PICTURE BOOKS FOR TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by

Lindsey Kesanen

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

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
August 2019

Capstone Project Facilitator: Melissa Erickson
Content Expert: Beth Pearson
DEDICATIONS

To Matt~
Thank you for always believing in me, pushing me to follow my dreams, and supporting me every step of the way.

To Grace~
I hope this project inspires you to help others, guides you to build a life filled with compassion and empathy, and reminds you of the importance of learning about our big, diverse world.

To My Students~
Thank you for providing inspiration every single day. You motivate me to be the best teacher I can be and are a constant reminder of why lifelong learning is so important.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

- Introduction ................................................................. 6
- Professional Background ...................................................... 7
- Personal Background ......................................................... 10
- Our Current Social Climate .................................................. 11
- Conclusion ........................................................................ 13

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

- Introduction ....................................................................... 15
- Critical Literacy Theory ...................................................... 16
  - Paulo Freire ................................................................. 17
- Critical Literacy in Education ................................................. 19
  - Introduction ................................................................. 19
  - Definition ....................................................................... 19
  - Strategies ....................................................................... 20
    - Problem Posing .......................................................... 22
    - Switching .................................................................... 23
    - Alternative Perspectives ............................................... 24
    - Exploring Identities ..................................................... 24
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Hi Mrs. Kesanen,

I would love to know the name of a book you guys read in class last week. Sam (name changed for data privacy) said he read a book about a woman that lost her job and was homeless. It definitely touched him! He came home and emptied his piggy bank and we’ve been talking about ways to donate his money to people who need homes and food. Thanks so much for sharing that important story with the class!!

On December 10th, 2018 I received the email above. It is one of those emails that I love receiving as a teacher. One that not only affirms that I am making a difference in my first grade classroom, but also one that sparks a passion for change. Books like the one mentioned above are few and far between in my curriculum. It was an additional text that was recommended by our service learning committee that I find time to read in my classroom to support our service learning initiative. Once a year, we take time to read two or three stories that are tied to a social justice issue. The theme this year was homelessness.
Although I am grateful my school attempts to implement the use of these books, I have found in my heart it is not enough. I have had the pleasure of teaching first graders over the course of nine years. As I continue to expand my knowledge base, I realize as a teacher, I need to do more to bring important social issues to light in my first grade classroom. The picture book that inspired this young man was titled *The Lady in the Box* by Ann McGovern (1997). In this book, we learn of a woman who is living in a box outside a restaurant. In secret, two young children befriend the woman and try to help improve her situation. As the story unfolds, the woman is forced to move spots because the restaurant owner no longer wants her living outside his business. We see how the young girls grapple with the possibility of having to tell their mother about their secret situation or risk having their newfound friend freeze to death (McGovern, 1997). It is a beautiful tale of compassion, giving, and showing the reality that many homeless people face on a daily basis. It was the first picture book I have ever read that sparked my students to clap at the end.

In that moment, I knew I was on to something big. The email that followed a day later confirmed the need for me to find more ways to include these important picture books in my classroom. This was what has led me to the burning question: *How can picture books be used to support discussion on social justice issues in the elementary classroom?* As the chapter continues I further explain the importance and relevance of this topic selection from my professional, personal, and worldview perspectives.

**Professional Background**
I work in a school district that is 90% white, with only 1.4% of the population receiving English Language Learner services and 11.9% receiving special education services. Less than 7% of our student population receives free and reduced lunch. Based on this information, it is easy to see that our student body is not incredibly diverse. This is an additional reason why I think incorporating picture books that center around social justice issues is crucial for expanding our students’ perspectives and views of the world.

In the summer of 2017, I attended the Hamline University Literacy Institute. One of the presenters introduced me to the essay titled “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors” by Rudine Sims Bishop. The excerpt below is one that remains in my mind and inspires me to make this important change in my classroom.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiarity or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Sims Bishop, 1990, para. 1)

Each year I have students enter my classroom from all different walks of life. They deserve to see and read books that act as *mirrors* in which they can connect to the characters, settings, adventures, and problems. However, they also deserve books that
serve as windows which introduce them to social issues happening in our world. Books that might show them another perspective different from their own experiences. Books that might inspire them to think deeply about these issues and develop ideas on how to tackle them.

I recently watched Grace Lin’s Ted Talk called *The Windows and Mirrors of your Child’s Bookshelf*. Many of Rudine’s ideas are emulated in this particular Ted Talk. Grace’s speech shares about her childhood experiences of growing up Asian. She was the only Asian girl in her elementary school. Because of this, she tried her best to forget she was Asian. At one point, she shares that she did not recognize her own reflection in a store window because she had tried so hard to forget she was Chinese. Grace later describes a world of not being able to see herself in books, magazines, or on the TV screen. Until her adult years she never paused to think about herself, her culture as an Asian person, or why her parents immigrated to the United States in the first place. Grace’s powerful story caused me to pause and think about the students in my classroom and school. It made me wonder how many of my students did not fully understand their own culture or wanted to suppress it because they were surrounded by peers who were different from them. It made me pause and think if my own library truly acted as both windows and mirrors for all of my students in my room. Towards the end of Grace’s Ted Talk (2016) she questioned, “How can we expect kids to get along with others in this world; to empathize and share if they never see outside themselves?” This quote is another key reason why I want to dive deeper into researching picture books on social
justice issues. My hope is this project will help all students begin to understand the importance of empathy and how to help those in need.

Two years ago, our district enlisted the help of Dr. Ramon A. Pastrano IV, the President and CEO of Impact Lives. This organization focuses on providing learning and training experiences linked to work with social justice. Our school district recognized that we needed additional guidance to help us close the widening achievement gap with our students of diverse backgrounds. Through Impact Lives, we were offered an opportunity to take a cultural competency survey. Through this survey, we gained a better understanding of how we view ourselves and people from other cultures. Based on our results, we developed an action plan to help us move along the cultural competency continuum. Then, during several of our professional development days, we have learned about the importance of knowing our own cultures and the importance of developing knowledge and empathy towards other cultures. Our work with Dr. Pastrano is an additional motivator to research my topic on discussing social justice issues in the elementary classroom. To be truly culturally competent, one must not only have knowledge of other cultures, but be able to view the world from another culture’s lens. I believe that picture books tied to social justice issue ideas can help my students begin to develop a sense of empathy and create multi-perspective experiences.

**Personal Background**

I grew up in a small city in central Wisconsin with demographics even less diverse than my current school district. As a white, blonde, blue-eyed girl, I had the opportunity to see myself in plenty of picture books we read in school. I saw images of a
family similar to mine. One with a mom and dad, a sibling, and pet dog. While these books had problems and solutions, they were all of the kind that never sparked me to think about more pressing issues that happen in real life outside of my four school or home walls.

It took me until I turned 20 years of age to realize the concept of white privilege. I was sitting in a college course and we were reading an article that highlighted how companies only tailor their products to white people. We explored the idea of how makeup, bandaids, TV commercials, and magazines only catered their products to people with white skin tones. I am ashamed to think that for twenty years of my life I never thought about how other people did not have access to basic necessities that would complement the color of their skin. It was a pivotal moment in my life and changed the way I saw our world. I can distinctly remember walking the aisles of the grocery store and taking note of all the products that would match my skin tone, but not the skin tones of people different from mine. I felt a range of emotions from ashamed, maddened, and saddened, to inspired and hopeful. Although I did not have the means to create products that could alleviate this problem, I knew I could one day inspire change by encouraging students to see the experiences and perspectives of other’s lives.

**Our Current Social Climate**

When I turn on the news, I am inundated with headlines surrounding a serious social divide and heated issues that greatly impact people from around the globe. Huge movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, immigration reform, and LGBTQ+ rights are highlighted on an almost daily basis. There is so much unrest and uncertainty in
our world today. No matter how sheltered (or not sheltered) children are in their home environments, they still gain glimpses of these huge issues facing our world. They hear things from other students at recess, the lunchroom, and in the classroom. My belief is instead of hiding these issues from our children, we should introduce them in a way that will spark discussion and promote problem-solving. We should be proactive rather than reactive when introducing social issues to our students.

As I begin to think about how I can promote change and inspire students to learn about social issues, I come back to the words of educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire (1972), from his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, 1972, p. 39)

Instead of shying away from discussing these hot topics with my students, I need to proactively seek out opportunities to introduce and discuss these issues with my class. I feel picture books are a great way to begin bridging this gap and are a developmentally appropriate medium to introduce these important social issues to children. They are a
great way to begin meaningful, deep discussions that promote critical thinking and problem-solving.

