107). The first aspects of racial identity

that children notice are typically eye shape, skin color, and hair (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 106).

*The Colors of Us* by Katz (2002)

*All the Colors We Are* by Kissinger (2014)

*Princess Hair* by Miller (2018)

*Ron's Big Mission* by Blue (2009)

*Not Quite Snow White* by Franklin (2019)

*Let the Children March* by Clark-Robinson (2018)

*The Youngest Marcher* by Levinson (2017)

*Granddaddy's Turn: A Journey to the Ballot Box* by Bandy (2015)

**Gender**. Gender bias is another topic that is important to include in literacy curricula.

Derman-Sparks (2013) emphasized the importance of selecting books that disrupt common and

harmful gender stereotypes. Derman-Sparks (2020) argued the prevailing model of gender "rests

on binary opposites of expected behaviors, attitudes, skills, feelings, appearance, and life

outcomes (p. 123). It is important for teachers to disrupt such models, however, PEN America

(2016) found that children's books that explore gender identity and expression are amongst the

most common titles to be brought to the American Library Association by parents who express

concern over the appropriateness of content, therefore limiting students' access to the topic (p.

10). When these children's books are censored, a student's identity affirmation can be

dismantled due to lack of representation and discussion in the classroom (PEN America, 2016, p.

10). The following list of children's literature could be used to explore this theme with primary-

aged children:

> *Pink is For Boys* by Pearlman (2018)
>
> *Lucia the Luchadora* by Garza (2017)
>
> *I Love My Purse* by Demont (2017)
>
> *Julian Is a Mermaid* by Love (2018)
>
> *Drum Girl Dream* by Engle (2015)
>
> *Malala's Magic Pencil* by Yousafzai (2017)

**Economic class**. Classism is explained as the system of economic inequity and bias against people in the working class as well as impoverished individuals (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 137). While people with wealth typically experience bias that is positive, individuals with lower income levels usually experience negative biases (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 137). Within picture books, it is important to affirm economic experiences of all themes including working from home, occupations, and housing (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 144). Below is a list of picture books that explore themes of economic class and fairness:

> *A Chair for My Mother* by Williams (2007)
>
> *Maddi's Fridge* by Brandt (2014)
>
> *Those Shoes* by Boelts (2009)
>
> *A Place to Stay: A Shelter Story* by Gunti (2019)
>
> *A Different Pond* by Phi (2017)
>
> *Night Job* by Hesse (2018)

**Abilities.** This topic encompasses individuals with ability differences, more commonly referred to as disabilities (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 153). Children need exposure and accurate information regarding disabilities because they "try to make sense of what they observe within their limited experience and understanding" which can lead to misconceptions (Derman-Sparks,

2020, p. 153). Teaching children about ability differences can increase inclusion and acceptance, dispel harmful misconceptions, help young learners understand the limitations of others with disabilities, and build appreciation between shared abilities and similarities (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 156). It can also support children with disabilities as they navigate questions from other children (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 155). The following titles are children's books that explore the topic of ability differences:

*Benji, the Bad Day, and Me* by Pla (2018)

*A Friend for Henry* by Bailey (2019)

*My Friend Suhana* by Abdullah (2014)

*The Amazing Erik* by Huber (2014)

*I Will Dance* by Flood (2020)

*My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* by Best (2015)

*All the Way to the Top* by Pimentel (2020)

**Family.** Derman-Sparks (2020) explained that family structures come in many forms, with numerous variations existing across class, race, and culture (p. 166). Family structures are diverse and can include adoption, LGBTQ, biracial or multiracial, immigrant, blended, migrant, co-custody, multigenerational, foster, single-parent, extended, grandparent custody, amongst many other dynamics (Derman-Sparks, 2020, p. 166). Families may experience various stressors from societal prejudice and discrimination which makes representation and discussion of diverse family structures important. Moreso**,** children's books are meant to provide reflection and affirmation of children's identities and worlds, therefore topics of family makeup, such as LGBTQ should be included (PEN America, 2016, p. 10).

*Who's in My Family?* By Harris (2012)

*Stella Brings the Family* by Schiffer (2015)

*Nonni's Moon* by Inserro (2018)

*My Footprints* by Phi (2019)

*Mango, Abuela, and Me* by Medina (2017)

*Drawn Together* by Le (2018)

**Summary**

As a result of the literature findings for critical literacy theory and interactive read-alouds, an investigation of the effectiveness of children's literature via picture books was pursued. It was quickly evident that picture books are an effective medium for incorporating social justice topics in early elementary instruction. In order to facilitate critical literacy instruction through an effective interactive read-aloud, teachers must select quality texts that thoughtfully consider the four dimensions of critical literacy as well as address themes of social justice. Together, these three elements show how this literature fits the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?*

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter two of this project provided a literary analysis of the research found to answer the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* The evidence found as a result of this analysis shows the importance of implementing social justice themes in early education. As a result of this research, a first grade social studies curriculum rooted in critical literacy and read-alouds through picture books addressing social justice themes will be created.

The research in chapter two provided a framework for which to build a social studies curriculum as an answer to the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* Looking ahead, chapter three provides a rationale and overview of the research project that was created as a result of this literary analysis. There is also an analysis of Understanding by Design by Wiggins and McTighe (2013), the processes used to design this curriculum project. Lastly, this chapter provides information regarding the setting, audience, assessment, and timeline for the project's implementation.

