Anti-Bias Multicultural Education Using Children’s Literature

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Abstract

This action research project was completed to test the effects of reading and discussing multicultural children’s literature on young children’s positive self-concept and appreciation of human differences. The setting was a Montessori primary (preK-K) classroom of 18 children, ages two years 10 months to five years 10 months. Ten children were White, four were biracial, three were Asian American, and one was Latin American. Data was collected using a tally sheet, picture test, self-concept test, discussion log, and self-assessment journal. Readings took place each day and books centered on topics such as individuality, race, skin color, diversity, inclusion, and activism. The results indicated that children did show a decrease in negative attitudes towards human differences and an increase in positive attitudes towards human differences throughout the intervention. The action plan implications conclude that the study could be conducted with a narrower focus and within an intersectional framework.

Keywords: Montessori, children’s literature, multicultural, anti-bias
Every other Saturday, I pay a visit to the children’s section of my neighborhood public library. I fill two large canvas bags with children’s picture books, diverse in genre, topic, reading level, and illustration style. I choose books on concrete mixers, ballet class, stegosaurus, and Henri Matisse. I pick up a book of Irish children’s poetry, a book about tornadoes, a book that is a song about peace, and a wordless book about a girl who collects wildflowers. For the next two weeks, the books will belong to the reading nook in my Montessori preschool/kindergarten classroom, also called a Children’s House. Though it is a work item on my weekend to-do list, checking out library books for my classroom is a chore I enjoy. A remnant of my childhood self still delights in running my hand along the gleaming, brightly colored spines in the children’s stacks. I love turning the pages of picture books, absorbing the unique interplay of text and illustration and the surprise of the story as it unfolds.

As I select books, I consider representation. I want to check out books that depict a diverse array of families, races, ethnicities, gender roles and identities, and abilities. The children in my classroom come from households that reflect the heterogeneity of families in the United States: families with same-sex parents, families with one or more parents of color, families with parents who are divorced, families with members in non-traditional gender roles, immigrant families, and families of various ethnicities, races, and religious practices are represented in the classroom. Most of the children’s books in the library, though, depict people who are White, able-bodied, and hegemonic by all definitions. Finding books that tell stories about People of Color, I discovered, required hunting and digging. After months of combing through the library shelves, I became
frustrated at the challenge of finding high-quality children’s books about people from diverse backgrounds.

I wanted books that not only represented children of different backgrounds, but that openly and directly addressed issues of race, racism, injustice, tolerance, and social change. I had become alarmed, but not surprised, by intolerant attitudes and disdainful comments about human differences that I occasionally overheard in the Children’s House. With acts of hate speech, violence, racism, and discrimination announced daily in the local and national news, it seemed inevitable that prejudicial attitudes would materialize in the microcosm of the classroom. In past shared reading experiences with children, I had found that children often disclose their beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes towards others in conversation with the subject of a book. In my experience, reading and discussing children’s books with a young child is about their ideas as much as it is about the contents of the book itself. Could reading and discussing select children’s picture books encourage children to challenge stereotypes and critique institutions of systemic racism? I was led by this question to pursue an action research project in my classroom environment.

The intervention was held at a private Montessori school in a middle-class urban neighborhood. Eighteen children from ages two years ten months to five years ten months were included in the study. Approximately one-third of the children in the intervention spoke English as a second language. At the beginning of the intervention, 16 students, 10 girls and six boys, were in the class. Nine children were White, three were Asian American, three were biracial, and one was Latin American. Two new students (one

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1 To maintain inclusive language regarding gender identity, the singular “they” is used to refer to an individual child in this paper.
biracial, one White) joined the class mid-intervention. I am a White, 30-year-old woman from a middle-class background and the lead teacher and researcher in the classroom. Also in the classroom was my assistant, a White former public elementary school teacher in her 50s. The intervention lasted six weeks, from January 15 to February 22, 2019.

In executing this intervention, I hoped to discover practices for identifying high-quality diverse children’s books and learn effective reading methodologies to engage children on topics of race, racism, and human differences. In methodically reading and discussing an array of anti-bias multicultural children’s books, I wished to dispel negative attitudes towards human differences observed in my classroom and replace them with a more respectful and appreciative outlook on human diversity. Dr. Montessori (1949) wrote, “the child is both a hope and a promise for mankind” (p. 28). To advance humankind, Dr. Montessori argued that we must begin with and invest in the child above all else. As a Montessori educator, I aspire to Montessori’s vision of justice for all. Through my intervention, I sought to align myself with Montessori’s aspirations, providing young children with the knowledge and language to envision and create a more just world.

**Theoretical Framework**

The research in this intervention is informed by the philosophy of critical pedagogy. Developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972), critical pedagogy asserts that the function of education in an inequitable society is to promote justice and equality for all. Freire (1972) warned educators against a “banking” model of education which regards students as empty vessels that educators “deposit” knowledge into. As passive participants in the educational process, students in the banking educational system
become desensitized to social inequalities and learn to accept and internalize the status quo (Freire, 1972). Instead, Freire (1972) argued that learning should be a dynamic exchange between teacher and students, in which students play an active role in their education. Open-ended dialogue between students and teacher with joint questioning, analyzing, and exchanging cultivates in students what Freire (1972) refers to as *critical consciousness*, or the capacity to distinguish and critique personal, political, and economic oppression.

Using the philosophy of critical pedagogy, Lee, Menkart, and Okazawa-Rey (2008) advised educators to introduce lessons that (1) address students’ life experience and understanding of an issue, (2) give nuance and complexity to the issue, (3) provide different teaching methods for various learning styles, (3) cultivate student’s individual and collective agency, and (4) inspire a sense of hope. In addressing issues related to race and racism, Lee, Menkart, and Okazawa-Rey (2008) added that teachers should provide lessons that (1) counter stereotypes and question misinformation about People of Color, (2) reveal the systemic and historical roots of racism and its adverse effects on both People of Color and White people, and (3) acknowledge the existence of racism and the injustice it has and continues to cause.

The classroom in which I teach is situated in an educational system, neighborhood, city, state, and country founded on White supremacy. Following critical pedagogy, I wanted to provide opportunities in the classroom for children to critique the structures that preserve injustice in the United States and encourage children to generate ideas and actions for creating a more just world. Through dialogue about literature, students can critique society, ask questions about the world, and develop confidence in
their ability to articulate their perspectives (Short, 2012). Short (2012) argued that dialogue about literature teaches students tolerance for differences in opinion and provides students the opportunity to defend their perspectives without disrespecting another’s beliefs. For similar reasons, Freire (1972) asserted that dialogue has the power to produce transformation and revolution. In the following section, I will examine the approach past researchers have taken to anti-racist teaching in the early education environment with varying results.

**Review of Literature**

This review of literature analyzes how past researchers have approached anti-bias multicultural (AB/MC) curriculum in the early education environment. Curricula that challenge stereotypes and discrimination in young children are examined, as are approaches to discussing these topics in an educational setting. In particular, this is an investigation of past research that uses children’s literature as a vehicle for addressing differences among peoples. This review explores approaches for eliciting engaging conversations about identity, diversity, and race in early childhood settings through reading and discussing children’s literature, and the benefits of dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1998) as outlined in the "Question with CARE" approach (Committee for Children, 2004). Children’s picture books can be used as a springboard for engaging young children in a critical exploration of their ideas and attitudes towards race, racism, and human differences (Kemple, Lee, and Harris, 2016). As young children investigate race and racism through shared reading experiences, they begin the practice of challenging stereotypes, realizing injustices, and questioning the racial status quo, a
prerequisite for the anti-racist attitudes that motivate advocacy (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Kemple, Lee, and Harris, 2016).

**Clarification of Terms**

As Kailin (2002) noted, biologically, there is just one race—the human race. Decades of research in fields such as evolutionary biology, genetics, and anthropology have concluded that racial groups are not genetically distinct, measurable, or scientifically significant (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The Human Genome Project revealed that genetic variations between races are less than those within racial groups (Brown, 2002). The term *race* is, therefore, a socially and politically constructed concept (Kailin, 2002; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Castagno, 2014). Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) described race as an ideology established in economic and historical power relationships based on false scientific beliefs of genetic traits. The fact that people invented race, however, does not invalidate its societal significance or implications on individuals (Castagno, 2014). Rustin acknowledged race’s contradiction as simultaneous omnipotent and artificial, stating that race is “both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization” (quoted by Morrison, 1993: p. xi). Despite the fallacy of biological racial categories, race plays a significant role in the treatment, privileges, and disadvantages of all people residing in the United States and all aspects of society (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006). Aboud (1988) defined racial prejudice as a negative judgment or opinion of people from a racial group because of their race.