**Conclusion**

Looking at the culminating experiences from my personal childhood, professional background, and media stories that have given me additional perspectives, it is easy to see why I have selected this topic for further research. The information I have gained through my courses at Hamline University, paired with the needs I see in my students and school environment are the driving forces behind my burning question involving picture books centered around social justice issues.

In chapter two, I dig deeper into current research and past educational philosophies that support this idea. I look to see where this idea takes root and how I can help it blossom in my classroom and in the classrooms of other elementary teachers. The upcoming chapter contains a literature review which will show research that helped shape answers to my burning question: *How can picture books be used to promote discussions around social justice issues in elementary classrooms?* For my project, I plan to develop a website that elementary teachers can use as a means to explore social issues in their classrooms. Chapter three explains the rationale behind the website project along with framework research, the audience, setting, and timeline. I want the website to be easy to use so teachers can quickly locate a social justice topic of interest, select a corresponding picture book, and have access to questions that can inspire deep discussions and promote critical thinking around the topic.
Lastly, chapter four will include my reflection after project completion, major learnings I discovered throughout the process as well as revisions that may need to be made in the future. Chapter four also will discuss any project limitations, the process for communicating the project to my K-2 staff, and the benefits made to my profession because of my project. Lastly, it will include a summary paragraph with my final conclusions for the overall project.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

When reflecting on current literacy skills, it is apparent that twenty-first century learners need more than just phonemic awareness, phonics, and comprehension. Aside from these foundational literacy concepts, there is an additional need for students to think critically about the texts they are reading. Twenty-first century readers must move from being “passive recipients of knowledge” to ones who are active in questioning an author’s intent, understanding there is more than one side to every story, deepening their own understanding of text, and broadening their perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 6). Research has found that critical literacy skills actually deepen students’ comprehension. It allows them to “become actively engaged with the text and question the author’s purpose, thinking, and format” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 7). Implementing critical literacy skills in the classroom plays an important role in social justice education.

When looking at our current society, there is much discussion around the areas of race, culture, gender, class, and discrimination. Teachers have the power to address these important issues in their classrooms or banish them from discussion. Groenke, Maples, and Henderson (2010) believed “21st century literacy skills must include not only learning how to respectfully articulate and voice opinions, but also how to listen to and
receive others’ opinions and viewpoints on important issues” (p. 29). Incorporating social justice discussions in classrooms allows students to do just that. It teaches them the importance of empathy and viewing issues from multiple perspectives and puts them in the driver’s seat to inspire problem-solving and activism. The ideas of social justice education stem from Critical Literacy Theory and the works of educator Paulo Freire.

When beginning research, it is important to establish the foundation in which the topic is rooted. Identifying the theory that best correlates to the topic is crucial in understanding the how and why behind the research. “When the term *theory* is used in the field of education, it refers to a well-documented explanation for a phenomenon related to teaching and/or learning” (Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 4). The first part of this section will include research on Critical Literacy Theory which leads to the second part of the section on the work of Paulo Freire. The idea of social justice education is rooted in many of his theories. Following the theories, the section further reviews critical literacy strategies and social justice education in classrooms. After that, the review takes a closer look at why picture books are a wonderful way to begin discussing social justice issues in elementary classrooms. The last section reviews why some teachers are apprehensive to tackle these types of conversations in their classrooms. The following comprehensive review of literature in these areas will gather information to aid in responding to the question: *How can picture books be used to support discussion on social justice issues in the elementary classroom?*

**Critical Literacy Theory**
Many different types of theories have been developed about the topic of literacy over the ages. As literacy education began to be viewed through a more political lens, the Critical Literacy Theory was born. According to Morris (2011), “Critical Literacy Theory considers the political aspects of literacy education such as the ways in which schooling reinforces persistent inequalities in contemporary society, and the opportunities that exist within education to empower individuals to overcome such social oppression” (as cited in Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 133). This new lens encouraged teachers and students to begin to question the imbalances of power that could be found in different types of literature. Instead of just reading texts, literacy education moved to analyzing the meaning behind the author’s words and deciding if there might be a hidden agenda behind their message.

Tracey and Morrow (2012) explained how Critical Literacy Theory highlighted the idea that education is in fact not a “politically neutral process” (p. 133). Instead, the theory explored how schools were in a position of power to push a particular type of agenda that caused an imbalance of power for the learners in the classroom. One of the leading theorists who played a role in developing this theory was Paulo Freire.

Paulo Freire. Paulo Freire was a well-known scholar and theorist. By leading the way in developing the ideas behind Critical Literacy Theory, he became arguably one of the most influential educators of the twentieth century. Paulo believed in “reading the world, not the word” (Veugelers, 2017, p. 413). This meant students had the power to challenge the ideas found in the texts they were reading. They used their own background knowledge of their world paired with inquiry to develop a better understanding of words.
How one person created meaning for a text could vastly differ from another. According to Freire (1981), students were able to make better connections to concepts if they were allowed to organically discover the purpose and process behind them. Veugelers (2017) expanded on this idea and explained, “Freire’s view on inquiry is to regard it as a rather open process, with reading the world meaning that attention is given to the context and the cultural and dialogical process of meaning making” (p. 414). He believed inquiry and curiosity were the keys to establishing deep thinking and connections with literature.

Critical Literacy Theory was built out of Freire’s ideology. According to Giroux (2010), “critical pedagogy affords students the opportunity to read, write, and learn for themselves—to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and the application of acquired skills” (para. 5). This theory shifted literacy education from teacher-centered to student-centered thinking. It promoted a new kind of engagement and transparency of power in literature. Students were invited to question the texts and the authors who wrote them. This theory encouraged them to become “problem posers” where they critiqued, questioned, and challenged the issues brought to light in their classrooms (Giroux, 2010; Wolstein, 2016). This began to even the playing field for all learners and helped them develop a sense of their own rights and power.

Eventually, Freire’s unconventional and radical thinking caused him to be jailed and eventually exiled from his native country of Brazil (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Even though the government tried to abolish his ideas, the field of literacy education continued to use them for good. As Wolstein (2016) explained, Freire’s work can be seen in
classrooms that support critical literacy and the exploration of social justice issues. Freire wanted nothing more than to have teachers share the power of learning with students by showing them how to question their world. The following section shows Freire’s work in action by exploring the definition of critical literacy and highlighting strategies that can be used in elementary classrooms.

**Critical Literacy in Education**

**Introduction.** According to McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), critical literacy involves reading texts with multiple lenses and actively participating in the reading process. It empowers readers to challenge the author’s message and intent and helps them actively reflect, question, transform, and take action. In addition, it allows students to gain a deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts related to power, inequality, and injustice. As Wilhelm (2009) stated, “Changes that move students and teachers in the direction of critical literacy are essential at this moment, particularly given the dominance of oversimplified notions of learning, literacy, understanding, and assessment” (p. 36). The ideas Wilhelm expressed are why I believe critical literacy skills are crucial for twenty-first century learning. The next section will provide a definition of critical literacy. Further sections will highlight different critical literacy strategies that can be used in elementary classrooms.

**Definition.** Several researchers and scholars have developed definitions of critical literacy with similar ideas. Linder’s (2006) article on exploring multiple perspectives gave a definition that encompassed many of the same ideas from different researchers in the area of critical literacy.
A critical approach to literacy instruction encourages readers to question authors’ intents and to consider the purposes of their texts; to view how the texts attempt to shape readers’ perceptions of themselves; and to examine issues related to gender, race, power, and social injustice. Critical literacy also encourages readers to scrutinize texts from various points of view and to engage in reflection that leads to transformations within the reader that direct them to act upon social injustices in society. (Linder, 2006, p. 24)

Comber (2001) took a simpler approach to defining critical literacy. She stated, “Critical literacy means practicing the use of language in powerful ways to get things done in the world” (p. 2). Each definition highlighted the power found in critical literacy practices. These definitions described the need for students to understand how texts have the power to shape their own perspectives and proved that is okay to challenge the ideas found within them. Additionally, these definitions promoted the development of empathy through learning of social justice issues and also inspired students to take action against injustices. There are several different approaches teachers can use to implement critical literacy practices in their classrooms. The following section explores the research behind these practices.

**Strategies.** Many researchers and scholars in the area of critical literacy explained the importance of drawing on students’ previous experiences, backgrounds, family and community life, and values to support their learning (Comber, 2001; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Wilhelm, 2009). Researchers found that students were more prone to be
engaged in critical literacy strategies when they evolved around topics that interested the students.