**CHAPTER THREE**

*When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful. - Malala Yousafzai*

**Introduction**

Chapter two analyzed the three important components that must be considered in applying critical literacy through read-alouds in the development of social justice instruction that is appropriate for primary-aged learners: critical literacy theory, read-aloud best practices, and social justice themes in children's literature. These three elements create the foundation for answering the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?*

Over the course of my career as a kindergarten teacher, I have doubted my competence in discussing sensitive topics that often come up during social studies instruction such as Thanksgiving, race, and politics. As I reflected on the causes for this, I determined it was a direct result of my personal lack of research and professional development as well as a deficit in curriculum and resources for teaching the content from a critical literacy perspective. The literature analysis discussion in chapter two provided the information and resources necessary for guiding critical discussions with younger learners, best practice for interactive read-aloud, and guidelines for selecting children's literature with social justice themes. These elements guided my social studies curriculum development.

Chapter three answers the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* This chapter describes the research project designed using the research and literary analysis in chapter two, which explained the components that must be considered for incorporating social justice topics in primary-elementary classrooms. This chapter includes a description of the proposed curriculum project as well as the design process selected for creating the curriculum alongside a rationale.

Later, it shares information regarding the setting and audience in which this research project was implemented. Finally, this chapter explains the assessment process and timeline for creating and implementing the project.

**Project Overview**

This project was determined based on the author's professional setting in which a new literacy curriculum is being implemented alongside the absence of an official social studies curriculum. In response to an inability to supplement the new literacy curriculum, a social studies framework was chosen to implement social justice issues through critical literacy and read-alouds.

Social justice instruction was incorporated within a social studies curriculum for first graders based on critical literacy and interactive read-alouds. The curriculum was created using the research and ideas found in chapter two that propose best practices for critical literacy instruction, elementary read-alouds, and children's literature featuring social justice topics. This project, located in the appendix, includes social studies themes, academic standards, lesson plan sequences, suggested anchor and supplementary texts, assessment rubrics, as well as lesson plan templates to allow teachers to tailor instruction to the unique needs of individual classroom settings. Within the framework, teachers can use the lesson plan templates to create critical literacy read-aloud sequences that are responsive to the needs and experiences of their students.

The first step in the project involved identifying the standards and themes utilized for social studies instruction in the researcher's first grade setting. The Minnesota State Social Studies (2011) standards for first grade include four academic standards under Citizenship and Government, three standards for Economics, three standards in Geography, and five academic standards for History (Minnesota Department of Education, pp. 22-25 ). The standards were used

to outline the social studies themes in which social justice picture books, interactive read-alouds, and critical literacy lessons would be centered. The social studies themes used for first-grade study are aligned with the Minnesota State Social Studies (2011) standards and are listed below:

School Rules and Laws (1.1.1.1.1 & 1.1.4.7.1)

Voting (1.1.4.6.1)

United States Symbols & Traditions (1.1.2.2.1)

Wants and Needs (1.2.1.1.1)

Scarcity (1.2.3.3.1)

Me on the Map (1.3.1.1.1 & 1.3.1.1.2)

The Colors of Us (1.3.2.3.1)

Holidays of Our World (1.3.2.3.1)

Biographies: Leaders for Social Justice and Allies (1.4.1.2.1)

Family Life (1.4.1.2.2, 1.4.2.4.1 & 1.4.2.4.2)

Timelines (1.4.1.1.1) (Minnesota Department of Education, pp. 22-25)

The next step involved identifying social justice learning outcomes, in which the author incorporated Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards (2019) for kindergarten through second grade (p. 5). The Social Justice Standards (2019) outlined learning goals in four areas: identity, diversity, justice, and action (Teaching Tolerance, p. 5). These standards were used for two reasons: to create rubrics to assess students' development of these skills throughout the application of the curriculum and to build instructional goals throughout the curriculum's trajectory. In order to ensure each social justice standard was taught throughout the curriculum, the standards were divided into each unit. For example: in unit one, the social justice theme of justice is taught, with an emphasis on three of the five identified standard components. This

strategy allowed for each social justice standard to be assessed across the curriculum. Many of the social justice standards are assessed more than once throughout the curriculum in order to provide students an opportunity to demonstrate growth and development in each area.

Next, the rubrics and assessments were created. The social studies rubrics were designed to align with the author's district grading system. The grading scale utilizes the terms beginning, developing, and proficient in order to assess student understanding towards the social studies standards. Each unit's culminating rubric for assessing the social studies standards involved translating the academic standard with a critical lens to ensure alignment within the curriculum's goals. In contrast to the rubrics that assess the social studies standards, the social justice rubrics were designed to assess growth on a number scale and can be used for grades kindergarten through second. The author chose to adjust these rubrics to reflect the ongoing learning as reflected in Teaching Tolerance's (2019) social justice standards, where a score of four, which signifies proficiency, would be the goal for the end of second grade (p. 4). The social studies and social justice rubrics were used to create assessments for students' progress towards proficiency in each unit. The rubrics and assessments will also be used to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum.