Racism in the United States is not only, or even predominantly, attitudes of prejudice harbored by some individuals toward specific groups of people (Castagno,
Racism, as defined by Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011), is a systemic and pervasive force that privileges people identified as White and disadvantages those who are not White. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) defined White people as all people of European ancestry who benefit from systems of racism in the United States, noting that this classification encompasses people of numerous ethnicities and nationalities. Castagno (2014) argued that racial dominance is central to Whiteness, and the purpose of Whiteness is to maintain the status quo of White power and privilege while claiming a pretense of neutrality. White children learning “Whiteness” contributes to the perpetuation of systemic racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

Racism generates and maintains hierarchies of subjection and oppression (Castagno, 2014). Deeply rooted in American history, the effects of systemic racism significantly influence the direct and indirect treatment of all persons in the United States. Pervasive systems of oppression fundamentally disadvantage People of Color in areas of economic opportunity, neighborhood and community safety, access to high-quality health care and education, to name a few (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) defined People of Color as groups of people who are systemically disadvantaged by structures of institutional racism, which encompasses a range of ethnicities and cultures including African Americans, Arab Americans, Asian Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islander Americans.

**Systemic Racism and Young Children**

It is commonly believed that young children do not notice racial differences or discriminate based on race or ethnicity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Wolpert 2006). In fact, children notice and are curious about differences in physical characteristics from
a young age (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Research shows that children are aware of racial differences during infancy (Kelly et al., 2007), and most children have a basic understanding of race by age three (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Aboud, 2008; Katz, 2003; Ramsey & Williams, 2003). As small children begin to discern physical differences associated with race, they absorb attitudes towards themselves and others from their family, peers, culture, media, and environment (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Wolpert, 2006; Gopaul-McNicol, 1988). If children are not given opportunities to challenge the dominant culture’s discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, they will internalize them (Wolpert, 2006). Research shows that children’s racial prejudices begin in early childhood, typically between three and six years of age (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011), and increase in the early elementary years (Seefeldt, 1995).

Institutional racism can sabotage healthy development in the preschool years, interfering with young children’s development of a positive self-concept and sense of empathy (Derman-Sparks, 2006). Research shows that older children are less likely to counter racial bias than younger children (Tatum, 1992). Kailin (2002) argued that older children are more tolerant of racial prejudice because they have taken part in systems of racial oppression for a longer period of time than younger children, and have already come to internalize racial inequality as the norm. Early childhood anti-racist education can supply children with the social, linguistic, and intellectual tools for recognizing and opposing racial prejudices encountered in their world (Husband, 2011; Tatum, 1992). From a young age, children can develop positive attitudes towards human diversity and learn to treat all human beings with respect (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Kemple, Lee, and Harris, 2016). By incorporating AB/MC curriculum in the classroom, children
can develop positive social identities based on personal strengths and interests rather than racial hierarchies (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

As young children develop their self-concept, reasoning mind, and social skills, systemic racism plays a profound role in shaping their feelings about themselves and their fledgling racial identity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). As members of one of the most diverse societies in the world, American children encounter diversity in many forms: differences in home language, culture, socioeconomic status, education level, gender identity, religious beliefs, level of disability, physical characteristics, and, of course, race (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Young children in the United States are absorbing a world of differences, witnessing a vast assortment of skin color, vocal tone, facial features, physical proportions, and so on. Despite an increasingly diverse society, many early educators consider children “too young” to take part in meaningful conversations about race before first grade (Husband, 2010). Others are simply uncomfortable engaging children in discussions about race, or uncertain how to go about doing so (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011).

Children’s ideas about people of different backgrounds are affected by environmental factors and influenced by the attitudes of their parents and peers (Aboud, 1993; Bigler & Liben, 2007; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Children absorb patterns of racial privilege presented in news stories, images in the media, and the adults’ attitudes (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Montessori (1949) wrote of the enormous role a child's environment plays in their development from birth to six years of age. During the first six years of life, children's special mental powers allow them to unconsciously absorb their environment into the fabric of their being (Montessori, 1949). Montessori
(1949) wrote, "Impressions do not merely enter [the child's] mind; they form it. They incarnate themselves in him" (p. 25). Systemic racism and other forms of oppression are captured by the young child’s absorbent mind, which does not discriminate or judge (Montessori, 1949). Van Ausdale and Faegin (2001) stated that children are not only absorbing and mirroring but are also active participants in the process of their own socialization, synthesizing elements of their environment into their understanding of persons with differing backgrounds. With each new generation, Van Ausdale and Faegin wrote (2001), young children “help to build or rebuild a racialized society with their own hands and materials learned from the adult world surrounding them” (p. 21).

Many researchers and theorists have examined the root of children's expressed White racial preference. Early studies on racial prejudice revealed that Black children often expressed a desire to be White, while young White children did not show a wish to be Black (Clark & Clark, 1947; Morland, 1958, Radke, Trager, & Davis, 1948). More recent studies (Van Ausdale & Fagen, 2001; Spencer 2010 as cited in Kareem 2010) supported the notion that White superiority is incorporated into the early identity of White preschoolers. Research by Van Ausdale and Faegin (2001) uncovered instances of White children associating Whiteness with being an American. A study from CNN found that both White and Black children express a bias towards White people, though Black children's prejudice was not as strong (Spencer 2010 as cited in Kareem 2010).

**The “Colorblind” Approach**

Many strategies for discussing race in early childhood education settings have been used with varying outcomes. The “colorblind” approach to race entered public discourse after segregation laws were outlawed in the United States in the 1950s
(Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). The “I don’t see color” claim, perhaps intended to express an attitude of racial equality, in fact, ignores the historical and current realities of racism in the United States (Faegin, 2000; Husband 2011; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Many researchers (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Boutte et al., 2011; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) have called into question this philosophy. Research shows that children themselves are not colorblind about skin color, nor are they oblivious about race (Earick 2009; Boutte et al., 2011; Ramsey 2009). Past researchers argued that the colorblind approach, which may appear neutral at first glance, ignores the realities of systemic racism, even supporting systems of racial oppression (Kailin, 2002). When parents and educators do not acknowledge the role of racial prejudice in society, children develop a “magical” or false consciousness about race and racism (Freire, 1972). Also, past research uncovered bias in early childhood educators who considered themselves colorblind (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Gillian, 2005; Mednick & Ramsey, 2008). If young children mimic adults’ silence about race and are discouraged from discussing and analyzing their understanding of racial identity, it is likely they will cultivate racist attitudes (Boutte et al. 2011; Derman-Sparks 2008; Earick 2009). Baldwin (1962) wrote, “not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (p. BR11). When race and racism are not discussed or even acknowledged in school, White children and Children of Color receive the message that Whiteness is the norm, and Children of Color are not given the language or space to address the racism they experience (Van Ausdale & Faegin, 2001; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006).

The “Tourist” Approach
A second approach to multicultural education adopted by many early educators involves exposing young children to different cultures through diverse materials such as photographs, dolls, foods, and multicultural activities (Lee, Gamsey, & Sweeney, 2008). Such activities are often introduced during cultural or religious holidays and focus on a single celebration or specific event. Researchers warn that this “tourist approach” to multicultural curriculum often does not encourage deep conversations about cultural differences or invite children to question their ideas about diversity (Aboud & Levy 2000; Lee & Lee 2001; Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen 2007). The multicultural unit is often presented as "other," distinct from the regular curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Research by Day (1995) and Lee and Lee (2001) examined children’s reaction to multicultural materials, noting that the children were drawn to the novelty of the objects, but did seem to link the objects to an understanding of cultural differences. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) advise teachers to use caution in selecting and using multicultural materials in the classroom, as they can reinforce stereotypes and give children inaccurate depictions of racial and ethnic identities.

