The Effects of Discussion Groups on Teacher Confidence and Comfort-Level with Anti-Bias Education at a Private Urban Montessori School

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Submitted on June 11, 2020

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Project Coach: ____________________________ Date: 6/11/20
Abstract

This action research was conducted to examine the effects of peer discussion groups on the comfort and confidence of lower-elementary Montessori teachers in conducting literature-based anti-bias lessons. The intervention was conducted in a private, urban, Montessori school, serving students from toddler to middle school. The participants of this study were five first-third grade teachers, including the participant researcher. Data was collected through pre- and post-intervention surveys, teacher post-lesson self-assessments, transcription coding of discussion groups, and researcher self-reflection rating scale and journal prompts. Three discussion groups were scheduled two weeks apart, with teachers giving literature-based, anti-bias lessons between the first and second discussion groups and the second and third discussion groups. Data indicated that teachers became more comfortable and confident in their anti-bias teaching practice and that the discussion groups created a space for reflective dialogue. The action plan suggests that this intervention could have a farther reach if it were conducted for a longer period of time, across a wider age range, and in multiple schools.

Keywords: Montessori, anti-bias, children’s literature, antiracism, ABAR, discussion groups
Maria Montessori acknowledged the world-changing potential of the child when she said, “The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind” (1949/1972, p. 36). At a time in history when we are nationally and globally battling a pandemic, systemic racism, and massive economic hardship, the importance of planting the seeds of a better future through the education of our children becomes ever more urgent.

Montessori philosophy and curriculum elevate the values of interconnectedness, peace, and reverence for humanity, particularly through the cosmic curriculum and peace education. The cosmic curriculum helps the child situate themself within the broader context of humanity, highlighting the universality of our human needs, and the diverse ways we meet those needs (Montessori, 1967). Peace education teaches the child that social interconnectedness is powerful, and that people have a mutual interest in resolving conflict and building understanding (Wolf., 1996). Children develop an awareness of global diversity and similarity through lessons about fundamental human needs and the varied ways cultures of people meet those needs (Han & Moquino, 2018). Yet Han and Moquino (2018) point out that peace education is “incomplete without the historical context and connection to social justice” (p. 8). They assert that “if we want our children to lead the way to peace, [educators] need them to understand the truth of systemic oppression and injustice, and we need to build in them the skills they will need to be peacemakers” (Han & Moquino, 2018, p. 9). In discussing the best practices for peace education in Montessori schools, Boucher suggests that it is our guidance that can reveal to children “that it is not just war that is antithetical to peace but also oppression, discrimination, and neglect” (Oestiging, Speed, Mosquino, & Boucher, 2019, p. 53). While Montessori’s vision of peace education has provided a basic pedagogical foundation for the classroom, the practice comes to life with anti-bias education (ABE). Anti-bias education, as outlined by Derman-Sparks and
Edwards (2010), is structured to support student pride, awareness of injustice, and promote advocacy. Just as our world is interconnected, so too is our classroom to the world outside. One thing that binds us together is complex systems of privilege and oppression. We do not create peace by ignoring that truth.

There is a common value of social justice at the school where I work. It is a private, urban Montessori school, serving 391 young people, from toddlers through middle school students. In addition to its mission statement, the school has proclaimed its values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural competency, as critical attributes of a peaceful community. While these values are in place, there is not a set curriculum for how to teach students about systemic inequity. Teachers find a lack of structure and guidance on curricular implementation and teacher preparation in the best anti-bias learning approaches. While there has been professional development in these areas, teachers are primarily approaching this work independently, with no structured time for reflection. Additionally, teachers that are less comfortable with this work, may not be engaging in these conversations as often as their peers. Since teachers operate independently, without a unified ABE approach and curriculum, it is unclear if they feel equipped and confident in their practice.

Our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee meetings are a space for passionate and generative conversations on these topics. The committee consists of at least one teacher from each grade level, who is charged with relaying initiatives to the team-level. Our team-level meetings are held once a week, and are usually so full of logistical problem-solving, that there is often not much time and energy left for DEI topics. Because there is not an independent time and space allotted at the teaching team level, ABE preparation and alignment
of teachers falls short. At times, teachers appear uncomfortable with how to approach topics on their own.

The explicit anti-bias lessons that we conduct in our classrooms are a major component of our ABE work. In these lessons, we often use literature as the means to create the dialogue and projects that bring our children to reflect on bias and diversity. For my action research project, I wanted to take this familiar teaching practice and create a reflective space for team-level discussion. I set out to discover if implementing the same ABE lessons across our five lower elementary classrooms, coupled with engaging teachers in bi-monthly discussion groups, would impact teachers’ confidence and comfort with their ABE practice. Moreover, it could elucidate what teachers need in terms of professional development, time and resources, curriculum, and community. The hope is that through this collaborative effort we address teacher ABE needs, ultimately impacting the students, their families, and by extension the very world in which we live.