Once the rubrics and assessments were developed, the lesson plan templates were created. First, the strategy of lingering, proposed by Vasquez (2017) and Lewison, Leland, and Harste's (2015) was applied. As a result, five interactive read-aloud lesson plan templates were created in order to support instruction that revisits an anchor text numerous times. Once the five-day lesson sequence was developed, the individual lesson plans were developed. Within each lesson plan, Fountas and Pinnell's (2017) interactive read-aloud framework was applied in order to facilitate an orderly interactive read-aloud process. The critical literacy aspects of instruction

are acknowledged within the lesson plans, but are not pre-selected or designed due to the dynamic nature of critical literacy instruction. Lewison, Leland, and Harste's four dimensions of critical literacy (2015) as well as the critical literacy instructional strategies adapted and created by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) are applied following the selection of each anchor text.

Next, the mentor and supplemental text selection process began. Anchor texts were selected based on criteria outlined by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) and Derman-Sparks (2020). Children's picture books were selected to fit within the social studies themes and standards. The texts were also required to address a social issues topic identified by Derman-Sparks (2020), such as cultural diversity, race, gender, economic class, ability, or family. In order to ensure equitable representation of social identities, each anchor text was compiled into a chart to represent the social justice topics being discussed. Finally, the texts were analyzed to ensure they fit within the four dimensions of critical literacy as suggested by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015). Once the anchor texts were selected, the supplemental text list was created. The supplemental texts included an additional component for social issues themes: taking action. Supplemental texts were selected to support the anchor texts in order to provide multiple perspectives for each theme. This was done in an effort to represent each social identity from various perspectives in an effort to avoid a singular story that may misrepresent a group of people or perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Therefore, the supplemental texts were selected with the intention to be read to students during the designated unit outside the social studies block. The supplemental texts could be used during a morning meeting or a story block during the school day.

Once the anchor texts were carefully selected for each thematic unit and academic standard, the five-day lesson plan contingency templates were used to design activities,

strategies, and discussion prompts within Fountas and Pinnell's (2017) interactive read-aloud format. First, the identified academic and social justice standards were outlined in each lesson sequence, along with the requirements for proficiency, to ensure instruction was created with the learning outcomes in mind. Once the standards and learning outcomes were included, the four dimensions of critical literacy were applied to the anchor text. This provided a guide in which to build instruction to ensure students critically engage with each dimension of critical literacy within the five-day lesson sequence. Once the dimensions were identified as focal instructional guides within each lesson, McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) critical literacy strategies and discussion prompts were proposed for each day of the discussion component of the interactive read-aloud process. Next, embedded text talk prompts were selected to provide students with exposure to each identified dimension topic prior to the critical discourse segment of the lesson. The discussion prompts and strategies were thoughtfully selected to fit within the three components for each lesson: the academic standards, the identified dimensions of critical literacy instruction, and the selected anchor text. Therefore, the strategies and discussion applied to one lesson contingency cannot be readily applied to another anchor text. This process was repeated for each selected anchor text proposed in the curriculum. As a result of the dynamic nature of these lessons, the instruction is able to provide relevant, authentic, and critical discourse. An example for how these components were applied in a developed lesson plan can be found in Table 3 below:

Table 3

**Unit 1: School Rules and Laws**
**Anchor Text Week 1 -** *Drum Girl Dream* by Margarita Engle

**MN Social Studies Standard (2011):** 1.1.1.1.1 & 1.1.4.7.1
**Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Anchor Standard (2019):** Action
**Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015):**
Dimension 1: Disrupt the Commonplace
   ● *What does the author want us to think, believe, or value from reading this text?*
Dimension 2: Examine Multiple Viewpoints

- *How might another character experience this story?*

Dimension 3: Focus on Socio Political Issues
- *Social Issue: Gender*
- *Political Issue: Rules and Laws*

Dimension 4: Take Action
- *Example: Have you experienced unfair rules - maybe at home, at school, or somewhere else? How can we take action to make sure rules are fair for everyone in our classroom?*

| | Opening | Read Aloud with Embedded Teaching and Text Talk | Discussion and Self-Evaluation | Record of Reading | Written or Artistic Response |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Day 3** *Whole Group Meeting* *Dimension 2* | *Visit social studies standard:* <br><br> Review rule and law definitions and examples (IE: ask before going to the bathroom at school). <br><br> Post the word *rule* on one side of the classroom and *law* on the other side. Read aloud scenarios for students to determine whether it is a rule or a law. Discuss and repeat. <br><br> Discussion: <br> 1. Do you think rules and laws are important? Why or why not? <br> 2. What might happen without rules and laws? <br> 3. What might happen if there were too many rules or laws? | *Text Talk Prompts:* <br><br> Page 28: Do you think her dad knows how much she wants to play the drums? Why do you think he keeps saying no, even though it makes her and sisters sad? <br><br> Page 31: Why do you think her dad decided to break the rule and let the drum dream girl have a chance to play the drums? | *Critical Literacy Strategy - Alternative Perspectives through Alternative Texts* <br><br> Today we are going to use a critical literacy strategy called Alternative Texts to see how another character might experience the story. We know how Drum Dream Girl sees the story, but what characters do we not know much about (IE: her dad, the boys in her community, her sisters)? <br><br> Select a character whose narrative is missing. Guide the class through re-imagining the story through that character. Discuss. | N/A | N/A |

Table 3

It is important for teachers to be aware that although discussion prompts and critical

literacy strategies have been selected within each lesson plan, they are intended to be used as a

guide. Teachers should apply critical stance and responsiveness to students' thinking and

discussion within each lesson as opposed to utilizing the lesson plan as a scripted lesson. Each

lesson in the five-day sequence builds upon each other in order to deepen students'

understanding and insights into the text and culminates in a discussion and activity that allows students to take action.