**An Alternative: Anti-Bias Multicultural (AB/MC) Education**

Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) and Sleeter and Grant (2009) advocate for an alternative to the colorblind and tourist approaches to multicultural education. In a culture of systemic racism, some researchers argue that it is not enough for early childhood educators to teach children to embrace diversity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Sleeter and Grant (2009) contended that the term “multicultural” suggests the idea of “many cultures,” which fits with the portrait of the United States as a diverse, multicultural country, but ignores and discounts the role of systemic racism in
the national narrative. To challenge racism that is systemic and ubiquitous, educators must give children tools to develop positive identities based on individual strengths and interests, rather than false notions of racial superiority, and help children see the personal benefits of a culture that is free of systemic racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). An anti-racist approach to education acknowledges that racism exists and is furthered through the practices, teachings, and ideologies of schools and other public institutions (Husband, 2011). In response to a racially unjust system, an anti-racist educator invites children to adopt a critical lens on institutions of education (Kailin, 2002). Going further, Brandt (1986) argued that anti-racist education should instill an awareness of race and racism in children that is directly contrary to the traditional norms and ideologies about race as traditionally taught in schools. To inspire solidarity, Wolport (2006) argued that young children who are White should be taught about White people who have worked to fight racism. Rather than absorbing feelings of guilt about racism, Wolport (2006) argues, White children learn they can choose to take a stand against it.

Montessori (1949) observed that young children are concrete thinkers, best able to learn through physical encounters with their world mediated through their senses. Children in the Montessori environment are introduced to sensorial material that provides materialized abstraction so they may classify and categorize their world. Kemple, Lee, and Harris (2016) and Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) suggested beginning a discussion of race with observable differences children see in their immediate environment. Variations in skin color, eye color, hair texture, and facial features are apparent and intriguing to young children (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Discussing diversity that children observe in their environment, the researchers argued, prepares
children to understand and reflect upon human diversity beyond their immediate surroundings (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010).

From a young age, children can learn that differences between people and groups are to be celebrated and respected (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). To achieve such aims, Derman-Sparks and a group of early childhood educators developed an anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989) with four primary goals: (1) children will develop self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities, without feeling superior to anyone else; (2) children express comfort and joy with human diversity, use respectful language for discussing human differences, and express deep, nurturing human connections; (3) children can identify unfairness, discuss unfair and untrue ideas using appropriate language, and possess emotional empathy for unfair circumstances; and (4) children are empowered to act against instances and prejudices and unfairness in their environment.

Through an intentional, direct, and hands-on approach to discussing race with children in early education programs, the research suggested young children can develop an appreciation for human diversity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Perkins & Mebert, 2005; Kim, Wee, & Lee, 2016).

**Using Children’s Literature for Anti-Bias Aims**

When the text and images of a book present a picture of life that is accessible to the emotional, intellectual, and moral experience of a child, it is children's literature (Glazer, 1986). Children's picture books are useful tools for discussing identity, supporting moral development, and eliciting meaningful discussions of difficult topics in the classroom (Bishop 1990; Potter, Thirumurthy, Szecsi, & Salakaja, 2009). Through
literature, we can learn about one another and ourselves (Lee & Johnson, 2000; Bishop, 1990). Discussing international children’s literature can build community in the classroom, as children develop their own self-concept, gain an appreciation of those who are different from themselves, and embrace a sense of belonging in the school environment (Baldwin, 2018). Research shows that children’s literature can be used to incite conversations with young children about a range of social topics (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). For example, children's books have been employed in past research to support respectful attitudes toward persons with disabilities in young children (Favazza & Odom, 1997). Kemple, Lee, and Harris (2016) suggested reading children’s books in the early education classroom as a way to open the door to discussion about physical differences associated with race and prompt further learning experiences about diverse groups of people.

Bishop (1990) argued that multicultural children's literature serves as both mirrors and windows. As mirrors, literature allows children to see themselves reflected in a work of art. Through a book's illustration and story, the child can celebrate, honor, and validate their own identity and individual life experiences. Like windows, the child can explore stories, cultures, and adventures beyond the realm of his or her personal lived experience. The child can observe and appreciate the customs and traditions of other communities and peoples, meeting characters and learning about life experiences far his or her own family and community. Studies showed that multicultural activities and literature could encourage children to discuss and explore their attitudes towards human differences with teachers and peers, stimulating meaningful conversations in the classroom and challenging children’s assumed views (Chafel et al., 2007). In a Korean study, Kim, Wee,
and Lee (2016) found that reading multicultural children’s books changed Kindergarteners understanding of and attitudes towards racial diversity and helped children develop appropriate language for discussing race.

In examining several studies from the 1970s, Aboud and Levy (2000) found that children’s attitudes about diversity did not change simply from exposure to books about other groups of people. To counter prejudices, the researchers suggested, educators must engage children in a critical discussion of the material and present them with an alternative to the dominant culture’s discriminatory attitudes (Lee, Gamsey, & Sweeney, 2008). Rosenblatt (1991) stated that children’s response to a work of literature not only reflects the story but transforms it. Each reader interprets a text differently and responds to it in his or her own way (Rosenblatt, 1991). The teacher can use specific approaches to spark engaging conversation about a work of literature in their students (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Cowhey (2006) found that inviting children to direct and lead the discussion can encourage more substantial dialogue. In using children’s literature to engage children in conversations about poverty and other challenging issues, Chafel et al. (2007) found that children participated more actively in the discussion when the story connected to an aspect of their lives. In a kindergarten study, Lee, Ramsey, and Sweeney (2008) found that a more in-depth discussion of children’s books was inspired when teachers did not direct the conversation but collaborated with children on investigating answers to open-ended questions.

Baldwin (2018) pointed out the immense influence the adult reader’s perspective has on the child’s when reading global children’s literature. In shared reading experiences, it is common for young children to make comments that seem biased or
inappropriate, i.e. “he looks weird” or “what’s wrong with her hair?” Baldwin (2018) argued that such instances are opportunities for the educator to guide children towards a new understanding of human differences. The adult should model a respectful attitude towards cultural differences, actively listen to children’s ideas, and lead children without hostility to a more accepting perspective (Baldwin, 2018). Yenika-Agbaw (1997) discussed how to read children’s books from a critical multicultural perspective. Using a “question-centered approach,” (Shannon, 1995) educators can guide the conversation of children’s literature towards a critical analysis of the text, inviting children to be comfortable with multiple readings and interpretations of the book and, subsequently, the world (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997).

Dialogic reading is a shared reading strategy shown to deepen young children’s understanding of a picture book while supporting language development (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003; Kotaman, 2013). In dialogic reading, the adult uses open-ended questions, inserts supplemental information, and prompts children to apply the text to their life, encouraging children to take on the role of active participant in the reading experience (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Kemple, Lee, and Harris (2016) outlined the “Question with CARE” approach, developed by the Committee for Children (2004) to encourage emergent literacy and support early social awareness. This approach, based on dialogic reading research (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003; Kotaman, 2013), consists of “using a variety of Questions, Correcting and modeling language use, Affirming children’s answers, Repeating what children say and having them repeat what the adult says, and Expanding on what children say” (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, p. 100). In a discussion that encourages multiple perspectives, the teacher takes on
the role of moderator, treating each child with respect as they share thoughts and ideas with classmates (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997). With time and space, an inclusive, child-centered discussion can bloom.

**Criteria for Selecting Multicultural Children’s Books**

Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) and Short (2012) cautioned educators to take care in selecting multicultural children’s books, warning of the potential to reinforce stereotypes if race is misrepresented or presented incorrectly. Mendoza and Reese (2001) observed that even some award-winning children's books misappropriate marginalized communities. Based on the work of the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1980), Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) provide the following recommended criteria for selecting multicultural children's books: (1) Check for stereotypes in illustrations. All publications should depict people as genuine individuals with distinctive features. (2) Be alert to tokenism, i.e., having only one example of any one group. (3) Look for stereotyped roles. Children's books should have a balance of different people in active and recipient roles. (4) Be alert for biased views of different lifestyles. (5) Ask who the heroes are in the story. To prevent children from forming stereotypes, educators should offer children an array of stories portraying a variety of individual life experiences any single groups of people. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) urged teachers to begin with texts, images, and discussions about similarities and differences among the children in their classroom as a starting point for talking about diversity outside the school. Educators should emphasize that all human beings are made up of both common characteristics and unique life experiences and physical traits.