At the heart of each of the strategies researched is the idea of inquiry-based learning. This type of pedagogy places students in the driver’s seat and allows them to investigate their own wonderings about the world. Teachers are in charge of preparing lessons that will encourage students to be reflective practitioners and ultimately develop their own understanding of concepts (Cleovoulou, 2018; Freire, 1983; Wilhelm, 2009). Wilhelm (2009) explained that inquiry strategies should be both reflective and reflexive. Reflective activities revolve around making meaning of concepts through the personal experiences, values, and interests of the students. Reflexive activities focus on broadening the students’ personal horizons, understanding the history of different groups of people, and working towards helping them develop empathy towards others.

Before teachers dove into selecting inquiry-based strategies linked to critical literacy, they had to first establish an appropriate environment that supported this type of learning. Mulhern and Gunding (2011) explained, “A critically literate environment, like an inquiry-based environment, is safe and inclusive, and shared experiences and ideas are valued” (as cited in Cleovoulou, 2018, p. 311). This ties back to the ideas of Freire and Wilhelm that reiterated the importance of putting the children’s ideas and interests at the forefront of classroom activities. Student-developed questions were to be honored and utilized as the driving force for developing lessons. This concept helped teachers establish a classroom that focused on safety, inclusivity, and respect.
An important ideology Cleovoulou (2018) highlighted was understanding that there is not a set script when it comes to critical literacy implementation. Since student thinking is the key to inquiry and critical literacy, the strategies mentioned are a way to begin exploring critical literacies. The lessons should be altered as students begin to share their interpretations of the texts they are analyzing and discussing.

**Problem posing.** One critical literacy strategy that can be used with both narrative and information texts is *problem posing*. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) explained that problem posing begins with selecting a specific type of text to engage in a critical discussion. This might include books or videos for students to view. Then, after the reading or viewing, the teacher asks students questions to engage them in critical discussions. The following questions were examples from the work of McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004).

- “Who is in the text/picture/situation? Who is missing?”
- “Whose voices are represented? Whose voices are marginalized or discounted?”
- “What are the intentions of the author? What does the author want the reader to think?”
- “What would an alternative text/picture/situation say?”
- “How can the reader use this information to promote equity?” (p. 41)

This strategy allowed students to start by sharing their initial observations and understanding, and then moved them into analyzing the text on a deeper level. Questions such as “What are the intentions of the author? What does the author want the reader to
think?” (p. 41) promoted students to formulate responses around understanding the message the author was trying to convey.

Gallagher (2015) expanded on this idea by using photographs as a way to explore problems in society. He began by selecting and showing a photo from Life’s *100 Photographs That Changed the World.* After showing the photo, he asked students what they noticed about the photo and then prompted critical thinking by asking “what was the photographer’s purpose in taking this photo” (p. 44). Both McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) and Gallagher’s (2015) strategies promoted deepening students thinking beyond the literal and getting them to explore deeper meanings behind the text or photo. Questions like “What might be the deeper purpose for sharing this photo” help students see a larger problem that is worth exploring (Gallagher, 2015, p. 44). This process of questioning brings in ideas to support social justice awareness and problem-solving.

**Switching.** McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) shared another type of *problem posing* strategy called *switching.* After students read a text or view a video, they begin a critical discussion by answering specific questions which cause them to imagine an alternative version of the story or video. An example of *switching* is asking the question “What gender is this? How might the message change if another gender was represented?” (p. 47). This causes students to understand that the meaning behind the text can change based on the gender that is displayed. Other switches that could be used for discussion include: *themes, settings, body-style, clothing, emotions, ethnicity/race, language,* and *relationship/organization* (pp. 47-48).
Alternative perspectives. Researchers in the area of critical literacy have examined the strategy of exploring multiple perspectives or alternative perspectives (Linder, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). This strategy allows students to deepen their understanding of texts by exploring different viewpoints either from the characters in narrative stories or from people in informational or “real-life situations” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 49). This strategy begins by having students read a selected text and engage in discussions about its meaning and message. The teacher then has students read another text which provides an alternative message, promoting a discussion around the differences. Another approach also includes having the students write an alternative text displaying a different viewpoint. Linder (2006) reiterated that either of these techniques help students begin to take notice of the perspectives being displayed in texts and the ones that are missing. She emphasized that these “discussions expose everyone to a wide range of possible perspectives and give voice to points of view that otherwise may not have been heard” (p. 33).

Exploring identities. Another important critical literacy strategy McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004) identified revolved around helping readers explore identities, including their own and ones of characters in the books they were reading. They stated, “When exploring identities, readers who are critically aware read beyond the text and examine influences that shape our sense of self—who we are, what we do, how we speak” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 90). This strategy not only builds students’ sense of self but also encourages them to challenge stereotypes that are created around a person’s
ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation. Again, books were used as the main source for helping students explore this concept.

**Exploring social justice issues.** Several researchers identified using picture books as a means for discussing social justice issues. A study completed by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) showed that picture books were a great way for teachers to introduce awareness of social injustices. These teachers were considered *novices* when introducing social justice discussions in their classrooms. The study selected picture books as a means for supporting teachers in this endeavor. Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ociefka, and Vasquez (2000) explained that picture books “make difference visible, give voice to those traditionally silenced, explore dominant systems of meaning in our society, question why certain groups are positioned as others, and show how people can begin to take action on important issues” (as cited by Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, 2002, p. 384). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) added similar sentiments and stated that picture books “demonstrate to readers of all ages that their actions can change the world” (p. 58).

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, research shows that critical literacy is an important part of twenty-first century learning. Scholars such as McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) highlighted how critical literacy transforms readers from being *passive* participants to *active* participants in the texts they are reading. In order for teachers to accomplish this task, they can utilize a variety of strategies to promote critically literate discussions in their classrooms. Picture books were found to be an important source in supporting these
types of discussions. The following section will further explore the critical literacy theme of social justice and how picture books are used to support classroom discussions.

Social Justice

**Definition.** Several experts in the area of social justice education define social justice as treating all people with fairness and seeking ways to promote fairness amongst different groups of people regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender (Mackey & de Vocht-Van Alphen, 2016; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Sleeter, 2013). Cunningham and Enriquez (2013) added that “Social justice is teaching for the sake of arousing the kinds of vivid, reflective experiential responses that might move students to come together in serious efforts to understand what social justice means and what it might demand” (p. 29). Social justice-themed lessons in classrooms are helping students understand the concept of fairness and how this has looked for different groups of people over periods of time. It brings clarity in understanding how to promote fairness for all people and evokes a motivation for students to take action in their school and communities. One of the ways to promote discussion around social justice issues is through the use of picture books in primary classrooms.

**Why picture books?** Several experts in the area of social justice education have used picture books as the main resource to spark discussions around important issues. Researchers have found that picture books help level the playing field among students with varying levels of reading skills (Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Neumann, 2009; Simpson, 1996). It is important to note that there are not a plethora of studies in the area of utilizing picture books to teach social justice issues in
elementary classrooms. Nor are there many that refute it. One researcher, Simpson (1996), explained that picture books are a great way to engage readers in a specific topic and promote excitement. Illustrations in picture books can provide additional information to the readers and provide another source for analyzing what the author and illustrator are trying to portray in the books. She also found that the relative shortness of the text allows students to revisit it many times, promoting additional reflection on the topic (Simpson, 1996).

Cunningham and Enriquez’s (2013) study shared similar sentiments by explaining how picture books can be used to support close reading and promote “listening skills, language, and analytic abilities” (p. 29). They explained that picture books used in the context of read-alouds help students begin to make connections or disconnections to the themes found in the books. When pairing read-alouds with social justice picture books they found that it provided students with a chance to think more deeply about concepts that surrounded them in everyday life. As Laman (2006) described it, social justice read-alouds provide an opportunity to “read a text with a new lens, to reconsider social issues, recast possibilities, and recognize the complexities of categorizing actions” (as cited in Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013, p. 29).

Wanless and Crawford (2016) wrote an article focusing on how picture books could be used to teach race-related topics in primary classrooms. In this article, they first explained that there are three types of race-related teaching practices (RRTPs) including color-blind, color-aware, and social justice approaches (p. 4). The color-blind approach avoids discussing race in classrooms whereas the color-aware and social justice
approaches take a proactive model in discussing race, helping students build a race positive identity and empowering them to “play a role in acting against discrimination” (p. 4). Wanless and Crawford (2016) explained that picture books are a great way to begin these discussions because they not only can act as mirrors for children to see themselves and some of their personal experiences, but also act as windows for children to learn about other races and cultures different from their own. This idea pays homage to Bishop’s (1990) work in incorporating multicultural texts in classrooms. Wanless and Crawford (2016) emphasized the importance of understanding that text sets are a better way to begin these conversations versus only using one book. They argued that one book standing alone cannot represent a group or culture in its entirety. Instead, they suggested that using text sets allows students to see multiple perspectives represented throughout the varying books and creates more “teachable moments and meaningful conversations” around social justice issues (p. 6).