**Theoretical Framework**

The lens of this action research project is rooted in the theory of critical pedagogy and anti-bias educational theory (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Freire (1970) acknowledged that educational practice does not exist in a vacuum, but often functions as an extension of an inequitable society. Freire (1970) argued for a pedagogy that could transform the world through raising social consciousness. In the traditional “banking” model of education the teacher holds the knowledge and power and “deposits” knowledge in the form of facts and rote memorization to their students. This dissuades students from asking the questions that would challenge the status quo and positions the teacher as the sole purveyor of knowledge (Freire, 1970). In the “problem-posing model,” the students’ knowledge is recognized as crucial by the teacher, and
the student-teacher relationship becomes reciprocal, with each member of the classroom speaking from their experience and collaboratively generating knowledge through dialogue (Freire, 1970). Problem-posing dialogue, comprised of critical questioning and reflection acknowledges both present-moment reality and people as “unfinished” and “becoming,” and creates a space for participants to awaken to the fact that sociopolitical realities can be made to change (Freire, 1970). Educational dialogue focused on the meaningful themes present in our world and our lives, sets the stage for participants to break through perceived limitations and imagine new and hopeful possibilities that can be realized through action.

Anti-bias educational theory echoes Freire’s directive that education holds the promise for bringing about a more just world, and that students and teachers must work together to learn and produce knowledge through dialogue (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006). Recognizing that bias is built into society, anti-bias education uses strategies like dialogue and self-reflection to counteract the passive and active forces that underpin bias in individuals, school environments, and students. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) have outlined the goals of anti-bias education (ABE) for students: (1) grow self-aware and proud of their social identities, (2) feel comfortable with difference, developing the ability to navigate it with care and love, (3) recognize unfairness when it arises, and (4) feel empowered to act against injustice. With these goals in mind, anti-bias teachers employ a variety of strategies within their personal lives, classrooms, and communities to make a meaningful impact.

Given that the preparation of the teacher is essential to the success of this work, the following section will review the literature of best anti-bias classroom practices, and the ways in which teachers may be best supported in their journey.
Review of Literature

The purpose of this action research project is to explore the best ways to support teachers in implementing anti-bias practice in their classrooms. In counteracting bias development in children, it is essential that the child’s educational environment provides them opportunities to develop an understanding of their own identity, an appreciation and understanding of difference, and the knowledge and empowerment to stand up to bias. There are many directives from the literature on bias formation in children, the effects of anti-bias education (ABE), using children’s literature as an anti-bias inquiry tool, and the potential of teacher collaboration to promote community and growth in faculty ABE practice.

Bias Formation in Children

Children recognize and respond to human difference early in their development. As early as 6-months old, children develop preferences for the faces of people of their own race, particularly if they have less exposure to racial and ethnic diversity in their lives (Kelly et al., 2007a; Kelly et al., 2007b; Xiao et al., 2017; Xiao et al., 2018. By preschool, children become aware of themselves in relation to others through observation of physical and behavioral differences, such as skin color or ability (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). A child’s identity forms as an integration of personal and social identity signifiers (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Personal identity consists of aspects that highlight their individuality (e.g., age, family, or name), while social identity is informed by membership to social groups (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and race) (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

A child’s identity development happens in the context of social inequity. As children develop their self-concept in the preschool years, their understanding of difference is informed by overt or subtle biased messages received from society (Boutte, 2008; Katz, 2003; Van
These messages are internalized in their perception of themselves and others (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). The 1947 study by Clark and Clark showed how Black children preferred White dolls, revealing the negative impact segregated society can have on Black children’s racial identity, a finding that was brought to the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Keppel, 2002). Though some more recent replications of the “doll study” have found improvements in self-esteem, negative associations with blackness still persist which may be a consequence of media consumption as well as diversity of interaction (Sharpe, Alston, Ifedi, & Munn, 2014). When it comes to the images that children consume, the simple absence of diverse representation communicates whose experience matters (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Milner, 2010a). If left unaddressed, children’s awareness of inequitable representation and power between social groups has the potential to create unfair preference for the dominant group (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Newheizer & Olson, 2012). While social norms often shun expressions of explicit prejudice, many studies reveal the persistence of implicit bias in children (Monteiro, Franca, & Rodriguez, 2009; Newheiser & Olson, 2012; Williams & Steele, 2019). Despite its concealed nature, implicit bias in children has real consequences, including discrimination (Monteiro et al., 2009).

Fortunately, bias formation can be curbed. In infancy, early exposure to diverse faces holds promise in combating early bias formation (Xiao et al., 2018). Another study showed that messages promoting norms of human similarity and egalitarianism (e.g., stating to the child that differences in skin color exist, but do not matter, because humans are very similar) had an inverse effect on older children’s preferential treatment based on race (Monteiro et al., 2009). The communication the child receives from their various environments is a crucial variable in the
emergence of bias. Educators and school systems have the unique opportunity to provide children with an environment that counteracts bias and the inequity it perpetuates.