**Conclusion**
As young children become members of their culture, navigating social norms, developing interpersonal skills, and establishing a sense of self, they inherit the racial prejudices and biases of their environment (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Wolpert, 2006; Gopaul-McNicol, 1988). Early childhood is a unique time of life when the child's social identity and attitude towards human differences are established. Early childhood educators are agents of socialization for young children, playing a crucial role in shaping young children's attitudes towards diversity, identity, and race (Grant & Agosto, 2006; Cristol & Gimbert, 2008). Research has shown that early education AB/MC curriculum can encourage attitudes of appreciation and celebration towards physical differences associated with race. Kemple, Lee, and Harris (2016) stated that children's picture books are one of the most powerful tools available to early childhood educators, with the potential to serve as a point of departure for in-depth discussions and learning experiences. Through the critical examination of multicultural children's literature, the early childhood educator can act as a powerful, contradictory force to the racial prejudices children encounter in their world, encouraging positive attitudes towards human diversity from a young age.

**Methodology**

This action research project was developed to test the effects of reading and discussing multicultural children’s literature in a primary (preschool/Kindergarten) Montessori classroom on children’s positive social identity and appreciation of human diversity. The setting was an urban, middle-class private school in the Upper Midwest. Eighteen children from two years 10 months to five years 10 months were included in the study. Approximately one-third of the children involved in the intervention spoke a
language other than English at home, including Spanish, Mandarin, Russian, Greek, French, Arabic, and Khmer. At the beginning of the study, 16 children, 10 girls and six boys, were enrolled in the class. Nine children were White, three were Asian American, three were biracial, and one was Latin American. Two new children, both girls (one biracial, one White) joined the classroom mid-intervention. Four children in the classroom were enrolled part-time, attending school three days per week on a schedule of their parents choosing (one child came to school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and another child came Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, for example). Two adults were present in the room during the data collection period: myself, the lead teacher (also called the guide), and my assistant.

Data collection took place during the morning work cycle, from 8:30 am to 11:15 am. Multicultural children’s books were read to small groups or the whole class at various times during the morning work period, and each child had the opportunity to participate every day. The intervention lasted six weeks, from January 14 to February 22, 2019, during an unusually cold and snowy winter. School was closed one day during the study due to weather, though there were two additional days when about half the class was absent due to poor driving conditions, snow, and below zero temperatures. In the second week of the intervention, the stomach flu spread around the classroom, and roughly half the class was out sick for at least one day. Additionally, about half the class had a cold at some point during the intervention.

During the first week of the study, a four-day week, I collected four forms of baseline data. I kept a tally (see Appendix A) of observed comments and behaviors that express a negative attitude toward human differences, for example, one child telling
another, “you talk weird.” I also kept a tally of comments and behaviors that express a positive attitude towards human differences, for example, one child telling another, “you have cool glasses.” Both tallies were kept during the morning work cycle, from 8:30 am to 11:15 am.

I gathered baseline data on children's racial awareness, racial self-identification, and racial preference using a pre-intervention picture test (adapted from Dutton, Singer, & Devlin, 1998; see Appendix D) and I collected baseline data on children's perceived social identity using a spontaneous self-concept test (adapted from McGuire et al., 1978; see Appendix E). Both tests used laminated picture cards printed on three-by-four-inch white cardstock and stored in individual pouches on the spoken language shelf for the duration of the study. The picture cards were similar in appearance to the spoken language cards, also called classified nomenclature cards, commonly used in the Montessori environment to build the vocabulary of prereaders through a variety of games and activities. As a Montessori teacher, I am comfortable using picture cards as educational tools to engage young children in conversation, check language proficiency, and teach new vocabulary. Likewise, children in the Montessori environment are familiar with picture cards and accustomed to using them in a variety of ways, so tweaking the picture card activity to meet the needs of the pre-intervention test seemed an appropriate way to gather data for this study.

The picture test consisted of a set of eight photographs, each a close-up of a child’s face. All children in the photographs were smiling and arranged against a neutral background with minimal visible clothing or jewelry. The cards were numbered from one to eight in the bottom right corner in correspondence with the following race/gender

To complete the pre-intervention picture test, I invited each child individually to look at the pictures with me at a time in the morning work cycle when they were not engaged in another activity. I told the child we were going to work with the picture cards and invited them to bring the cards to a table or working mat of their choice, helping to guide the child to a quiet area of the classroom where there would be few disruptions. I invited the child to lay out the picture cards so we could see all the pictures, and comment on anything they noticed. I then told the child I was going to ask them some questions about the photos and they could answer by pointing to one or more pictures. I told the child there were no right or wrong answers and if they did not know, they could say "I don't know." I asked the child eight questions about the pictures (see Appendix D). After some questions, I invited the child to elaborate on why they chose a certain picture, for example, I asked “Why?” or “What makes you say that?” After I asked the last question, I sat quietly with the child for a few moments to give them a chance to provide any more information or ask questions. To conclude the picture test, I had a short conversation with the child about how we cannot really know someone just by looking at them. I then thanked the child and let them know they could look at the pictures any time they wanted.

The self-concept test contained pictures representing nine positive characteristics (e.g., “nice,” “smart,” “brave” etc.) and nine negative characteristics (e.g., “mean,” “grumpy,” “selfish,” etc.). Each card contained a labeled picture of a child doing
something representative of that trait. For example, “nice” was a picture of a child smiling and offering a pencil to another child, labeled with the word “nice,” and “mean” was a picture of one child pulling another child’s hair and the word “mean.”

The pre-intervention self-concept test was completed in two phases. In the first phase, I invited children to work with the self-concept picture cards in small groups of two to four children. I tried to gather a mix of older and younger children, so the older children could read and describe the card to the younger ones who might know fewer of the words. I let the children know that the cards showed words that are used to describe people. As a group, we went through the deck one at a time, naming the cards. For each card, I asked the children to describe what they saw in the picture. Then I gave the name of the characteristic illustrated by the image, or, if the older child was able, invited them to read it. I then asked the children if they knew what that word meant. If they knew it, I encouraged them to describe the word. If none of the children knew the word or gave an incomplete or incorrect definition, I set it aside. After we finished looking at all the cards, I gave a three-period lesson, a Montessori method for disseminating new language, on the cards the children did not know. In the first period, I renamed the characteristic and gave a brief description of it. In the second period, I gave many lively commands to the children, for example, “point to ‘smart,’” “give me ‘selfish,’” etc. In the third period, I invited children to name the card. For example, I pointed to the card for “grumpy” and asked, “what’s this?”

In the second phase of the self-concept test, I invited children one at a time to work with the characteristic cards at a table or working mat. Again, I tried to direct the child to a quiet area of the classroom where disruptions would be minimal. I asked the
child if they remembered the cards and reminded them that the cards illustrated words that we could use to describe people. I told the child that we were going to use the cards to see which words they would use to describe themselves. I then invited the child to retrieve their name card, a card children in the class readily recognize and use to identify their cubby and weekly classroom job. I put the child’s name card on the upper left side of the table or working mat and told the child we would place the cards they would use to describe themselves under their name card. If the child did not use one of the cards to describe themselves, we would place it on the far right side of the table or working mat. I told the child there were no right or wrong answers and if they did not know, they could say “I don’t know,” and we would turn the card upside down in the bottom right corner of the table. I then flipped through the characteristic cards one at a time, reviewed the name and meaning of the word, and invited the child to place the card in one of the columns. After several cards, I invited the child to take over placing the cards in columns according to their determination. As the child distributed the cards, I occasionally asked them why they made some decisions. For example, after the child placed the “brave” card under their name, I would invite the child to share a time they were brave. After the child had laid all the characteristic cards, I asked them if there were any other words they would use to describe themselves. To conclude the self-concept test, I discussed with the child that there are many words we can use to describe ourselves and other people and that each of us is unique. I then thanked the child and let them know they could look at the picture cards any time they wanted.

In weeks two through five, I continued to keep a tally of positive and negative attitudes towards human differences observed in the morning work cycle. In the second
week of the study, I began recording what was said in the "notes" section of the tally sheet (see Appendix A). In some instances, if I was not sure if a comment should be counted, I recorded it in the notes section of the tally sheet but did not include it in the tally.

