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# South Carolina Preschool Teachers' Perceptions And Experiences Implementing Critical Literacy In The Preschool Classroom

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SOUTH CAROLINA PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND  
EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE PRESCHOOL  
CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

Critical literacy situated within a critical theoretical and pedagogical paradigm focuses specifically on exploring the sociopolitical implications of texts and challenging information rather than taking it at face value. The present study constitutes a case study that describes the perceptions and experiences of seven preschool teachers who employ critical literacy in their early childhood classroom and how their pedagogy fits within the existing themes seen in the early childhood literature. Specifically, this case study is an instrumental collective study, consisting of in-depth interviews. Through qualitative analysis of these interviews a variety of specific pedagogical methods for implementing critical literacy are explored. These include critical questioning: (including questions based on children's experiences as culturally relevant pedagogy, bibliotherapy, and the children's interests/questions), critical literacy to explore multiple perspectives (such as within: common children's stories/fairytales, social justice/diversity books, and historical/non-fiction texts), and taking direct social action. Additionally, the participant's responses regarding other methods of teaching for social justice, the developmental appropriateness of various social justice topics, and the challenges of implementing critical pedagogy with young children are also described and analyzed. Additionally, this research provides insight as to how critical literacy can be progressivist/constructivist based through the role of play and extension activities.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

Within K-12 education in the United States in 2018, the dominant philosophy of schooling continues to remain theoretically essentialist, placing the bulk of emphasis on accountability mandates for teachers and students, standardized tests, and science, technology, engineering & mathematics (STEM). Essentialism (Bagley, 1941) is grounded in the idea that curriculum should be centered on the fundamentals such as Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic and should prepare students for the workplace. Today this also includes Science, American History, and Geography. Mastery of these essential skills is often promoted through memorization of facts.

Social reconstructionists such as Rugg (1929) and Counts (1934) sought to construct curriculum and pedagogy around issues of social justice and to enable students to examine social problems such as racism, sexism, poverty, and worker exploitation, in American society. Social reconstructionist educators argue that the root of the present focus on standardized curriculum, instruction, and testing in K-12 public schooling is due to essentialism (Spring, 2015). On the other hand, Counts (1938) argued that the school should be involved in educating students about racial and class discrimination, poverty and unemployment issues. The social issues today are similar, although the list is even more expansive and issues such as computers and technology; political oppression and war; environmental pollution; disease; world hunger; and depletion of the earth's resources are explored as well (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004).

In addition to criticizing “teaching to the test,” critical educational theorists have highlighted many of the other reasons why teachers may not employ critical pedagogy or social justice related curricula. These reasons include factors such as fear generated within the hierarchical confines of the school institution (Apple, 2013; Giroux 1978; 1984; 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren 1989; 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995). Multicultural education scholars also argue that the lack of pre-service teacher preparation does not prepare white female middle class teachers to teach children of color or white children about controversial or multicultural topics (Banks, 2008; Lewis-Charp, 2003; Nieto, 2010). Additionally, many educators steer away from social justice curricula to avoid opposition from other staff and parents (Lewis-Charp, 2003). Educators who embrace a social reconstructionist philosophy strive to find successful pedagogy and curricula that can be utilized to teach for social justice (McLaren, 2007).

Social reconstructionists or critical education theorists (i.e. Freire, 1970; Apple, 2013; Giroux 1978; 1984; 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren 1989; 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995) have continued to build upon the body of knowledge of Counts (1934) and Rugg (1929) further developing the field of critical pedagogy. Through critical pedagogy, educators seek to challenge the unfair existing sociopolitical factors that govern their world and nation while creating a language of hope, resistance, and possibility through theory, practice, reflection, and action (Freire, 1970; Giroux 1978; 1984; 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren 1989; 2005; 2011; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Quantz 1992).

One type of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, is frequently cited throughout the educational literature as a viable way to teach students about social justice issues (Comber, 1994; 2003, 2015; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997; 1999; Shor, 1999). Critical Literacy has many definitions. According to Luke & Freebody, (1997), “The term critical literacy has come to refer to such a wide range of educational philosophies and curriculum interventions that their family resemblances and shared characteristics would be hard to pick” (p.1.) However, the definition I am drawing from is grounded in the idea that students should learn simultaneously how to ‘read’ texts as they learn to question text and images for unfair and harmful representation and ideas (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As Freire and Macedo (1987) explain we must be able to read both the “word and the world.” This is supported by Multicultural educators (i.e. Ladson-Billings, 1992, Nieto, 1994, Banks, 2008) who expound on the fact that literacy development happens in social, historical, and political contexts and needs to include a re-framing of how knowledge and text is constructed.

One of the most common definitions of Critical Literacy includes the act of exploring the sociopolitical implications of texts (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Shor, 1999). This dissertation focuses on critical literacy specifically through the exploration of text and pictures in children’s books. In this sense, critical literacy encourages students to explore multiple viewpoints through different texts and question the sociopolitical implication of texts and pictures rather than taking everything they read at face value (Comber, 1994; 2003, 2015; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke & Freebody, 1997; 1999; Shor, 1999). Therefore students should be able to

decipher and interrogate what they read and relate this to larger themes within their everyday lives and society. Specifically, this often includes teaching about diversity (i.e., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.).