The curriculum created for this capstone will be implemented during the 2020-2021 school year in a first grade classroom, with aspirations for it to be implemented with all first grade classrooms in the elementary school of this capstone's author. The intention of this social studies curriculum is to incorporate social justice topics through the lens of critical literacy and read-alouds with first-grade learners.

**Curricular Design Process**

Through the author's professional development experiences and extensive research, *Understanding by Design (UbD)* by Wiggins and McTighe (2013) was selected as the research based model for the development of this curriculum. UbD relies on the notion of backward design, or *purposeful task analysis*, which requires educators to first consider the learning target and results sought prior to planning instruction. UbD argued that curriculum "should lay out the most effective ways of achieving results" as opposed to deriving results from previously created lessons and units (Wiggins & McTighe, 2013, p. 14).

There are three stages in backward design. Stage 1 involves identifying desired results. In this stage, curriculum designers ask what students should know, understand, and be able to do as a result of instruction. Stage 2 focuses on determining acceptable evidence. This involves the creation of common assessments in order for students to show evidence of learning outcomes and achievement. Stage 3 allows for learning experiences and instruction to be planned. Once clearly identified results and evidence of learning has been determined, curriculum planners are able to consider designing appropriate learning experiences and instruction. This stage of design also allows for intentional differentiation to occur (Wiggins & McTighe, 2013, p. 18).

The intention of the UbD process is to create a curriculum that fosters students'

development of a deep understanding of content as opposed to content knowledge. This concept

of deep understanding would allow students to transfer their learning, which would enable the

learner to apply their learning conceptually within real-world applications. Therefore, UbD

strives to create meaningful, life-long learning through backward design (Wiggins & McTighe,

2013, p. 14).

**Curricular Design Process Rationale**

The UbD curriculum design model was selected in an effort to ensure intentional,

methodical, and goal based instruction within the development of this project. Wiggins and

McTighe's (2013) backward design enabled the creation of a more effective and sustainable

curriculum that aims to provide life-long learning and understanding that enables students to

transfer learning within their everyday lives. Each social justice and social studies standard has

clear learning outcomes, which are outlined in the developed rubrics. Once developed, these

rubrics were transposed into each unit's instructional contingency where thoughtful instruction

was planned to ensure students could be successful with the desired learning outcomes. This

allowed for instruction to provide more meaningful and authentic learning experiences for

students as well as increase student achievement.

**Setting and Audience**

The setting for this project is a public school district in suburban, Midwestern Minnesota.

The population of the city is 64,400. The district accommodates eleven school buildings and

services approximately 8,875 students from preschool through twelfth grade in addition to

transitional programming that services students with disabilities from ages 18-21. Approximately

64% of students in the district identify as White/Caucasian, and 36% identify as students of

color. Approximately 25% of students in the district receive free or reduced lunch. In 2010, the district underwent boundary change in an effort to reduce concentrated poverty and increase academic achievement (Bridges, 2016). This is one of many changes the district has undergone in recent years to support an equity and diversity focused mission.

In the last five years, district leadership made personalized learning a main focus for educational change and reform. The district has successfully passed referendums approving 1:1 iPad devices to children in the elementary grades and 1:1 MacBook devices in secondary grades. The most recent referendum passed initiatives to move four year-old preschools into the elementary buildings as well as redesign learning in the high school to support capstone projects. These efforts are a part of the district's mission to create equitable educational opportunities and personalize learning.

Aside from referendum goals and initiatives, the district has adopted new programs including AVID and Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports in its quest towards instructional excellence. Educators in the district consistently receive professional development on the topics of equity, assessment, math and literacy best practices, replacement practices, and initiatives. The district's mission statement promises to inspire each student to reach personal fulfillment and contribute purposefully in our ever-changing world. This is supported by the district's dedication to developing teachers' effectiveness through professional development and ongoing learning opportunities.

The student audience that this social studies curriculum will be designed for are first-grade students attending one of the six elementary buildings in the district. The researcher is a first-grade teacher in this school, which has an enrollment of 825 students. The elementary

school is identified as a Title 1 School which results in additional funding and staffing from the state.

This elementary school serves 122 first-graders. There are six first-grade teachers with an average class size of twenty-two students. In addition to low class sizes, this setting also provides additional services through Reading Corp programming and Title-1 intervention.

In the 2019-2020 school year, the targeted audience for this curriculum identified as 31.1% White/Caucasian, 41% Asian, 13.1% Black or African American, 8.2% Latino, 4.9% as two or more races, and 1.6% American Indian or Alaskan. The two dominant racial/ethnic groups include Asian, with a strong Indian presence, as well as White/Caucasian. Of the 122 students, twenty-two of the first-graders were assessed for ELL services with seven students qualifying for support. Seven students received Special Education services and approximately twenty-five students were recipients of free or reduced lunch.

The intended audience of this project is the researcher's first-grade class in the 2020-2021 school year. Approximately 22 students between the ages of six and seven will participate in the piloting of the curriculum proposal. One class was selected in order to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum within the piloting year. These students will participate in critical literacy lesson plans, discussions, and projects. The effectiveness of the curriculum will be evaluated through the formative and summative assessments designed for the curriculum. Eventually, the goal for this curriculum is for the intended audience to expand to all first-grade classrooms in the district.

**Project Timeline**

The research question for this project was designed in April of 2020, with the literary research and analysis taking place between April and June 2020. Following the literature analysis process, the curriculum development process was initiated in June 2020.