Another study completed by Dever, Sorenson, and Broderick (2005) used picture books in three second-grade classrooms to highlight social justice issues. Two of the classrooms were in a fairly homogenous rural school, and one was a more diverse urban school. In each classroom, teachers read a picture book and then allowed students time to respond in their journals. Some of the picture books read included: Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991), Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991), and The Story of Ruby Bridges (Coles, 1995). After the sessions were complete teachers analyzed their students’ responses and found two broad themes emerged: empathy and advocacy. Many of the children showed empathy by writing how they felt bad and sad based on the experiences
of the characters. Many commented that they would try to help the main characters and attempt to make things more fair for them. Some of the students even wrote from the perspective of the characters and what it would be like to live a day in their shoes. Based on the research above, it is clear that read-alouds can play an important role in facilitating social justice discussions in classrooms (Dever, Sorenson, & Broderick, 2005).

Over the years, a tremendous amount of research has been completed on the effectiveness of read-alouds and their influence on student reading achievement. A recent brief published by the International Reading Association (2018) stated the following about read-alouds:

Effective read-alouds increase children’s vocabulary, listening comprehension, story schema, background knowledge, word recognition skills, and cognitive development. In addition to these important academic benefits, read-alouds promote a love of literature, foster social interactions, and ignite a passion for lifelong reading habits. (p. 2)

The brief continued to share how read-alouds can be used as a way to reduce the academic reading gap between affluent and impoverished students. It further explained that in order for read-alouds to be effective, teachers must expose and engage students in texts that are narrative and informational. They should purposefully plan spots to model thinking, ask and answer questions, and allow students to share their own thinking about the text. Lastly, the brief shared “when teachers purposefully read-aloud from texts that capitalize on students’ interests and academic needs, students are more likely to embrace the authentic role of literacy” (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 4).
A link to the concepts highlighted in the brief can be found from reading gurus Fountas and Pinnell (2006), in their book *Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency: Thinking, Talking, and Writing About Reading, K-8*. In this book, they explored the strategy of *interactive read-alouds* and their value in supporting student reading development. They explained that interactive read-alouds provide readers with a chance to engage in the text and play an active role in understanding it. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) stated, “The teacher is reading the words aloud, but in every other way the students are processing the language, ideas, and meaning of the text” (p. 216). As teachers read the text, they take time to pause and purposely model a particular reading strategy or use the time to have the students reflect and talk about the text.

Fountas and Pinnell (2006) explained how interactive read-alouds support thinking *within, beyond,* and *about the texts*. Within-the-text thinking supports the literal understanding of the text. Students should be able respond to questions with information that they can find directly in the text. Beyond-the-text thinking is more inferential. The answers are not found directly in the text. The students use clues that are implied by the author or illustrator but are not implicitly stated within the text. This type of thinking supports “personal connections, connections to other texts, using background information, noticing new information and adjusting your views” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 217). Lastly, when thinking about the text, readers take notice of how the text was crafted and can engage in critical thinking. For example, an author might use headings as a way to organize information in a text or write about events in chronological
order. In addition, this type of thinking should also encourage students to critique the text and follow up their responses with evidence.

Aside from the deep thinking that interactive read-alouds promote, Fountas and Pinnell (2006) also highlighted the importance in how read-alouds can help students develop a sense of community within their school environment:

Daily read-alouds create shared meanings among a group and contribute to a sense of community. It is important for every child to experience being a member of such a group. Through texts, the teacher and students get to know one another in a deeper way. In addition, students will read inspiring stories in both fiction and nonfiction, ones on which they can model their own actions. (p. 218)

Fountas and Pinnell and the International Reading Association emphasized through their research that these combined elements support deeper thinking and engagement in reading by the students. Pairing these read-aloud strategies with picture books is a way for teachers to begin fostering discussions around social justice topics in their classrooms.

**Picture books by social justice theme.** Just as the International Reading Association (2018) pointed out in their brief on the importance of selecting texts related to students’ interest and academic needs, several articles have been written surrounding text selection and social justice topics. Articles by Rakestraw (2014), Neumann (2009), Cunningham and Enriquez’s (2013), O’Neil (2010), Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazza, and Leboeuf (2015), and Soeiro (2016) have focused on using picture books to
support discussions on social injustices. The following is a compilation of texts that could be used to promote discussions around social justice themes in elementary classrooms.

**Race.** In an online article titled *14 Children’s Picture Books Exploring Race and Racism*, Rakestraw (2014) emphasized the importance of holding discussions about race starting at an early age. She stated, “studies show that children can learn racially-biased behaviors as young as three and learn to categorize people by race (non-verbally) at as young as six months” (para. 1). Both Rakestraw (2014) and Neumann (2009) selected picture books that parents and teachers could use to help begin holding discussions around race. Below are a list of picture books that could be used to support this topic in elementary classrooms:

- *Crossing Bok Chitto* by Tingle (2006)
- *Skin Again* by Hooks (2004)
- *The School is Not White!: A True Story of the Civil Rights Movement* by Rappaport (2005)
- *Show Way* by Woodson (2005)
- *All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Got Our Skin Color* by Kissinger (2014)
- *Let’s Talk About Race* by Lester (2005)
- *Amazing Grace* by Hoffman (1991)
- *The Name Jar* by Choi (2001)
Wealth inequality. In Cunningham and Enriquez’s (2013) study, some of the teachers were working in a school with an affluent demographic of students. Due to this, the teachers wanted to select social justice texts that helped their students better understand how to define wealth and privilege. The following are a list of books teachers used to support discussion around the topic of wealth inequality in their elementary classrooms:

*The Table Where Rich People Sit* by Baylor (1994)

*Mr. Bow Tie* by Barbour (1991)


*The Lady in the Box* by McGovern (1997)

*Fly Away Home* by Bunting (1991)

*Those Shoes* by Boelts (2007)

*The Last Stop on Market Street* by De La Pena (2015)

*Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* by Disalvo-Ryan (1997)

Gender bias. O’Neil’s (2010) study described the harmful effects that stereotypes can cause for children and how conversations around them can help combat these negative outcomes. O’Neil (2010) stated “Guiding children in their construction of knowledge about their place in the society in which they live means helping them distinguish between useful cultural expectations and harmful restrictions of stereotyping for both themselves and others” (p. 47). Various researchers in the area of social justice have used picture books to develop discussions around the injustices of stereotypes and
gender bias. The following are a list of picture books elementary teachers used to discuss this topic:


_Grace for President_ by DiPucchio (2008)

_Amazing Grace_ by Hoffman (1991)

_My Princess Boy_ by Kilodavis (2010)

_Not Every Princess_ by Bone and Bone (2014)

_Made by Raffi_ by Pomranz (2014)

_Boy, Can He Dance!_ by Spinelli (1993)

_Pearl Fairweather Pirate Captain_ by Sanders (2017)

**Disabilities.** Research completed by Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazza, and Leboeuf (2015) explained how picture books featuring characters with disabilities are important to include in classroom curriculum. These books are important for both students with and without disabilities. “Through book reading and discussions, teachers can promote disability awareness in a manner that will lead to greater understanding about individuals with disabilities, and provide vocabulary that is current, appropriate, and relevant to all children in the class” (Ostrosky et al., 2015). The following are a list of books teachers used to support discussion around the topic of disabilities in their elementary classrooms:

_Rescue and Jessica: A Life-Changing Friendship_ by Kensky and Downes (2018)


_The Pirate of Kindergarten_ by Lyon (2010)
We’ll Paint the Octopus Red by Stuve-Bodeen (1998)

Don’t Call Me Special by Thomas (2002)

My Friend Isabelle by Woloson (2003)

Someone Special Just Like You by Brown (1995)

We Can Do It! by Dwight (1998)

Andy and His Yellow Frisbee by Thompson (1996)

Social justice action. In the article Loud in the Library, authored by Soeiro (2016), she described books that promote social justice action as ones that “allow us to look at an injustice singularly but also examine the greater social contexts that created it” (p. 43). She goes on to explain that these books should help students take a closer look at their personal beliefs and values and analyze what changes they can make to help others. In addition, Cunningham and Enriquez (2013) believed that social justice books that promote action also help readers understand how “power is constructed and circulated in our society” (p. 31). The following books are texts elementary teachers have used to promote social justice action in their classrooms:

Each Kindness by Woodson (2012)


A Bad Day at Riverbend by Van Allsburg (1995)


Rosa by Giovanni (2005)

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type by Cronin (2000)
As these researchers and scholars have shown, picture books are a great way to begin introducing social justice issues in elementary classrooms. However, it is important to note that some of the studies shared teachers’ apprehension with discussing social justice topics in their classrooms. The next section highlights some of these concerns and provides information on how they were addressed. This research is one of the motivations instilling my desire to develop a resource for teachers to use to explore social justice topics in their elementary classrooms.