Comber (1994) defines critical literacy as a process where students become researchers of language, and where teachers respect student's resistance while exploring minority constructions of literacy and language, and problematizing classroom and public texts. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) synthesized the definitions of critical literacy from the past thirty years within the existing literature and categorized them into the following four elements, "1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple-view points, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382). This dissertation explores critical literacy contexts by focusing most specifically on how the sociopolitical implications of text can be explored (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Shor, 1999) and by employing Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) definition of critical literacy.

According to some critical literacy theorists (i.e., Casher and Stotler, 2015; Cervetti, Pardales, and Damico, 2001; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Mclaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004), such critical literacy questions could include but are not limited to:

- What viewpoints or voices are being left out (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Mclaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004)?
- Are there other perspectives?
- Is this viewpoint of the author in line with the dominant Eurocentric view?

- Which groups may be benefitting from this view and who may be marginalized?
- What meaning is assigned to certain people or events in a text (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001)?
- How are different groups positioned within the text? Are they positioned within a power hierarchy?
- Are there hidden messages within the text (Casher & Stotler, 2015)?
- In which cultures/places would you find this text (Casher & Stotler, 2015)?
- Whose voices are being heard/unheard (Freebody & Luke 1990; Luke and Freebody, 1997; Mclaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004)?
- Whose values are being perpetuated (Freebody & Luke 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1997)?
- What does the author want us to think (Mclaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004)?
- How might alternative perspectives be represented (Mclaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004)?
- What action might you take based on what you have learned (Mclaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004)?

#### BACKGROUND: EARLY CHILDHOOD CONTEXT

While progressivist and constructivist techniques are popular in preschool learning models (Morrison, 2014), these progressivist and constructivist approaches remain focused on inquiry, exploration, and children's interests in general rather than being in-tuned to social justice issues. Beginning in kindergarten and elementary and secondary education, essentialism remains the predominant paradigm. Additionally, with the rise of public preschools this also raises concern for essentialism to become more and

more visible with preschool classrooms as well. For example, in South Carolina such as through the first steps initiative (firststeps.com), and pre-set standards, children in public preschools are expected to be able to master more traditional literacy skills at a younger and younger age (see: Chapter five). As a former preschool teacher, including having worked within the state of South Carolina I found this topic to be particularly important. As I identify not only as a constructivist and progressivist educator, but also as a social reconstructionist, I undertook this study pertaining to critical literacy and teaching for social justice.

While many early childhood education theorists focus on how preschool children should be learning pre-literacy skills including phonological awareness (Machado, 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), there is an increasing demand to focus on literacy rather than pre-literacy. This is evident with the rising development of public preschools.

Additionally, even for many educators who embrace constructivist, and progressivist approaches to learning who wish to focus on age appropriate pre-literacy or early-literacy skills, there is a lack of attention given to including critical literacy and thinking critically about reading during this time. For example, Martinez-Roldán and López-Robertson (1999) highlight the unfortunate fact that many wrongfully believe children should learn to read first because they think are too young to embrace critical practices. Such a traditional essentialist literacy teaching focus has been the predominant paradigm in literacy programs that focus on decoding and basic comprehension, without a critical reflection of the social context and does not accomplish enough in terms of preparing students to be critical thinkers or for a multicultural world (Iiannidou, 2015).

As this research draws from Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys' (2002) definition of critical literacy that includes analyzing texts and "1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple-view points, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382), a focus is how can this practice take place for emergent readers who are not yet able to read by themselves. One example is that with emergent reader's critical literacy might take the form of children first listening to teacher read-alouds or looking at the illustrations in the story and then partaking in a teacher-initiated critical dialogue/critical questioning about what they are reading or seeing in the pictures and the sociopolitical implications (Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004; 2010).

#### RATIONALE

I argue that while much of the literature on early childhood development supports young children learning in a largely constructivist and progressivist classroom (Morrison, 2014). In terms of equity, and closing the opportunity gap, all young children need to have the option to learn pre-literacy skills such as phonological awareness. However, many early childhood teachers often steer away from social reconstructionism and multicultural education (Banks, 1985; 1995; Husband, 2012). This is problematic since if young children are not provided with opportunities for anti-racist and anti-bias education, they can develop prejudice, stereotypes, and bigotry at a young age (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Boutte 2008; Derman-Sparks 2008; Earick 2008; Husband, 2012; Zaman, 2007). Such harmful prejudices and stereotypes are learned in places such at home, with peers, the media, and schools, and society at large (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Boutte et al., 2011;

Derman-Sparks, 2001; Gopaul-McNicol, 1998; Husband, 2012; Leaper, 2000; Morrow, 2006). Such learning can take place through live and symbolic models (Bandura, 1986).

