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Julie Rech

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Multicultural Picture Books and the Hard Conversations They Invite:  
Do Minnesota's Early Childhood Educators Feel Prepared to Talk About Race During  
Shared Reading Experiences?

by

Julie Rech

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Introduction

There is a rare place in this world where innocence and purity still prevail, where joy and delight abound, where a sense of wonder reigns supreme, and the weight of the world is left at the door. It is a place where kindness and respect are instilled daily. Yet even this place is not immune to bias. This magical place is an early childhood care and education center, sometimes called a preschool or childcare center, and this paradox may come as a surprise to some, even to those who work there. How is it that bias can permeate even a space designed to care for sweet, pure, perfect babies and young children? Well, no place – and nobody – is impervious to bias. It is everywhere.

In spring of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, America found itself forced to confront the racism that has pervaded our nation since its birth. In particular, the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd sparked protests and demonstrations across the world, and Americans' calls for racial justice came with a renewed sense of urgency. In the wake of this Racial Reckoning of 2020, terms like “implicit bias” are being used in the mainstream more than ever before.

According to the Smithsonian Institution's project, *The Bias Inside Us* (2021), bias is a natural part of the human experience, but how we respond to it – whether or not we let it impact our actions – can have major implications for the people we encounter. Bias, a preference either for or against a person or group of people, is closely related to other -isms, like ageism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, classism, and, most relevant to this work, racism. One need not look far to see its existence and impact on our current

early childhood education system. It is evident in the disparity of quality and educational approaches among programs and who has access to them. It is also evident within our programs, our classrooms, our curriculum, and even in our educators themselves.

When it comes to discussing racial biases and the racial inequities and injustices that come along with them, there is notably less clarity regarding how to best approach these topics. We accept colorblindness as the desired, equitable approach to education, preach equality, emphasize sameness, and are complacent in our shallow celebrations of diversity. But what happens when educators find themselves faced with a difficult question about race or, even more intimidating, racism? Do we have the foundational knowledge of critical pedagogy to recognize the necessity of these questions and conversations? Do we have the training and education to engage in them? These curiosities have led me to this research, which seeks to answer: *To what degree do early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students?*

The following pages of this chapter discuss how my experiences have brought me to this research focus and question. I will provide a short introduction to the concept of bias in early childhood which will offer foundational context for why a social justice-oriented approach to early childhood education is important. Finally I will identify stakeholders and my overall goal for this work.

### **Bias Starts in Early Childhood**

While it may be shocking, science tells us that infants as young as three months show a perceptual preference for people of the same race as their primary caregivers and others closest to them (Waxman, 2021). Categorization of this nature is developmentally



appropriate, but by the time children reach preschool age, they are beginning to connect their racial categories to the expressions of bias around them (Waxman, 2021). Children, being the keen observers that they are, pick up on both overt biases and repeated microaggressions. This ultimately informs the way the child understands the people and the world around them.

The lack of representation in classroom materials is another significant indicator of the presence of bias in early childhood education. Mainstream cultural items are easy to pick out around the typical early childhood classroom. For example, when there are tables and chairs, hot dogs and hamburgers, forks and spoons in the dramatic play area; a guitar and a keyboard in the music area; every shade of red, green, and blue markers, but only a pale peach when it comes to skin tones. Even classrooms that utilize more natural materials tend to have human-like figures made of light, unpainted wood, rather than varying shades of browns. It is often our implicit biases that steer us towards these materials over ones that offer a more authentic representation of the diversity in our classrooms and our world.

Bias in early learning environments also shows up in the lack of representation in children's literature. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (2021), only 13.7% of picture books published in the United States in 2021 were about Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). The same analysis found only 9.6% to be authored by BIPOC writers in 2021. Furthermore, studies done in recent years exploring diversity in Caldecott Honor and Award winning books have found significant underrepresentation of BIPOC authors, illustrators, and characters (Davis et al., 2021; Koss et al., 2017).

This discrepancy between the amount of books featuring racially diverse authors, illustrators, and characters compared to White ones is in turn reflected on our classroom bookshelves. So often educators reach onto a bookshelf, pull out yet another book – perhaps one that is widely celebrated – that reflects only the dominant Whiteness of our society. This lack of representation in classroom materials and books informs the way our young students conceptualize themselves, other people, and the world around them.

### **From the Mouths of Babes**

I return now to the magical place that is the early childhood classroom, where children are noticing that all the characters in their books are White, as are all the superheroes they idolize, as are most of the people in our school community. Soon they will begin to internalize the prevailing message that race is not to be discussed, but today they still exhibit the oblivious bluntness for which young children are known.

It is free play, a time in our day during which students are invited to explore the classroom and use materials of their own choosing at their own pace. The sounds of a minor social conflict draw me to the dramatic play area, where two children are arguing over a babydoll. I notice that there is a second, rejected babydoll laying on the floor and suggest that one of them use it. *I don't want the Black baby*, one child says with defiance. I am caught off guard and instead of acknowledging the racial bias behind this comment, I choose to use this opportunity to teach problem solving, sharing, and turn taking skills.

Another day during large group time we meet on the circular rug and settle in for a story. I have preselected the book because I want to read a story with Black characters, but I know my mostly White students will not choose one on their own. I have chosen *Milo Imagines the World*, by Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson (2021), a book

purchased for our classroom by school administration that features a young Brown child imagining passengers' lives as he and his sister ride the train to visit his mother in prison. In it, he is surprised when the little White boy dressed in a suit gets off at the same stop to visit someone at the same prison. I am sure I am prepared to respond to whatever questions my students might throw at me about Milo and his family.

What I am not prepared for is 25 pairs of eyes staring at me expectantly when one child asks, "But why is the *fancy* boy going there?" I have a range of responses percolating in my head, and I try to think fast. Do I ignore the implicit, unconscious racial bias underlying the question and simply explain that all different kinds of people can find themselves in prison? Do I invite the student to question why they are surprised that the "fancy boy" is going to the prison, but are not surprised that Milo is? I know that this question is seeped in the racial bias and institutionalized racism to which my young student is exposed, even though they do not explicitly mention race. I do not, however, know quite how to respond to this question. Afterwards, I wonder to myself if other preschool teachers feel better prepared to engage in these queries during read aloud experiences.

### **Towards A Better System**

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unsustainability of America's early childhood education system has become nearly impossible to ignore. Its glaring flaws have left families and children across the country without early care and education, with a particularly negative impact on Black and Hispanic communities (Malik et al., 2020). While the challenges faced by this field are coming to the forefront on the national and political levels, changes in classroom practices feel slow. I believe that advocating

for more robust social justice forward approaches to teaching will be an imperative part of building a better system. Such efforts must happen alongside the larger fight for funding and policy reform.

If we are to explore the flaws in early childhood education and move towards a more equitable system, we must examine the ways in which racial injustice shows up in our programs and classrooms and how educators respond. It is my goal that educators, administrators, providers, operators of early childhood education programs, and state regulating bodies will begin to recognize that our biases impact our practice, explore the ways in which they do so, and hone our ability to disrupt it. Fortunately, there are two well-developed approaches to education that are designed to address race bias and inequities: anti-bias and anti-racist education. I am hopeful that better understanding the impact of bias will result in more earnest diversity, equity, and inclusion program development, more robust anti-bias or anti-racist education efforts, and drive educators to consciously seek out multicultural books that depict authentic representation and diversity.

Furthermore, I aim to move us closer to an understanding of Minnesota's early educators' ability, willingness, and confidence when it comes to engaging in the meaningful discussions about race and injustice that quality multicultural books invite. Calling attention to this issue is intended to elevate the field of early childhood education and promote the highest quality, most effective, and equitable teaching practices. To this end, I challenge early childhood educators to step out of the role of charitable caregiver and see our work as agents of social change as well as call for increased critical literacy training requirements.

**Positionality**

At this point I acknowledge my position as a straight, cisgender, physically able, female, Korean adoptee who was raised in predominantly White systems and settings. Despite having spent much of my childhood buried in a book, I cannot recall a single one in which the main character was an Asian girl, much less a female Korean adoptee. I did not know the feeling of seeing myself physically reflected in the characters I read about, and to this day have rarely seen my experiences as a transracial adoptee reflected in the books I read. From personal experience, I am acutely aware of the lack of authentic racial representation in picture books and thus acknowledge that this issue may feel amplified to me.

Additionally, I acknowledge that the scope of this work fails to extend beyond race to include topics pertaining to ability, gender, or sex. When determining a feasible breadth for this work, the privilege of being physically able, straight, and cisgender informed my decision to focus on race alone. Finally, as an educator who is still on her own journey of critical consciousness and who works in a school that serves primarily high-income White families, I continue to make personal evaluations of the various multicultural approaches to education. I acknowledge that I have largely been immersed in the mainstream narrative of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education.

**Summary**

This chapter has explored my personal connection to this topic as well as given context for the issue of racial bias in early childhood education, particularly as it pertains to the way students and teachers engage with books in our classrooms. I expressed the

need for awareness of this issue among the early childhood workforce and the potential for increased awareness and training to result in educators who can effectively put anti-bias or anti-racist teaching approaches into practice. It is my hope that exploring the question *To what degree do early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students?* will convey the importance of addressing racial injustice with young children. Furthermore, I aim to emphasize the necessity of developing a mode of improving educators' abilities to use multicultural picture books to do so.

This study aims to challenge educators to critically examine their practice and their ability to effectively teach quality, authentic multicultural texts and disrupt harmful norms. It does so by collecting feedback, attitudes, and experiences from early childhood educators in Minnesota through surveys and interviews. A main objective of this work is to highlight a need for specific training on these topics and advocate for requiring such training for early childhood educators.

The following chapter will consist of an extensive literature review. The section will acknowledge and make connections between the existing literature and inform the reader of the conceptual issues related to bias in this field, educator attitudes towards discussing race in the classroom, multicultural picture books and critical literacy, and the strengths and critiques of anti-bias and anti-racist approaches to early childhood education. Chapter Three will describe the design of this investigation, including identifying the participants, location, and data collection methods. In Chapter Four, I will discuss the findings and provide an analysis and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative results. Finally, in Chapter Five I will conclude by considering the

implications and limitations of this work as well as offer recommendations for future research and applications of the findings.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The purpose of this work is to move closer to an understanding of the extent to which early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to use multicultural picture books to support children's understanding of topics of race, equity, and power by asking the question: *To what degree do early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared read-aloud experiences with their students?* My work is situated within a large body of literature pertaining to understanding and undoing bias in early childhood education as well as teaching for social justice and anti-bias and anti-racist pedagogies in early childhood. This chapter provides a review of the work that has come before and positions my work to build upon it by exploring how these attitudes and concepts come into play among educators in Minnesota.

The review conducted here explores four main topics which are foundational to this work. It discusses implicit bias in early childhood education as it relates to the development of racial preference and implicit bias in young children as well as the existence of bias in early childhood educators. It goes on to explore educator perceptions of race topics in the field and persistent harmful attitudes relating to race, and examine the ways in which these attitudes seep into classroom discourse. Next, it offers a discussion of the importance of quality representation in children's books and critical literacy as an approach to teaching multicultural picture books. Finally, it examines the anti-bias and anti-racist pedagogical approaches to early childhood education. My aim is to convey the necessity of educators critically examining their own practice and using



multicultural texts to engage in meaningful conversations of race with their young students as well as evaluate Minnesota's teachers' ability to do so.

### **Implicit Bias in Early Childhood Education**

In recent years, the concept of bias has become an increasingly discussed piece of the human experience. A bias is a preference for or against a particular thing, person, or group of people (Waxman, 2021). Implicit bias refers to the unconscious stereotypes held by an individual that impact the way that person interacts with the people and world around them (Gilliam et al., 2016; Neitzel, 2018; Staats, 2015). Bias can impact learning environments in a myriad of ways. This work focuses on implicit biases as they relate to people and groups of people based on race and will dive into the existence and impact of implicit bias in early childhood learning environments. This discussion on implicit bias in early childhood education will examine the existing literature on the early development of bias in young children, the ways in which young children learn and internalize the biases of the adults around them, and educators' implicit biases influencing discrepancies in disciplinary practices. It will provide important context for the necessity of an early childhood education workforce that is equipped with the skills to engage in discussions of racial inequity with their young students.

#### ***Early Development of Racial Preference***

While it is understood that newborns do not show any racial preferences, child development experts have found that infants do begin paying attention to race as early as three months of age (Anzures et al., 2013; Waxman, 2021). This preference is often discussed in terms of *own-race* and *other-race*, in which infants whose experience has primarily been with people of their own race prefer to look at faces of their own race.

This is known as the “other-race effect” (Anzures et al., 2013). Infants and young children typically have more opportunities to engage positively with members of their own race because of the frequency with which they are exposed to own-race individuals. Conversely, a lack of exposure to other-race individuals results in fewer positive interactions and associations with members of other races. Therefore, asymmetrical exposure to individuals of all races informs racial preference in infancy. This is indicative of the significant role of the environment, even when no outward bias is being expressed by adults and caregivers (Anzures et al., 2013; Waxman, 2021).

It is important to note that a tendency to categorize objects and people is a fundamental cognitive function innate in humans from infancy (Waxman, 2021). Further, the ability to sort things with increasingly complex rules is an indicator of developmental progress and growing executive functioning skills. The “other-race effect” in infancy is not tied to prejudice, nor does it influence infant and toddler social interactions (Anzures et al., 2013). In the first few years, then, preferences are largely perceptual and, though certainly influenced by the child’s experiences and surroundings, are not yet imbued with racial bias.

There is evidence, however, suggesting that the nature of an infant’s experiences and surroundings impact the way in which that individual’s preferences bend towards biases as they age. Setoh et al.’s (2013) perceptual social linkage hypothesis identifies social stimuli as a link between such perceptual preferences and future bias. It predicts that unbalanced experiences with own- versus other-race faces impacts that individual’s racial biases as they get older. This hypothesis is supported by much of the relevant existing research which finds evidence of the plasticity of these preferences in that

three-month-olds with equal experience with people of their own race and other races show no visual preference (Anzures et al., 2013; Perszyk et al., 2018; Waxman, 2021). The malleability of implicit biases in young children and the perceptual social linkage hypothesis point to the value of dedicated efforts to avoid and unlearn them.

### ***Learned Implicit Biases in Early Childhood***

By the time children are of preschool age, the other-race effect remains at play and racial preferences have moved beyond being purely perceptual (Anzures et al., 2013; Waxman, 2021). If in infancy one's environment impacts the individual's preferences, then by early childhood the attitudes and biases of the adults around them have also begun to pervade their racial categorization. Around the time children arrive at preschool, some significant changes are happening in the way they categorize people. First, children are beginning to make generalizations of groups of people based on their categorization of individuals. Second, language is becoming an increasingly influential factor in their construction of racial categories.