**Anti-Bias Education**

Since the Civil Rights Movement, schools have been a major battleground for racial justice in the United States (Banks, 2013). After desegregation, the ethnic studies movement made gains in the inclusion of marginalized groups in curricular content (Banks, 2013). While many teachers were motivated to provide their students of color with equitable representation and give their White students a chance to recognize and value diversity, it was usually done in a way that made ethnic content separate from the mainstream curriculum (Banks, 2013).

Educational diversity reformers sought to deepen the practice of multicultural education by highlighting the multitude of factors, besides the content of lessons, that needed to be addressed for a thoughtful and intentional implementation (Banks, 2013. Banks and Banks (1995) proposed “equity pedagogy” an essential component, defining it as “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate, a just, humane, and democratic society” (p. 152). Banks and Banks (1995) also argued that teachers must facilitate student knowledge-construction, by engaging students in questioning, making connections, evaluating, and critiquing different interpretations of reality, echoing the essence of Freire’s (1970) problem-posing model decades earlier.

Responding to the short-comings of superficial multicultural education, Derman-Sparks published a framework for Anti-Bias Curriculum, which eventually grew into the Anti-Bias Education (ABE) approach widely embraced by social-justice-oriented educators today (Escayg, 2019). Similar to Banks’ approach, not only must there be an equitable representation in the
curriculum and physical environments, there must also be a critical engagement in knowledge production by faculty and students (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Banks, 2013). Through the use of dialogue, students learn how asking questions, sharing knowledge, and examining problems leads to new understanding and widens their perspective (Peterson, 2012). The most impactful anti-bias education is when the critical consciousness generated through dialogue leads to social action (Banks, 2013; Derman-Sparks, 2006; Peterson, 2012). Simultaneously, the teacher must be engaged in their own self-reflective journey: critically examining their own biases, social identities, comfort-levels, beliefs, and mindsets (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Milner, 2010b), in order to combat the implicit biases and lack of self-awareness that impedes this work.

**Using Literature to Spark Dialogue**

Books have the awesome power to offer children the stories that help them construct a sense of themselves in the context of the larger world (Short, 2012). In the TED talk “The Danger of the Single Story,” author Adichie (2009) highlighted the duplicitous power of stories to joyfully engage the imagination, but at the same time limit it through the omission of stories untold. Bishop (1990) similarly pointed out that children’s literature impacts the health of a child’s emerging worldview and self-concept, and argued that the books they encounter should be comprised of both “windows and mirrors.” “Windows” are stories that offer a glimpse into cultures and experiences different from one’s own, and “mirrors” are the stories where children can see at least a part of themselves represented, validating their lived experience and identities (Bishop, 1990). A lack of exposure to diverse stories can truncate one’s knowledge of the real world and lead them to develop stereotypes about groups of people. Additionally, if an individual’s identity is omitted from the stories, they can be left with a detrimental message.
about society’s value of their story (Adichie, 2009; Bishop, 1990). Many echo an urgency that teachers critically examine the content of the literature used in their classroom to ensure that it provides a wealth of diverse perspectives and representation (Baldwin, 2018; Brinson, 2012; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Johnson, Koss, & Martinez, 2017: Kemple et al., 2016; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016; Potter, Thirumurthy, Szecsi, & Salakaja, 2009; Strategy, 2018; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2012).

When aiming to reduce bias in the classroom, diversifying the content of the literature cannot alone counter bias formation (Aboud & Levy, 2000); intentional curation must be matched with discussions encouraging critical inquiry (Johnson et al., 2017; Kemple et al., 2016; Potter et al., 2009; Souto-Manning, 2009). In dialogical storytelling, young students are active participants in the read aloud process, engaging with questions and prompts that spark the construction of new understanding (Kotaman, 2013). Book discussions can help children make connections, develop empathy, as well as navigate difficult topics in all their complexity (Committee for Children, 2009). This can be done with careful consideration to the developmental stage of the students. When literature is intentionally chosen to encourage conversations around social justice, these conversations can help children develop their capacity for empathy and a strong moral voice (Chafel, Flint, Hammel, & Pomeroy, 2007; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). The conversations opened up by a carefully chosen book can also allow for any problematic notions held by the child to surface and be thoughtfully addressed by the teacher (Baldwin, 2018; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Lee, Gamsey, & Sweeney, 2008; Yenika-Agbaw, 1997). If educators neglect to engage children in conversations questioning their assumptions, children are likely to internalize oppressive stereotypes and attitudes (Kemple et al., 2016).
The “Question with CARE” strategy outlined by Kemple et al. (2016), provides a framework for dialogic reading that helps teachers engage young children in topics that counteract bias. In the strategy the teacher asks a variety of questions throughout the book (Q), corrects and models language use for the children (C), affirms the children’s answers (A), repeats back what the children say and asks them to repeat back what they say (R), and expands on the children’s contributions (E). In this way, the teacher can act in tandem with the children to explore multicultural literature and construct new understandings (Kemple et al., 2016). This strategy attempts to build the critical thinking skills and exposure to content that are foundational elements of the ABE approach.