Doctors Kenneth and Mamie Clark investigated how children develop racism at a young age through many studies including the work of children's development on racial awareness and attitudes. Beginning in 1939 and continuing into the 1940's their work included presenting children with drawings and asking them about race and their "The Doll Test" experiments, where children viewed a white and black doll and responded on perceived positive and negative characteristics. This test demonstrated that these young children already held immensely racist thinking as they were biased to the lighter skinned doll, as they often assigned it positive characteristics (Clark & Clark, 1947). Such tests have been recently repeated with similar results (Jordan and Hernandez-Reif, 2009; NBCnews.com, 2016). In addition, other tests and studies have also generated similar findings as well, such as Goodman's (1964) research concluding that by age three children notice racial difference and between ages four and five, children express positive and negative attitudes about specific races. Hirschfeld (1995) found children begin to express preferences for races by the time they are four and five-years-olds.

Early childhood researchers also show how the first few years of a child's life is the time where they develop attitudes about differences in gender roles between boys and girls and develop stereotypes such as the specific behaviors and toys that should be used by each gender (Aina & Cameron; 2011; Kim, 2016; Klein et al., 2007). Rubble (2004) highlighted the impact of these stereotypes and roles by ages five through seven.

Additional studies also point to how preschoolers can also demonstrate stereotypical classist attitudes as well, including the notion that rich people are happier

and more likeable than those who of lower economic status (Derman-Sparks, 2007; Naimark, 1983; Ramsey, 1991).

These studies suggest that the early years are not only a time to lessen the chances that children develop harmful prejudices and stereotypes, to interrupt them when they occur, and a key time for children to learn about social injustice and its realities in the world around them. Thinking critically about the symbolic models in books can be a viable way to counter this.

Books provide an avenue for young children to learn and question social norms (Jackson, 2007). However, books are not always used in this fashion and instead may be where children view stereotypical and hegemonic images and portrayals of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. and may internalize them. Although critical literacy appears frequently in the educational literature as a successful tool for social justice curricular implementation at the mid Elementary- Secondary education level (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Shor, 1999). Researchers and educational leaders also believe that critical literacy would be a successful way to teach young learners about social justice as well (Comber, 1999; 2003; Fisher, 2008; Harwood, 2008; James & McVay, 2008; Kuby, 2013; Labadie, Wetzel, and Rogers, 2012; Labadie, Pole, & Rogers, 2013; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012; Silvers, Shorey, & Crafton, 2010; Vasquez, 2004; Vasquez 2007). However, research is limited on how to implement critical literacy with such young children (Comber, 2003; Harwood, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017; Kuby, 2013; Mankiw and Strasser, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004). I, along with other advocates of critical literacy, argue that by not questioning what they are reading and seeing, children and people may pass

down harmful or inaccurate ideas (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Shor, 1999). Within the classroom, critical literacy opens up the floor to insightful dialogue and inquiry, allowing students to question and critique texts and society rather than becoming mere recipients of information (including inaccurate information) about the “other.” As close examination of apparently innocuous texts often reveals inherent bias.

In a society bombarded with overt and covert bigotry, teaching for social justice is crucial and early childhood educators can help eradicate such bigotry within children before it develops. Research also shows that it is often easier for young children to be non-complicit to injustice than older children (Derman-Sparks and Phillip, 1997; Tatum, 1992; Kalin, 2002). To combat this racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic slant, there are many ways young, emergent readers can engage in critical literacy. Some of these methods include listening to read aloud stories, looking at the illustrations, and engaging in critical dialogue through the help of a teacher about what they are hearing/seeing and taking action to challenge these stereotypical or harmful notions (Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004; 2010). By engaging in the critical literacy process, young children can ideally develop a recognition of and strong foundation of social justice issues. This research focuses on critical literacy as a viable way to help create a social justice mind frame within young children by reducing prejudice, building their own self-esteem, learning to question dominant narratives, and develop critiques of the sociopolitical implications of the books and pictures they view/read.

Since there is limited literature on critical literacy curriculum and pedagogy in preschool classrooms (Comber, 2003; Harwood, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017;

Kuby, 2013; Mankiw and Strasser, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004), I broadened my search to include other pedagogical methods, many of which share key critical literacy components for teaching for social justice with young children. Although not outlining implications specifically for critical literacy, these articles and books help to strengthen my rationale that social justice issues are important to explore with young children. The most commonly found pedagogical methods include but are not limited to: 1) The art educational areas of drama and theatre (Cathers & Schniedwind, 2008; Dishy & Naumer, 2010; Hyland, 2010; Tabone, 2003; Wohlwend, 2009); 2) Interviews, field trips, and activism (Cowhey, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2013); 3) Guest speakers (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Kohler & Christensen, 2012); 4) Digital photography (Serriere, 2010); 5) Storytelling (Phillips, 2012); 6) Creating drawings about bigotry and intolerance as well a way to counter such bigotry (Boutte, López-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Cowhey, 2008; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2012; Kuby, 2012); 7) Teacher facilitated discussions/questions (Bentley, 2011; Boutte, 2008; Hyland, 2010); and 8) Story time (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Cunningham, Egan, & Enriquez, 2013; Kelly, 2012; Martin et al., 2012; Murphy, 2009). A more detailed description of the above literature pertaining to critical literacy and other methods of teaching for social justice in early childhood is provided in Chapter two of this dissertation.

#### JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

The empirical literature on critical literacy in the early childhood classroom, specifically for preschool aged children remains scarce (Comber, 2003; Harwood, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017; Kuby, 2013; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004).

I feel graduate students in education who have taught preschool and implemented critical pedagogy are an ideal participant set since they have both classroom experience, may have in-depth knowledge, and may be able to better name their practices. Additionally, since one of my goals is to add to the literature on how teacher education on critical literacy could be improved, gaining insight into the teacher preparation these teachers had had during their various degrees was also important.

#### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Since there is a relatively limited amount of scholarly resources available for early childhood educators at the preschool level, upon a search for “critical literacy” (Comber, 2003; Harwood, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017; Kuby, 2013; Mankiw and Strasser, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004), this presents a great challenge to early childhood educators who would like to be effective or grow as critical pedagogues. Early childhood educators need more resources to be able to implement such pedagogy with young learners. Drawing from the rather limited research available in and scholarly books, journals, and interviews with critical pedagogues, this study offers insight into solutions for early childhood curriculum and pedagogy in relation to teaching young children about social justice issues and implementing critical literacy.

Although education programs have evolved over the last several decades to include social reconstructionist curriculum and pedagogy aimed at enabling young children to grapple with social injustice, much more work needs to be done to design productive and practical strategies for early childhood educators to implement such practices. In particular, this research emphasizes the value of social reconstructionist curriculum and pedagogy that can be used as an effective tool to support social justice goals and multicultural education.

This study provides insight for practitioners (current preschool teachers) as well as for social justice researchers and college educators as to how they can improve their pre-service teacher training programs so that future educators can feel prepared to implement such critical pedagogy once in the classroom.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of South Carolina educators who are working toward or have already obtained a doctorate in education and who consider themselves social justice educators for preschool aged children. A detailed look at how those familiar with critical literacy have utilized such pedagogy at the early childhood level will buttress the current literature. Additionally, it can introduce or strengthen the critical literacy practices of early childhood educators for all grades. It can also improve future college courses in education, specifically pertaining to social justice curriculum and pedagogy for young learners.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION:

The overarching research question that guided my study was: What are the perceptions and experiences of social justice preschool educators who have or are working toward a doctorate degree in education in implementing critical literacy with four-year-old preschoolers?

Sub-questions included:

- 1) What social justice topics do these preschool teachers/ believe should be explored through critical literacy with four-year-old children and why?

2) Which specific pedagogical strategies do these preschool teachers implement or think should be implemented for critical literacy instruction with four-year-old children and why?

3) What are some of the advantages and challenges that these preschool teachers have experienced implementing critical literacy in the preschool classroom?

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

Critical Literacy practices are grounded in Freirean liberatory praxis (1970) which includes teaching children to read both the world and word (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As a form of resistance to challenging the status quo and disrupting hatred and bigotry such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism within early childhood text for preschool children this study fits a wide theoretical frame that encompasses many theories that all fit within what Joseph et. al (2000) calls “Confronting the dominant order.” More specifically this work draws from critical education theory (Apple, 2013; Giroux 1978; Giroux 1984; 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren 1989; 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995), multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and anti-bias education (Banks, 1985; 1995; 2008; Derman-Sparks, 2008; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995; 1997; Nieto, 1994; 2010), and critical race theory (Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso 2002). As Luke (2012) points out “Freire’s (1970) educational projects in Brazil, approaches to critical literacy have been developed through feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, and critical race theory; critical linguistics and cultural studies; and, indeed, rhetorical and cognitive models (p.5).”

In addition to confronting the dominant order (Joseph et al., 2000) this study also draws from progressivist and constructivist learning models for young children (Dewey, 1938; Morrison, 2014; Piaget, 1963; Vygotsky, 1987). Others who have studied critical literacy practices in early childhood such as Beach and Cleovoulou (2014) have also combined critical theory with Piaget's constructivist learning theories. Although critical theory is situated in a confronting the dominant order framework (Joseph et. al, 2000) this research draws eclectically from the two to make it fit best for the early childhood context.

#### METHODS: CASE STUDY

This case constituted a group of bounded individuals (Hatch, 2002), in this sense, the "case" consisted of seven South Carolina educators who have implemented critical literacy with four-year-olds and who have or are working towards an advanced degree in education. Through semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to share their stories and reflections of their critical literacy and other social justice teaching practices.

#### PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the present study were selected via Purposive sampling (Chen, 1981; Merriam 1998; Singleton & Straits, 2010) also known as *purposeful* (Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 1998) or *criterion based sampling* (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998) for those who met the criteria of teaching or having taught preschool to four-year-old classrooms, who hold or are working towards an advanced degree in education, who consider themselves social justice educators, and have implemented critical literacy. This included seven former and current

SC (South Carolina) teachers who had taught between 2-10+ years at both private and public schools and preschools.

#### DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of semi-structured face-to-face, phone interviews, and follow up e-mails with each participant to member check. This included at least an hour-long interview with each of the seven participants. I choose interviews as a way to gain in-depth knowledge of the experiences and perceptions of early childhood critical pedagogues regarding critical literacy practices with young children.

#### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a critical research endeavor, I strove to consider liberation on all levels of the research process, included treating my participants with respect and not a means to an end. With this, I have taken into account that the research process itself can be exploitative to the participants (Sapsford, 1999). Additionally, the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's university approved this research.

#### INFORMED CONSENT

A written consent form (See Appendix) was provided to all participants in the research in order to guarantee anonymity. This written consent also notified the participants of their right to stop the interview at any time.

#### OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

The key terms utilized in this study and their definitions include the following.

*Constructivist-* A progressivist curricular orientation that is child- centered and focuses on learning through the senses, with emphasis on curricula based on children constructing their own knowledge (Piaget, 1963; Vygotsky, 1987)

*Critical Pedagogy*- A practice made popular by Brazilian social justice educator, Paulo Freire (1970). According to Wink, critical pedagogy is teaching students “to name, to reflect critically, to act” (2004, p.123).

*Critical Literacy*-Paulo Freire (1970) known for planting the seeds for critical pedagogy can also be credited for planting the seeds of critical literacy (McLaren, 2011). One of the most common definitions involves exploring the sociopolitical implications of the text (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Shor, 1999). According to Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) critical literacy specifically involves “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple-view points, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382).

*Early Childhood Classrooms*- Classrooms for children ages 0-9 years (Morrison, 2014)

*Elementary School*- Including Grades P-5, 4K-5, K-5 or K-6, some early childhood years are included within this (P-3, 4K-3, or K-3).

*Essentialist*- The curricular orientation that focuses on reading, writing, and arithmetic; the basics of learning made popular by William Bagley (1941).

*Preschool*: Preschool is defined as ages 3-5 (Morrison, 2014).

*Progressivist*- Based on the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1938). A curricular orientation that is child-centered, based on children’s interest’s areas compared to traditional rote learning methods. It should however include a balance between teacher/child-initiated activities.

*Social justice issues*- Is defined building off of Adams et al. (2013) text as including racism, classism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and anti-Semitism as well as

the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality and the multiple layers of power/oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

*Social Reconstructionist-* A curricular orientation made popular by Harold Rugg (1929) and George Counts (1934) that focuses on teaching about social justice issues. A more radical form of progressivism.

*Teaching for Social Justice-* The aim of a Social Reconstructionist curricular orientation that has evolved over time to include teaching about and helping to eradicate racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc.

*Text-* This paper focuses on texts in the form of literacy works, including both written text and visual texts within picture books.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

### **Knowledge Generation**

The interview description and analysis of the seven participants provides much insight into critical literacy pedagogy implications for young children. These take aways can be helpful to practitioners, researchers, media specialists, and curriculum developers. Additionally, it provides a look into what challenges preschool teachers face with this method of social reconstructionist pedagogy and curricula, while also showing how these teachers assessed its effectiveness in helping to create a social justice mindset and reduce prejudice. Through coding and analysis various factors that influence preschool teachers' uses of a social justice pedagogy, specifically within the state of South Carolina is explored. Finally, this research has added to the existing body of literature pertaining to critical literacy and other methods of teaching for social justice in an early childhood setting.

## **Professional Application**

The interviews questions served to detail the experiences and perceptions of educators who implement social justice and critical literacy pedagogy for preschool as well as their teacher preparation. Therefore, the information collected could be a helpful resource for early childhood educators who want to implement critical literacy practices. For example, this included questions such as, “Tell me about your pre-service teacher preparation (if any) that explored teaching for social justice in the early childhood classroom” and, “Tell me about employing methods of teaching for social justice in your preschool classroom?” Additionally, the insight uncovered can help teachers better understand the advantages, limitations, considerations, and drawbacks of this strategy for teaching for social justice issues in a preschool classroom. Through the responses and analysis provided within this dissertation, educators reading this may also be more inclined to engage in critical self-reflection, which is crucial for facilitating social change in the classroom (Howard, 2003).

College professors of pre-service teachers, social justice enthusiasts, as well as the public may also gain insight from this study. By understanding teacher’s views, this may be a step towards additional teacher preparation or support staff for critical pedagogy and social justice curricula development. In addition, the insights generated from this study could also contribute to a positive shift of attitudes amongst teachers regarding their curriculum design and implementation.

### **ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS, SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS**

The present study operated under the assumption that teaching for social justice and exploring the pedagogical strategies utilized in early childhood education is useful to

the field of preschool teaching. Additionally, it acknowledges that those interviewed responded to their best ability and the information collected was valid and reliable in describing their ideas and insights. One way I helped to make this study reliable was by triangulating the data; in this case by conducting interviews, follow up e-mails, and requesting formal lesson plans. This allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of each participant's views and perspectives. Other methods such as member checking helped to increase the credibility of the data.