Weeks two through five were dedicated to the intervention, reading and discussing multicultural children’s book each day in small groups at various times during the morning work cycle. A total of 19 children’s picture books were included in the intervention (see Appendix F) and each week’s selection of books had a concentration based on Ramsey and Derman-Spark’s (2011) anti-bias curriculum. Week two was about “Building A Positive Self Concept;” week three was “Understanding Differences;” week four was “Appreciating Diversity;” and week five was “Inciting Activism.” Before reading each book from the reading list to the class, I read the book several times myself, researched the author and illustrator, prepared discussion questions, considered a young child’s potential perception of the book and its topics, and generated ideas for modeling appreciation of diversity and encouraging anti-bias attitudes during the reading and discussion. I recorded my goals for sharing the book with children (Appendix C) and possible discussion questions (Appendix B). During the reading, I kept notes on children’s questions, emotions shown, viewpoints expressed, and the depth of the discussion on the Discussion Log (Appendix B). As soon as possible after the discussion, I recorded additional details in the Discussion Log. In the evening after I got home from school, I completed a self-assessment of the discussion, noting positive and negative aspects of the reading, what I would have changed about the conversation, and rated my performance as an anti-bias educator (see Appendix C).
I was divided on how to organize the readings in the classroom. I wanted all children to participate in each day’s reading and discussion, but I knew from experience that activities done as a whole group could quickly disintegrate, becoming chaotic. If I read the book multiple times in small groups throughout the morning, I anticipated that it would be challenging to ensure all children were included. In the end, I tried several different approaches over the four weeks, none of which were ideal. In the first week of the intervention, I read the books mainly during the period before lunch when the class gathered while several children helped set up lunch in the classroom. However, I found that children struggled to focus during this time of transition and the discussion was not as engaging as I had hoped. The following week, I read the book at the very beginning of the work cycle, immediately after children entered the classroom at 8:30 am and had not yet chosen an activity. The level of engagement was much higher at this time, but many children missed the reading, as some children in the class were perpetually late to school. In the later weeks, I began reading the book once at 8:30 am, and again later in the morning work cycle for children who arrived late at school. In addition to formally reading aloud and discussing the books included in the intervention, they were available for children to look at and read independently for one week in the classroom library.

Week six was the final week of the study. During week six, I did not read or discuss books related to the intervention. To measure the effectiveness of the intervention, I continued to keep a tally of positive and negative attitudes towards human differences observed in the morning work cycle. I also completed post-intervention picture and self-concept tests in the same manner as in the pre-intervention tests described above.
Data Analysis

The intervention lasted for six weeks. In the first week, I gathered four forms of baseline data: (1) a negative attitudes tally (Appendix A), (2) a positive attitudes tally (Appendix A), (3) a pre-intervention picture test (Appendix D), and (4) a pre-intervention self-concept test (Appendix E). During week one, I recorded a total of ten instances of negative attitudes toward human differences and one instance of a positive attitude toward human differences, as shown in Figure 1.

![Baseline Data: Attitudes Tally](image)

**Figure 1.** Baseline Data from Attitudes Tally Sheet

In the baseline self-concept test, children chose from nine positive characteristics and nine negative characteristics to describe themselves. They were also given the opportunity to come up with their own words to describe themselves. The mean number of positive words children chose to describe themselves in the pre-test was 6.1 words (see Figure 2). The mean number of negative words selected by children in the pre-test was 1.9 words.
In the baseline picture test, the majority of children were able to correctly identify children by race as Black (85%) and White (77%). A smaller percentage of children (23%) correctly identified children as Asian American or Latin American. For Question 5, “Which child looks the most like you?” 57% of children correctly identified a child of their own race, 14% of children identified a child of a different race, and 29% of children said they did not know (See Figure 3).
In the baseline picture test, children showed a White racial preference, as indicated by answers to questions 6-9. In response to question 9, “Which child would you like to be friends with?”, 40% of participants chose a White child, 27% chose an Asian American child, 17% chose a Black child, 11% chose a Latin American child, and 5% said they did not know (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Baseline Picture Test Results for Question 9](image)

**Multicultural Children’s Literature Intervention**

In weeks two through five, I read and discussed multicultural children's books in the classroom each day at various times during the morning work cycle. I continued to keep a daily positive and negative attitudes tally during this time. A total of 19 children’s picture books were included in the study (see Appendix F). As I analyzed data from the readings, I noticed multiple instances of children expressing attitudes of pride during book discussions; "pride" was circled on my discussion log as an emotion shown during 42% of readings. The following behaviors indicated a sense of pride in participants:
children enthusiastically recognized an aspect of their identity that was portrayed in a book, children were eager to volunteer information about themselves, and children expressed positive attitudes about their and their families’ unique characteristics.

Four books included in the intervention directly addressed themes of self-acceptance and self-love. After reading Beaumont’s *I Like Myself* (2016), I invited children to share things they liked about themselves. Some responses children gave, as recorded on my discussion log, were: “I like myself because I like to be fast,” “I like that I play beautiful music on the piano,” and “I like being a big sister.” In Pate’s *Being You* (2018), the author asks, “If there was a sign on your chest / what would it say?” The illustration accompanying the text shows children holding signs with “I am” messages like “I am capable,” and “I am talented.” In our discussion of the book, I invited children to share what the sign on their chest would say. In my discussion log, I recorded some responses children gave, including, “I am strong,” “I am a giant,” “I love my mommy and daddy,” “I am polite,” and “I am helpful.”

In my self-reflection journal, I wrote about a spontaneous child-initiated activity that I observed in the classroom after the discussion of *Being You*. A child approached me as I was putting the book away and said, “I want to make a sign! I want to make a sign that says ‘I am helpful.’” I had not thought of inviting children to create their own signs in conversation with the book. I scrambled to help the child find paper and soon a small group of children was making "I am" signs (see Appendix G). When the children finished creating their signs, they paraded around the classroom holding them in front of their chests and taking turns raising their signs over their heads, chanting, “I am powerful! I am helpful! I am a giant!” When recording the positive aspects of discussing *Being You*
in my self-reflection journal, I wrote about children’s initiative in extending their expressions of pride beyond the reading and into their classroom activities.

As I analyzed the book discussions, I noticed that many of children’s expressions of self-pride also suggested feelings of family pride; one or more family members was referenced in 63% of the readings in which "pride" was circled. In response to an illustration of a family dinner scene in Lin's *Ling and Ting, Not Exactly the Same* (2010), a child exclaimed, “My family eats with chopsticks, too!” In week four of the intervention, I read from *All the Colors We Are* (Kissinger, 2014) about where our skin color comes from (three places: our ancestors, the sun, and the amount of melanin in our skin). When I shared that some families have one parent with dark skin, one parent with light skin, and children with skin color somewhere in between, a biracial child waved their hand in the air and repeated, “my family’s like that!”

My goals in reading *All the Colors We Are* were to teach children about the scientific process that gives us our skin color, give children language to describe their own skin color, and help children see that each of us have our own unique skin color. After introducing the book, I invited children to describe the color of their skin. Of the 14 children present for the discussion, three said, “White,” one said “middle White,” one said “in the middle,” one said “really dark,” one said, “tan” and the rest shrugged or said nothing (see Figure 5).
I then read from the book that we call people “White” or “Black,” but everyone’s skin is actually a shade of brown. The author gave examples of words that could be used to describe various shades of brown, such as “caramel,” “seashell,” and “chocolate ice cream.” I circled “delight” as an emotion shown during the reading; upon hearing these delicious words, some children giggled, and all fourteen children wanted to tell what their skin color was (See Figure 6). Some responses children gave were “pearl,” “cocoa,” “copper,” “tortilla,” “honey,” “cupcake,” “creamy peanut butter,” and "vanilla, chocolate, and orange mixed together" ("This gets me hungry," one child sighed). In my self-reflection journal that evening, I noted the simultaneous self-pride and joy in diversity that I observed during the conversation about skin color. Each child had chosen a positive association for their skin color, and each child’s description was unique.