**Fear in engaging in social justice discussions.** A study by Baily and Katradis (2016) explained that teachers are uncomfortable holding discussions around social justice issues because they do not have a solid base of understanding the complexities of the topics around *race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality,* and wealth inequalities (p. 216). Ultimately, if teachers did not feel well versed in these concepts, it was hard to expect them to develop lessons and hold discussions with their students. For example, some of the white teachers did not feel comfortable discussing racism with their students because they did not have a solid background in understanding these issues themselves or how to explain them. They were worried about backlash from administration or parents. The study also found that teachers did not want to address some of these topics in their rooms as a way to protect the children. They argued that the students would not be able to truly comprehend these topics and that they would essentially go over their heads (Baily & Katradis, 2016). Cleovoulou’s (2018) study also shared similar discomforts voiced by teachers. It explained that teachers had concerns about how to broach these sensitive
topics and how to manage conversations around them in a way that would be appropriate for their students.

An interview with author Robin DiAngelo (2019) explored the concept of white fragility which is a term she coined to explain how easily white people become offended or upset during discussions of race. DiAngelo explained that most students are being educated by a homogenous group of teachers, ones who mostly grew up in an environment that lacked racial diversity. Because of this, she considers teachers and students to be part of a racist system (van der Valk & Malley, 2019). DiAngelo encourages teachers to acknowledge their socialization in a racist system and to begin building emotional stamina. DiAngelo explained, “Change how you understand what it means to be racist, and then act on that understanding. Because if you change your understanding, but you don’t do anything different, then you’re colluding” (van der Valk & Malley, 2019, para. 13). DiAngelo (2019) encouraged white teachers to draw upon their emotional stamina and avoid becoming defensive when a parent of color brings up concerns about how the teacher might be treating their child differently due to race. She explained that historically the system of education has done much harm to people of color so it is a natural reaction for people of color to not immediately trust the teacher. Teachers should recognize this injustice and find ways to build trust and respect with the parent (van der Valk & Malley, 2019).

A study completed in New Zealand by Anne Hynds (2010), also uncovered some parental resistance to social justice education. Similar to the United States, New Zealand is also grappling with an achievement gap between their majority population (NZ
European/Pakeha) and the minority groups including the Maori. To help combat this issue, New Zealand’s government launched a reform to aid teachers in receiving professional development training that focused on culturally responsive pedagogy. Through these professional development sessions “teachers reflected on their expectations for Maori students and worked on developing more responsive, positive relationships with their Maori students.” (Hynds, 2010, p. 381). In addition, teachers met with fellow colleagues to complete data analysis of the Maori students’ achievement levels to assist them in differentiating their instructional practices.

A study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the reform efforts. The study uncovered resistance from parents in the dominant group and resistance from Maori teachers. The parents of the dominant group felt the reform “as threatening to their children’s identities and educational opportunities” while the Maori teachers had concerns and “disagreement about involving students in decision-making processes and whether this was compatible with traditional cultural protocols” (Hynds, 2010, p. 383). The conclusion of the study explained that better communication and partnerships needed to be developed between all stakeholders to ensure a shared vision of school reform was created. This not only needed to happen at the beginning of reform, but also needed to be sustained throughout the reform process and implementation. Ultimately, the study found that “more attention is required on the preparation of school leaders and change agents working in equity-minded school reforms and their understandings and dispositions towards resistance to change” (Hynds, 2010, p. 391).
Another study by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) explored using professional development and workshops as a way for teachers to begin learning about critical literacy and social justice topics. Components of the workshops they found to be most beneficial included allowing times for teachers to share their own stories and ideas around critical literacy practices as well as troubleshooting ideas. Other important components were developing literature circles around discussing social justice books and having access to books that teachers could use in their classrooms. After teachers engaged in these workshops and had time to implement critical discussions around social justice issues, they found there was more they wanted to learn. The study by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) found teachers wanted more time to discuss and reflect with peers who also attended the workshops. They wanted more time to find and analyze social justice books they could use in their classrooms. Teachers also felt it would be beneficial to record peers utilizing social justice lessons and use them as a means for discussion. Lastly, teachers expressed a larger need to continue to further their studies and personal understandings of historical events. They recognized that if they were not well-versed in these events, it would be difficult to help their students develop these important understandings.

Based on these studies, it is apparent that in order for teachers to begin implementing critical literacy practices in their classroom they need to have proper training and background knowledge on social justice issues. This concluding research is the driving force behind my project development, which is further defined in chapter three.
Summary

As research shows, implementing critical literacy practices is an important part of supporting twenty-first century learners. The work of Paulo Freire and his assistance in developing the Critical Literacy Theory imparts that teachers have the right and responsibility to instill critical thinking strategies in their students. He believed students should be “reading the world, not the word” and have the ability to challenge the thinking and ideas found in the texts they read in the classroom (Veugelers, 2017, p. 413). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) highlighted that critical literacy includes aiding students in gaining a deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts related to power, inequality, and injustice. Educators can use discussion strategies such as Problem Posing, Switching, Alternative Perspectives, Exploring Identities, and Exploring Social Justice Issues as a way to develop these critical literacy skills (DeVoogd & McLaughlin, 2004). Several studies have found that using picture books is a strong way to support discussion around social justice topics in the classroom. Pairing these books with the strategies mentioned above can help students begin to better understand the concept of fairness, justice, and empathy towards others.

Research also highlighted that some teachers were not comfortable with broaching the topics of social injustices in their classrooms. The study by Baily and Katradis (2016) found teachers did not feel like they had enough background information to teach about social injustices or were concerned about negative backlash from administration or parents. Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) found that workshops
focusing on critical literacy strategies using social justice picture books helped teachers feel more confident in utilizing these skills in their own classrooms.

The research, scholars, and researchers highlighted in this chapter have provided clarity to assist in answering the question of: *How can picture books be used to support discussion on social justice issues in the elementary classroom?* This research has helped shape my capstone project idea, which is developing a website that teachers can use as a resource to begin exploring social justice topics in their elementary classrooms. Chapter three will take a closer look at the project rationale and overall description, website design process, audience, setting, and timeline of project implementation.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

After reviewing the research around critical literacy education and social justice, it is apparent there is a need to find ways to integrate these concepts into our twenty-first century classrooms. Our students deserve the chance to discuss literature in a setting where they can challenge the author’s intent, learn about alternative perspectives, and also find motivation to take action against social injustices. Freire’s work and the ideologies found in Critical Literacy Theory emphasized that students should be allowed to challenge the status quo and have time to discuss social justice issues in the safe environment of their classrooms. The research and studies I reviewed brought me back to my initial research question: How can picture books be used to support discussion on social justice issues in the elementary classroom? I found that many of the studies used picture books as a way to begin having these crucial social justice discussions in classrooms.

There have been several times over the course of my teaching career where my first grade students have asked questions that made me feel uneasy and unsure of how to answer. Some of these questions revolved around religion, politics, and race. I would brush these comments or questions under the rug by saying “we are not going to discuss that now” or “that is a great question for your parents”. Instead of tackling these issues
head on and using them as a teachable moment, I took the easy way out and banished the ideas from further discussion. My research in chapter two helped me realize I am not alone in my actions, as some studies cited other teachers’ lack of comfort in tackling these topics. However, the research also informed me of existing strategies and books I can use with my young learners to support discussions around social justice topics in our classroom. In particular, the study by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) found that teachers who attended workshops and learned about different resources felt better prepared in discussing social justice topics in their classrooms. This study, paired with other research I reviewed, is the inspiration for my capstone project.