As children age, they grow increasingly attuned to the various expressions of bias in their environments and begin to use this information as context for evaluating and forming expectations of others (Waxman, 2021). They are starting to apply things they have heard or learned about one individual and apply that information to that individual's larger group (Waxman, 2021). This inductive reasoning does not necessarily involve assumptions about contentious or sensitive topics. If, for example, a four-year-old learns that their Black classmate's favorite color is orange, they might infer that all Black children love the color orange. This pattern, however, is explained by the theory of psychological essentialism, which Waxman defines as "the belief that people of the same

race share essential properties that run deeper than the eye can see” (p. 895). This belief, Waxman maintains, has implications for the development of social stereotypes and prejudices. The Setoh et al. (2019) study on the perceptual social linkage hypothesis supports this connection, as it found that preschoolers with stronger racial categorization skills also have greater implicit bias.

However, it is around this time that perceptual preferences based on visual factors, such as physical features, begin to hold less importance to children. That is, while children are beginning to make predictions and assumptions about the behaviors of others, the outward appearance of race has little impact on those assumptions (Waxman, 2021). Instead, it is the language – particularly the naming of a group – that guides their racial categorization and even impacts their choices for social partners (Waxman, 2021). Other factors that children begin to internalize include social category labels, expressions of bias in media, and general biases expressed and communicated by family members, teachers, and other people in their environment (Gilliam et al., 2016; Perszyk et al., 2018; Schubert Center for Child Studies, 2014).

Expressions of implicit biases are not always spoken, though, and may be communicated through nonverbal signals. Skinner et al. (2017) investigated the possibility of young children “catching” social bias via nonverbal signals in a study that showed preschool-aged children videos of two actors in different colored shirts being treated differently: one receiving positive nonverbal signals and the other receiving negative nonverbal signals. Skinner et al. found that not only did children prefer the target of positive nonverbal signals over the one who received negative nonverbal signals, but that this preference was extended to the targets’ friends. This is suggestive of both the

impact of psychological essentialism and the plasticity of implicit biases in young children. It is further evidence that seeking a better understanding of how to minimize implicit bias in early childhood environments and engage children in conversations about disrupting biases, as is the aim of this research, is imperative and worthwhile work.

### ***Implicit Bias in Early Childhood Educators***

So far this section has focused on the early development of race categorization and implicit bias. However, it is the presence of implicit bias in the adults and educators in early childhood education that has a more direct impact on some students. One of the most prevalent and concerning ways this racial bias shows up is in the inequity of disciplinary practices and academic exclusion. Since 2005, studies have shown that children of color are expelled from preschool at a significantly higher rate than their White counterparts - about three to four times higher (Gilliam et al., 2016). Additional research has been conducted over the past several years to examine the way in which implicit biases contribute to this disparity in disciplinary practices.

A study performed by Gilliam et al. (2016) observed early childhood educators in order to evaluate the effect of racial bias on behavioral expectations and disciplinary recommendations. Educators were shown video clips and instructed to press a button on a keypad each time they saw a behavior that could potentially become a challenge. They found that educators, especially White educators, tended to pay closer attention to Black students when expecting challenging behaviors (Gilliam et al., 2016). That is, when told to expect a challenging behavior, educators hold the bias that Black students are more likely to present that behavior than White students. The study also employed eye tracking

technology during this task, the results of which showed that teachers spent more time observing Black boys than they did other children (Gilliam et al., 2016).

While there is significant research on the role of racial bias in disciplinary practices in older students, the nuance of this relationship in early childhood education is only beginning to be understood. Though implicit biases have been broadly identified as a cause of discriminatory practices, Gilliam et al. (2016) found, contrary to their hypotheses, no relationship between the child's race and the educator's recommendations for suspension or expulsion. This in-depth study also found that Black educators recommended disciplinary exclusion more frequently than did White educators, regardless of the children's race (Gilliam et al., 2016). Gilliam et al. offered that this, paired with the possibility that Black educators are more likely to teach in schools with more Black students, could partially explain the high number of expulsions and suspensions among Black preschoolers.

Still, experts maintain that intentional efforts to unlearn implicit biases will decrease the use of exclusionary practices in schools (Neitzel, 2018). The reality is that early childhood educators, just like everyone else, do have implicit biases which impact the way they operate in the classroom, and the statistics on racial discrepancies in school exclusions are shocking (Staats, 2015). Black children make up just 19% of preschool enrollment in America, but account for 47% of preschoolers suspended at least once (Gilliam et al., 2016). When students perceive a bias against them, their relationship with their teacher is strained and their self-esteem and potential for academic success may be affected (Schubert Center for Child Studies, 2014). Furthermore, the impact of exclusion is significant in that it denies educational opportunities for the student, contributes to the

preschool to prison pipeline, creates challenges for the working parents and guardians, and perpetuates cycles of academic inequities.

Repeatedly, evidence points to the malleable nature of implicit biases and the particular degree of plasticity in infants and young children compared to adults. The literature reviewed here asserts that infant and children's preferences and biases are neither as nuanced nor as entrenched as they are in adults, and are shaped by their environment, experiences, and exposure to diversity (Perszyk et al., 2018; Waxman, 2021). Furthermore, the literature shows that young children do not necessarily develop a conceptualization of normativity and deviance, rather it is learned through social processes. Thus, early childhood is a crucial developmental time for children to begin engaging in discourse of race, power, and inequity. This work builds upon the literature discussed here in its aim to approach the challenge of undoing bias and disrupting oppressive norms via the effective teaching of diversely representative texts and critical literacy in early childhood education. It seeks to understand how well-equipped Minnesota's early childhood educators are in doing so.

### **Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes Towards Race Topics in the Classroom**

The previous section discussed the presence of implicit bias in early childhood. As revealed by the Gilliam et al. (2016) study, implicit bias does permeate classroom practices, and possibly disciplinary practices, in early childhood. This section will discuss educators' attitudes towards race topics in early childhood education. It will explore the colorblind ideology that persists among early childhood educators, the prevailing belief that children are too young for discussions about race, and the way these ideas show up in classroom discourse. A look at discourse analysis will offer an examination of the ways

in which early childhood educators navigate conversations pertaining to race that arise in the classroom. An understanding of the broad attitudes among educators provides a point of reference for this exploration of the degree to which early childhood educators in Minnesota specifically feel equipped with the skills to effectively engage in such conversations.

### ***Colorblindness***

Colorblindness is the racial ideology that ignores skin color or race and believes that every individual should be treated equally, regardless of their race or skin color (Choi, 2008; Husband, 2019). Such attitudes have been consistently popular in modern education, where refrains of *I don't see color*, *I only see children* are common (Boutte et al., 2011). Research suggests a prevalence of colorblindness among educators (Krealmeyer et al., 2016). According to Husband (2011), this racial ideology is particularly prevalent among early childhood educators, a majority of whom opt for such colorblind approaches when it comes to issues of race.

In their examination of colorblind ideologies among pre-service educators, Choi (2008) recounts real student reactions to Ladson-Billings's critique of the colorblind approach. The education students were adamant that "Teachers should not stereotype race. Seeing color in children is like stereotyping" and "Teachers shouldn't give differential treatment based on race" (Choi, 2008, p. 55). Choi recalls that these assertions were met with general agreement from the rest of the class. Likewise, Boutte et al. (2011) quote an early childhood educator in a graduate education course who insisted, "I don't care if they're Black, White, or green with polka dots, I treat all children the same" (p. 335), pointing to the ubiquity of this attitude.



In their work, Choi (2008) names constructs to explain the ideological underpinnings of colorblindness in education. The postmodern framework of colorblindness in education, supported by an individualistic paradigm, frames racism as an individual problem (Choi, 2008). This rhetoric wrongly equates racism in schools with overt discrimination. Certain interpretations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's ethical code of conduct, which guides accredited early education programs across the country, are folded into this framework (Boutte et al., 2011). Principle 1.1 states, "Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011, p. 3). A postmodern interpretation of this principle perpetuates the idea that discrimination only appears as overt actions, and fails to recognize that children of different races experience harmful practices in different ways (Boutte et al., 2011).

Meritocratic ideology is grounded in the idea that hard work pays off and is held up by the notion of the American Dream (Choi, 2008). It, similar to the postmodern framework, perpetuates the narrative that racism – interpreted as overt harm to Black individuals – no longer exists because people of color can and do work hard and achieve success. Thus the meritocratic ideology draws upon examples of successful Black individuals as proof of a post-racist society. For this reason, it promotes equal treatment of all students, regardless of race. Some preservice teachers who may subscribe to a meritocratic ideology feel that even something as innocuous as noticing race would impede the equal treatment of students (Krealmeyer et al., 2016).

As a field, educators have widely accepted this discourse as the norm because of the perceived fairness of treating all students equally, while treating certain groups differently is considered unprofessional, evidence of favoritism, and is increasingly perceived as a political act (Choi, 2008). To this point, Matias (2016, as cited in Beneke & Cheatham, 2020) found that well-intentioned teachers tend to shift conversations away from race and racism in order to avoid being perceived as racist. Teachers have internalized the popular social message that a colorblind approach is the right one (Boutte et al., 2011). Under the veil of well-intentioned attempts at equality, colorblindness has almost become congruent with the prototype of a “good” teacher, when in reality, a failure to recognize racial differences thwarts teachers’ abilities to meet all students’ needs. The prevalence of such beliefs calls into question how well prepared early childhood educators are to engage in important discussions of race or racial injustice during shared reading experiences with their students.

### ***Too Young for That***

Accompanying the colorblind ideology is the prevailing perspective among early childhood educators that young children are not yet old enough to engage in discussions of race. Young children are synonymous with innocence and purity, and arguments against discussing race in schools are amplified in early childhood. This age, some teachers insist, is too early to introduce children to the concept of race, much less racism (Boutte et al., 2011; Husband, 2011). Supporting this argument are claims that such discussions are too complex for young children to understand (Boutte et al., 2011, Buchanan, 2015). For example, in one teacher’s explanation of their hesitancy to extend

discussions about race, they expressed their belief that intangible concepts are difficult for young children to grasp (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020).

The purpose of this section is not to offer a rebuttal to educator attitudes, rather to better understand them. However, the above section, Bias in Early Childhood Education, discusses the general understanding among child development experts that children begin making racial categorizations, generalizations, and internalizing the biases of those around them from an early age. Children often have a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of race and power concepts, thus a developmentally appropriate approach to such discussions is preferred over avoiding them altogether (Boutte et al., 2011). A synthesis of pedagogical approaches to this end will be discussed in a later section.

As a result of the misconception that topics of race are too advanced for young children, teachers in early childhood environments are uncomfortable engaging in these topics with their students (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Boutte et al., 2011; Buchanan, 2015; Husband, 2011). Buchanan found that pre-service teachers considered discussions about race to be controversial and therefore were hesitant to or avoided engaging in such conversations altogether. Other pre-service teachers in Buchanan's study suggested that race-related topics are inflammatory in nature and therefore inappropriate to discuss with children. This work builds upon these common perceptions and examines whether they have permeated the mindsets of Minnesota's early childhood educators.

### ***Discourse Analysis***

In order to better understand this discomfort and the corresponding strategies used during conversations about race with young children, researchers have studied teacher-student interactions, with particular attention to engagement during book reading.

Because shared reading experiences of authentic, multicultural literature can be an effective way to invite conversations that encourage students to develop their critical consciousness, experts have sought to understand how and to what extent educators are doing this (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Nguyen, 2021). Beneke and Cheatham recorded and observed 16 read-aloud events and analyzed the micro-interactions between pre-service teachers and their students in an early childhood program. Their study found three discursive patterns that both point to educator discomfort and are suggestive of the persistent colorblind ideology.

The first identifiable pattern is the use of page-turning and an intonation of finality to limit students' opportunities to contribute to a teacher-determined topic or extend the conversation to a new topic (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020). Educators exercised their power and control by predetermining the desired topics of discussion and then limiting student participation. When the educator felt that the topic had been sufficiently addressed, or if a student offered commentary that went beyond the scope of the educator's agenda, they would signal the end of the conversation by verbalizing a final response, such as *uh-huh*, and promptly turn the page. This pattern of evading direct discussion is congruent with Nguyen's (2021) findings which showed that early childhood educators often failed to respond to biases verbalized by children during conversations about anti-bias or multicultural books.

Another discursive pattern identified by Beneke and Cheatham (2020) is labeling physical differences. Again educators stayed close to the text and modeled their predetermined expectations and agenda by naming physical differences between book characters. For example, during a read aloud an educator might ask their class to name

various character's skin colors, but then turn the page, signaling the end of the conversation, when a student attempts to push the discussion further. Rarely did they allow students to make connections to their own experiences. While this focus on differences is a clear attempt to acknowledge diversity, it fails to frame race as a social construct and acknowledge its role in power and privilege dynamics of society. Furthermore, it fails to validate the significant role that race plays in students' lives. This approach reflects the aforementioned belief that young children cannot grasp such intangible concepts, and that their learning must remain within the concrete, such as labeling visible features.

Finally, Beneke and Cheatham (2020) identified a pattern of emphasizing sameness during book reading experiences. Educators used display questions to direct students to the desired, predetermined conclusion. This conclusion was typically that despite physical differences, people are all the same or should be treated the same. Again, educators used page turning and final intonation to signal the end of the discussion once students arrived at this conclusion. This approach, which undermines the relevance and significance of racial diversity, reflects and perpetuates the colorblind ideology discussed above.

The discursive patterns identified by Beneke and Cheatham (2020) are congruent with Davidson and Fouts's (2022) findings from a similar study. In recording and observing group reading times, they found that participants engaged in discussions that primarily focused on identifying similarities and differences in an attempt to acknowledge diversity, but avoided making connections to issues of power, stereotypes, and hurtful or discriminatory behaviors.

This section has examined educator attitudes about addressing race topics with young children and the resulting discursive patterns that show up in classrooms during shared reading experiences. This analysis reveals the persistence of a general avoidance of broaching meaningful race-related conversations and a misunderstanding of young children's development of racial awareness. Underpinnings of bias are evident both in these attitudes and in teaching strategies. This work seeks to understand how Minnesota educators fit into this analysis and whether or not they feel they are equipped with the skills and knowledge to effectively engage their students in multicultural texts.

### **Multicultural Picture Books and Critical Literacy**

Having established the existence of bias in early childhood education and examined educator attitudes towards race, we now move towards a discussion of more practice-oriented themes as they pertain to racial diversity and literacy. Though our classrooms continue to grow increasingly diverse, our bookshelves may not be keeping up (Husband, 2019; Koss et al., 2017). This section offers a discussion of the value and quality of multicultural children's literature before offering critical literacy as an approach to teaching these texts. It will build upon the discussion of bias and educator attitudes and discourse as it explores the diversity in picture books through the lens of critical literacy for social justice. It is necessary to advocate for multicultural literature, examine the nature of it, and understand approaches to teaching it in order to make sense of Minnesota educators' ability to teach and discuss it in early childhood classrooms.