Figure 5. Pre-reading Skin Color Responses
Post-reading: “What color is your skin?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Pearl”</th>
<th>“Tortilla”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Copper”</td>
<td>“Brownish pink”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Honey”</td>
<td>“Cupcake”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Creamy peanut butter”</td>
<td>“Vanilla, chocolate, and orange mixed together”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Peach tan”</td>
<td>“Apple”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Seashell”</td>
<td>“Caramel”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Toffee”</td>
<td>“Vanilla”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Post-reading Skin Color Responses

The results of the self-concept test also suggested an increase in self-pride and positive self-esteem. As indicated in the self-concept test, the mean number of positive words children chose to describe themselves in the post-test rose by 1.5 words from the pre-test, and the mean number of negative words children chose to describe themselves in the post-test declined by .5 words from the pre-test (See Figure 7).

![Baseline and Post Intervention Data: Self-Concept Test](image)

Figure 6. Baseline and Post Intervention Self-Concept Test Results
Children’s responses to readings and discussions suggested an increase in positive attitudes towards human differences. In the first week of the intervention, positive attitudes towards human differences were expressed during 25% of readings, and negative attitudes towards human differences were expressed during 50% of readings. In the final week of the intervention, positive attitudes towards human differences were expressed at 80% of readings and negative attitudes were expressed at 40% of readings. This is significant because a similar pattern was recorded in the daily attitudes tally. The instances of negative attitudes towards human differences recorded in the morning work period showed a downward trend over the six weeks of the intervention. In the first week, I recorded ten negative comments about human differences, and the final week, I recorded two negative comments. The instances of positive attitudes towards human differences showed an upward trend, with one comment in the first week of the intervention and seven comments in the final week (see Figure 7).
Figure 7. Intervention Data: Weekly Attitudes Tally

Children’s responses to books also suggested an increase in feelings of empathy and concern for the well-being of others. On my discussion log, I circled “empathy” as an emotion shown during 26% of readings. One of those readings was Garcia’s *Listening with My Heart: A Story of Kindness and Compassion* (2017) from week three of the intervention. In the book, the main character, Esperanza, meets a new child at school named Bao who does not speak English. In our discussion, I asked children what they thought it would feel like to go to a new school where you do not speak the language. Some responses that I recorded on my data sheet were “sad,” “bad,” “lonely,” and “scary.” In our discussion of *Listening with My Heart*, we talked about specific ways that you could be kind, welcoming, and friendly to someone like Bao who does not speak English. In *Listening with My Heart*, Esperanza and Bao play soccer and invent hand signals together. Esperanza learns a few Vietnamese words and teaches Bao some English. Children came up with other ideas for ways to be welcoming to someone who you do not share a language with, like “you could play together outside,” “you could give them a hug,” “you could say ‘Hi’ and ‘Bye,’” and “you could get them a tissue if they need one.”

A few weeks before beginning this research, a new child who did not speak English, Child A, had joined the class. Child A had a difficult transition from staying at home with their grandma to starting school in an environment where they did not speak the language. Not yet three years old, they often seemed confused or scared and would break down crying at intervals throughout the day. They stayed mostly by my or my assistant’s side and did not usually engage with other children in the class. They were the
first child in my position as a lead teacher who entered the classroom with virtually no English, and I struggled to communicate with them, understand their needs, comfort them when they became distressed, and engage them in activities in the classroom.

In my self-reflection journal, I noted that a handful of children and one in particular began extending acts of kindness to Child A in the days following our discussion of *Listening with My Heart*. One child helped Child A get on their shoes after our time in the gym. Another child brought Child A a broom when they had a spill. Children found ways of asking Child A to work with them and Child A found ways to agree. In my self-reflection journal, I wrote about observing an older child and Child A run by holding hands on the playground, smiles on both of their faces. Child A put a hand in the air to me as they passed as if waving good-bye to their time glued to my side, and I waved back. Child A became increasingly independent in the classroom, and I learned what their laugh sounded like. The child's drop-offs became easier, and their vocabulary began to grow.

In my discussion log, “empathy” was also circled as an emotion shown in week five of the intervention during our discussion of Shapiro’s *Magic Trash* (2015). The book teaches about an artist, Tyree Guyton, who transforms neighborhoods in Detroit with vacant, crumbling homes into community art pieces. The book prompted a discussion about art, community, activism, and recycling. When I showed children an illustration of a neighborhood wrecked with vandalism, a child asked, “Why does it look like that?” I recorded on my data sheet that I talked about how some people choose to damage other people’s property, and the whole community suffers. The child said, “that’s sad.” I continued reading about how Tyree used art to create change in his neighborhood and
talked about the power of art to change people’s minds and impact a community.

Children learned the word “collaboration,” and that some art is made by more than one person working together. After the discussion ended, we returned to work time, and a group of children decided they wanted to make art out of trash. In my self-reflection journal, I wrote about children taping scraps of paper from the recycling bin to the walls, windows, and floor. As they worked, one child said, “How about our job is this. Help people and make art for them, and be nice to them.” Another child said, “Let’s make art for people. All kinds of people that we don’t even know.” Several children decided they wanted to be artists when they grow up.

In my self-reflection journal, I wrote about the children’s art project incited by *Magic Trash*. Inspired by the book, children were questioning the socially-accepted view of garbage as foul and offensive. What we are told to reject, the children chose to embrace for its potential beauty. Children asked disruptive questions of the status quo regarding garbage: who gets to say what is trash? Can we look at our trash in a new way? The children had adopted a radical perspective on trash, in the direction of Freire’s critical consciousness.

Later that day, I observed a child apply critical consciousness to an instance of racial discrimination in contemporary politics. A few hours after we read *Magic Trash*, I recorded a discussion I overheard between two children about Donald Trump in my self-assessment journal. One child explained to another that Donald Trump was our president. The child said, “He wants to build a wall so all the Brown and Black people can’t come to Minnesota, and we want them to come.” In response, another child, Child B, said, “I want to write a letter to Donald Trump saying, ‘You are a bad man.’” I had never spoken
to the children about Donald Trump, had never said his name in the classroom, and was unaware they knew who the current president was or about his border wall. As I recorded in my self-reflection journal, Child B dug in the recycling bin and found a cardboard cartoon Valentine’s Day cards container (it was the day after Valentine’s Day), and wrote a letter to the president on the back of the box. After they finished the letter, Child B brought the piece of cardboard to me and asked me to send it to Donald Trump. The letter was written in yellow colored pencil and illegible. Held very close to my face, I could decipher an assortment of backward letters and misspelled words. I invited the child to bring the letter home and ask their parents to help them send it to the president.

In my self-assessment journal, I reflected on what I would have changed about each reading. Contemplating what could have been improved in early conversations helped inform my decisions for later discussions. In the first week of the intervention, I wrote, "give more concrete examples/ideas" three times in my self-assessment journal as something I would have changed about the discussion. I reflected that talking about “how to help other people feel held up” in our discussion of You Hold Me Up (Smith, 2018) during week one of the intervention did not lead to a very engaging discussion; I gave the conversation a score of 1 out of 5 for depth of discussion, the lowest possible rating. I wrote that I wished I had examples of the topic prepared ahead of time to share with children. As the intervention continued, I looked for ways to help children link the themes of the book to their lives. Before reading Be Kind (Miller, 2018), I jotted down a few examples of kindnesses children could practice in their lives, such as offering a friend a hug when they are sad, sharing your toys, or getting someone a towel if they have a spill. I noticed that children were much more engaged than in the discussion in
which no examples were given. In the discussion of *Be Kind*, six children shared their own ideas about kindnesses they could offer, such as “give my grandpa a card when he’s sick,” “putting my dishes in the dishwasher,” and “if someone forgets to wash their hands, you could tell them to wash their hands, so they don’t get in trouble.”

In looking over my self-assessment journal, I observed that I scored myself significantly higher in modeling appreciation of human diversity than encouraging anti-racist attitudes in children. In response to the question “did you model appreciation of human diversity?” I circled “yes” for 95% of the readings. But in response to the question “did you encourage anti-racist attitudes in children?” I circled “yes” just 29% of the time. In reflecting on this discrepancy, I concluded that insecurity and lack of confidence in the role of anti-racist educator in large part account for the difference in scores. Modeling appreciation of diversity is within my comfort zone; it feels natural and familiar to share with children a sense of joy in the unique strengths and experiences each of us have to share. Appreciation of diversity has been modeled for me by my own educators, family members, coaches, peers, and role-models all my life. I do not have the same depth of experience for modeling anti-racist attitudes. I believe that anti-racist education is necessary for eradicating institutional racism, and I wish to act as an anti-racist educator, but I lack the confidence, experience, and training to recognize myself as one.