Delimitations of this study included the scope of those who were preschool teachers, employ critical literacy, and are seeking or have obtained an advanced degree in education. Specifically, I selected those who teach in four-year-old classrooms. With this it is important to note that the data collected may not have external generalizability and internal generalizability in various ways. According to Maxwell (2013), external generalizability involves the data being relevant beyond the case studied while internal generalizability refers to its significance within the case itself. Since the scope of the data is limited to SC, and SC is a case study for a state with a very specific conservative political climate, the data may not have external generalizability within or beyond the U.S. Therefore, the research may not offer significant insight into teacher's attitudes about social justice pedagogy for geographical areas with different sociopolitical climates and orientations.

However, as previously specified, the goal of this research was by no means to claim generalizability. As the main concern with a case study, the purpose resides, "not with generalizability, but with developing an adequate description, interpretation, and explanation of this [sic] case" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 79). While the information collected

through interviews is not used to generalize SC preschool teacher's experiences implementing critical literacy as a whole, it does help to provide valuable insight and description about the thoughts, lesson plan implementation, and teaching practices of SC preschool teachers working towards graduate degrees with four-year-old students from a potentially wide variety of backgrounds.

Limitations of this study included that it only consisted of SC preschool teachers who wished to be interview participants for the study. Additionally, this research was situated within a specific time in history and may not be relevant to reflect teacher's attitudes on the subject in the far future.

#### TRANSITION AND SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Although critical literacy is a somewhat frequently cited way to teach for social justice in the upper grades, there remains scarce literature pertaining to its usage with young learners. The literature that does exist on the topic remains with both vague and scarce theoretical and applied implications for uses with preschoolers. Very little of this literature examines teachers' perceptions and experiences implementing this strategy and the advantages and drawbacks. Since critical literacy remains vastly underexplored in early childhood this research uncovers what some of the possibilities and limitations of critical literacy are for young learners. It also details how it can be a successful tool for exploring social justice with young children.

By partaking in an instrumental collective case study of SC preschool teachers who self-reported aligning themselves with critical pedagogy and who have or are working towards an advanced degree, insight was gained as to how they incorporated critical literacy with young learners. In addition, this research sheds light on how other

critical educators could utilize such strategies as well as the challenges they may encounter.

Chapter one provides an introduction to this topic, including the background, a brief overview and history of the topic and the related literature both in the general and early childhood context, a rationale, justification for the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, the overarching research questions, the theoretical framework of the study, a brief overview of the research method, the participants, data collection, ethical considerations, Informed consent, operational definitions, the significance, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and scope of the proposed study.

Chapter two includes a review of the literature related to the philosophical/historical underpinnings of teaching for social justice and critical literacy, key theoretical implications, and the existing empirical research pertaining to critical literacy and other methods of teaching for social in early childhood settings. Chapter three details the case study methodology employed in the study. Chapter four details the research findings. Chapter five provides a further discussion of the analysis and the concluding findings.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### INTRODUCTION

While there is a plethora of literature that explores teaching for social justice, its application in early childhood, in particular with four-year-olds and in relation to critical literacy is limited (e.g. Comber, 2003; Harwood, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017; Kuby, 2013; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004). Those that do examine this often do not provide rich empirical data as to how these methods were implemented by the researcher or teacher-researcher. Broadening the literature search so that it includes all early childhood classrooms (as defined as Prek-3<sup>rd</sup> grade or Prek-2nd) as well as books and chapters, provides additional studies to draw from. In addition to critical literacy, some of the frequent themes/pedagogical methods found in the literature for teaching for social justice include: drama and theatre, interviews and field trips, guest speakers, digital photography, storytelling, creating drawings about racism, teacher facilitated discussion/questions, and story time/picture books/read-alouds.

This literature review is organized into three major sections: Part one: philosophical/historical underpinnings of teaching for social justice (which is the philosophy of all critical pedagogy including critical literacy), Part two: key theoretical underpinnings of teaching for social justice and critical literacy, and Part three: the empirical research on teaching for social justice in early childhood settings (which includes the following categories: Critical Literacy with Preschool Children, Critical Literacy in the K-3 grades, and Other methods of Teaching for Social Justice in the Early

Childhood Classroom, with the sub categories: interviews and field trips, guest speakers, digital photography, storytelling, creating drawings about racism, Group discussion/ teachers asking questions, story time/picture books/read-alouds).

For part two of the literature: empirical literature on pedagogical models utilize to teach for social justice in early childhood classrooms, the following search terms were used for the first round of searching: “teaching for social justice” or “social justice education” or “social justice”, and “preschool” or “early childhood” or “first grade” or “second grade” or “third grade”, and “pedagogy” or “pedagogical strategies” or “teaching methods” or “critical literacy” or “art” or “painting” or “drawing” or “photography” or “drama” or “puppets” or “discussion” or “conversation” or “children’s literature” or “read alongs” or “story time”. For the second round of researching I utilized the following search terms: “critical literacy” and “preschool” or “pre-k” or “kindergarten” or “first grade” or “second grade” or “third grade” or “two-year-old” or “three-year-old” or “four-year-old” or “five-year-old” or “six-year-old” or “seven-year-old” or “eight-year-old” or “early childhood”. The primary search engines I used were “Education source and Eric” and “Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC and PsycINFO.” Other search engines were used as well. My lit review focused on articles from the past ten years, with the exception of a few key works from years prior. Additionally, research on critical literacy that utilized the term critical literacy was by default mostly from the last ten years, as there was information on critical literacy and early childhood implications that utilized the term “critical literacy”.