### ***Importance of Multicultural Picture Books***

Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) developed a way of conceptualizing books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors into cultures. This model has influenced the

way in which educators understand the function of multicultural texts and the importance of diversity in literature, which is perhaps best expressed by Bishop's own explanation of the power and impact of reading. When a book is a mirror and one sees themselves in literature, reading "becomes a means of self affirmation", but when one does not find themselves represented in their books, they "learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (Bishop, 1990, paras. 1 & 4). When books are also authored and illustrated by non-White individuals, they invite young children of color to envision new future possibilities for themselves (Davis et al., 2021; Koss, 2015). Racial representation in picture books plays a crucial role in undoing the biases that young children of color have internalized about themselves, as discussed in the above section.

Racial diversity in children's books is imperative not only for racial identity development in children of color, but also for White children. White children and children from other dominant social groups may frequently see themselves in the books they read, but they also need windows into authentic depictions of other cultures (Bishop, 1990). When these children encounter only mirrors in their books, they develop an inflated sense of their own value in the world (Bishop, 1990). Asymmetric racial representation in picture books can foster a lack of humility and hinders work done towards equity (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010).

Furthermore, White children who find themselves in racially homogenous communities will likely have few opportunities to interact with people different from themselves. Engaging with books that offer windows and sliding glass doors into accurate depictions of cultures beyond their own can be meaningful learning

opportunities (Bishop, 1990; Husband, 2019). With the right texts, children can experience other cultures in ways that are authentic, positive, and avoid deficit-framing (Husband, 2019). These experiences can support the development of empathy towards other racial groups and historically marginalized groups (Husband, 2019). Finally, multicultural picture books, paired with a critical literacy approach, can also support a developmentally appropriate critical consciousness of topics such as race, equity, and power in our world (Husband, 2019). Because picture books can be a powerful tool to support young children's understanding of such social issues, it is necessary to understand the extent to which Minnesota's educators feel confident in using books to this end.

### ***Analysis of Multicultural Picture Books***

All multicultural books are not created equal, and the quality and nature of the representations of multicultural characters matters. Experts have used a critical race theory (CRT) framework for content analysis of multicultural picture books. CRT is a theory developed by legal scholars in the 1970s that has since been applied across disciplines, including education. CRT places race, rather than class or socioeconomic status, as the focal point of analysis (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Koss, 2015). Two major tenets of CRT are applied to this content analysis: counter-storytelling and interest-convergence theory.

Counter-storytelling, as it pertains to CRT, refers to a method of storytelling that challenges myths held by the majority group or telling stories of populations that are often left untold (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Koss, 2015). The content analysis conducted in recent studies suggests that there is more work to be done to challenge



misconceptions about racial and ethnic minority groups. The majority of books analyzed failed to provide authentic, accurate, detailed, modern, and relatable depictions of characters from a particular cultural group (Koss, 2015). For example, most Caldecott Medal and Honor books that featured Black boys as main characters were about historical figures, slavery and civil rights movements, or challenges of urban life (Davis et al., 2021). Researchers discovered noteworthy exceptions, but overall, the books that did feature diverse characters had underpinnings of bias.

Interest-convergence theory in CRT is the conjecture that real advances for people of color, as a whole, will not occur until it is in the self-interest of White people (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010). This analysis refers to the insufficient representation of people of color in children's literature. Studies conducted over the past several decades have all pointed to a historic lack of representation in children's books, and more recent literature discussed here illustrates the continuation of this trend (Davis et al., 2021; Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Koss 2015; Koss et al., 2017). Each study employs its own set of parameters and methods of analysis, but the findings were consistent in that people of color have been and continue to be underrepresented in characters, authors, and illustrators.

Based on CRT's interest-convergence theory, more high-quality multicultural books and increased representation will occur when the academic, intellectual, and developmental interests of people of color converge with the economic interests of the White-dominated publishing industry (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010). Imperative to this convergence taking place is the undoing of the stereotype that people of color are neither academic nor do they purchase books. This bias itself is evidence of the need for

increased diverse racial representation in our children's books. This work seeks to advocate for exactly that, as well as ensuring that educators are capable and confident in engaging in the meaningful discussions that such books invite.

### ***Picture Books and Critical Literacy***

The power of multicultural picture books, as discussed above, is contingent upon the educator's effectiveness in teaching them. Critical literacy is one approach to engaging with texts that aims to promote a better understanding of and counteract social inequities (Bennett et al., 2017). Critical literacy is built upon Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's theory of literacy as a socially constructed means of power (Kim & Hachey, 2020). Freire conceptualized literacy as "the relationship of learners to the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, as cited in Wells et al., 2022, p. 191). Critical literacy, according to Freire, had the power to enable laborers in lower positions to challenge poor working conditions and advocate for themselves and their rights (Comber, 2015). In education today, critical literacy challenges students to identify racial injustices in their world and then take meaningful action to disrupt that injustice (Husband, 2019).

Scholars have named four main theoretical tenets of critical literacy in education: disrupting the commonplace; interrogating multiple viewpoints; focusing on sociopolitical issues; and taking action to promote social justice (Husband, 2019; Lewison et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2022). The ultimate goal of a critical literacy approach, the foundation of which is a belief in young children's intelligence and capabilities, is social action (Bennett et al., 2017). Critical literacy in the early years challenges what children have been taught about right and wrong, invites them to make connections to

other ways of thinking, and contributes to the understanding that literacy is not neutral (Bennett et al., 2017; Kim & Hachey, 2020).

In effective practice, critical literacy challenges the common beliefs and attitudes held by early educators that young children are not old enough to be able to critically analyze intangible social issues, much less take meaningful action. Case studies by experts have evaluated the use of counter-storytelling, image analysis, and scaffolding by teachers to question issues of fairness as effective ways to introduce critical literacy practices into early childhood classrooms (Kim & Hachey, 2020; Lewison et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2022). When educators start with the texts and media that children are already exposed to, introduce new perspectives, and guide them to ask questions, solve problems, and take action, they are taking a developmentally appropriate approach to applying the goals of critical literacy (Bennett et al., 2017).

Critical literacy calls for educators to understand their work as a practice with meaningful social consequences. Based on Freire's work mentioned above, it is teachers who give others the ability to understand and challenge systemic inequities. This conceptualization of educators is at odds with how society has historically viewed teachers, as well as the censorship being called for in schools today. The educator's role has typically been to deliver standardized knowledge via curriculum that has been dictated from above and determined by the dominant culture (Lewison et al., 2002). Educators are conditioned to prefer unambiguous "right" answers to questions, and can struggle with the open-ended questions and multiple correct answers that often result from an inquiry of alternate perspectives (Lewison et al., 2002). Furthermore, contrary to the critical literacy framework, educators are told to remain neutral on sociopolitical

issues when such topics arise in our classrooms and, recently, legislation has been introduced calling for more extreme censorship.

Multicultural picture books have the potential to be powerful tools for early childhood educators to teach critical literacy. However, teachers must be prepared to engage in content analysis of multicultural texts. Furthermore, teachers will have to be willing to confront their own biases and recognize their social impact in order to take an effective critical literacy approach. The review in this section provides important context for this work, as both an understanding of the importance of quality multicultural picture books and of critical literacy theory are imperative to educators' ability to engage in discussion of race topics during shared reading experiences with their students. Furthermore, critical literacy is situated within the broad pedagogical approaches to social justice education, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Anti-Bias Education and Beyond**

At the same time bias and a hesitancy to discuss race persist in early childhood education and representation in picture books continues to lag, significant work has been done to move toward establishing an approach to education that specifically counters such attitudes. Gaias et al. (2022) situate these pedagogical approaches on a continuum which broadly represents the degree to which each addresses issues of diversity and inequity. On one end of the spectrum lies the colorblind ideology. Towards the other end lie the many pedagogical approaches associated with an anti-discrimination approach, including Ladson-Billings's 1995 culturally responsive pedagogy, Souto-Manning's 2013 multicultural education, Paris's 2012 culturally sustaining pedagogy, and Derman-Sparks's 1989 anti-bias education (Gaias et al., 2022). Anti-bias education

remains one of the most widely accepted approaches with a unique, singular focus on early childhood education. This section will examine the anti-bias approach, its limitations, and explore anti-racist education as an alternative pedagogical approach to engaging in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with students.

### ***Tenets of Anti-Bias Education***

Anti-bias education, developed by Louise Derman-Sparks in 1989, is built upon the belief that young children are not only conscious of racial differences and attune to the biases of the adults around them, but also that they are capable of participating in discourse about race and taking action to confront it (Beneke et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2021). Understanding the four central tenets of anti-bias education is imperative to understanding the overall goals of this approach. The tenets, as laid out by Derman-Sparks and Olson Edwards (2019) are identity, diversity, justice, and activism.

Identity, Derman-Sparks and Olson Edwards (2019) explain, places a focus on supporting students to feel self aware, confident in, and proud of their individual and group identities without needing to feel a sense of superiority over others. An emphasis on diversity means that children will feel comfortable with and see joy in human diversity. The justice focus in anti-bias education applies to building children's capacity to recognize unfairness and bias and exercise empathy for the hurt and harm caused by injustice. Finally, in teaching activism, educators will empower and support the development of students' abilities to stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias.

Additionally, the concept of the teacher as a perpetual reflective learner is a key aspect of this approach. Anti-bias education is to be considered a process in which the

teacher is constantly observing and experiencing, critically reflecting, and discovering new ways to think and act (Beneke et al., 2019; Urbani et al., 2022). This critical reflection of one's own internal prejudices and biases, or critical consciousness, is especially crucial given the inequities that exist in education systems, some of which have been discussed above. It is only in this process of developing one's own critical consciousness that teachers can begin to acknowledge and understand the way their own biases perpetuate or disrupt persistent inequities in education (Urbani et al., 2022).

Though anti-bias education is a generally palatable, well-accepted, and endorsed social justice approach to early childhood education, some critics say it fails to adequately engage young children in meaningful critical discussion and practices (Escayg, 2019). A critical understanding of the existing frameworks for approaching race topics in early childhood education is important context for this work as it seeks to examine how prepared Minnesota's early educators are to engage in discussions of race with their students during shared read aloud experiences.

### ***Limitations of an Anti-Bias Approach***

Again applying critical race theory as a lens for critical analysis, some scholars have identified a number of shortcomings of anti-bias education. A noteworthy criticism of the conceptual underpinnings of anti-bias education has to do with the early childhood education field's adherence to developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). DAP refers to teaching based on experts' understanding of child development and age-specific competencies. Escayg (2019) argues that not only is DAP subject to individual biases, it is cause for the practical shortcomings described in the following paragraph. Furthermore, because the anti-bias approach is constructed upon DAP, and because DAP

is so widely accepted and followed, little critical analysis of anti-bias education exists (Escayg, 2019). While DAP is an important structure in early childhood education, it is time, some argue, for educators to begin to ask not only what is best for young children's development, but also "Who says so?" (Vandenbroeck, 2007, p. 31).

Beyond the conceptual, experts identify ways in which anti-bias as a practice falls short. The focus of anti-bias education remains on naming differences, celebrating them, and acknowledging that they can be the basis upon which stereotypes, biases, and injustices occur. Critical analysis, however, suggests that it fails to recognize and challenge the institutions and systems that uphold oppressive power structures, nor does it name racism (nor any other discriminatory -isms) (Escayg, 2019; Janmohamed, 2005). It fails to connect the individual to the systemic, again indicative of the attitudes examined in prior sections of this work in which educators feel children are not capable of understanding intangible topics. Related, some experts also identify a failure to address Whiteness and privilege. This oversight, Escayg (2019) argues, only perpetuates White dominance in its implicit centering of Whiteness, however unintentionally.

### ***Towards Anti-Racist Education***

Anti-racist education is offered by some as an alternative to anti-bias education and other more traditional social justice-oriented approaches to education. Experts have developed varying conceptualizations of this pedagogical approach, which will be synthesized here. Underpinning this approach is the belief that schools are a microcosm of society as a whole and, as such, educational ideologies, policies, and practices are rooted in and perpetuate racial injustice (Husband, 2011). It calls for explicit critique of broad power inequities related to race and class as well as the Eurocentric theories that

govern our understanding and practice of early childhood education (Escayg, 2019; Husband, 2011).

In practice, anti-racist education calls for educators to explicitly acknowledge Whiteness and teach about privilege and power. One of the ways to approach this is to engage in conversations that invite children to reflect on the connection between race and power (Escayg, 2019; Husband, 2011). An example of a developmentally appropriate application of anti-racist education in early childhood is a unit about airplanes paired with discussions that challenge representation, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation of different racial groups that include questions such as “Who can or cannot be a pilot?” and “Why?”, “Says who?”, and “How do you know?” (Escayg, 2019, p. 15). Furthermore, anti-racist education aims to move away from a focus on individual prejudices and towards the consideration of the systemic nature of racism (Escayg, 2019).

As is the case with anti-bias education, educators must do significant reflective work in order to put anti-racist theory into practice. They must be willing to examine how race and racism show up in their own lives and the lives of their students, even when doing so evokes a strong emotional response (Husband, 2011). Anti-racist theory requires educators to acknowledge and investigate the power inequities based in racism that are embedded into the early childhood field (Janmohamed, 2005). They must be willing to challenge dominant culture in education institutions, policies, and practices and potentially face conflicts with parents and administration who feel anti-racist education is neither appropriate nor relevant in early childhood. This work starts in teacher education, where, as it is, preservice educators are taught to celebrate diversity on a superficial level without meaningful exploration of power and privilege (Janmohamed, 2005).



This section has provided a discussion of two central approaches to social justice education in early childhood. After exploring educator attitudes in previous sections, an understanding of these pedagogical approaches is significant in that it situates the field of early childhood education on the continuum of multicultural education. Both approaches discussed here require the educator to engage in critical reflection. In the absence of this work, no real change can be made in the classroom or beyond. This research will build upon this theoretical synthesis as it aims to uncover the extent to which Minnesota educators have embarked on this work and how equipped they are to engage in meaningful discussions of race during shared read aloud experiences. Furthermore, an understanding of these pedagogical approaches will inform the analysis of educator responses during the research process.

### **Summary**

The literature analysis in this chapter has laid the theoretical groundwork for this research. An examination of the bias in this field and the attitudes and resulting discourse between teachers and students in their classrooms is suggestive of the importance of social justice forward pedagogical approaches to early childhood education. Social and racial justice must be brought in from the margins of early childhood pedagogy and curriculum and early childhood professionals must recognize the political and social nature of our work. Furthermore, a more robust understanding of the role of multicultural literature and specific pedagogical approaches provides a foundation for understanding and evaluating the ways in which Minnesota educators are approaching this work.

Discussions of quality in early childhood care and education must include meaningful analysis of critical pedagogy and practices. This work aims to advance the

field of early childhood education by confronting the existing bias, advocating for effective and appropriate approaches to teaching multicultural texts based on theories of critical pedagogy, and uncovering the degree to which Minnesota's early childhood educators are equipped to do so.