Building Community and Practice in ABE Professional Development

Professional development in teaching is a learning journey that often begins in teacher education programs but continues with opportunities embedded within the school year of practicing teachers. Many preservice teacher education programs have more recently prioritized a focus on anti-bias/anti-racist (ABAR) teacher preparation (Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010; Hansen, 2015; Kaur, 2012; Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Milner, 2010a; Swanson et al., 2019). However, there remains a wide range of experience and comfort levels held by inservice teachers in approaching these topics (Vittrup, 2016). Given the age span of inservice teachers, the self-reflection and cultural competence training that is currently more commonplace in many teaching programs is unlikely to be a pre-service experience shared by elder practitioners (Lin et al., 2008). By coming together to develop and refine their ABE practice, teachers can get on the same page with effective strategies for implementing ABE. Additionally, a collaborative setting ensures teachers will avoid the isolation of doing this work alone (McCaffrey, 2017).
Coming together in community is a beneficial component to a teacher’s learning journey. In an effort to build the social-emotional skills and cultural competencies of preservice teachers, Nenonene, Gallagher, Kelly, and Collopy (2019) used a “professional learning community” (PLC) model, a group consisting of education department faculty who set out to collaboratively meet this aim. The five core dimensions of PLCs outlined by Hord and Summers (2008) provided a framework for implementing these communities successfully. These elements included: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) shared vision and values, (3) collective learning and application, (4) supportive conditions, and (5) shared practice. Supportive and shared leadership refers to a decentralizing of leadership away from hierarchy, allowing teachers to take ownership of the process. Shared vision and values provide a philosophical grounding for this work, allowing participants to be on the same page with their commitment to a common mission. Collective learning and application, outlined by the work of Kruse, Seashore Louis, and Bryck (1994), necessitates the commitment of teachers to self-reflection, sharing their practice with colleagues, a hopeful disposition to student learning, collaboration with the aim of practical implementation, and a common set of student-centered values in their teaching. Supportive conditions are also crucial, such as access to resources, time, and space for this work provided by administration, as well as a common commitment, trust, and mission-driven focus of colleagues. Within a supportive context, shared practice appears as discussion, critique, offering recommendations, questioning reasoning, and providing feedback (Nenonene et al., 2019). In the case of Nenonene et al. (2019), the PLC setting promoted understanding, cohesion, and ownership among the faculty, specifically through discussion that included ideation, connection to and critique of existing practices, and imagining future improvements, leading the authors to
encourage other organizations to leverage their existing supportive structures and shared vision to establish a PLC for continued collaborative learning amongst faculty.

These collaborative opportunities support meaningful change in teacher practice by allowing for co-construction of knowledge and reflection on practice (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selingel, & Beckingham, 2004). Bakkenes, Vermunt, and Wubbels (2010) report that teacher learning most frequently comes from experimentation and reflection, which in turn result in changes in teacher knowledge and beliefs. Professional learning communities create space for these learning processes to be prioritized and explored collectively.

The review of the literature highlights the importance of anti-bias education and identified dialogic literature discussion as a promising tool. Meeting collaboratively in a PLC-like setting to share our approach to literature for ABE in the classroom and discussing the “Questioning with CARE” tool, could bring about a sense of unified purpose through a shared goal, as well as increase understanding and comfort with ABE. I did not find any study or program exploring in-service collaboration as a means to influence ABE involvement. This is significant because, if the effects are meaningful, it could provide an approachable model for school communities interested in promoting ABE.

**Methodology**

This action research intervention was developed to investigate the effects of a collaborative team-level discussion group on the confidence and comfort of teachers in their anti-bias practice. The discussion groups concentrated on the use of children’s literature as an anti-bias teaching tool. The intervention was conducted in a private, urban, AMS-accredited Montessori school, with four lower elementary head teachers (who teach in mixed-aged
classrooms serving students in first through third grade). All participants were cisgender, heterosexual, White women, ranging in age from 23 to 40 years old.

Prior to the intervention, teachers completed a survey consisting of questions around their experience and perspectives with ABE, including their confidence and comfort-level in their ABE practice (see Appendix A). The survey was administered through email as a Google Form. The teachers then participated in three discussion groups that were up to an hour in length and scheduled two weeks apart, over a 5-week period. Discussions were held in our school’s conference room during our lunch break, with lunch provided by the school. In the time between discussion groups, teachers conducted independent lessons using a children’s book to spark discussion around diversity, equity, and inclusion with their students. After each lesson, teachers filled out a self-assessment form, adapted from Yates (2019). Following the final discussion group, teachers filled out the same survey as before the intervention, with the addition of open-ended questions about their thoughts on the intervention and what they believed would be helpful to support their ABE practice going forward (see Appendix A).