## PHILOSOPHICAL/HISTORICAL: LITERATURE OVERVIEW

### **Teaching for Social Justice**

John Dewey is known as one of the first to advocate for a progressive approach to education. In his groundbreaking work, *Democracy and Education* (1916) he supported an approach different to the traditional rote learning and the dominant essentialist paradigm. In addition to learning being directed by teachers as well as based on subject matter that is interesting to the students, Dewey's Progressivist approach advocated for the school institution as a place for students to develop a social consciousness. Building off Dewey's ideas of Progressivism, Howard Rugg (1929)'s *Man and his Changing Society*, developed the first widely used textbook series for junior high students that taught about social justice issues. These books were highly controversial, criticized for preaching socialist and communist ideologies, and were soon banned by schools. This social reconstructionist movement, also referred to as the teaching for justice curricular orientation, continued to grow as a more radical form to Dewey's progressivism. George Counts (1932) with his pertinent essay, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order*, explored how the classroom should be a place for students, with the guidance of the teacher to critique and challenge exploitative and oppressive societal structures. Additionally, the philosophical roots of critical pedagogy and the critical literacy problem-posing method goes back to the Frankfurt school of critical theory during the 1920's.

## THEORETICAL: LITERATURE OVERVIEW

In addition to the historical and philosophical underpinnings of teaching for social justice, key critical educational theorists have built off the work of Dewey (1918),

Rugg (1929), and Counts (1934) have theoretically grounded the teaching for social justice curricular paradigm. Of these key educational theorists are Freire (1970) who is most well-known for outlining, “problem posing”, “critical pedagogy” and “critical literacy”, Giroux (1988), and McLaren (1989), amongst many other critical educational theorists and critical multicultural theorists. In his revolutionary look at education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970), is known for planting the seeds of critical pedagogy. According to Freire (1970), critical pedagogy involves understanding, critiquing, and transforming oppressive power structures in the classroom and society at large and involves Conscientização (critical consciousness or consciousness raising). With this is the need for teachers to be change agents and for the experience of education to involve liberatory pedagogy, which to Freire involves “acts of cognition, not transfers of information. (p.67).” Freire juxtaposes this next to what he calls “The banking concept of educating” which to him is an oppressive education, which involves rote memorization and repetition, and students are treated as mere receptacles for teacher is to deposit information into. Key critical educational theorists and critical pedagogues such as Giroux (1988) built off the theoretical ideals of Freire, further conceptualizing what this type of transformative education could entail. With this Giroux explores the teacher’s job to work as intellectuals, help students critique the existing social order, and strive for transformation. McLaren’s (1989) *Life in Schools* developed this notion set forth by Freire and Giroux by exploring the additional theoretical implications of critical pedagogy and teaching for social justice in the classroom setting.

Freire and Macedo (1987) also developed the field of critical literacy, in particular explaining how it is crucial that children learn to understand the world as they

understand how to read the words. Or, as they explain it they must be able to read both the “word and the world.” According to Giroux (1993) critical literacy, “points to pedagogical practices which offer students the knowledge, skills, and values they will need to critically negotiate and transform the world in which they find themselves.” (p. 376). Luke and Freebody (1999) highlighted specific ways teachers can help students critique text. Such critical literacy includes students practicing code breaking and creating a space to make meaning and critique. Shor (1999) also further expounds upon the notion of critical literacy. With this Shor explains how no pedagogy is neutral and educators therefore need to help students critique and challenge society through text. Gathering definitions of critical literacy within the literature over the past thirty years, Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) have summarized critical literacy as “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple-view points, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382).

## EMPIRICAL: LITERATURE OVERVIEW

### **Critical literacy with Preschool Children**

There is an extremely scarce amount of empirical literature on critical literacy in preschool classrooms that currently exists that utilizes the term “critical literacy” (Comber, 2003; Harwood, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017; Kuby, 2013; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004). Even amongst these, many such as Comber (2003) Harwood (2008) And Mankiw & Strasser (2013) still include many theoretical applications, while others remain almost entirely theoretical (Kuby, 2013; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez, 2004).