The following chapter will describe the survey and interview investigation carried out for this research. It will include a description of the participants, location, and time of the research as well as give a detailed explanation of the methods and tools used. The theoretical framework constructed here will give context for the research paradigm, methods, and future analysis of this research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### Introduction

Existing literature describes the way young children begin developing racial preferences and biases about groups of people. It proves that children internalize and accept the biased messages they hear from the people and world around them from an early age (Anzures et al., 2013; Gilliam et al., 2016; Perszyk et al., 2018; Setoh et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2017; Waxman, 2021). A review of educator attitudes and discourse analysis suggests that the prevailing opinion that topics of racial inequities should not be broached with young children impacts the quality and nature of classroom discussions during read aloud experiences (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Boutte et al., 2011; Choi, 2008; Husband, 2011; Krealmeyer et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2021). Finally, critical analysis of representation in multicultural picture books, critical literacy, anti-bias, and anti-racist education confirms the necessity of a social justice forward approach to early childhood education and offers a foundation for evaluating the nature of such teacher-student interactions (Beneke et al., 2019; Bennett et al., 2017; Escayg, 2019; Husband, 2019; Kim & Hachey, 2020; Lewison et al., 2002; Urbani et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2022).

While these research topics are becoming increasingly salient in the early childhood education field as a whole, most early childhood education policies, regulations, and training requirements are determined at the state level. This work seeks to build upon the existing research described above to move toward an understanding of this topic in Minnesota specifically. The research described here aims to answer the question: *To what degree do early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to*

*engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students?* The goal of this investigation is to offer an evaluation of Minnesota's educators' ability and willingness to engage in the conversations of race topics that multicultural picture books invite, as well as their understanding of the critical pedagogies that uphold the importance of such discussions. Findings can potentially guide decision-makers to include critical literacy training in Minnesota's early childhood education training requirements.

### **Research Paradigm and Method**

This research is framed within the constructivist and transformative research paradigms. Aligning with the constructivism perspective, which aims to “rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 27), this work is dedicated to making sense of teachers' views as they relate to racial topics that arise during group reading experiences. This research is built upon the belief that understanding early childhood educators' knowledge pertaining to critical literacy and multicultural picture books as an important piece of social justice education will be an imperative step towards building a more equitable early childhood education system.

This research is also informed by critical race theory and the notion that structures in our society are responsible for and perpetuate the marginalization of Black and Brown individuals. This theory provides the basis for this work, which ultimately aims to support the educators in this field to better prepare their students to recognize, understand, and disrupt the racist structures they will encounter throughout their lives. The literature review section of this work seeks to amplify the voices of Black and Brown experts in this field, which is congruent with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) description

of the transformative worldview which centers voices that may typically be marginalized. Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) also associate the transformative research paradigm with social or political agenda. The foundation of this work is social action and the belief that to talk about injustices is not enough. It calls for action from students, from teachers, from the bodies that govern Minnesota's early childhood education systems, and for the inclusion of critical literacy training for early childhood educators.

A mixed methods approach is chosen for carrying out this study, specifically an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. As such, this study takes place in two parts, a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The initial quantitative phase uses a survey design. This method was selected due to its ability to reach a large participant population across the state of Minnesota. The qualitative phase uses an interview design in order to explore more open-ended questions and uses a smaller subset to explain observations that arise during the quantitative phase.

### **Participants and Setting**

This research centers the voices and opinions of early childhood educators in Minnesota. Also of primary interest is the nature of discourse during classroom read-aloud experiences, implying the students' ability to comprehend texts, communicate verbally, and have conversations. As such, this work excludes early childhood professionals working exclusively in infant and toddler classrooms. Therefore, the participants of the initial survey part of this study include individuals working with preschool-aged children in an early childhood care and education capacity in Minnesota.

As this study takes an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach, I also identify the smaller participant group for the secondary interview aspect. This subset includes three individuals described briefly in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Participant Subset*

<b>Type of workplace</b>	<b>Education attainment</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>
Licensed child care center	Graduate degree	5
Childcare in public school district	Bachelor's degree	13
Pre-Kindergarten in parks and recreation	Bachelor's degree (pursuing graduate degree)	15

Both parts of this study examine early childhood educators across different workplaces. The survey was administered online and interviews were held virtually. For this reason, I did not need to seek permissions from a specific location or administration.

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

Much consideration was given to ensuring ethical data collection, and this study was ultimately approved by the Hamline University Institutional Review Board. In most cases, my initial contact with potential participants occurred via email communication. This communication included the detailed information necessary for participants to give informed consent. It provided descriptions of both the overall objectives and the specific methods used in the project. It explicitly stated that participation was voluntary, and that they could opt out by simply choosing not to fill out and submit the survey.

Recipients of this communication were informed that receiving the email does not automatically make them a participant and that only submitting a completed survey would qualify them as such. This initial communication also informed each potential participant that the survey was anonymous and their identity would not be disclosed anywhere in the report. A link to the Google Forms survey was included in this email and the first survey question, which can be found in Appendix A, was designed to ask participants to explicitly consent to being a participant in this study.

In some cases, my initial communication with potential participants happened within the “CARE (Child Care Advocates Ready to Emerge) Fellowship” group on Facebook. The post in this Facebook group included the same information as the previously described email communication. In the case of both the email and the Facebook post, I invited individuals to forward the information and the link to the Google Forms survey on to their greater early childhood education networks.

From the pool of survey respondents, I identified three interview subjects. These interviewees were again given detailed information, in writing, about the objectives and process of the study. Interview subjects were informed that some of their personal information would be included in the written report, including their type of workplace, education, general location within Minnesota, and years of teaching experience. Interviewees were also informed that their interview would be recorded for the sake of my analysis, but would not be made available to the public. Each interviewee was given an opportunity to opt out of the interview and signed Hamline University’s Institutional Review Board approved consent form prior to being interviewed.

## **Methodology**

This study employed surveys followed by interviews for data collection. Because this study uses an explanatory sequential approach to data collection, some interview questions were developed after an initial analysis of survey results.

### ***Survey***

The survey used in this study was built and administered using the Google Forms website. I directly contacted individuals in the early childhood care and education field across Minnesota to ask for their help in sharing the survey throughout their networks. I distributed the survey via a link in an email which also included a brief introduction to myself, a detailed description of the study, and an ask for those willing to forward this email to others who fit the participant description. The survey was open during May and June of 2023 and was ultimately completed and submitted by 26 participants.

The survey, found in Appendix A, began with multiple choice and open-ended questions about educational attainment and work experience. These were followed by a series of Likert scaled statements to which participants indicated their agreement rating on a scale of one (disagree) to six (agree). The broad goal of the survey was to cast a wide net and observe any trends (or lack thereof) in early childhood educators' understanding of the importance of high quality multicultural texts and how to teach them. The questions were designed with the intention of identifying possible relationships between education, training, and work experience and one's understanding of critical literacy in theory and practice.



### ***Interviews***

During the survey phase, eight individuals indicated an interest in learning more information about being interviewed for the second phase of data collection. I contacted these individuals directly and obtained written consent from the three individuals who were ultimately willing to participate. The interview questions, some of which were developed prior to receiving survey results and some after, can be found in Appendix B. The interviews were conducted individually online and were recorded and transcribed using Google Meet.

Prior to receiving survey results, the initial aim of the interviews was to glean a deeper understanding of early childhood educators' feelings towards teaching multicultural texts, anti-bias and anti-racist educational approaches, and their perspective of their ability to engage in conversations about race and racism during shared reading experiences. After initial analysis of the survey results, the interview focus shifted towards examining possible explanations for the survey results. My constructivist approach to this work informed me that surveys alone can not provide a full picture of how prepared our early childhood educators are, or feel they are, to discuss race during read-alouds. Interviews allowed participants to share their experiences, in their own way, which provides valuable insight.

### **Data Analysis**

Following data collection, the Google Forms survey results were imported into Google Sheets and examined for trends, patterns, or relationships using Google Sheets and Canva graphing capabilities. This analysis included using mean and mode scores and then creating basic graphics to visually represent the findings. In some cases, a numerical

value was applied to qualitative data in order to carry out this type of analysis. I also used raw scores to make scatter plots in order to provide a visual representation of possible relationships between factors.

I began with an examination of participant education, work experience, and attitudes towards and understanding of the social-justice oriented teaching approaches discussed in this work. This involved a basic breakdown of the data, mean, and mode calculations which were represented using histograms, bar graphs, and pie charts. I then explored possible relationships between these factors, paying particularly close attention to results that appeared to be outliers or that were unexpected. This analysis was represented on scatter plots. Next, interview recordings and transcripts were annotated and examined for meaningful information to provide context for patterns uncovered by the survey results. The analysis of this qualitative data involved reviewing and rewatching several parts of the interviews. I organized my findings by theme and analyzed them within the context of the literature review.

### **Summary**

This study took place within a transformative and constructivist paradigm and ultimately aimed to inform action that promotes social justice-oriented education practices and training requirements that enable educators to engage in critical literacy practices in their classrooms. A survey paired with interviews gave insight into Minnesota early childhood educators' current attitudes toward this issue as well as their perceived ability to engage in meaningful conversations about race and racism during shared reading experiences. The hope was for this insight to highlight areas for growth in

our early childhood workforce and advocate for increased training on this topic. The following chapter provides an analysis of the findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Introduction

The previous chapter describes the methods applied in this study in order to better understand the degree to which early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared when it comes to discussing topics related to race during shared reading experiences. As described above, the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to data collection. Initial quantitative data was collected via a 21-question survey of early childhood educators in Minnesota. Following the survey, qualitative data was collected through three one-on-one virtual interviews with individuals who had indicated on the survey an interest in being interviewed. The survey and subsequent interviews were designed to propel me towards an answer to the question: *To what degree do early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students?*

This chapter uses the sequential data collection method as an organizational guide. In my discussion of the data, I will begin with a presentation of the survey results and offer an analysis of the findings. Subsequently, I will describe the findings from my interviews and dissect the themes that emerged.

#### Survey Results

Over the course of four weeks in May and June, 2023, I collected survey responses from early childhood educators across Minnesota via Google Forms. The first portion of the survey aimed to determine participants' educational attainment and work experience before shifting to topical Likert scaled agreement statements designed to

understand attitudes towards discussing race in early childhood classrooms as well as educator perceptions of how prepared they feel to do so. The survey reached individuals with a wide spread of work experience in both teaching and administrative capacities, in private and public elementary schools, various child care centers, and nannies.

### ***Participant Education and Experience***

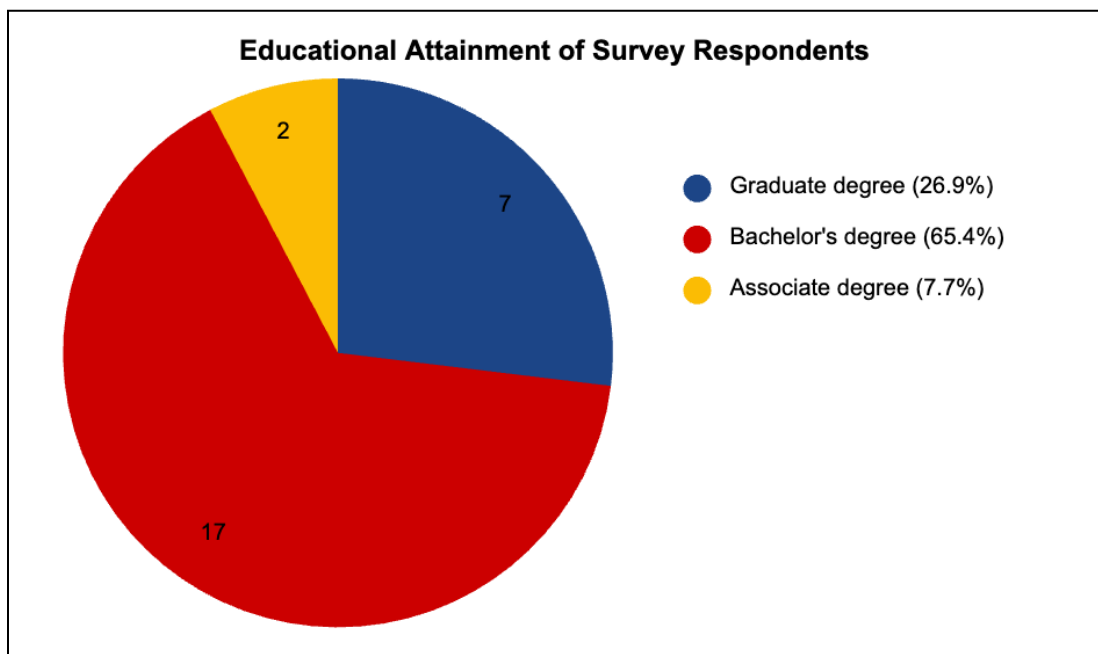
Of the 26 total survey participants, the majority, 65.4% (n=17), hold a bachelor's degree, 26.9% (n=7) hold a graduate degree, and the final 7.7% (n=2) have an associate degree (see Figure 1 below). The results of this small survey were at odds with the actual educational attainment of early childhood educators in Minnesota. According to a report on the childcare workforce in the Twin Cities Metro area presented by Ramsey County and RealTime Talent titled *Early Childhood Education and Childcare Workforce Challenges and Opportunities* (Olson & Dirtzu, 2021), 32.5% of early childhood education and childcare professionals have achieved a four-year degree, 15.3% have an advanced degree, and 12% hold a two-year degree. In the survey presented for this thesis, no respondents reported having attained some high school, a high school diploma, nor some college. However, the Ramsey County and RealTime Talent report by Olson and Dirtzu indicates that 40.2% of early childhood professionals fall into one of these categories.

Related to the measure of educational attainment is the teaching credential held by early childhood educators, depicted in Figure 2 below. The results of this survey found that 34.6% (n=9) have a teaching license and 11.5% (n=3) have a Child Development Associate credential. At 53.8% (n=14), the majority of survey respondents do not hold any professional teaching credential. Since many early childhood educator teaching

positions in Minnesota do not require a teaching credential and since, according to the Ramsey County and RealTime Talent report by Olson and Dirtzu (2020), 52.2% have attained a two-year degree or less, it is possible that, as is the case with educational attainment, the data regarding teaching credentials held by early childhood educators that was collected from this survey may not be representative of the early childhood workforce in Minnesota as a whole.