My role in the discussion groups was as facilitator. In the first discussion, after comparing and contrasting our school’s values statements with Derman-Sparks and Edwards’ (2010) “Goals of Anti-Bias Education” (see Appendix B), teachers brainstormed the benefits, pitfalls, and best practices for using children’s literature for ABE (see Appendix C). Additionally, I introduced the “Question with CARE” children’s literature discussion framework that they could use as a teaching tool (see Appendix D). In the following week, teachers used the book *Neither*, by Airlie Anderson (2018), a story about a bird-bunny that doesn’t fit into the binary logic of “The Land of This and That,” to facilitate discussions of difference and inclusion in their classrooms. After the discussion, teachers each filled out a self-assessment that asked
them to reflect on various components of the lesson they gave (see Appendix E). In the second group discussion, I utilized the “Rose-Thorn-Bud” reflection exercise, which is designed to reflect on what went well, not-so-well, and areas of potential (see Appendix F). Teachers read another book to their class in the weeks following the second group discussion. This book, *Circle Unbroken*, by Margot Theis Raven (2007), synchronized with Black Lives Matter Week and provided a focus on Black history. In addition to reflecting on the previous week’s lesson, the final discussion group provided a space to share reflections on the intervention as a whole and thoughts on how our ABE practice can be best supported in the future.

My own reflections as the researcher were documented after each discussion, through an observational tally and rating scale, a self-reflective rating scale, and through prompt-guided journal entries. I recorded each group discussion using the Voice Memo app on my phone, since a real-time tally would be impossible given my role as facilitator. Transcribed recordings were coded for the number of reflective statements, which included subsections of sharing, critiquing, recommending, and questioning (see Appendix G). These categories were determined by Hord and Sommers’ (2008) elements of successful PLCs. Additionally, within the sharing subsection, I included codes for if teachers made reference to getting ideas from others, experimenting, or experiencing friction, three other “teacher learning activities” in addition to reflection that Bakkenes et al. (2010) referenced in their work.

Before and after each discussion group, I rated my own enthusiasm toward the discussion, confidence as a facilitator, connectedness to community, and expected versus assessed productivity and reflectiveness of the discussion (see Appendix H). To flesh out the rating scale, I wrote post-discussion journal entries to elicit my own thoughts and observations about the discussion and the project in general (see Appendix I).
In reviewing the data collected, I aimed to discover what elements of the meetings impacted teacher responses to the questionnaire. By coding the data in alignment with Hord and Sommers (2008)’s best practices for PLCs, I was curious to determine how the elements of effective PLCs, including reflection and teacher learning, directly impacted teachers’ experience with engaging in ABE work.

Analysis of Data

The questions contained in the pre- and post-intervention surveys belonged predominantly to four major categories: value of anti-bias education (ABE), ABE confidence, ABE comfort, and value of others (meaning community and teamwork) in ABE. When the Likert scale items for each category were averaged in the pre-intervention survey, the biggest difference was between the participant value of ABE (mean=5) and their confidence in their practice (mean=3). All participants rated the value of ABE teamwork at 5, suggesting that in our participant group the teachers shared core values for ABE and collaboration in ABE practice.

Comparison of pre- and post-intervention survey categories showed a slight decrease in value of others in ABE, due to one respondent choosing a 4 for “value of community” instead of the 5 they selected in the pre-intervention survey (representing a change of -.17 when scores were averaged). Value of ABE remained high with an average Likert Scale value of 5 pre- and post-intervention. There was a small increase in ABE comfort (a change of +.25), and a larger increase in ABE confidence (+.78). This indicates that after participating in the intervention, teachers were slightly more comfortable and confident implementing ABE.
Closer examination of the changes between individual survey questions in the ABE confidence category, showed growth of +1 pre- and post-intervention for the items “I feel confident talking about race with children” and “I feel prepared to facilitate literature discussions with an anti-bias aim.” Given that the intervention specifically engaged these two actions, it is possible that practicing them led to increased confidence.
When the same analysis was run on the ABE comfort survey items, the gains were in the “comfort addressing bias with children when it surfaces in social interactions” (+.33) and “comfort teaching curriculum that addresses race” (+.67). Again, since this intervention involved engaging children in a conversation around race, it is possible that led to higher teacher comfort.
Also worth noting is that between surveys there was an increase in teacher self-reported likelihood of participation in individual (+.75) and group (+1) ABE professional development. When asked to rate how helpful this intervention was, the average of responses was 4.33, indicating a positive view of its effectiveness. Having a positive experience with professional development may lead to greater future participation.

In addition to the pre and post-intervention surveys, teachers were also able to give individual feedback through their lesson self-assessments. After each of the two lessons using children’s literature for ABE, teachers completed a self-assessment. This form asked teachers: to write their goals and preparation for the book, rate their appreciation for human diversity and encouragement of anti-bias attitudes, reflect on positive and negative aspects of the lesson, reflect on what they would change in the future, rate their performance as an anti-bias educator,
rate the depth of the discussion, reflect on their use of the QCARE tool, and to document what questions they asked the children.

Of the three teachers who completed the intervention, there were no changes between their ratings in the first and second self-assessments, except for one teacher whose assessment of the depth of the discussion between the first and second lessons went from 3 to 1 and her assessment of her performance from a 4 to a 3. The depth of the discussion appeared to be a consequence of the children’s ability to attend. The teacher recommended that the book be used in small group lessons next time to enhance student engagement.