As I took time to reflect on how teachers of today tend to get information and resources for their classrooms, it became obvious that websites and blogs are a favorite medium. Sitting in the teacher’s lounge, I often overhear talk about latest Pinterest finds and recent purchases made on teacherspayteachers.com. With the click of a mouse teachers have accessibility to millions of resources they could include in their classrooms. According to an article by Forbes, over two-thirds of teachers in the United States use the teacherspayteachers site for resources (Jones, 2018, para. 2). I have personally gone down many rabbit holes and spent far too many hours searching for the right lesson or book to use with the particular topic I am researching. With this thought in mind, I want to create a website that is a one-stop-shop for my K-2 colleagues. I want to remove hours of searching and develop a site that is easy to use and provides everything teachers might need to tackle discussing social justice issues.
This website houses critical literacy information revolving around social justice topics. It provides lesson plans, discussion questions, and text sets teachers can use to support discussions around topics of wealth inequality, disabilities, and race. The following sections further highlight the website overview and framework. They also detail the audience and setting for the project as well as the timeline for completion and a concluding summary. My ultimate hope is my project provides an easy-to-use resource for teachers who are beginning to hold these crucial discussions around social justice topics in their classrooms.

**Project Overview**

As I began thinking about how I want this website to take shape, I realized I should start by gathering some feedback from the staff members at my school. I wanted my website to be tailored to the specific topics our teachers feel are most important to address with our student population. Therefore, I decided to develop a one-question survey for the K-2 staff in my school to answer. I used a Google Form as a way to gather input from staff. I asked my K-2 staff the following question: What three social justice issues do you feel would be most beneficial for your students to learn about? They were able to pick from the following choices: Race, Class (wealth inequality), Gender Inequality, Age, Disabilities, and Environmental Rights. Teachers were encouraged to select their top three topics for further discussion.

Twenty-nine of the K-2 staff members responded to my survey. The top three social justice issues they selected included wealth inequality (86.2%), disabilities (86.2%), and race (79.3%). These three social justice topics have become the main focus
of my website creation and development. I have decided to use Google Sites as my medium. I chose this medium because my school uses Google Sites to share important curriculum information and resources, so teachers have familiarity with using it. I also have some familiarity with using Google Sites, so I am hopeful it will be a fairly easy interface to use as I build the website. In addition, it’s free and accessible with or without a gmail account which makes it shareable with schools outside of my district.

The homepage of my website acts as the “command center” to access links to different pages. It contains an overview of the website purpose, content, and information on navigation. It houses links in the upper righthand corner where teachers can access the different pages. The first page is titled Critical Literacy and incorporates the rationale behind the importance of implementing critical literacy education. The next page is titled Social Justice and gives a rationale for why these are important discussions to have in elementary classrooms. The Social Justice page link contains a drop down menu that houses a section titled Why Picture Books? This page explains the research backing why picture books are a great way to begin having these discussions. Also, under the Social Justice page there are three additional links to the three different social justice issues our staff voted on (wealth inequality, disabilities, and race). This page can eventually expand to include more social justice topics in the future.

My individual social justice pages includes a “norms setting” lesson plan that could be used as a way to introduce the social justice texts. These pages also include texts sets around each specific social justice topic. I included a read-aloud video of each text so all classrooms have access to the book. The videos were made with an app called
Shadow Puppet (2014). The app was easy to use and made it simple to take pictures of each book page and add a voice over recording. The page also includes a lesson plan related to critical literacy strategies addressed in chapter two, including problem posing, alternative perspectives, switching, and exploring identities. I used a lesson plan template modified from the website www.smartdraw.com. The discussion questions included on the website are developed from the framework suggested by Fountas and Pinnell. The style of discussion questions focus on thinking within, beyond, and about the text in the lessons. It also includes a follow-up activity such as a writing activity or craft the students could complete.

My last page is a resource page that houses links to other critical literacy resources, professional development opportunities (such as upcoming conferences), possible grants teachers could apply for to purchase books for their rooms, and websites such as diversebooks.org so teachers can explore even more titles to add to their collections.

My hope is this website layout design provides my K-2 colleagues and other elementary teachers with a quality resource they feel confident in using in their own classrooms. I want my website to remove barriers teachers might encounter such as finding lesson plans, questions, or text sets they could use to support discussion around the social justice topics of wealth inequality, disabilities, and race. In order to accomplish this, the following section explains research-based web design formats and guidelines I needed to consider when building my website.

**Framework Research**
According to Bigby (2018), there are eighteen usability guidelines and website design standards to consider when building a website. The following list are the guidelines I considered when building my website: design process and evaluation, optimizing the user experience, accessibility, hardware and software, the home page, page layout, navigation, scrolling and paging, headings, titles, and labels, links, text appearance, lists, screen-based controls (widgets), graphics, images, and multimedia, writing web content, content organization, search, and usability testing.

Bigby (2018) explained that design process and evaluation should include making sure the website content is useful for the intended audience by collecting feedback from several potential users. By gathering different perspectives, the website creation is strengthened and able to reach more audience members. I implemented this guideline and the usability testing guideline by collaborating with my content reviewer, school technology coordinator, and a few K-2 teachers to serve as reviewers. Their feedback was crucial in strengthening the content and overall format of my website.

In order to optimize the user experience, Bigby (2018) explained the website should have clear vocabulary that is easily understood by all audience members, appear professional and credible, avoid pop-up adds, and create pages that are easy to print. Singh’s (2013) article on characteristics of great website design also reiterated the importance of creating forms that are easy to access and download. Since I used Google Sites as my main website medium, I felt it looks both professional and credible, as my school already used this format to relay other important curricular information. I made sure to avoid any pop-ups and ensure my resources and pages were easy to print. This
medium was also compatible with the software used at my school. This ensured that all K-2 staff and other elementary teachers can access the site without additional barriers.

As far as accessibility, both Bigby (2018) and Singh (2013) explained that websites must meet the criteria laid out in section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Any graphics or images should be clearly labeled in order to support people using assistive technology. The layout should be easy to navigate and locate information. My home page with links across the top to separate pages provides easy navigation for anyone who utilizes my website. I ensured that any images include labels that would be compatible with assistive technology. Each page contains headings that clearly highlight the topic covered on that specific page. I selected a font and text that is easily readable. Singh (2013) mentioned that font color should contrast with background color. For example, black font on a white background makes the text easier to read.

Bigby (2018) added that there are particular *scrolling* guidelines to consider. He suggested that horizontal scrolling should not be used and vertical scrolling should be minimized. To help avoid scrolling, the website creator should think about using links to separate important information into pages. This makes it easier for users to find information they are looking for and makes the website more visually appealing. Again, my homepage with links across the top make it simple for elementary teachers to locate information. I strived to only include pertinent information on each page to reduce the need to scroll.

Lastly, Bigby (2018) explained that a search function is important to include in website design. This allows users to easily locate key information they may be searching
for. As I develop my website, I should think about keywords that could be used to describe each of my pages. These keywords can be used to help me set up a search function within my website. This feature, paired with the other guidelines mentioned above, should help me create a website that will support its intended audience.

**Audience and Setting**

My specific audience is the kindergarten through second grade teachers in my school. Although, I hope other elementary teachers will find it to be helpful as well. I recently found out the third through fifth grade staff in our intermediate school setting has a website with resources linked to critical literacy and our Character Counts! program. Character Counts! is our school wide character development program that focuses on six pillars of character including: respect, fairness, trustworthiness, caring, responsibility, and citizenship. This program is a huge part of our school identity and overall community. This newfound information provided an even larger motivation for me to create a website that our K-2 staff could use to support student’s critical literacy skills. I have heard that several of the 3-5 staff utilize a website a colleague of mine created, so my hope is some of our K-2 staff will follow suit with my website.

The setting is my K-2 elementary school. This school is located in a suburb west of Minneapolis. The district is unique because it is a single campus setting where all of the schools reside on one road. This environment creates a tight-knit community where families are very involved in their children’s education. The school has over 40 teachers and support staff in our K-2 building. There are 575 students enrolled. Our school district is 90% white, with only 1.4% of the population receiving English Language Learner
services and 11.9% receiving special education services. Just shy of 7% of our student population receives free or reduced lunches.

Based on this information, it is easy to see that our student body is not incredibly diverse. This is an additional reason why I think incorporating picture books that center around social justice issues is crucial for expanding our students’ perspectives and views of the world.

**Timeline**

I began building the website in June 2019 as part of my capstone project class. I worked closely with my content reviewer to ensure the information, lessons, and text sets incorporated on my website are appropriate for our K-2 students. By the end of June, I met with my school’s technology support person to gather feedback on the site. I also felt it was important to gather feedback from some of the K-2 teachers, as they are the primary users of the website. By using them as reviewers, I integrated their feedback to make the overall site stronger. The website was completed in July of 2019 and was ready to roll out to the K-2 staff during the August 2019 professional development week.