**Figure 1**

*Educational Attainment of Survey Respondents*



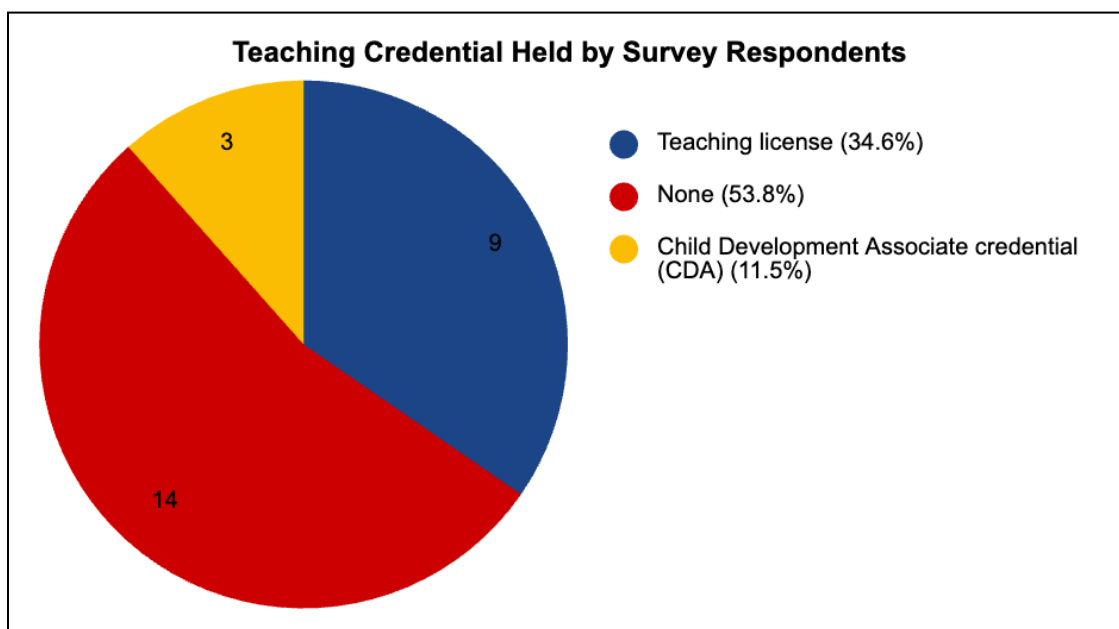
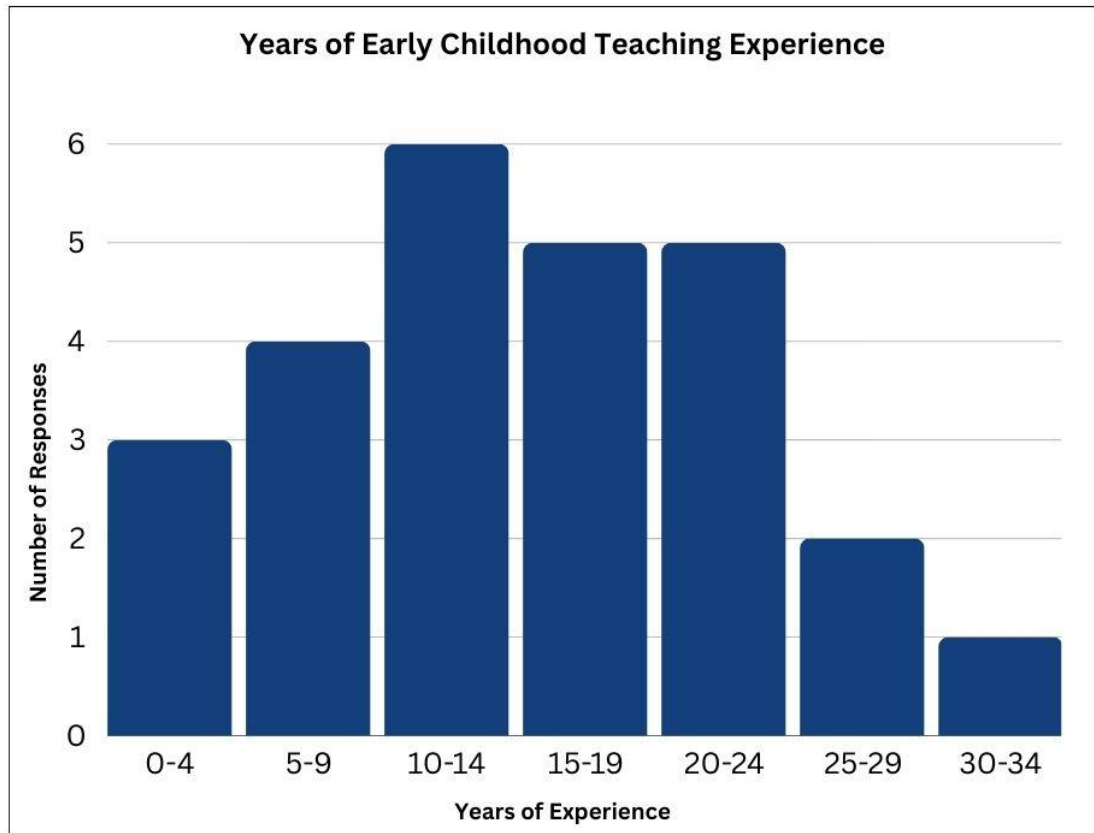
**Figure 2***Teaching Credential Held by Survey Respondents*

Figure 3 below shows a breakdown of participant work experience. The mean years of experience for the participants in this data set is 14.26 years, suggesting that educators tend to stay in the early childhood classroom for several years, if not decades. However, a study on retention and turnover of educators in a national private, high-quality early childhood education program found that not only has teacher retention in the early childhood field long been an ongoing challenge, it is one that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bryant et al., 2023). Furthermore, the same study found that early childhood educators with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to leave their job. Because the participants of my survey had achieved a higher level of education than the typical early childhood educator, it follows that they also represent an anomalous group of educators who have remained in the field longer than their peers typically do.

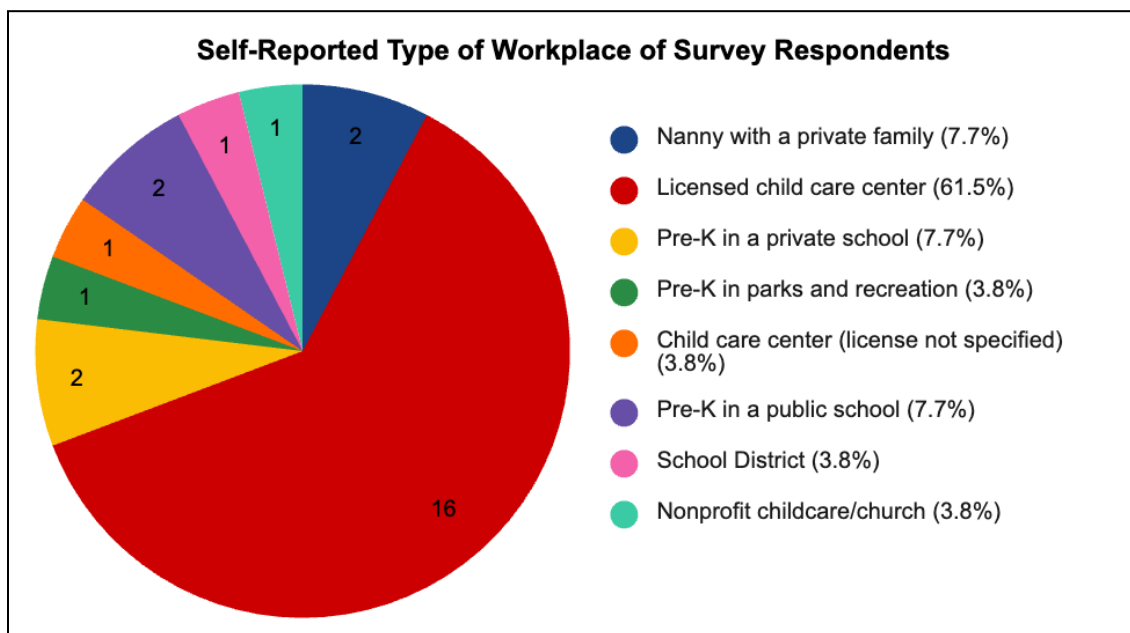
**Figure 3**

*Years of Early Childhood Teaching Experience of Survey Respondents*



Finally, there are many different ways of providing early childhood care and education. Modes of delivery may range from in-home child care, to family, friend, and neighbor care, to church-based programs, to public and private licensed and unlicensed daycare centers and pre-kindergarten programs. The nuances between these modes of delivery are such that distinguishing the type of workplace may be significant in identifying additional factors that contribute to an individuals' ability or willingness to discuss issues of race during read-aloud experiences in their classrooms. Figure 4 illustrates the type of workplace as reported by survey respondents.

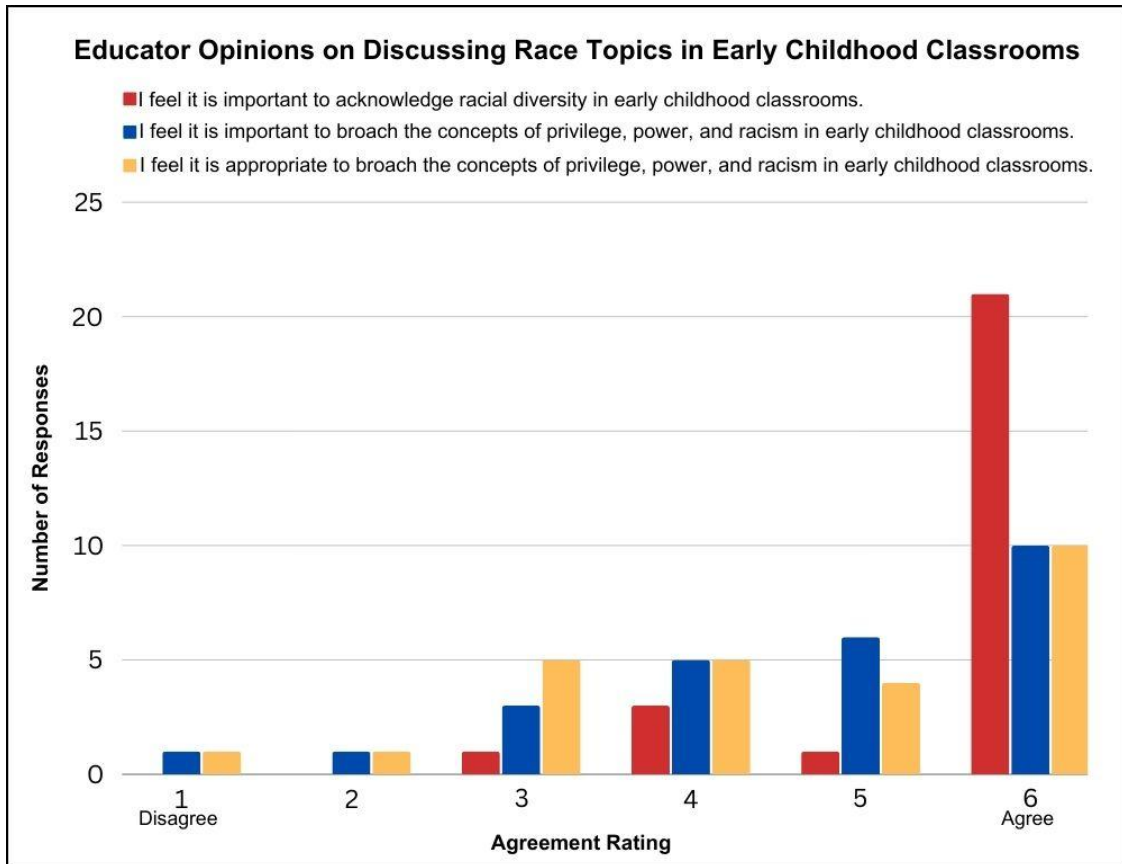


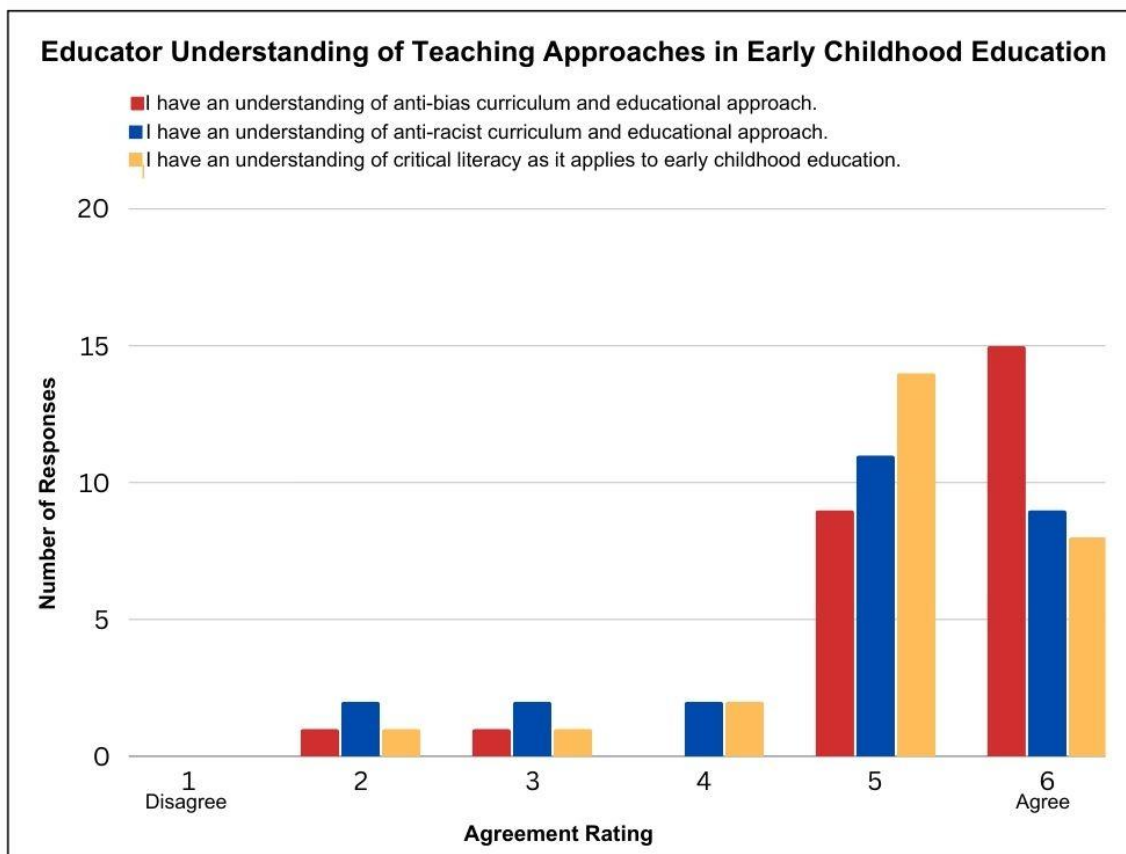
**Figure 4***Self-Reported Type of Workplace of Survey Respondents****Race Conversations***

The survey results illustrated in Figure 5 below show an overwhelming agreement among respondents that acknowledging racial diversity is important in early childhood classrooms. Respondents have also received more training on anti-bias education, anti-racist education, and critical literacy than I anticipated (see Figure 6). Knowing that this subset of early childhood education professionals has unusually high educational attainment and robust work experience, I sought to understand where these educators developed their understanding of and ability to execute these educational approaches. In evaluating the data, I was curious about whether formal education, workplace training, or work experience were related to educator confidence and ability in engaging in conversations about racial topics during shared reading experiences.