While the data from the teacher self-assessments did not register much change between lessons, it did indicate something more important about teachers’ participation in the intervention. This self-assessment engaged teachers with the various elements of reflection: sharing, critiquing, questioning, recommending, bringing the reflective process of the teacher discussion groups to the individual level. These qualities are all crucial to a successful Professional Learning Community.

Beyond individual feedback, data was also collected in discussion group sessions. After recording and transcribing the dialogue from discussion groups, the transcripts were coded for reflective statements (subcategorized as critiquing, sharing, recommending, or questioning), and teacher learning activities, such as experimenting, experiencing friction, and getting ideas from others.
Table 1

*Statements of Reflection and Other Teacher Learning Activities Tally*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Activity</th>
<th>Discussion Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiquing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommending</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas from Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiencing Friction</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
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Upon first glance, it appears that the groups became less reflective over time. While the first discussion group had the most reflective statements, it was also the longest at 38:17, while the other two were 26:09 and 19:30, respectively. The topic of discussion was also a more broad reflection on practice, while the latter two were more focused on specific literature discussions. Recounting stories of experiencing friction in one’s practice happened most often in the first discussion group, especially as we talked about challenges and pitfalls to ABE.

While the number of remarks in each category is difficult to compare from one discussion group to another, due to difference in length and content, one thing is evident: reflection, critiquing, sharing, recommending, and questioning were evident in all sessions. The consistent presence of the various forms of reflection show that the composition of the discussions in the focus group were in line with best-practices for PLCs.
Reflective statements were a crucial element found throughout the discussion groups. In one discussion group, one participant exhibited examples of the three most common types of reflection: sharing, recommending, and critiquing. In one statement, she shared about her classroom’s engagement with the text, saying, “The images were so dense that the kids definitely noticed a lot of great things. There was the circle theme and they asked about details, how the slaves were kept from running--they noticed the apparatuses keeping slaves together, questions about that.” That same participant later made a recommendation, stating, “it might have been better to do it in a smaller group setting.” She also offered a critique of her practice, saying, “My goal was to try to link this [book] to that [a Black Lives Matters lesson] and talk about how there’s contemporary movement, Black Lives Matter--I mean, there’s the Civil Rights [Movement] but this is an ongoing struggle and this book kind of represents that. But we never got there.” Her statements spurred expressions of agreement, further sharing, and recommendations from colleagues, showing the collaborative dialogue essential to effective PLCs.

The presence of the qualities of a PLC were evident from the participants’ statements as well as from my own experience as a participant observer. The researcher self-reflection, completed before and after each discussion group, showed consistent increase in the areas of enthusiasm, confidence, connectedness to community, predicting and assessing productivity, and predicting and assessing reflectiveness from the start of each discussion group to the end of each group.
Table 2

*Researcher Self-Reflection Rating Scale*

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<th>Discussion Group 1</th>
<th>Discussion Group 2</th>
<th>Discussion Group 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connectedness to Community</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected vs. Assessed Productivity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected vs. Assessed Reflectiveness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 2 indicate that ratings in all areas either remained the same, or increased by 1-2 points by the end of each session. These increases may have been a result of the experience of engaging with work one is passionate about, and seeing the positive effects of discussion on teacher collaboration and rapport. Journal writings completed after each discussion group consistently showed optimism, even on a more stressful day.

When compiled together, the data made a few things clear. The comfort and confidence of participants in their ABE practice increased. Additionally, participants engaged in discussion groups, incorporating reflective dialogue and shared practice, necessary for effective PLCs and teacher learning.

**Action Plan**

The purpose of this study was to create an intervention that would support the anti-bias education (ABE) practice of the lower elementary teachers at my school. The research sought to investigate the effects of peer discussion on teacher comfort and confidence with their anti-bias
instruction. Comparisons between pre- and post-survey data showed a positive change in both teacher confidence and comfort with their ABE practice. Qualitative analysis of the discussion groups through transcript coding and researcher self-reflection illustrated a generative and positive atmosphere, high in reflection, sharing, and collaboration.

While positive effects are evident, a number of limitations exist, including the sample size, the homogeneity of the sample, and the duration of the study. Given that this intervention was held with a grade-level team, the sample size was limited to five teachers, including the participant researcher. When one teacher had to exit the study for medical reasons, the survey data was adjusted to reflect only three respondents. A larger sample size would provide more compelling and statistically valid data.

The sample of participants was also limited in terms of demographics. All participants were straight, cisgender, White women, except for the participant researcher who is a nonbinary, White, queer person. If the sample of participating teachers was more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, it is likely that the discussion groups would consist of more diversity of perspective. It is also possible that the pre and post survey data could be different. Specifically, it would show if the comfort and confidence in ABE of teachers of color and/or queer teachers is affected to this same degree as White and/or heteronormative teachers and if White, heteronormative teachers experience the same gains in comfort and confidence when working in a more diverse group.