Once the 2019-2020 school year wraps up, I will send a final survey to the teachers as a way to gather feedback on the website. This survey will help me determine how many teachers have utilized the site and also gather teacher suggestions to strengthen the site. Specific questions I plan to ask include: Do you utilize this website? What features are most helpful? What features would you like to see changed? Are there any additions you would like to see on this website? Based on the results of the survey I will make any necessary additions or changes to the website.
Summary

The main components of chapter three included the overview of my final project related to the research completed in chapter two. Chapter three also included the framework research for the website, the audience and setting, and a timeline for project completion. Looking ahead, chapter four includes a personal reflection on my project creation, completion, and implementation. The chapter includes my key takeaways from the process of developing and implementing the website as well as revisions that may need to be made in the future. Chapter four also discusses any project limitations, the process for communicating the project to my K-2 staff, and the benefits made to my profession because of my project. Lastly, it includes a summary paragraph with my final conclusions for the overall project.
CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

Learnings through my coursework at Hamline University paired with my elementary teaching experience led me to the research question *How can picture books be used to support discussion on social justice issues in the elementary classroom?* The purpose of this capstone project was to develop a website that elementary teachers could use to aid them in holding social justice discussions in their classrooms. Chapter one explained the rationale behind my research question. Chapter two consists of a literature review that explored the research behind critical literacy and social justice education. The third chapter explained the project overview and frameworks for website creation. The website provides background information on critical literacy as well as social justice education. In addition, it provides text sets revolving around social justice topics of race, disabilities, and wealth inequalities. Each text set includes access to videos of the associated book being read aloud and lesson plans teachers could use to hold social justice discussions in their classrooms. This project serves as a tool to help elementary teachers begin to hold these crucial discussions in their classrooms through a read-aloud format.

The following chapter contains the major learning throughout the capstone process as well as reviewing the literature used to create the project. The chapter also
addresses possible policy implications as well as limitations that arose during the completion of the project. Lastly, the chapter contains information on future research and recommendations, my plan on how to communicate the project results, as well as benefits to the profession.

**Major Learnings**

Participation in the capstone process aided in my development as a researcher, writer, and learner. Early on in my coursework, I began to notice a theme that kept emerging in the research explored throughout my classes. It was about the importance of incorporating critical literacy strategies into the classroom regardless of the grade or subject being taught. Each class emphasized including student-centered literacy practices and encouraging students to ask questions about the author’s purpose and strategies on how to think about books through varying lenses. Another common denominator I noticed throughout my learning was linked to the works of Paulo Freire. His name appeared in many of the articles I was reading for my coursework. Naturally, when it came time to begin research on my topic, I immediately turned to Freire’s work.

Research showed how Freire’s theories helped shape the Critical Literacy Theory which provided background information and became the foundation to support the purpose of my capstone project. I then began to research specific strategies teachers could use to help students begin to look at texts through varying lenses and explore social justice issues through a discussion format via the use of picture books. My research showed the importance of selecting texts that helped students engage in thinking about alternative perspectives and promote action in the face of social injustices. As I was
working through the research I began to notice similarities between discussion questions and strategies researchers had used in various elementary classrooms. My professor suggested that once these commonalities began to come to light, I would know I had exhausted the research process.

Aside from helping my development as a researcher, this process also impacted my development as a writer and learner. I completed my undergraduate degree in 2007, thus leaving a large span of time where I did not engage in a formal, professional style of writing. The capstone process helped introduce how to complete a thorough literature review and create a paper that follows an APA format. The capstone process helped me reestablish how to appropriately summarize and cite findings from various researchers. It taught me how to organize my work and create smooth transitions to make my paper easier for others to read. The process also helped me create an efficient lesson plan format teachers can use to hold these important read-aloud discussions. The process instilled a newfound confidence in my ability to write a professional paper that will be used to support educators who will embark on this journey after me.

Lastly, the capstone process aided in my learning of how to compile all of the research and develop a project that could inform the instruction of elementary teachers in the area of social justice education. In order to create my website, I had to learn how to use Google Sites to develop web pages that are easy to navigate and provide pertinent information to the intended audience of elementary teachers. I learned about the 18 usability guidelines for websites, which became my personal guide in creating the website’s organization, layout, navigation and overall functionality. Most importantly, I
learned how to take all of the research I read and use it to develop a website that
elementary teachers could use for starting social justice discussions in their classrooms.

When thinking about this project as a whole I know there will be continued research that
will help shape the work teachers will need to do in order to have these crucial
conversations in their classrooms.

**Revisiting the Literature**

While there seems to be growing research in the area of critical literacy
implementation, I noticed, as mentioned previously, that much of the research linked
back to the works of scholar and theorist, Paulo Freire. Freire believed in “reading the
world, not the word” and wanted nothing more than to have teachers share the power of
learning with students by showing them how to question their world (Veugelers, 2017, p.
413). Freire (1981) encouraged teachers to help students use their own background
knowledge of their world paired with inquiry to develop a better understanding of words.
He believed students were able to make better connections to concepts if they were
allowed to organically discover the purpose and process behind them. This type of
thinking can be witnessed in my website through the student-centered questions
incorporated in each social justice text lesson. Each social justice page explains that it is
okay for students to take these discussions in a different direction than what the teacher
might originally have envisioned. These pages explain that the lessons might open up
doors for further research that can be completed by the student or with guidance from a
teacher depending on age range of the students. Friere’s thinking is seen in the goals of
the lessons which are to help broaden students' perspectives, aid them in developing empathy and caring for others, and to promote a call to act in the face of social injustices.

The research also shows how Freire’s thinking aided in the development of the Critical Literacy Theory. Again, this theory shifted literacy education from teacher-centered to student-centered thinking. It promoted a new kind of engagement and transparency of power in literature. Students were invited to question the texts and the authors who wrote them. This theory encouraged them to become “problem posers” where they critiqued, questioned, and challenged the issues brought to light in their classrooms (Giroux, 2010; Wolstein, 2016). This began to even the playing field for all learners and helped them develop a sense of their own rights and power. This research also played an important role in the development of my project because I wanted to find a way we could begin to hold these important discussions with elementary students in a developmentally appropriate way. Often times, it seems like social justice discussions are withheld until students are in middle school, high school, or beyond. However, research shows that we can begin to have these discussions in elementary classrooms by using picture book text sets that address different kinds of social justice topics.

In order to develop the discussion questions and corresponding critical literacy activities I drew from the research of literacy gurus Fountas and Pinnell and McLaughlin and DeVoogd. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) believed that interactive read-alouds should support students’ thinking within, beyond, and about the texts. Within-the-text thinking supports the literal understanding of the text. Beyond-the-text thinking is more inferential. The answers are not found directly in the text. About the text thinking
requires readers to analyze and critique the author’s craft. As I created each lesson plan, I focused on including questions that would promote thinking in these three areas. Some of the questions require responses can that can be found directly in the text while others promote inferring and thinking about the author’s purpose and intent. These types of questions make a great link back to the purpose of critical literacy which is allowing students to challenge the author’s purpose.

After creating the read-aloud questions, I began to create extension activities teachers could choose to use in their classrooms. Many of the activities stem from ideas of researchers McLaughlin and DeVoogd. Switching, alternative perspectives, exploring identities, and exploring social justice issues are examples of activities I included within my read-aloud lesson plans.

Switching involves students reading or hearing a text, then beginning a critical discussion by answering specific questions which cause them to imagine an alternative version of the story. In my Amazing Grace lesson plan, I incorporated the concept of switching by asking the students to imagine what would happen if the roles were reversed and Raj wanted to play Cinderella. The ultimate goal is helping students understand that race and gender should not determine their parts in a play. Hardwork and practice are the best ways to achieve a star part. The Name Jar lesson incorporated another version of switching. This time the students had to imagine what the book would be like with an alternate ending where the key character ends up picking an American name versus keeping her Korean name. Both lessons promote deeper thinking and challenge the students to think from each of the characters’ perspectives.
Another McLaughlin and DeVoogd strategy I included in my lessons involves exploring identities. This strategy not only builds students’ sense of self but also encourages them to challenge stereotypes that are created around a person’s ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation. *The Day You Begin* lesson includes an activity where students create a collage incorporating their interests and things they feel make them unique. Students then share the collages with one another as a way to build connections and community within the classroom.

*The Pirate of Kindergarten* and *Don’t Call Me Special* both incorporate McLaughlin and DeVoogd’s strategy called alternative perspectives. This strategy allows students to deepen their understanding of texts by exploring different viewpoints either from the characters in narrative stories or from people in informational or “real-life situations” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 49). This activity helps students explore what life would be like if one of their senses (vision or hearing) was impaired. It provides them with a chance to think from the character’s perspective and help them develop a deeper understanding and empathy towards people who have disabilities.