**Figure 5**

*Educator Opinions on Discussing Race Topics in Early Childhood Classrooms*



**Figure 6***Educator Understanding of Teaching Approaches in Early Childhood Education*

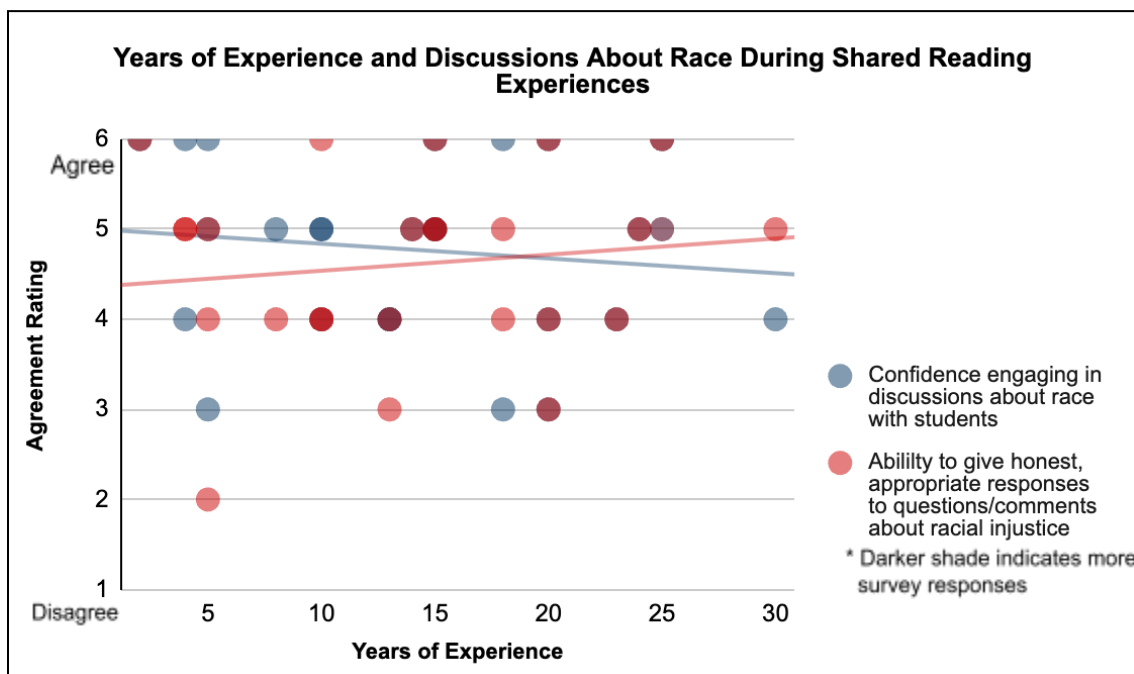
Trendlines on the scatter plot in Figure 7 illustrate that there is a slight negative relationship between years of experience and participants' rating of their confidence level when it comes to engaging in discussions about race during shared reading experiences. This is reflective of the educator attitudes discussed in Chapter Two, particularly the discursive patterns, colorblind ideologies, and the misconception that the topic of race is too complex for young children. Conversely, there is a slight positive correlation between years of experience and participants' perceptions of their ability to give honest, appropriate responses to questions and comments about racial injustice. It may be the case that longer-serving educators hold more traditional attitudes, but do feel they are

able to give what they believe are appropriate responses to childrens' queries and observations.

Next, educators' confidence engaging in discussions about race with students and their perceived ability to give honest, appropriate responses to questions and comments about racial injustice were analyzed in relation to educational attainment. This analysis shows a slightly stronger positive correlation for both measures (see Figure 8). This suggests that, among survey respondents, education played a more significant role in preparing them to engage in race-related conversations during shared reading experiences. Furthermore, it is suggestive of education's power to disrupt the harmful, persistent attitudes mentioned above.

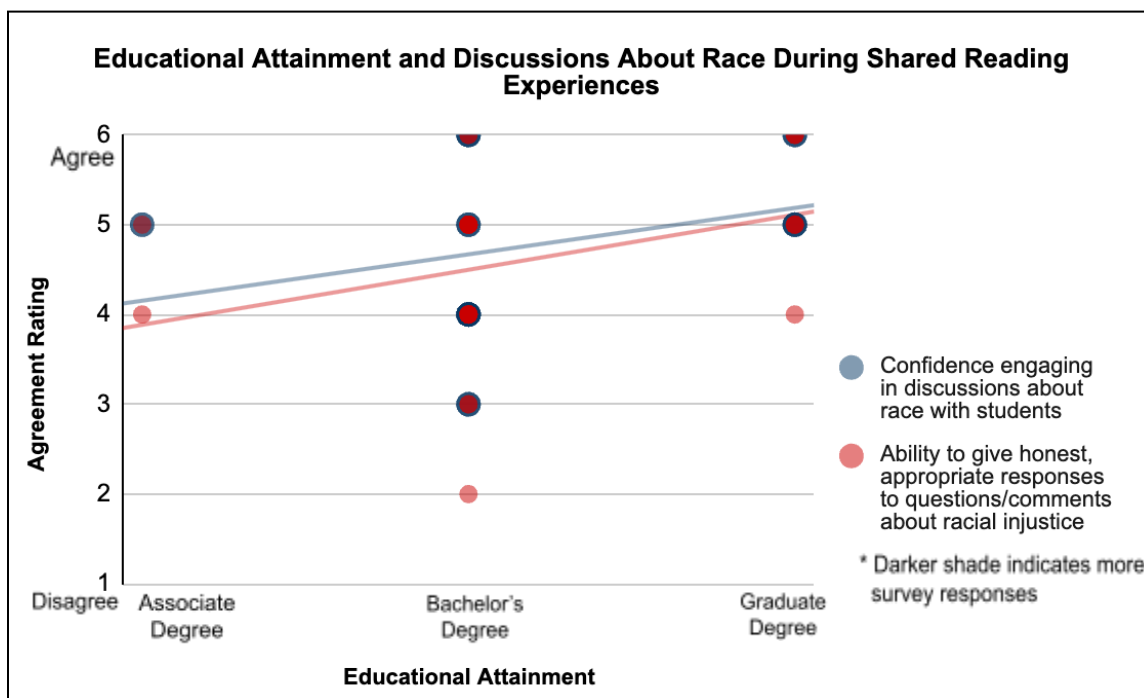
**Figure 7**

*Years of Experience and Discussions About Race During Shared Reading Experiences*



**Figure 8**

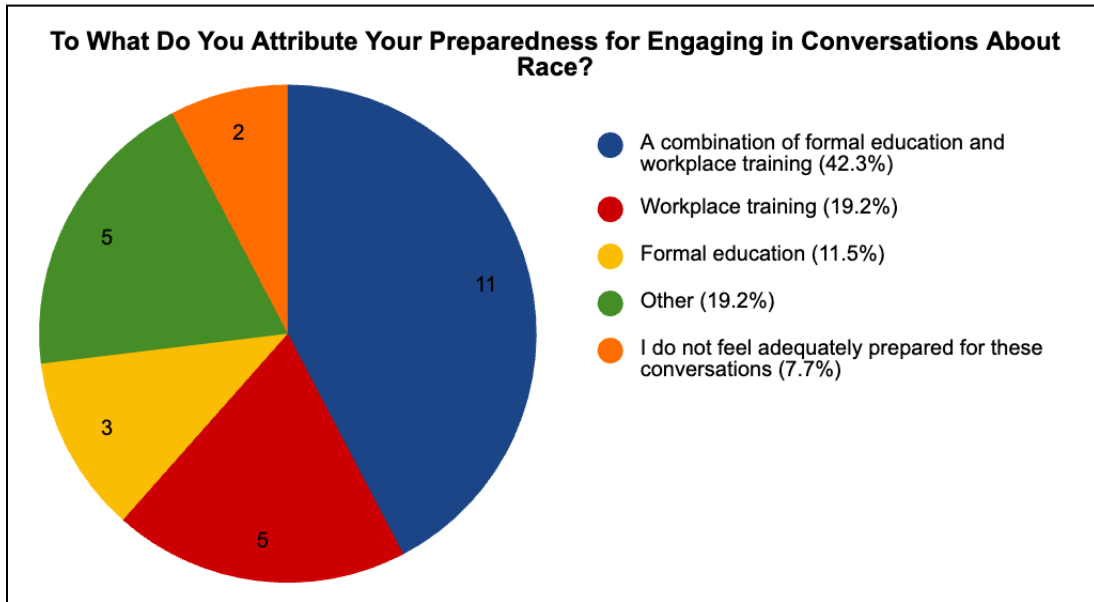
*Educational Attainment and Discussions About Race During Shared Reading Experiences*



Contrary to this assessment, however, the majority of participants do not attribute their preparedness for these conversations to formal education alone, but rather to a combination of formal education and workplace training (see Figure 9). Survey responses show that 84.6% (n=22) of participating early childhood educators do have access to training courses about anti-racist education, anti-bias education, and critical literacy through their workplace, with anti-bias education being the most common (see Figure 10). These results suggest the possibility that neither formal educational attainment nor workplace training alone can provide the guidance and instruction necessary to support educators in the ongoing work towards growing increasingly comfortable acknowledging and discussing race and racism with their young students.

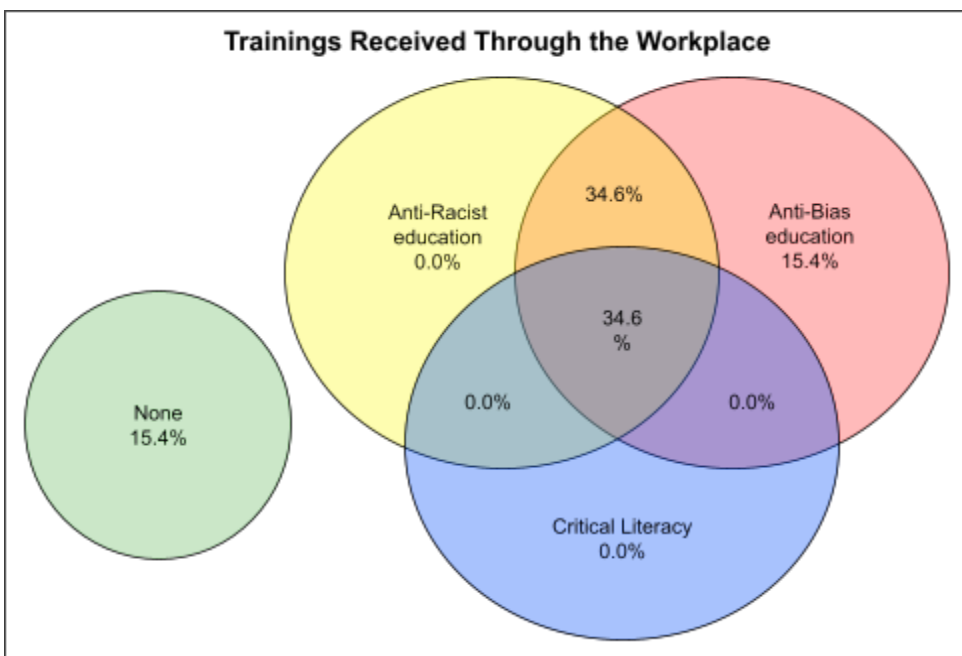
**Figure 9**

*To What Do You Attribute Your Preparedness for Engaging in Conversations About Race?*



**Figure 10.**

*Trainings Received Through the Workplace*





## **Interview Results**

Following the survey closure, I determined that I had reached a subset of educators whose high educational attainment and extensive work experience was greater than that of the Minnesota early childhood workforce as a whole. Furthermore, the Likert scaled responses suggest that this group does not subscribe to colorblind ideology, has been exposed to anti-bias and anti-racist education approaches, and generally understands the importance and appropriateness of acknowledging topics related to race in the classroom. For this reason, the interviews discussed here focus on exploring the key factors that might explain how this group of educators arrived at their current attitudes and opinions, with the goal of uncovering a potential means for other educators to embark on their own journey of this nature.

Virtual interviews were conducted with three educators who work in different early childhood settings in Minnesota. The first interviewee (IA) has a graduate degree, has worked in early childhood education for five years, and is employed at a licensed child care center in the Twin Cities Metro. The second interviewee (IB) has a Bachelor's degree, 13 years of experience in early childhood education, and works in childcare programs within a public school district in Lake County, MN. The third interviewee (IC) is currently pursuing a graduate degree, has 15 years of early childhood education experience, and most recently worked in child care programs within Minneapolis Parks and Recreation. All three interviewees were raised in largely White communities and identify as White themselves. All three also express a deeply held belief in the importance of acknowledging both racial diversity and racial injustice in their early childhood classrooms and possess a range of abilities in doing so.



This analysis of the interviews first explores these teachers' experiences and ability related to engaging young students in multicultural children's books. It then seeks to identify common themes that may point to reasons why they are ahead of their peers in terms of their understanding of the importance of discussing race and racism during shared reading experiences, and possibly their ability to do so. An understanding of why some teachers may already feel prepared to engage in conversations related to race during shared reading experiences will allow me to offer better informed recommendations for creating a pathway towards a better prepared workforce as a whole. The three main themes I identified in the interview participants' responses are shortcomings in Minnesota's existing early childhood education training offerings, experiences that force one to confront their own racial identity, and deep self-reflection. The following analysis uses these themes as an organizational framework for discussing participants' experiences.

### ***Experiences with Multicultural Texts***

When asked to recall a time when they were confronted with a child's question or comment about race during shared reading experiences, IA and IB reflected on past situations in which they did not feel confident in their responses. Their sentiments were reflected in refrains of "I wish I would have [...]" and "I didn't have an answer." IA also shared the tendency for their own biases to seep into their responses, sometimes assuming that a child may be expressing a bias or prejudice when, in fact, they are not. Since the experiences these two interviewees recall, both have continued to develop their ability to respond to student questions and comments related to race during shared reading experiences and beyond.

IA described their current approach to responding to tough questions during read-aloud experiences in the classroom. IA explains that they come to these conversations being “brutally honest” about what they do not know. They are willing to say “I will do some research and get back to you”, and then do exactly that, if they are not immediately able to give an honest and appropriate answer. IA acknowledges that occasionally questions related to race or other highly controversial topics come up that they feel are not appropriate for classroom discussion. Even in these cases, instead of dismissing the question, IA validates its value and then honestly and clearly explains to their students that while this important topic does impact them, it is one that their parents will decide how and when to teach them about.

IC gave a passionate and highly informed explanation of why they encourage frank and honest conversations when any potentially controversial topics arise in class, as well as the way they communicate to parents. They describe their understanding of the current research pertaining to child development and psychology, their belief that the colorblind mindset is “so vastly outdated”, calling to mind the discussion of bias development and educator attitudes in Chapter Two of this work. In the approach that IC presented, a willingness to confront topics related to race and racial injustice when they arise applies both to shared reading experiences and elsewhere in the classroom.

In their reflections on their ability to select quality multicultural picture books for their classrooms, all three educators expressed general confidence, their own thoughtful considerations for evaluating the quality of books, and varying degrees of excitement about growing their own libraries. IB, however, did reveal a piece of their internal monologue during book shopping which reflects the discomfort that is common among

early childhood educators. They disclosed that they may page through a book and think to themselves, “I don’t know how to handle the conversations that could come from this, so I’m going to skip that one.” Located in a small town in northern Minnesota, IB also expressed the challenge of selecting books without having an opportunity to read them in their entirety prior to purchasing.