The sample could also be expanded to include discussion groups for other grade levels, outside of lower elementary. The impact of these discussion groups on toddler and early childhood teachers versus a group of middle school teachers may vary in content and effect on teacher comfort and confidence with ABE. The fact that this was conducted in a Montessori
school versus a traditional setting also created sample homogeneity. However, shared norms and values around anti-bias, did allow this group to exhibit collective focus on meaningful instruction and openness to best practices during discussion groups. If this study was conducted across multiple school settings that represented Montessori and traditional, public and private, the data would reflect a greater diversity of school environments.

This intervention was also limited by time, with the intervention lasting five weeks. If implemented throughout the school year, on a bi-weekly basis, these discussion groups could present teachers with an even more substantial opportunity to align and reflect on their ABE practice. Our school has yet to develop an ABE scope and sequence, but these regular discussion groups could help us pilot one, and refine it over time. These meetings would: provide time for reflection on lessons given during the previous week, give teachers time to review anti-bias aims, and encourage sharing of lessons and resources for the next week’s theme. Over time, the team could document which lessons were most effective and meaningful to students and teachers. With children’s literature as an effective tool at our employ, it could serve as the material and intellectual launchpad for these lessons. Multiple teachers expressed a desire for a shared ABE library, consisting of books and lessons recommended by fellow teachers. These meetings could be an opportunity to curate a permanent library of ABE resources.

Consistent and meaningful engagement with anti-bias education is crucial not only in the education of our youth, but that of ourselves. One is never done when it comes to this work; there is always more to learn and unlearn, more perspectives to consider and share. While there is always a place articulating the school’s mission and philosophy with respect to social justice, the meaningful change comes through action. We must walk the walk. Providing a structure for teachers to explore and reflect on this work is akin to the scaffolding we provide our students
every day in our Montessori environments. If we believe we are life-long learners, propelled by curiosity and passion, we must construct our own teaching environment with the structure that allows teachers to learn the ways to best provide anti-bias education. This action research can serve as a jumping-off point for educators interested in exploring how team-level collaboration for ABE can positively impact their school. I plan to continue down this path in my own school community, and I hope that this paper shares a story that will empower others to guide their own schools to a more just and liberating practice.
References


Appendix A

Pre- and Post-Intervention Online Survey Items

Both Pre- and Post-Intervention:

On a scale from 1-5…

- How confident do you feel in your anti-bias practice?
- How important do you think it is to talk about race with children?
- How confident do you feel talking about race?
- How often is race addressed in your classroom?
- How valuable is community to your anti-bias practice?
- How connected to community do you feel in your anti-bias practice?
- How likely are you to participate in individual staff/faculty PD around anti-bias practice?
- How likely are you to participate in group staff/faculty PD around anti-bias practice?
- How well does the visual and material environment of your classroom reflect an anti-bias lens?
- What is your comfort level addressing bias with children when it surfaces in social interactions?
- What is your comfort level articulating anti-bias education with parents?
- What is your comfort level teaching curriculum that addresses race?
- What is your comfort level teaching curriculum that addresses gender?
- What is your comfort level teaching curriculum that addresses class?
- How prepared do you feel to facilitate literature discussions with an anti-bias approach?
- How often do you reflect on your social identities (e.g., gender, race, class) and how they have shaped your experience?
  - [Daily, 1-6 times/week, 1-3 times/month, less than once a month, never]
- What do you see as the greatest roadblock to doing anti-bias work? [open-ended]
- What kinds of support would be helpful? [open-ended]
- What does cultural competency look like for a teacher? [open-ended] For a student? [open-ended]

Post-intervention only:

- Was this intervention helpful? [Not at all/Somewhat/Very much] How so? [open-ended]
- What are some supports/structures would be most beneficial to you in your anti-bias classroom practice? [open-ended]
Appendix B

Goals of Anti-Bias Education
Adapted from Derman-Spark and Olsen (2010)

1. Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social interactions.

2. Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.

3. Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

4. Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.
Appendix C

Discussion Group #1 White Board Record

We Value Statements

Diversity

Inclusion

Equity

Cultural Competency

Goals of ABE

Sense of belonging

Embracing others

Self-knowledge

Sense of community

Self-awareness

Educational

Professional

cultural diversity

Potential ABEs:

- support healthy school culture
- build trust
- provide opportunities
- encourage self-reflection
- support collaborative learning
- increase cultural awareness
- promote critical thinking
- foster a sense of community

Using Children’s Lit

- counter to lecturing
- sparks starting point
- to have empathy for others
- introduces diversity
- literature not enough by itself
- historical context

- to see oneself represented

- place it in a thoughtful way (e.g., mathematics)
- create a safe space and need for understanding
- guide child to provide time for reflection
- provide books before discussion
- provide a safe environment
- ask group to read
- student application to life
- ask students to engage with others
- ask students to explain diversity
- ask students to explain their perspectives

- understanding others
EFFECTS OF DISCUSSION GROUPS AND ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION

- place it at a thoughtful time (e.g., mindfulness)
- work back from goals and find piece of literature
- writing time provides time for follow up
- pre-view book before discussion for messages
- book group good time - pre-teach concepts / vocabulary
- linking to other works - student application to life
- think about audience / avoid singling out - teach about micro-aggressions
- answer questions openly / honestly by "I'm not sure."