On three occasions, I recorded discomfort talking about race in my self-assessment journal. I sometimes excuse children to wash their hands for lunch by the colors they are wearing (i.e., "if you're wearing red, you may go wash your hands"). On the day of our skin color discussion, a child asked to be excused to wash hands for lunch based on skin color. I was taken aback and made uncomfortable by the comment, not
knowing how to respond in the moment. I passed over it and said I would be excusing them by the first sound of their name. When I reflected on the discussion that evening, I considered why I became uncomfortable, and what I could have said instead. I wished I had used the occasion to explicitly addressed our history as a nation of segregating people by their skin color and the damages it has and continues to cause. Instead, I became uneasy at the allusion to segregation and the idea of enacting it in any way in the classroom, and the opportunity passed.

In assessing my performance as an anti-bias educator, I gave myself a mean rating of 3.2 out of 5, with 5 being “excellent,” and 1 being “poor.” In my reflection journal, I questioned my perspective as a White woman on my approach to multicultural discussions. Included in the intervention was Berne’s *My Food, Your Food, Our Food (How Are We Alike and Different?)* (2018), a book about food from different cultures and different ways of eating. I chose the book because I had overheard children in the past say negative comments about the food other children brought from home in their lunch (i.e., "Ewww, what is that?" or "Gross, that smells weird."). In my discussion log, I recorded that we talked about where our food comes from, the incredible variety of foods and different types of foods families eat, and the similarities and differences between how we eat at home and how we eat at school or in a restaurant. I circled “pride” as an emotion shown during the discussion; one child shared that their family says a prayer before they eat dinner at home, and another child shared that they and their whole family like spicy food. We did a grace and courtesy lesson, role-playing how you could respectfully ask someone about the food in their lunch. We had what I thought was a lively, engaging discussion, and I concluded feeling satisfied with myself. That evening,
though, as I looked over my discussion notes and filled out my self-assessment, I thought for the first time about how I had framed the discussion. I had intended to encourage respectful attitudes towards foods from different cultures, but when I pondered possible negative aspects of the discussion, I wrote, “am I normalizing a White point of view? (i.e., ethnic food as ‘other’).” Immediately I knew the answer was yes. The lunches I had overheard negative comments about were typically ethnic foods brought to school by a Child of Color. I was using a White point of view to help White children feel better about food eaten by people who are not White. Had I considered how that would make a Child of Color feel? Had I considered how a Child of Color might find the White child's lunch? I had not. The self-reflection data indicated that more training and self-examination was needed to investigate the impact of my identity as a White person on future discussions in the classroom.

**Post-Intervention Data**

In the final week of the study, I completed the post-intervention picture test and self-concept test. The purpose of this data was to measure any changes in attitudes towards human differences and children’s self-concept following the multicultural children’s books readings and discussions. Also, I continued to keep a positive and negative attitudes tally during the final week of the intervention. In the post-intervention self-concept test, the mean number of positive words children chose to describe themselves rose somewhat, from 6.1 to 7.6 words (See Figure 3). The mean number of negative words children chose declined slightly, from 1.9 to 1.4 words, indicating children developed an increase in positive identity and a decrease in negative self-association.
In the post-intervention picture test, the percentage of children who correctly identified Black children rose from 85% to 93%. The correct identification of White children also rose, from 77% to 93%. Identifying children who are Latin or Asian American remained flat. We did not formally discuss these races by name as part of the intervention, so I was not surprised that children did not show increased accuracy in identifying members of these races. In comparison with the baseline test, children’s racial self-identification rose slightly; 22% more children chose a child of their own race as looking most like them (See Figure 9). Children were more likely in the post-intervention test to volunteer information about why they picked a child of their own race as looking most like them, saying they selected that child because the child “has skin like me” or “his eyes look like mine.”

![Pre-test: Which child looks most like you?](image1.png)

![Post-test: Which child looks most like you?](image2.png)

*Correct response  Incorrect response  Didn't know*

*Correct response  Incorrect response  Didn't know*

**Figure 8. Baseline and Post Intervention Picture Test Results for Question 5**

The results showed a flat rate of White preference, but a new category emerged in the post-intervention data. When asked which children they would want to be friends with, 19% of children replied, “all of them” (See Figure 10). No children had chosen “all” in response to the question in the baseline test.
When asked which children they thought they would not like, the percentage of children who replied “None of them,” increased from 4% to 13%. Though the results do show an overwhelming White bias, they indicate that children in the post-intervention test were more likely to express an attitude of equality and a refusal to discriminate based on race than in the baseline test. The results indicate that children’s acceptance and appreciation of human diversity did increase and children developed a more positive self-concept throughout the intervention.

**Action Plan**

As I researched multicultural children’s books for this intervention, I found heaps of gorgeous books that I could not wait to share with my students. It was challenging to narrow it down to just 19 books to include in the study. During the intervention, though, I longed to linger with the books that resonated with my students, and I found myself irritated that I had to move on to a new book the following day. I had carefully selected and prepared for the readings and discussions in what I hoped would be a scaffolding learning process, with each concept building on and being enriched by previous ones.
This was not always the case, and sometimes I felt that discussions were cut short by my self-imposed reading schedule. As the days passed, I began to feel that this project’s pace was too fast and my goals were too broad for its scope and timeline. I spent only a week each on lofty objectives like building a positive self-concept, understanding human differences, accepting and appreciating diversity, and inciting action to create change. I found that six weeks was not enough time to cover Derman-Sparks and Ramsey’s (2011) anti-bias curriculum.

In my discussion log, I scored the depth of each discussion on a scale from 1 (not deep at all) to 5 (very deep). Some of the books included in the intervention led to more in-depth and engaging discussion than others. Seven of the books scored a 1 or 2, meaning they did not lead to very deep or engaging discussions. Just four books scored a 5, indicating they connected deeply with children and incited thoughtful questions and discussion. These books were (1) *All the Colors We Are* (Kissinger, 2014), (2) *Listening With My Heart* (Garcia, 2017), (3) *My Food, Your Food, Our Food* (Berne, 2018), and (4) *Magic Trash*, (Shapiro, 2015). As a follow-up study, I would like to implement another action research intervention in my environment, dedicating a week to each of the four most effective books from my first intervention. Young children often request to be read a favorite book many times (Sulzby, 1985) and research shows that repetitively reading the same children’s book to young children supports learning and helps with vocabulary acquisition (Horst, Parsons, & Bryan, 2011). Now that I know which books most interested the children in my environment, I would like to reintroduce them, taking more time to go through the story, learn the new vocabulary, study the illustrations, and do activities related to the book. I especially think the reading comprehension and
participation of younger children would increase from spending more time with a single book, as younger children often struggled to focus for the duration of the reading and discussion.