IA and IC both have the particular benefit of having personal and professional connections to children’s librarians and racially diverse local authors who graciously offer their knowledge and expertise. These educators both acknowledged that they occasionally require guidance when selecting authentic multicultural children’s books for their classrooms and they rely on these valuable connections to help inform their decisions. As they continue to strengthen their ability to critically evaluate and teach multicultural texts, these interview participants have found that experts from the field have meaningful and valuable information to share.

### ***Shortcomings in Minnesota’s Early Childhood Professional Development Courses***

At the time of the interviews, these educators had a relatively strong foundational understanding of social justice teaching approaches and all were honing their ability to engage in conversations about race and racism during shared reading experiences, as discussed above. Next I investigate the factors they identify as impactful in their journey from reactive and unsure to informed with a developing skill set. None of the three educators interviewed attributed their understanding nor ability to professional development training courses specifically intended for early childhood educators in Minnesota.

Regarding training associated with their workplace, IA went so far as to say, “From what work has given me... nothing.” IB referred to Develop-approved training courses (Develop is Minnesota’s quality improvement and registry tool that supports and maintains professional development among early childhood and school-age care and education providers). IB shared their experience having taken, “some Develop courses that were fine, not spectacular, *meh*.” IC discussed a meaningful professional development training that was not an early childhood-specific course, but rather presented by Minneapolis Public Schools and intended for elementary and secondary educators. IA pointed out that there is “not a lot of training that is specifically for early education because it is seen or deemed not appropriate for the age we teach.” IA’s analysis here evokes the persistent limiting ideologies discussed in Chapter Two of this work. Perhaps the opinion that race topics are too complex for young children inhibits the development of high-quality professional training opportunities pertaining to anti-bias, anti-racism, and critical literacy in early childhood.

The overall opinion of these three educators was that early childhood-specific professional development training offered through child care providers or registered through Develop do not provide adequately impactful learning opportunities to prepare early childhood educators to engage in conversations related to race during shared reading experiences. It is worth noting that these individual accounts differ from the survey results which found that 19.2% (n=5) of respondents did attribute their preparedness to engage in conversations about race during shared reading experiences to workplace training alone. While, in the interviewees’ experiences, early childhood education-specific professional development courses did not have the impact one might

expect, the following two themes examine factors that did play a role in their understanding of the importance of discussing race with young children as well as their ability to do so.

### ***Forced Confrontation of One's Racial Identity and Biases***

When discussing other factors that may have impacted their ability to have meaningful conversations with children about topics related to race, all three educators that I interviewed reflected on situations in which they were forced to confront their own Whiteness and the biases that come with it. IB explained that their own experiences inform the way they respond to children's questions and comments about race more than any reading they have done or professional development courses they have taken. They go on to express their belief that, "real life experiences are more impactful."

IA recalled an experience from their own childhood in which a group of children asked them, a White child with a darker skin tone and curly hair, "Are you White or Black?" IA recalls noticing the group's demeanor immediately change and become more at ease when they responded that they were White. IA also recalled noticing the single Black child in the group become visibly defeated as he registered the question and then ascertained the racist implications of his friends' reactions.

Later, when IA sought to unpack their experience with friends and family members, they were dismissed, being told "not to worry about it; 'you're White'." In this early formative experience, this educator describes being introduced not only to the uncomfortable reality of what it means to be White, but also the notion that race is not to be spoken about. This experience played a key role in the development of this educator's racial identity and continues to be an event to which they return for self-reflection.

Furthermore, today it is one factor that informs the way in which they approach the topic of race in their classroom.

IB recalled their experience as a White American living and teaching in South Korea. Having been raised in a small, White, homogeneous community in northern Minnesota, IB's time spent teaching in South Korea marked their first experience being in the racial minority. There they recall being on the receiving end of uncomfortable stares, stereotypes, and assumptions from locals. They described a time when they were refused service at a restaurant because the server wrongly assumed they neither spoke nor read Korean.

Though these experiences cannot be directly compared to those of people of color in America, they nevertheless left a meaningful impression on IB. They described their experience in South Korea as being the “cake-topper I needed” to feel like a more “well-balanced and well-rounded person.” The privilege of being able to perceive being a minority as a learning experience that one can simply step into and out of is worth examining, but falls outside of the scope of this work. Still, this educator cited these as formative experiences that have impacted not only the development of their own racial identity, but that also continue to inform the way they respond to children's comments about race in the classroom.

IC also described a “hardcore moment” in which they were forced to confront their Whiteness. Their experience took place during a professional development training designed for elementary school educators in which the facilitator, immediately before releasing the group for a lunch break, gestured to the crowd of mostly White people and announced, “And if you are White, you are racist.” IC described their own reaction as

being “offended, hurt, annoyed, and indignant.” They acknowledged that it took them a couple of years to unpack the conversation they later had with that training facilitator. As was the case with IA and IB, this formative moment in race identity development is one that this educator points to as key in informing their approach to discussing race in their early childhood classroom.

The science of race bias development, examined in depth in Chapter Two, can explain why these moments of forced confrontation of one’s own racial development were so impactful for these educators. Since preschool, they, like all people, have been attuned to and influenced by expressions of bias in the world around them (Waxman, 2021). Since then they have been internalizing social category labels, bias and representation in media, and biases communicated both overtly and inadvertently by family and community members (Gilliam et al., 2016; Perszyk et al., 2018; Schubert Center for Child Studies, 2014). Though malleable, these biases grow increasingly rigid the longer they are held (Perszyk et al., 2018; Waxman, 2021). In many cases, being knocked off our axis by an uncomfortable experience, such as the ones these interview subjects describe, may be a necessary first step in examining and unlearning our own deeply rooted biases.

Furthermore, experts point to intentional efforts to unlearn biases as imperative to elevating the use of more just and equitable practices in schools (Nietzel, 2018). Such efforts may need to include opportunities for educators to confront their own racial identity and racial biases in visceral and meaningful ways. IB, recognizing the impact of their own experiences in South Korea, ponders, “How significant would it be for everyone to experience something like that?” If more early childhood educators found

themselves in similarly uncomfortable situations as the ones that these interview subjects describe, then more educators may have a better developed sense of their own racial identity, a more honest understanding of the way their biases impact their practices, and may also be better prepared to have meaningful conversations about race during shared reading experiences in their classrooms.

### ***Self-Reflection***

As they described these instances of forced confrontation of their racial identity and biases, all three interview subjects demonstrated extensive, thoughtful self-reflection. Such experiences alone do not necessarily make the individual better prepared to engage in conversations about race when they arise during shared reading experiences in their early childhood classroom. Only when paired with intentional self-reflection can these formative experiences have their full impact on one's educational approach and teaching practices.

The interview subjects, all having been raised in communities dominated by mainstream White culture, have performed dedicated work exploring their own Whiteness and the way in which their racial identity impacts not only their practice, but the way they move through the world. IA reflected on generations of learned racism and an unwillingness to acknowledge and discuss race in their family. "I was so scared to talk about race for so long, and I wanted to understand why I was scared of race, why this was such a topic that we didn't talk about [...]this unspoken rule of where I grew up and no one was willing to talk about it," explains IA. It was with a deep sense of urgency that IA expressed their resistance to perpetuating this fear of race in their students..



Having had the opportunity to leave and later return to their hometown, IB reflected on the change this created in themselves. They recalled how limited their early experiences were, having had a single Black classmate for most of their childhood. IB went on to reflect on the degree of growth in forming and understanding their racial identity, biases, and approach to diversity they have seen in themselves since spending time away from their small town. IB's ability to reflect on the impact of their own experiences, they explained, puts them in a better position to support that same type of growth in their students and families. Furthermore, their self-reflection has allowed them to recognize their role as "an ally for diverse families that move into the area."

In their self-reflection, IC exhibited a distinct ability to critically examine their own experiences, interactions, and relationships, and biases as they apply to race and racial injustice, particularly when challenged by individuals different from themselves. They recalled the discomfort and shame they have felt after realizing the ways in which their biases manifest in their actions. After a particular conversation with a family member who identifies as a member of a historically underrepresented group led to this type of self-reflection, IC said, "my heart sunk so far to the bottom of my feet." IC's willingness to understand challenging conversations as an invitation to dive into self-reflection allowed them to uncover a meaningful truth that now informs their practice: "my actions could so quietly harm my students."

One of the fundamental aspects of anti-bias education, as discussed in Chapter Two of this work, is that the approach is to be considered an ongoing process in which the educator is a reflective learner. As such, anti-bias education is a perpetual cycle of experience and observation, critical reflection, and discovery of new ways to think and

act (Beneke et al., 2019; Urbani et al., 2022). Likewise, anti-racist education also requires educators to engage in dedicated self-reflection. In anti-racist education, educators must be willing to confront the strong emotional response that comes with examining the presence of race and racism in their own lives and in their students' lives (Husband, 2011).

In the synthesis of anti-bias and anti-racist education presented in Chapter Two, I assert that without critical self-reflection no real change can be made in the classroom or beyond. The three educators interviewed here have attained at least an undergraduate degree, some have been able to access quality professional development training, though not early childhood education specific, and all can point to at least one formative moment which placed their Whiteness directly and somewhat uncomfortably in front of them. Perhaps most importantly, all three engage in the crucial self-reflection process, demonstrate a relatively strong understanding of the importance of discussing race and racial injustice during shared reading experiences, and now express an ability to do so with relative confidence.

### **Summary**

The data collected from this survey represents a group of early childhood educators in Minnesota who have attained a higher level of education and experience in this field than is typical among their peers. Furthermore, survey respondents expressed an understanding of the social justice-oriented educational approaches discussed in this work to a higher degree than is the norm. Most surprisingly, they also rate themselves both comfortable and able to engage in conversations about race and racial injustice during shared reading experiences.

Based on these findings from initial data collection, I subsequently determined the focus of secondary data collection to be identifying factors that impact educator preparedness for engaging in conversations about race during shared reading experiences. All three interview subjects addressed a lack of quality training courses on anti-bias education, anti-racist education, or critical literacy as they relate to early childhood education. However, the three educators all point to specific, uncomfortable, formative moments that forced them to examine their own racial identity. Perhaps most significant is the ability of all three to engage in critical self-reflection about these experiences and their own biases.

Though small, the quantitative data collected in this study determines that highly educated and experienced early childhood educators in Minnesota consider themselves well prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students. The qualitative data suggests that professional development training courses are not particularly impactful to this end, but events that force one to confront their racial identity and dedicated self-reflection may be key factors. While this participant group likely does not accurately represent the greater early childhood workforce in Minnesota, it does offer insight into potential pathways towards a better prepared workforce as a whole. The following chapter provides a synthesis of this study's key findings as a whole, and contextualizes them within the framework of the existing literature.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

Extensive existing research allows early childhood specialists a more robust understanding of the way race bias develops in young children, the impact it has in early childhood education, and the importance of a social justice-oriented approach to early learning. This study builds upon this existing research and centers shared reading experiences of multicultural children's literature as a means of putting such educational approaches into practice. The extent to which read-alouds and high quality, authentic, and representative multicultural texts can be used effectively is determined by the educator's ability to do so. Therefore, this work set out to determine *to what degree early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students.*

Furthermore, this work was built upon the foundational understanding that young children begin developing bias as early as infancy and that addressing race diversity and racial injustice is both necessary and appropriate in early childhood learning environments. It is designed to serve as a call to elevate this field by promoting the highest quality, most effective, equitable teaching practices and challenging early childhood educators to recognize the social implications of our work.

The final chapter of this work will present a concise overview of the major learnings gained from the survey and interview. It will situate these learnings within the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and return to some key works that became particularly relevant to this study. This discussion will be followed by an

examination of the implications of this study as well as its limitations. Finally, informed by the full context of this work and the studies that came before it, I will make recommendations for future extensions of this study and offer suggestions for how the results can be used.

### **Situating Major Learnings in Existing Literature**

As described in Chapter Three, this study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design for data collection. This discussion of the key findings will consider both quantitative (a Google Forms survey) and qualitative (virtual one-on-one interviews) phases of data collection. The quantitative findings directly respond to the question *To what degree do early childhood educators in Minnesota feel prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students?* while the qualitative findings attempt to uncover potential explanations for the survey findings.

#### ***Quantitative Findings: Preparedness of Minnesota's Early Childhood Educators***

Based on the literature reviewed at length in Chapter Two, the key finding of initial data collection, a Google Forms survey, is unexpected. Survey responses show that the early childhood educators from Minnesota who responded to this survey have a better understanding of the social justice-oriented teaching approaches examined in this work than expected. Specifically, they are more inclined to believe that addressing the concepts of privilege, power, and racism in early childhood classrooms is both important and appropriate. Overall, they report having an understanding of anti-bias education, anti-racist education, and critical literacy and feeling confident in critically evaluating the quality of the multicultural picture books when building their classroom libraries. Ultimately the early childhood educators who participated in this study do feel generally

well-prepared to engage in discussions of race during shared reading experiences with their students.

A critical examination of the study, however, suggests that these results cannot be extrapolated to anticipate any broad generalizations about Minnesota's early childhood educators as a whole, as the study participants represent a specific subset of highly educated and experienced teachers. However, while these findings do not apply to all early childhood educators in Minnesota, the results of this study may begin to suggest that those who have achieved at least a bachelor's degree and who have accumulated considerable experience working in the field, similar to study participants, may be prepared to engage in discussions of race with their young students. Thus, formal education and work experience may play important roles in developing teachers' ability to do so.

Furthermore, in evaluating formal education and work experience, the data indicates that formal educational attainment was a slightly greater indicator of an educators' perceived ability to discuss race with their students. This finding points to the particular significance of formal education. This conclusion, however, contradicts the majority of existing research and literature on attitudes towards discussing race in early childhood classrooms and educators' confidence and ability to do so, much of which identifies challenges within teacher education programs.

The literature reviewed in the Chapter Two section titled Early Childhood Educators' Attitudes Towards Race Topics in the Classroom is largely based on studies of preservice teachers in college or graduate level education courses. The existing literature concludes that colorblindness, the notion that race topics are too complex or

inappropriate for young children, and general discomfort continue to present significant obstacles to the prevalence of effective anti-bias and anti-racist education practices (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Boutte et al., 2011; Buchanan, 2015; Choi, 2008). Contrary to the findings in from this survey, which identify formal higher education as the primary factor in one's perceived ability to discuss race with young children, the reality is that even within college programs that specifically aim to advance social justice-oriented teaching approaches, discussing race and racial injustice during shared reading experiences presents itself as a perennial challenge to preservice teachers (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020).

### ***Qualitative Findings: Contributing Factors to Educator Preparedness***

Another key finding, informed by interviews with three of Minnesota's early childhood educators, is the consensus that the current offerings for professional anti-bias or anti-racist training courses with an early childhood focus are not adequate to catalyze meaningful change in attitude or practice for early childhood educators. Though no explicit reason for this shortcoming is determined in this work, the fact that interviewees have accessed quality training courses of this nature designed for elementary or secondary educators may be reflective of the persistent attitudes of skepticism and doubt regarding the appropriateness of discussing race with young children that have been discussed at length within this work.