Once this information was organized and compiled, the curriculum was created using Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design process (2013). The unit sequences, themes, assessment rubrics, lesson plan templates, social justice text selections, and lesson plans were carefully curated and designed in close collaboration with the content reviewer, for the implementation within a first grade setting. The curriculum was written between June and August 2020, with the intention of the curriculum being implemented in a first grade classroom during the 2020-2021 school year.

**Project Assessment**

This curriculum is intended for classroom teachers and students, with social studies and social justice standards being assessed at the end of each unit.  The assessments will be implemented and used by the classroom teacher in order to guide and adapt future instruction. The social studies standards are assessed via sentence stems, open ended questioning, and image prompts.  The social justice standards are assessed via a rubric intended to be used for grades kindergarten through second, in which proficiency is the goal for the end of second grade. Students will be assessed upon the social justice rubrics at the end of each unit in which the standard is assessed, and again cumulatively at the end of the school year in which all units have been taught.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter three provided a project description in relation to the research compiled in chapter two. This chapter also provided an analysis of the curricular framework chosen to design

the project. It included a rationale for the curricular design framework selection. The chapter

included descriptions of the district, school, and audience for which the project was designed as

well as the timeline for the project's creation and implementation. The aforementioned

information helps outline the research project in which a first grade social studies curriculum was

designed with critical literacy methodology, elementary read aloud best practices, and social

justice children's literature.

Chapter four of this capstone includes a personal reflection of the project based on my

literature analysis, writing, and findings. The forthcoming chapter explores possible implications

and limitations of the project as well as its contributions to the education profession. Finally,

chapter four provides a summary outlining the conclusions drawn from the completion of this

project.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Your vision will become clear only when you can look inside your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens. - Carl Jung*

**Introduction**

This capstone focused on providing an answer to the question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* As a result of my research and curriculum development, I discovered that in order to teach primary learners in such a way, teachers must be committed to ongoing personal growth and development. Critical literacy and social justice are two elements that require ongoing work within critical competence and empathy, which ultimately cannot be scripted into a curriculum. Therefore, the developed curriculum project acts as a framework in which teachers may adjust and revise text selections and instructional strategies as a result of their personal growth and reflection upon their individual critical stance.

In the previous chapters, I discussed the literature review and project design to answer the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* In chapter one, my personal and professional context were explored in addition to the goals of this capstone project. Chapter two shared a thorough analysis of the literature published about critical literacy, read-alouds, and picture books for social justice. Chapter three contained an overview of the proposed curriculum project as well as an overview and rationale for the design process selected for creating the curriculum, Wiggins and McTighe's (2013) *Understanding by Design (UbD).* The chapter also provided information regarding the setting, audience, assessment process, and timeline for which the project will be implemented.

Lastly, chapter four shares my reflections as a result of the capstone project. This chapter identifies my major learnings and highlights beneficial information found in the literature review that I found to be vital to the successful creation of the curriculum project. It provides implications and limitations of the project, recommendations for future opportunities and research, and its benefits to the field of education. Finally, it includes an overview of the chapter and a conclusion to this project.

**Major Learnings**

As a result of the capstone project process, I developed my skills and understandings of myself as a writer and learner. During the process, two elements stood out as most memorable to this development: personal reflection and collaboration.

*Personal Reflection*

Throughout the capstone process, I found myself constantly reflecting upon myself as a writer and learner. The reflection cycle within the paper and curriculum components were in constant motion and never truly ended.

The beginning of the capstone process revolved heavily around literature analysis and writing. As a former English literature major, I found myself having to relearn everything I believed I already knew about academic writing such as American Psychological Association's academic formatting, narrative voice, and proper verb tenses. While my writing required significant attention, I was grateful to have prior experiences with my research topic. As I began to review literature on critical literacy, familiar names such as Paulo Freire and Vivian Vasquez quickly appeared. I felt somewhat at ease because I was able to find peer reviewed journals and articles as well as texts that built upon and added to my initial understandings within critical literacy, read-alouds, and social justice within picture books. Although some of my research

topics had been covered within the professional development coursework in my current professional setting, it has been seven years since I completed my undergraduate degree. Soon, I realized how quickly the research for educational topics and best practices in this profession evolves and grows. Therefore, I initially felt overwhelmed by how much information I did not know and would need to include to ensure a well-rounded research paper. I committed myself to learning as much as I could within the duration of the capstone process, and am dedicated to the ongoing learning that will occur following the completion of the process.

Following my research, I continued to revise and reflect upon my writing - especially within the literature review. I discovered that my paper was always evolving as a result of the research and learnings that occurred alongside the creation of the curriculum project, especially as I came to depend on certain research and authors for my content development. As my new learnings and deeper understandings added to the literature review, I realized that my personal beliefs as an educator and the lens in which I view the world were changing as well. Vivan Vasquez (2017) correctly identified critical literacy  as "a frame through which to participate in the world," which has led me to engage with the world around me in a new way (p. 3).