Future action research would benefit from examining ways to increase children’s engagement during small group readings and discussions, regardless of age. Some children, I noticed, were significantly more interested in the readings and discussions than others. Asking questions and inviting children to relate the topic of the book to their own life tended to result in a more engaging conversation about the book with some children, but other children rarely participated in the conversation and quickly appeared to lose interest when I opened a book to read aloud. These children appeared uninterested in books in general, both books included in this intervention and books unrelated to social justice themes. One possible explanation for children’s indifference to books at school is a lack of books and reading in the home environment. Future research could include family members as participants by hosting an information session in which they could model for parents how to read aloud using a dialogic approach or create a home reading challenge, encouraging children to share with the class about books read with family members at home. The researcher could also create a multicultural, anti-racist reading library from which children and parents could borrow material and discussion guides for families to use with books at home. This would offer the opportunity for children to share and discuss multicultural and anti-racist concepts from school at home with their families, reinforcing their understanding. Also, future research could examine ways of involving children who are less interested in books through other learning methods such as music, storytelling, dance, movement, role-playing, or art.
This research would have benefited from a more precise definition of what “appreciation of human differences” looks like. Sometimes, it was unclear if one child’s comment to another was about a human difference, or if the child was giving a compliment or put-down unrelated to differences in attributes. Also, context played a large role in whether a comment could be interpreted as expressing a positive or negative attitude towards human differences. For example, one child might repeat the words of a child with an accent because (1) they admire the sound of the child’s accent, (2) they are poking fun at the child with the accent, or (3) they do not understand what the child had with the accent has said (all three instances occurred during the intervention). In future action research, it would be beneficial to gather more detailed information about attitudes towards human differences observed in the classroom. My attitude tally did not capture data for the context surrounding a comment about human difference, what the comment was, or the name of the child who said it. Rather than keeping a tally, future researchers could record the comment made and include data such as facial expression, tone, and what was said before and after the comment. It would also be helpful to have a "neutral" category, for capturing children who are stating or noticing a difference without judgment. Due to time restrictions and responsibilities in my role as a teacher, collecting observational attitude data was beyond the scope of this intervention. In future action research projects, it would be beneficial to employ multiple researchers for data gathering purposes (i.e., a teacher and an assistant). It would also be helpful to collect data for a greater period to increase the validity of results and track changes in the beliefs of individual children about human differences.
There were many inconsistencies in the classroom environment during this intervention. Absences were higher than usual due to extreme weather conditions, sickness, and vacations. About half the class was absent for parts of weeks three, four, and six of the intervention due to snow, below-freezing temperatures, and a stomach virus that circulated the classroom. School was canceled due to below-freezing temperatures one day in week three of the intervention, and the school day began late or ended early on three occasions due to weather and poor driving conditions. Also, some children in the class were scheduled to come to school only three days per week, so there was never a consistent group of children in the study from one day to the next, making for a great deal of variability in types and nature of interactions between children. Though results indicated a decrease in negative comments about human differences in the classroom, attendance inconsistencies lessen the reliability of these results. It would be beneficial to conduct future research in an environment with greater day to day participant consistency.

For data gathering purposes, I numbered the picture cards used in the picture test from one to eight in the bottom right corner of the card. As children set the picture cards out, 31% of them independently chose to put the cards in numerical order. Not realizing that children would have this impulse, I had numbered the pictures so that each boy and girl of the same race were next to one another numerically. This may have affected results of the picture test, particularly questions about racial identification, as its possible children who arranged cards numerically could more readily notice racial differences and were influenced by the arrangement of cards to identify and comment upon race. In
future action research, it would be beneficial for the researcher to ensure the pictures were randomly arranged on the table during the picture test.

As I reviewed data from the picture test, I was surprised by some children’s expressed gender bias. The picture test was intended to measure racial preference, but data showed that some children favored children of their own gender, regardless of race. One child picked all the girls as children they would want to be friends with, for example, excluding boys of all races. I was especially surprised by this finding because gender preference was not something I noticed in the classroom environment. From my general observations, children seemed equally happy to work with other children of all gender identities. Additionally, two children expressed internalized sexism in addition to internalized racism, saying they did not like the Black girl in the picture test because she looked like a boy. It would be useful to take an intersection approach to race and gender in future research, examining how race and gender interact with and shape one another in the early education environment.

This research increased my awareness of the role my identity as a White woman functioning within a system of White privilege plays on my perspective and responsibilities as an educator. I was led to this research by a wish to protest an educational system that discriminates against people who are not White, but the research at times increased my feeling of helplessness and complicity as I faced my own internalized biases and the limits of my capacity to create change. I invited children to discuss race and racism openly, then struggled to find the right words when asked questions about these topics. I found myself feeling inadequate and unqualified as an anti-racist educator. This research pointed out my need for additional training as an anti-
racist advocate and my wish for support from the educational community. A teacher training program or discussion group in which educators could openly ask questions, role-play how to respond to specific situations in the classroom, and be asked to confront their own bias and prejudice would be beneficial for future anti-bias work.

Addressing issues of race and culture in the early education classroom during this intervention offered new challenges to me as an educator, but it did not spur me to disavow anti-bias curriculum. Instead, it revealed the immense need for additional early education work that seeks to confront and eliminate bias, prejudices, and misinformation. Dr. Montessori saw early childhood education as the key to the betterment of humanity (1949). She wrote (1949), “it is the child who makes the man, and no man exists who was not made by the child he once was” (p. 15). Early childhood educators and parents have the opportunity to instill a sense of respect for all people in children from a young age. My hope is that this research inspires continued incorporation of multicultural children’s literature into anti-bias teaching in the early education environment.
References


Husband, T. (2011). “I don’t see color”: challenging assumptions about discussing race


Kissinger, K., & Bohnhoff, C. (2014). *All the colors we are: The story of how we get our skin color/ Todos los colores de nuestra piel: La historia de por qué tenemos diferentes colores de piel*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.


Appendix A: Attitudes Tally

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Number of students (m/f) present:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weather:</td>
<td>Special circumstances:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tally of positive attitudes displayed toward human differences:</td>
<td>Tally of negative attitudes displayed toward human differences:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B: Children’s Literature Discussion Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Number of students (m/f) present:</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weather:</th>
<th>Special circumstances:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

| Title and author of book: |                                  |
|----------------------------|                                  |

| Themes of book:            |                                  |
|----------------------------|                                  |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adults’ questions and children’s responses:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s questions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive attitudes towards human difference expressed?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative attitudes towards human difference expressed?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did children direct the discussion?</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate depth of the discussion on a scale from 1-5:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very deep</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What emotions did children show in response to the book and discussion?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title and author of book:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your goals in sharing this book with children, and how did you prepare yourself for the discussion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you model appreciation for human diversity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you encourage anti-racist attitudes in children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive aspects of reading and discussion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative aspects of reading and discussion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you change about how you handled the reading and discussion, if anything?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate your performance as an anti-bias educator in the discussion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix D: Picture Test

*Adapted from Dutton, Singer, and Devlin (1998)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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<tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student’s name:</th>
<th>Student’s age:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weather:</th>
<th>Special circumstances:</th>
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<tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which children are Black?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which children are White?</th>
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</thead>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Which children are Asian?</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Which children are Latin?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which child looks most like you?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which child looks the nicest?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which child would you like to be like?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which child (if any) do you not like?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which child would you like to be friends with?</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes:</th>
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## Appendix E: Self-Concept Test

*Adapted from McGuire et al. (1978)*

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<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student’s name:</th>
<th>Student’s age:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weather:</th>
<th>Special circumstances:</th>
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</table>

### Adjectives child chose as describing what he or she is:

- Nice
- Smart
- Brave
- Happy
- Lovable
- Caring
- Peaceful
- Cute
- Polite
- Mean
- Lazy
- Sad
- Careless
- Grumpy
- Boring
- Unfriendly
- Rude
- Selfish
- Other: ______________

### Adjectives child chose as describing what he or she is not:

- Nice
- Smart
- Brave
- Happy
- Lovable
- Caring
- Peaceful
- Cute
- Polite
- Mean
- Lazy
- Sad
- Careless
- Grumpy
- Boring
- Unfriendly
- Rude
- Selfish
- Other: ______________

### Notes:

- 

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Appendix F: Children’s Literature Reading List

- *The Day You Begin* (2018) by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafeal Lopez
- *You Hold Me Up* (2018) by Monique Gray Smith, illustrated by Danielle Daniel
- *Be Kind* (2018) by Pat Zietlow Miller, illustrated by Jen Hill
- *We All Sing with the Same Voice* (2005) by J. Philip Miller and Sheppard M. Greene, illustrated by Paul Meisel
- *Being You* (2018) by Alexis Pate, illustrated by Soud
- *Listening with My Heart: A Story of Kindness and Compassion* (2017) by Gabi Garcia, illustrated by Ying Hui Tan
- *Ling & Ting: Not Exactly the Same* (2011) by Grace Lin
- *The Skin You Live In* (2005), by Michael Tyler, illustrated by David Lee Csicsko
- *All the Colors We Are/Todos los colores de nuestra piel: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color/La historia de por qué tenemos diferentes colores de piel* (2014), by Katie Kissinger, photographs by Chris Bohnhoff
- *Let’s Talk About Race* (2008), by Julius Lester, illustrated by Karen Barbour
- *Shades of People* (2010) by Sheila M. Kelly and Shelly Rotner
- *My Food, Your Food, Our Food (How Are We Alike and Different?)* (2018) by Emma Carlson Berne, illustrated by Sharon Sordo
- *Dreamers* (2018), by Yuyi Morales
Appendix G: Examples of Children’s “I Am” Signs

I am Helping

I am Powerful