Studies by Beneke and Cheatham (2020), Boutte et al. (2011), Buchannan (2015), and Husband (2011) examine the prevailing perspective among early childhood educators that young children are not yet old enough to engage in discussions of race. Many educators in these studies felt that topics relating to race and racism are too complex,

inappropriate, and thus do not belong in early childhood classrooms. These existing studies suggest that teachers in early childhood environments are uncomfortable engaging in these topics with their students as a result of the misconception that topics of race are too advanced for young children. Here I offer that another result of this persistent, harmful misconception is inadequate opportunities for educators to access quality training courses on anti-bias education, anti-racist education, or critical literacy in early childhood.

Finally, this work uncovers the impact and necessity of critical self-reflection on one's own biases, understandings, and experiences that form one's racial identity. The three one-on-one interviews with early childhood educators in this study gave practical context for this theoretical principle which is key to both the anti-bias and anti-racist pedagogical approaches.

In their dissections of anti-bias education, Beneke et al. (2019) and Urbani et al. (2022) assert that developing ones' critical consciousness is crucial for teachers to begin to acknowledge and understand the way their own biases perpetuate or disrupt persistent inequities in education. Likewise, in an anti-racist approach, not only is self-reflective work necessary for putting theory into practice, but educators are also called to explicitly acknowledge Whiteness and examine the way it relates to them (Escayg, 2019). For the White educators interviewed in this study, engaging in critical self-reflection and spending time dedicated to developing their own racial identity have been imperative to their growing ability to acknowledge Whiteness and the way racism shows up in early childhood education.



## **Implications**

The major learnings discussed here imply that the relatively highly educated and experienced educator participants in this study have tapped into something impactful that has propelled them in their journey towards being more critically conscious educators who confidently engage in conversations related to race and racism during shared reading experiences. Furthermore, an interpretation of these findings implies that formal education may have been that imperative factor for many educators. However, the assumption that higher formal education is the definitive measure of teacher preparedness as it pertains to discussing race and racial injustice in their early childhood classrooms is one worth examining on its own.

Applying an anti-racist education lens requires us to examine the ways in which educational ideologies, principles, and practices are rooted in and perpetuate racial injustices in our society (Husband, 2011). To simply recommend higher education as the preferred pathway for educators to hone their ability to effectively address race and racism in their classrooms using a social justice-oriented pedagogical approach fails to acknowledge the broad, embedded racial inequities that exist in our educational systems.

These inequities, which begin in early childhood and continue through higher education, include but are not limited to physical and financial barriers to access, exclusionary policies, spending discrepancies, the nature of and culture around standardized testing, and admissions practices. Furthermore, the way in which the American education system understands gaps in performance and achievement perpetuates a deficit perspective and a culture of poverty perspective and centers dominant White, Eurocentric cultural values (Kurchiko, 2019).

Perhaps the most salient application of the notion of performance gaps in early childhood education is Hart and Risley's seminal study revealing the 30 million word gap, first published in 1992. Their research broadly found that children in families of higher socioeconomic status typically hear roughly 30 million more words by the age of three than their counterparts whose families receive welfare (Hart & Risley, 2003). This study is frequently cited and informs many mainstream approaches to early childhood education, literacy education, and policy discussions. In a critique of the word gap, Kurchiko (2019) argues that favoring the linguistic practices of the privileged, dominant group fails to acknowledge and respect the value of the varied linguistic practices of all communities.

Though a full interrogation of the flaws which lie at the nexus of race, class, and our education system requires its own work, this tremendously brief critique serves to, at least, acknowledge the existence of racial inequity in education. Thus, to imply that formal higher education is necessary for early childhood educators' ability to effectively address race and racism during shared reading experiences is itself problematic and, by nature, excludes whole groups of potential educators. Formal education, a system that largely exists within, is reflective of, and perpetuates the racial inequities in our society, cannot be relied upon alone to disrupt those same harmful norms. The ongoing challenge will be to apply social justice-oriented teaching approaches to carefully unwind existing inequities while avoiding creating new barriers to equality.

Along with implying the impact of formal education, the results of this study also identified a significant gap in Minnesota's early childhood education-specific professional development training opportunities related to anti-bias education, anti-racist

education, and critical literacy. All three interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with either the Develop course offerings or the courses themselves. Rather than a move to increase formal education requirements for early childhood educators, a dedicated effort to address this existing gap in effective training opportunities for the early childhood workforce may be a more equitable and effective method of ensuring the preparedness of all educators in the field to discuss race and racial injustice during shared reading experiences.

An interpretation of interview analysis implies that including certain components in training courses may be significant in heightening their success. Based on key learnings from the interviews, providing basic context for bias development in young children, presenting the impact of bias in early childhood education, and building a foundational understanding of anti-bias, anti-racist, and critical literacy approaches to early childhood education will be only one piece of effective, high quality training courses. Results from this study imply that courses will also benefit from challenging educators to confront their race identity and develop their critical consciousness by providing ample, dedicated time for self-reflection. An additional component may include input from experts, such as librarians and racially diverse authors. Further research to this end is recommended in a later subsection.

### **Limitations**

The most noteworthy limitation of this study is its limited sample. At 26 respondents, the survey reached only a fraction of the educators I had hoped and anticipated. Not only does this study have fewer participants than expected, it fails to reach a representative sample of early childhood educators in Minnesota. The participants

are more highly educated and have more robust work experience than the early childhood workforce as a whole. Thus, extrapolating the results of the study to form the conclusion that Minnesota's early childhood educators across the board do consider themselves to be well-prepared to engage in conversations of race and racism during shared reading experiences lacks both strength and accuracy.

The small sample size of survey respondents also limited my pool of potential interviewees. Only able to conduct three interviews, I had the opportunity to dive deeper into this investigation with fewer individuals than I had hoped. Approaching this work with a constructivist lens, hearing and elevating more voices and more varied experiences from Minnesota's early childhood educators would have strengthened the research. Additionally, as a result of the initial learnings gleaned from the survey, the nature of my interview questions shifted away from a measure of their ability to engage in conversations of race and racism during shared reading experiences, as the research question asks, and towards an evaluation of contributing factors in their ability to do so.

Factors that may have contributed to the limited sample size include the timing and nature of the study. As described in chapters three and four of this work, the survey was open in Google Forms during May and June, months that are exceptionally busy for many educators who are wrapping up their school year and may also be preparing for summer programming. Additionally, by nature, this study requires participants to consider race and racial injustice, topics that may cause discomfort. Considering these topics as they relate to young children can make these already controversial topics even more so. It is possible that some potential participants elected to opt out of participating due to a disinterest in engaging in this particular topic.

Besides sample size, this work is limited in its scope due to its focus on shared reading experiences. Effective application of both anti-bias and anti-racist education will extend beyond literacy experiences and both are designed to impact one's whole approach to teaching, including the environment, the materials, the lessons, and family communication and engagement. To that end, my interview subjects had more experiences with broaching topics of race in their early childhood classrooms to share, but the discussion in this paper is limited largely to those relating to literacy and reading experiences.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The nature of this work is incredibly valuable in defending the necessity of addressing topics related to race in early childhood learning environments. Children begin developing biases in infancy; those biases will be impacted by the expressions of bias from the adults around them and will continue to impact the way they interact with the world unless we teach them to challenge their biases from a young age. Quality multicultural children's literature can be a powerful tool to that end, if educators know how to teach them. This work finds that many early childhood educators in Minnesota who have achieved a college degree and have worked in the field for many years do feel prepared to engage in conversations related to race during shared reading experiences - a promising, albeit limited, conclusion.

My first recommendation is to extend the data collection portion of this research in order to achieve a greater breadth of survey responses and perform more interviews. This will be necessary to gain a broader sense of the attitudes held by educators and more accurately identify and deeply examine possible discrepancies between the quantitative

and qualitative data. Furthermore, extending this work to reach a much larger sample of Minnesota's early childhood educators will yield far greater generalizations and conclusions. As it stands, due to having reached such a small, specific sample, it is not possible to draw accurate conclusions and make broad statements about the early childhood workforce in Minnesota as a whole. In order to better understand how prepared Minnesota's early childhood educators really are as it relates to discussing race during shared reading experiences, this work will rely upon hearing more diverse voices.

Next, I recommend that the findings be applied using an anti-racist lens that challenges the assumption of the necessity of higher education. All educators, including those who have not or are not able to access postsecondary education, need high-quality, meaningful courses to grow increasingly capable and confident when engaging in conversations related to race during shared reading experiences in their classrooms, thus a focus on addressing the gap in professional development offerings is recommended.

In order to achieve this, I believe experts must better understand what makes certain professional development training opportunities more effective and impactful than others. As revealed by the voices in this study, meaningful personal experiences and self-reflection will be imperative components in any effective training course related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. An effort to gain a more robust understanding of high-quality and impactful training courses may also include critical evaluation of existing courses of this nature paired with analysis of feedback surveys and more interviews with early childhood educators who have taken such courses.

Once early childhood professionals in Minnesota are able to design and offer high quality, effective, early childhood specific training courses that give educators the

knowledge and tools to engage in critical literacy practices in their classrooms, I believe they should be incorporated into the existing framework of required training governed by Minnesota's Department of Human Services. All early childhood educators and childcare providers must be held accountable in this domain. Failing to apply these learnings in a way that pushes forward all educators in this field, and instead leaves them to rely on costly college and university coursework to hone these skills and understandings, will further perpetuate the existing inequities in education and leave our children less prepared to be agents of justice in our diverse world.

### **Summary**

Just as I deserved not only to see myself reflected in the characters of my favorite books, but also to have teachers who taught me to question where the Korean-American adoptees were in those books, so do today's children. They should see themselves and their families on their classroom bookshelves and in the texts selected as read-alouds, and be able to wonder and learn about the different people they see in those books and the world around them. Furthermore, they should be taught the tools to identify and disrupt injustice when they encounter it. It is incumbent upon early childhood educators to give young children the foundation for these skills.

As our understanding of bias development in young children grows increasingly robust, and as the inequities in our world are reflected in education and schools as much as ever, it is time for Minnesota to elevate its standards for early childhood educators. We - educators, providers, families, and governing bodies - must collectively agree that high-quality early childhood education and a sustainable, equitable early childhood care and

education system cannot be achieved without greater social justice-oriented approaches to teaching and learning.

When all of Minnesota's early childhood educators can better access high-quality, early childhood education-specific trainings that challenge them to engage in critical self-reflection of their own experiences, biases, and racial identity, then they can begin the foundational first step towards understanding anti-bias and anti-racist education and putting critical literacy into practice. All children, in every community, deserve educators who understand the necessity of this work and who apply it effectively in the classroom.



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## APPENDIX A: Survey

1. I have been informed of this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits/risks, and agree to participate in this study and understand that the information provided in this survey will be used for academic purposes and that my name and identity will not be disclosed in the written report.
2. Education
  - a. High school
  - b. Some college
  - c. Associate's Degree
  - d. Bachelor's Degree
  - e. Graduate Degree
3. Teaching credential
  - a. None
  - b. Child Development Associate credential (CDA)
  - c. Teaching license
4. Years of early childhood teaching experience
5. Current type of place of employment (licensed child care center, family, friend, and neighbor care, Pre-K within a public elementary school, etc.)
6. Average age of students
7. On average, how frequently do read-aloud experiences occur in your classroom?
  - a. More than once per day
  - b. Daily
  - c. Multiple times per week
  - d. Weekly
  - e. Less than once per week
8. I feel it is important to acknowledge racial diversity in early childhood classrooms.
 

Disagree						Agree
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9. I feel it is *important* to broach the concepts of privilege, power, and racism in early childhood classrooms.
 

Disagree						Agree
----------	--	--	--	--	--	-------
10. I feel it is *appropriate* to broach the concepts of privilege, power, and racism in early childhood classrooms.
 

Disagree						Agree
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11. I have an understanding of *anti-bias* curriculum and educational approach.  
 \* The anti-bias approach centers diversity and equity goals in early childhood settings. Its goal is to foster positive social identities while preventing harm caused by stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.
 

Disagree						Agree
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12. I have an understanding of *anti-racist* curriculum and educational approach.

\* An anti-racist approach centers the institutional nature of racism and moves beyond individual prejudices and biases. It also challenges the Eurocentric theories which inform our understanding of early childhood education as a whole.

Disagree					Agree
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13. I have an understanding of critical literacy as it applies to early childhood education.

Disagree					Agree
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14. I know how to critically evaluate the quality of multicultural picture books when selecting books to include in my classroom.

Disagree					Agree
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15. I feel confident engaging in discussions about race with my students when they arise during shared reading experiences.

Disagree					Agree
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16. I know how to give honest and appropriate responses to children's questions and comments about racial injustice during shared reading experiences.

Disagree					Agree
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17. Parent opinions are a barrier to my ability and/or willingness to discuss race and/or racism openly in my classroom.

Disagree					Agree
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18. I have received training on these topics for my job (check all that apply).

- a. Anti-bias education
- b. Anti-racist education
- c. Critical literacy
- d. None
- e. Other

19. The training I have received for this job has prepared me to engage in conversations of this nature.

Disagree					Agree
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20. I would find training on these topics to be helpful in improving my teaching.

Disagree					Agree
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21. To what do you attribute your preparedness for engaging with conversations of this nature?

- a. Formal education
- b. Workplace training
- c. A combination of formal education and workplace training
- d. I do not feel adequately prepared for these conversations



22. Please share your contact information if you are willing to participate in a 30-45 minute interview for this study. Your contact information will never be shared with anyone other than Julie, the researcher, and will not be used in the final written paper.

## APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

1. Explain your understanding of why acknowledging race and racial diversity is important in early childhood education classrooms.
2. Do you think we should or should not go past superficial diversity efforts and engage in more critical topics, such as power, privilege, and racism in early childhood classrooms? Why or why not?
3. Explain your general understanding of social justice approaches to early childhood education, such as anti-bias or anti-racist approaches.
4. Are you able to describe a time when you found yourself faced with a student's question or comment about race? Is there anything you wish you had known or done differently?
5. Explain how confident you feel in your ability to select quality multicultural picture books for your classroom.
6. Explain how you would respond if a student commented on race or racial injustice during a read-aloud. How much information would you feel comfortable giving? How would you know how to respond? What knowledge or past experiences inform your response?
7. Explain the extent of the training or education you have had that has contributed to your ability to have meaningful conversations with children about topics related to race- and specifically during read alouds/literacy teaching. Do more work trainings come to mind or courses through your own education?
8. Explain other factors that you think may have impacted your ability to have meaningful conversations with children about topics related to race, especially as they arise during read-alouds. Location, demographics, families' religion, etc?
9. If this is part of your teaching practice that you value and would like to improve upon, what sort of things do you feel would be helpful in doing so?