Lastly, the concept of exploring social justice issues is covered in many of my wealth inequality lessons. Here, students are encouraged to think about all of the needs they see throughout the texts and develop ideas on how they could help solve the problems highlighted. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) explained that picture books “demonstrate to readers of all ages that their actions can change the world” (p. 58).

Throughout all of the lessons I made sure to incorporate questions or activities that would
prompt students to share their ideas on how to assist or take action when faced with social injustices.

The literature review in chapter two highlighted research and studies that found the use of picture books as a strong way to support discussion around social justice topics in the classroom. Pairing these books with the strategies mentioned above can help students begin to better understand the concept of fairness, justice, and empathy towards others. The research also supported implications for policy change in the future.

**Policy Implications**

As the research in chapter two uncovered, many teachers are apprehensive to begin social justice discussions in their classrooms. A study by Baily and Katradis (2016) explained that teachers are uncomfortable holding discussions around social justice issues because they do not have a solid base of understanding the complexities of the topics around race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and wealth inequalities (p. 216). Ultimately, if teachers did not feel well versed in these concepts, it was hard to expect them to develop lessons and hold discussions with their students. I believe policy in teacher preparation courses should include coursework on cultural competency and utilizing critical literacy strategies in classrooms across grade levels and subjects. Cultural competency training helps teachers develop an awareness of their own cultural identity and also aids them in learning about varying cultures and norms of their students and families. This training could help teachers gain comfort in housing social justice discussions in their classrooms because they have a stronger background knowledge and comfort to support these types of discussions.
Outside of cultural competency training, professional development opportunities should include background information and time for teachers to learn about implementing critical literacy strategies in their classrooms. As research shows, critical literacy skills can be embedded in all subject areas. Time should be allotted during professional development so teachers can collaborate and figure out ways they can incorporate these strategies in their classrooms. Teachers should also have access to reading specialists who have training in this area. Reading specialists could model this type of literacy practice inside the classrooms or also provide observations of teachers who want to incorporate this learning in their rooms.

Another policy implication relates to budget. In order for teachers to hold read-alouds related to social justice topics, they must have access to books. Budgets should be expanded to provide texts to teachers so they can utilize them for social justice read-alouds in their classrooms. The budget should also allow teachers to purchase books that include diverse perspectives to include in their classroom libraries. This would allow students access to texts that act as *windows* and *mirrors* which they can connect with and learn from. Although my website does provide access to the books through video read-alouds, there are still limitations to the overall project.

**Project Limitations**

As mentioned previously, one of the project limitations is access to physical texts teachers can use to hold social justice discussions. Although I tried to combat this by providing read-aloud videos, this process then also assumes that all classrooms have Smart Boards or other means to project the videos. Not all districts have budgets for these
types of resources so it is possible my website cannot be utilized by all elementary schools.

Another limitation I discovered was the lack of studies that negated the use of picture books to hold social justice discussions. A well-rounded literature review should include all perspectives and viewpoints. Unfortunately, there isn’t much research in the area of avoiding the use of picture books and social justice discussions which creates a weak point in my overall research. I believe as more and more teachers begin to implement critical literacy strategies we will start to see more research studies completed in these areas.

Lastly, one final limitation to my project relates to the timeline for completion. Since the project was completed during the summer of 2019, the results of its use will not be recorded in this paper. This is due to the fact that it will not be used with students until the start of the upcoming 2019-2020 school year. With all projects come limitations, but my hope is to continue to expand my website to include even more social justice topics and text sets in the future.

**Future Research and Recommendations**

When looking at the scope of the development of critical literacy, it is still a relatively new concept in the overall field of literacy education in the United States. Due to this, I believe more research studies should be done involving additional strategy techniques. Research should focus on other ways teachers can incorporate critical literacy activities in their classrooms. Additionally, there should be further research determining
if social justice discussions could pose negative effects in elementary classrooms. This would provide a more well-rounded research base in the area of critical literacy.

I also believe further research is needed in the area of training and professional development support for educators. Research has proven that teachers are apprehensive in implementing social justice discussion concepts due to possible backlash from administration or parents. Further research is needed to develop best methods that could support teachers in utilizing critical literacy strategies in their classrooms.

Additionally, as more and more picture books are published each year, research should review how to incorporate these texts in future social justice discussions. As Wanless and Crawford (2016) pointed out text sets are a better way to begin social justice conversations versus only using one book. One book standing alone cannot represent a group or culture in its entirety. Using text sets allows students to see multiple perspectives represented throughout the varying books and creates more “teachable moments and meaningful conversations” around social justice issues (p. 6). The more books that are published, the greater the need for additional research on how these picture books could be best utilized in the classroom.

Lastly, my website could be expanded to include additional social justice topics. As of now, it houses text sets that address three topics: race, disabilities, and wealth inequalities. Not only is there room to increase the number of read-alouds within each of these topic areas, but also room to incorporate read-aloud lessons on additional social justice topics. Ultimately, my website expansion should stem from the feedback and results I receive from the educators that have used the website lessons.
Communicating Results

Throughout the process of building the website, I asked several colleagues and my content expert to provide feedback on all aspects including content, navigation, and usability. Their suggestions helped shape the website into a tool that can be easily utilized in elementary classrooms. At minimum, the website will be shared with fellow teachers via email including background information on how to best use the website content, lessons, and access to the books which will be housed in my classroom. The best case scenario for communication is having a designated time to present the website and lessons during a professional development session to the K-2 teachers and specialists in August. I believe this would provide optimal results as teachers would have more time to ask questions about the website and how to implement the content in their classrooms.

Presenting my project to Hamline colleagues will also aid in sharing the website beyond my school walls. Teachers who have a need or desire for incorporating critical literacy and social justice topics can take the website link and use it to access lessons for implementation in their own classrooms. Additionally, social media is a great way to help my website expand to schools outside of my district. Sharing the link on sites such as Facebook or Twitter can help reach a wider audience. Upon finishing the 2019-2020 school year, I will gather feedback from staff members in order to modify, expand, and strengthen my website for future and continued use.

Benefits to the Profession

My website project, Social Justice Literacy Lessons, promotes equity in elementary schools by focusing on critical literacy lessons that hone in on important
social justice discussions. The website provides educators with an entry point into holding these discussions in their classrooms. The lessons were developed to fit into any standard read-aloud timeframe with additional activities teachers could use if they so choose. Teachers can begin using these lessons with the comfort of knowing they are research based, best practices. The norms lesson assists in establishing a safe and open environment where all opinions are valued and respected. Additionally, the norms lesson leads to the creation of an anchor chart that can be utilized during any type of classroom discussion. The sentence stems portion includes examples of how classmates can share their ideas and respectfully agree or disagree with others. These are important social skills that are transferable beyond the classroom walls.

Each read-aloud lesson was developed based on researched best practices in the area of critical literacy. The lessons are geared to help students build empathy and understanding towards others. They encourage the students to challenge the author’s intent, learn about alternative perspectives, see themselves represented in texts that can often be filled with dominant identities, and find motivation to take action against social injustices. The site breaks down concepts researched in the area of critical literacy instruction and social justice education. It provides text sets that can be used as a means for holding read-aloud discussions around the social justice topics of race, disabilities, and wealth inequality. Lesson plans house questions that characterize Fountas and Pinnell’s guide of within, beyond, and about the text questions.

In addition, the lessons offer research-based activities that teachers can use to enhance their students’ understanding of social justice action. The ultimate benefit of the
site is to provide teachers with a stronger background knowledge on critical literacy instruction and easy-to-use lessons that can aid them in holding important discussions around social justice topics using picture books.

Summary

Chapter four provided a culminating reflection on how the capstone process shaped my major learnings as a researcher, writer, and learner. The chapter provided a review of the literature that was integral in the creation of my website project. The chapter incorporated possible policy implications as well as limitations that arose during the completion of the project. I discussed some future research opportunities that could enhance the area of critical literacy implementation in elementary classrooms. I also shared my plan to communicate the project results, as well as benefits to the profession of education.

I have learned so much about being a writer, researcher, and learner throughout the capstone process. I have a deeper understanding of critical literacy strategies and ways to implement social justice conversations in my first grade classroom. I hope my website project is beneficial to elementary teachers and provides them with a means to begin housing these important discussions in their own classrooms. Ultimately, I hope the discussions help students broaden their perspectives, develop empathy for others, and take action when they encounter social injustices in their lives.
REFERENCES


https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2016/culturally-responsive-classroom


CHILDREN’S BOOKS CITED


Kissinger, K. (2014). *All the colors we are: The story of how we got our skin color.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.