In addition to the paper component of this capstone, I constantly reflected upon the development process of the curriculum. I quickly became frustrated by my realization that I may not be able to create a fully balanced and equitable curriculum due to the limitations within text selections and time restraints. As I selected texts, I continued finding new titles that I thought might be more impactful as an anchor text as opposed to a supplemental text. It was difficult to initiate the lesson planning process at times as I continued to wonder if a more effective text might still be discovered. Even once lesson planning was initiated, I would revise the critical literacy strategies I selected within an anchor text in hopes to make each lesson contingency

more effective or memorable. This led me to realize that within the process of creating critical literacy and social justice instruction, perfection is not attainable nor realistic. Critical literacy is a responsive framework that adapts to the student audience as discussion occurs and evolves. I found myself returning to lesson plans for revision of critical literacy discussion prompts and instructional strategies; however, while the prompts are suggestions, they could not be scripted because critical literacy at its roots states that it cannot be scripted. This understanding allowed me to give myself some grace during the planning and writing process.

### *Collaboration*

Within the writing element of this capstone, I discovered the importance of collaboration. As a learner in the past, I have always engaged in discussion with others to further my understanding.  However, I typically relied on my personal knowledge, understandings, and beliefs to create or adapt instruction. This project helped me realize how important the collaboration process truly is - especially when the product being created has the power to affect a large audience.

The curriculum development process is an area in which collaboration felt most important. As I selected anchor texts, wrote rubrics, and designed lesson contingencies, I found the insights of my content and peer reviewers to be of utmost importance. It is difficult to write a curriculum for a large audience while striving to disrupt your personal implicit biases because oftentimes it requires an outside perspective for such revelations.  I discovered that curriculums truly need the insights, expertise, and opinions of numerous professionals in order to interrupt bias within the development process so that a curriculum can be equitable and responsive to the student audience.

Another area that required significant collaboration within the curriculum process was the development of academic rubrics to guide student proficiency expectations. Initially, I intended to plug in the academic standards as written in order to determine proficiency. While reflecting with my content reviewer, I realized that my rubrics needed to reflect my goals for the curriculum: translating the academic standards with a critical lens. This required numerous revisions in which I collaborated with my content reviewer for an additional perspective to ensure critically competent proficiency expectations. Collaboration within this process acted as a variation of a checks and balances process, which proved to be beneficial and effective.

**Revisiting the Literature**

The literature surrounding critical literacy, read-alouds, and social justice themes in picture books had a profound impact on the development of my project. The elements that held significant importance included interactive read-alouds, critical stance, critical literacy instructional strategies, and text selections.

*Interactive Read-Alouds*

Fountas and Pinnell's research surrounding interactive read-alouds provided the base in which the instruction for my curriculum was designed. Fountas and Pinnell (2017) outlined six components to the interactive read-aloud: selection and preparation, opening, reading aloud with embedded text talk, record of reading, and written or artistic response (p. 12). This structure lent itself to each element in my project: critical literacy, social justice themes, and picture books. The viability of this structure was evident due to the ease of incorporating social studies standards instruction through the opening, meaningful text talk embedded during each reading, daily inclusion of critical literacy strategies during discussion and self evaluation, and space for reflection and taking action through the written or artistic response component. Furthermore, the

structure of interactive read-alouds lends itself to lingering, a critical literacy strategy that

Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) and Vasquez (2017) promote. Vasquez (2017) stated that

repeated experiences with a text provides students more critical opportunities to make

connections, apply different lenses for reading the text, and time to revise and refine thinking

surrounding different issues, topics, and events (p. 31).

There were many reasons for using Fountas and Pinnell's research on interactive read-

aloud, but perhaps most important is the ability for students to fully engage in comprehending

and discussing texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p. 12). The interactive read-aloud releases

students from decoding a text which promotes deeper levels of comprehension including the

ability for students to immerse themselves and explore a variety of topics across content areas,

examine a range of social issues, explore different cultures and kinds of family life, learn about

human problems and history, as well as expand their vocabulary (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017, p.

13). Ultimately, the interactive read-aloud is an ideal structure because it enables critical literacy

instruction to occur.

### *Critical Stance*

The most important component of the literature review within my curriculum project

development was the concept of critical stance. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015),

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), and Vasquez (2017) identified a teacher's personal level of

becoming critically literate, or critical stance, as an imperative component within teaching

critical literacy, one that cannot be read aloud like a script. Vasquez (2017) stated that critical

literacy is "a frame through which to participate in the world," and not simply an add-on (p. 3).

In order to develop a critical stance, teachers must engage in an ongoing process that involves

learning, understanding, and changing over time through means such as engaging in self-critical

practices, being open to possibilities, developing theoretical, research, and pedagogical repertoires, and changing with time and circumstances (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 33). This means that teachers must be on a journey toward personal critical competency in order to apply critical literacy strategies and discussion prompts within lesson planning. Critical stance is also necessary within lesson implementation as teachers help facilitate critical discussions with students. A critical stance disables the application of the same discussion prompts and instructional strategies from one text to another, because the discussion should be tailored to the given text as well as responsive to student discourse.

I found critical stance to be vital within each step of the curriculum design process. Although the concept of critical stance took up limited space within the literature review, I found that critical literacy instruction cannot be designed or facilitated without it. I believe it could be difficult for teachers to apply a critical literacy curriculum, such as the one I created, without having knowledge or development of their own critical stance.

### *Critical Literacy Instructional Strategies*

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) proposed numerous critical literacy strategies in their text *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text*. This became a resource I relied on for applying critical literacy in my lesson plans. Within each lesson contingency, I applied five critical literacy strategies for each day of instruction. After identifying each lesson's focus dimension, I applied strategies such as problem posing questions, switching, and alternative texts to further students' understanding and analysis of each text.