Best Practices

- historical context
- to see oneself represented

Individual work
Potential Pitfalls:
- Parent reactions
- Student isolation
- Feeling phoney
- Not knowing "best" vocabulary
- Curveballs
- Generational blindspots
Appendix D

Questioning with CARE Tool
(Committee for Children, 2004; Received from Kemple et al., 2016)

“Question with CARE” elements:

Q = Ask a variety of questions (fill-in the blank, open-ended, detail, etc.)
C = Correct and model language use
A = Affirm children’s answers
R = Repeat what children say, have them repeat what you say
E = Expand on what children say
### Appendix E

**Teacher Post-Lesson Self-Assessment**  
*Adapted from Yates (2019)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Number of students present:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title and author of book:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What were your goals in sharing this book with children, and how did you prepare yourself for the discussion?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you model appreciation for human diversity?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you encourage anti-bias attitudes in children?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positive aspects of reading and discussion:**

**Negative aspects of reading and discussion:**

**What would you change about how you handled the reading and discussion, if anything?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate your performance as an anti-bias educator in the discussion:</th>
<th>1(poor)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5(excellent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much did you direct the discussion?</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Mostly</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate depth of the discussion on a scale from 1-5:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Did you...**

- ...ask questions (Q)? Yes/No  
- ...correct and model language use (C)? Yes/No  
- ...affirm children’s answers (A)? Yes/No  
- ...repeat what the children say or have the children repeat what they say (R)? Yes/No  
- ...expand upon what the children are saying (E)? Yes/No  

**What questions did you ask?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix F

Discussion Group #2 White Board Record

1) Self-Assessments
2) Rose- Thorn- Bud
3) Next week’s Book

---

**Rose**
- enjoyable, our kids
- “world could be more diverse”
- announced movie
- connecting discussion to imagery - where are you from - meaning pronunciation - unnecessary repetition
- book appealed visually - the power of visuals
- Talking the point of view of the other character
- Preparing for upcoming project
- Display can allow for visual information and interpretation of story

**Thorn**
- Almost did that build it to base game
- Setting and struggle (fun)
- on-screen mode to navigate
- Straightforward accuracy required more encouraging
- lack of, knowledge of gender concepts
- self-selected comic limits diff. encountered

**Bud**
- looking at gender fluidity and the influence of limiting social expectations
- looking at ideas about gender concept
- could confuse gender concepts and language
- understanding when agonists are coming from

Would discussion around gender be best before or after the book?
- leaning toward that don’t simpify but differentiate
Rose

- enjoyable for kids
- "World would be boring if all same"
- annotated w/ pictures
- connecting discussion to imagery
  - what do you notice
  - making predictions
  - unearthing metaphors
- book appealed visually
  - the power of vividness
- Talking abt. P.O.V. of this/those characters
- Preparing for upstanding in public space
- Display can allow for school interconnection and internalization of history
Thorn

- How much did they link it to their own lives?
- Sitting was struggle (20 min.)
- Excitement turned to silliness
- Straightforward message required more digging
- Lack of knowledge of gender concepts
- Self-selected comm. limits
- Diff. encountered

Bud

- Linking it to their personal lives
- Preparing them for everyday
- Could and would understand
- Having before doing
EFFECTS OF DISCUSSION GROUPS AND ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION

Bud

- linking it to gender fluidity
- preparing by thinking abt. what we want conversation to be to segue into it
- linking to new ideas/thoughts/themes
- could connect to gender concepts and language
- understand where antagonists are coming from

Would discussion around gender be best before or after the book?

- having convos that don’t single-out but do representation

Comm. limits

Living (20mm.) led to silliness
Appendix G

Transcript Coding Tally

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Number of Participants Present:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection (Sharing):</td>
<td>Reflection (Offering Feedback):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection (Critiquing):</td>
<td>Getting Ideas from Others:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection (Recommending):</td>
<td>Experiencing Friction:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection (Questioning):</td>
<td>Experimenting:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H

Researcher Self-Reflection Rating Scale
Adapted from McCaffrey, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Pre-Focus Group</th>
<th>Post-Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How enthusiastic do you feel about today’s focus group session?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident do you feel as the facilitator this focus group?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How connected to your community in anti-bias practice do you feel?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How productive [do you expect/was] the conversation [to be]?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How reflective [do you expect/was] the conversation [to be]?</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I

Research Self-Reflection Journal Prompts

Adapted from McCaffrey (2017)

Reflection Prompts:

● This work feels important to me today because…
● This work feels challenging today because…
● I feel… about this work today because…
● Changes I notice in the group include…
● Changes I notice in myself include…