In my voting unit, I chose *Grace for President* as the first anchor text. In the first lesson, I identified Dimension 1: Disrupt the Commonplace as the focus dimension. The intention of the lesson is for students to understand the author's intentions and biases within the text. As a result,

I applied problem posing questions, as outlined by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) such as: What gender does our author seem to think is most important - boys or girls? Who is telling the story? Do we learn much about Thomas - why do you think that is? What does the author want us to think is important? (IE: females in the presidency, hard work). As a result, students will be able to determine their thoughts and feelings about the author's intentions.

Another McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) strategy I used is called switching (p. 47). In the Holidays of Our World unit, I selected *The Gift of Ramadan* as the first anchor text. The focus dimension was Dimension 2: Multiple Perspectives, in which the intention is for students to understand the story from another perspective than what is shown in the text. I applied a setting switch, where the character Sophia would experience Ramadan at school as opposed to her home. When the character is at home, she is able to fast, pray, and nap with her family's support. By applying a setting switch, Sophia may experience Ramadan differently. This lesson promotes deeper thinking and understanding as students come to understand how a character's perspective or experience might change as a result of their setting.

### *Text Selection*

The literature analysis provided guidelines and requirements for selecting texts for social justice instruction and critical literacy. Throughout the creation of the project, I referred to Derman-Sparks' (2020) work regarding social justice themes as well as Lewison, Leland, and Harste's four dimensions of critical literacy as interpreted by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) for text selection. Derman-Sparks' (2020) research led me to seek additional resources for identifying available social justice texts that proved to be invaluable: www.socialjusticebooks.org and www.teachingtolerance.org. These resources were helpful in the text identification process for social justice themes. As soon as I found texts that fit into each

social justice theme, I analyzed the texts' responsiveness to other selection guidelines and requirements.

As I began the text analysis process, I found myself reflecting upon Sharroky Hollie's (2018) work, *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogies,* which I became familiar with as a result of my coursework within Hamline University's MALed degree requirements. I felt that I could not commit to final text selections without analyzing each anchor text for cultural and linguistic responsiveness and authenticity. While my literature review did not share requirements or guidelines for culturally and linguistically authentic texts, I referenced Hollie's work in an effort to ensure authentic representations that would not perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations of singular communities.

Alongside social justice themes, the four dimensions of critical literacy, and Hollie's (2018) culturally and linguistically authentic text guidelines, I reviewed each anchor text for its application to the identified academic standards, age appropriateness, and students' interests. As a result, selecting a single anchor text for each social studies unit was incredibly difficult. The curriculum felt unbalanced, left significant room for critical discussion, and needed lesson expansion within the social studies standards. Therefore, I selected two anchor texts per unit in order to create a more equitable curriculum. Once I selected twenty-two anchor texts, I felt content with the social justice themes and cultural representation - until, I weighed the gender representation. Within social justice issues, I discovered women's narratives were far more prevalent than men's. As a result, I included a supplemental text spreadsheet within the curriculum in order to ensure that teachers are able to address more perspectives and narratives within each standard. It is important to share that the anchor text selections are tailored to an

identified first-grade classroom, and should be reviewed and revised by each individual teacher to ensure the texts are responsive to their individual classrooms and communities.

**Policy and District Implications**

One implication of this project is the Minnesota Department of Education's review and revision of academic standards. The current social studies standards were revised in 2011, which means they will likely be updated in the upcoming years. As standards are edited and revised, this may cause a need for rubrics and assessments to be adapted within the curriculum.

Another implication of this project involves mandated curriculums and the fidelity with which they must be administered. Schools and districts typically adopt curriculums in which various levels of fidelity are mandated or required by district leaders. If a school were to adopt a social studies curriculum that requires fidelity, teachers may not be able to use this curriculum. In that scenario, teachers may have to find creative ways in which to apply critical literacy and social justice texts within the school day.

Lastly, the funding of texts could be another implication. This project asks for districts to fund the purchase of social justice texts to support instruction, especially if the texts are unavailable in school libraries. Many teachers may find themselves purchasing anchor and supplemental texts on their own in order to ensure equitable and authentic representations of social identities and topics for each thematic unit. School or district budgets should be expanded to provide access to the anchor texts and supplemental texts identified within the curriculum.

**Project Limitations**

As previously mentioned, acquiring the anchor and supplemental texts could be difficult for some educators. This curriculum is founded upon interactive read-alouds which relies upon

having picture books available for instruction. If a district, school, or teacher does not have access to the suggested texts, it would prove to be problematic for implementation.

Another limitation is the lack of published books including authentic and diverse representations. The text selections for social justice and critical literacy require texts to be responsive to social justice themes as well as the four dimensions of critical literacy. Additionally, texts should include authentic representations of social identities such as race, gender, and cultures. As teachers strive to ensure their anchor texts are responsive to their unique classroom, they may discover that the texts have not yet been published.

A third limitation involves the planning process. Some teachers may need to substitute anchor texts in order to be responsive to their student audience. As a result, teachers would need to apply critical stance, embedded text talk, and critical literacy strategies that are tailored to the newly selected anchor text. Teachers may have limited planning time to select texts and apply the interactive read-aloud framework with critical literacy strategies due to not knowing their classroom audience prior to the start of each school year. Even though my efforts were to create a balanced curriculum, some students' identities in classrooms may not be represented for all teacher environments.

Lastly, teacher and administrator attitudes may affect the viability of this project. Due to the reflective nature of critical literacy, some teachers may not invest in the critical stance cycle that is required to effectively implement this curriculum. Additionally, teachers and administrators might feel uncomfortable discussing social justice topics within their classrooms. This curriculum emphasizes courageous discourse in order to interrupt bias. Teachers and administrators that feel uncertain about these topics and conversations could limit the effectiveness or use of this project.

**Future Research and Recommendations**

As a result of this project, I found children's literature to be an area that needs significant expansion. There is a critical need for picture books to be published that are wholly representative of social identities and social justice themes. In my text selection process, I spent an inordinate amount of time searching for, selecting, and analyzing texts for responsiveness and authenticity to social identities and social justice themes. As a result, I found that numerous perspectives and narratives were missing. It was particularly difficult to find picture books representing ethnic communities such as Somali, Pakistani, Iranian, Hmong, Native American as well as cultural diversity for students wearing sikhs, hijabs, and henna, which limited my ability to honor each student in my classroom. I suggest that publishers increase their representation of minority authors and communities in picture books.

Another recommendation I have as a result of this capstone process is the inclusion of critical literacy within professional development and training for educators. Throughout my work, I found numerous benefits to applying critical literacy practices within all grade levels. However, critical literacy does not seem to be a current focus for professional development, notably within my professional setting. I believe that professional development and training is an important area for expansion in order to support teachers in applying critical literacy practices and developing a critical stance which will affirm student identities, develop critical thinking skills, and support students' abilities to critically evaluate the world around them for justice.

**Communicating Results**

First and foremost, I believe presenting this project to my colleagues at Hamline University will provide a larger audience for promoting my curriculum outside my current work setting. The presentation allows me an opportunity to promote critical literacy and social justice

themes across grade levels, but especially in the primary grades where many teachers may feel uncertain whether it is appropriate to teach such concepts. This presentation could open up a discussion in which teachers will reflect upon their current instructional practices and beliefs, and open up to new ideas in an effort to validate, affirm, and empower their students.

Additionally, the results of this curriculum will be communicated within weekly grade-level professional learning committee meetings. At these meetings, teachers will discuss curriculum implementation, unit assessments, rubrics, and texts. These items should be analyzed for effectiveness within instruction and responsiveness to students. As a result teachers can collaborate to enhance each member's critical stance as well as revise instruction to increase student achievement. These meetings may also provide an opportunity for teachers to communicate results and collaborate with district literacy specialists and AVID coordinators, if accessible, to analyze content for effectiveness and promote the application of critical literacy and social justice within other content areas. Once the curriculum has been implemented, I hope to collaborate with my principal to share my learning with the entire school staff.

**Benefits to the Profession**

This curriculum fills an important void in the field of education and our communities; it provides teachers and students a lens in which to critically evaluate the world around us for justice and a podium to advocate for social injustices. The intention of the curriculum is to bring awareness to the biases of texts as well as represent the social identities and social justice themes that impact our society. As a result, it is my hope that students will feel validated and affirmed within their personal identities as well as empowered and emboldened as they read the world with a critical lens.

Many curriculums developed and sold by large education companies are ready-made which allows teachers to implement instruction without having to spend time within the planning process. Teachers often feel limited for time, so while this may be an effective advertising strategy, it is not necessarily best practice. In addition to the scripted aspect of these curriculums, districts often advise teachers to implement instruction with fidelity in hopes of achieving the mandated curriculum's promised results of academic achievement. Ultimately this diminishes teachers' ability to be responsive to students - and most significantly- lack the flexibility to apply critical stance. This could disrupt students' identity development and one's ability to find relevance and importance within instruction.

Currently, there seems to be a void in which published curriculums promote critical literacy as a vital component of instruction. Critical literacy is a framework in which to see the world, and therefore cannot be written into a scripted curriculum. However, the curriculum I have developed provides a thematic guide, rubrics, assessments, a framework for lessons as well as anchor and supplemental text suggestions and critical literacy strategies. The developed curriculum provides structure and flexibility, while promoting teachers' development of critical stance and responsiveness to their unique student audience and the community at large.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter four of this capstone shared my final reflections upon the major learnings, foundational and current literature, as well as the curriculum project that were analyzed and developed as a part of this capstone project. Together, these elements helped answer the research question: *how can primary-elementary teachers use critical literacy and read-alouds to teach social justice to young learners?* This chapter shared how the capstone process molded my major learnings as a writer and learner as well as reviewed the literature surrounding critical literacy

theory, interactive read-alouds, and social justice in children's books that was pivotal to the development and success of the culminating curriculum project. Finally, this chapter identified implications and limitations of the project, recommendations for future opportunities and research, and the benefits of this project to the field of education.

This process resulted in an evolution within my writing and learning. I have developed a critical stance and will continue my journey towards critical competence in an effort to implement effective and equitable critical literacy instruction in my first grade classroom. Furthermore, I have developed a deeper understanding of how to integrate social justice themes into instruction with young learners, through which I have acquired texts that are representative of my students and community, and can now more fully affirm and validate learners. I hope my curriculum provides a helpful guide for first grade teachers as they navigate critical literacy and social justice in their own classrooms. I also hope this project inspires others to develop similar curriculums for other grade levels. My biggest aspiration for this project is for courageous conversations to occur with my students in which each student develops empathy, a critical lens in which to read their world, and inspires each to take action against injustice within their own lives.

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