However, none of these involve elaborate empirical studies involving many details of teacher's views or classroom observations. Additionally, a limited amount is both empirical and focused on four-year-old children (Kim, 2016; Kim & Cho, 2017). Kim and Cho (2017) provide of the most in-depth empirical studies I could locate that involves an empirical study of critical literacy implications with four-year-old preschoolers. With this study, Kim and Cho observed and interviewed teachers in a four-year-old preschool classroom in Korea, which involved documenting the critical literacy practice of a teacher, including the books and pedagogy and the children's reactions and responses. The specific critical literacy pedagogy described by Kim and Cho involved a multi-modal approach, which involved the teacher's engaging the students in problem posing during read-alouds. This was followed by the opportunity for the children to draw or write a different interpretation of a popular fairytale from the perspective of a character in the book, other than the narrator. For example, this included telling the story/ or drawing a picture of the *Three Little Pigs* from the Perspective of the Big Bad Wolf, or *Cinderella*, from the perspective of the evil Stepmother. Children's drawings, verbal, and written responses were collected to show how these children engaged in the critical literacy process. Additionally, in this study, Kim and Cho intentionally made critical literacy a multi-modal activity by including drawing and writing as an extension activity to the problem posing and critical inquiry.

### **Critical literacy in K-3 or unspecified Early Childhood Classroom**

Since there was limited literature on critical literacy in preschool, critical literacy in grades K-3 or unspecified early childhood classrooms was also explored within the literature review. The Studies that do specify the grade involve exploring critical literacy

implications include: within kindergarten (May et al., 2014; Rogers, Labadie, and Pole, 2016), first grade (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; McVay & James, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2009), second grade (Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014), third grade (Cooper & White, 2012), first-third grade (Jones, 2012; Gove & Still, 2014), and first- second grade (Fain, 2008) classrooms. Others such as (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012) include unspecified classes within early childhood settings.

Books and book chapters that explore the theoretical or applied implications of critical literacy in the early childhood classroom or in grades K-3 include were included due to the lack of scholarly and empirical articles on the topic (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012; Quintero, 2009; Vasquez 2004; 2010). These books and book chapters serve as a rationale as to why critical literacy can be implemented in early childhood classrooms.

In addition to focusing on different early childhood age groups these studies, involve teachers and teacher-researchers who employ various specific methods of implementing critical literacy. In some of these studies/articles the teacher or teacher-researcher utilized or outlines how social justice themed books can or should be used critical literacy lessons (Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Gove & Still, 2014; Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; Meller et al., 2009). Meller et al. (2009) in particular highlights importance of using “High Quality Social Justice Books” when teaching early childhood students critical literacy. For her selecting the appropriate book is of the utmost importance. Before implementing a critical literacy lesson, she first previews the book, develops critical literacy questions that she will pose to the class and posts this on sticky notes within the book. Then before the actual lesson begins she conducts a brief summative assessment/ mini lesson to see how much the children already know on the

topic, then she goes a picture walk. This picture walk includes looking through the photos with her students and discussing them before reading the actual story. Then she reads the story aloud to the children and stops throughout to ask the questions she prepared. McVay and James's (2009) critical literacy involved young children exploring critical literacy history books; for example, students were encouraged to examine the story of Christopher Columbus and the first Thanksgiving with a critical eye.

Many of the existing articles highlighted teacher guided critical literacy questions, such as Souto-Manning (2009), while others focused on questions posed both to and by students themselves (Gove & Still, 2014). Gove & Still (2014) as well as other studies (Rogers, Labadie, and Pole, 2016; Stribling, 2014) also had the students explore the critical literacy component through drawing what they read, or learned, often with guided or extension questions. For example, in Stribling's (2014) study, the teacher observed had students create reflective and creative portraits of their own skin colors. Additionally their classmates were asked to describe their behavior and to reflect on racial differences after reading a book about skin color. While some, such as with older children, Jones' (2012) study of third graders, first involved teachers modeling critical literacy during class read alouds, then being assessed on their critical literacy during silent reading time, followed by further scaffolding of critical literacy during the next circle time.

Fain's (2008) demonstrated how critical literacy can be incorporated by reading through literature circles in the class and at home as homework and provided the students with critical literacy questions to explore themes of social justice/injustice present within the text. Through discussion, children expressed their personal experiences with various forms of oppression.

Stribling's (2014) implementation of critical literacy spans what she calls creating an entire "critical literacy milieu" in a kindergarten classroom. In this study, the teacher Stribling observed tried to incorporate critical literacy within all facets of the classroom including student/teacher interactions, encouraging open and at times confrontational dialogue between students. Similar projects like this we're attempted by the teacher as well as talking to students in their everyday interactions to incorporate the principles of critical literacy including explain multiple perspectives, exploring the sociopolitical, and working toward social justice.

Beach and Cleovoulou's (2014) study shows critical literacy can be implemented within a constructivist inquiry based setting (inquiry pedagogy). To facilitate an environment that was both Inquiry based and critical literacy derivative the educator selected social justice themed textbooks and then focused learning on the children's questions. This included encouraging student dialogue through these texts. In order for this text to be effective for both inquiry and critical literacy practices the stories must allow for student age appropriate social justice related dialogue and allow the children to make connections with it. These texts must then be connected to the student's life as an ongoing practice. Specifically the second grade instructor did this by reading a book about skin color and then having the children construct autobiographies as self-ologies.. These self-ologies included: bringing forward a question or idea, hypothesizing possible solutions or developing understandings, Discussing and analyzing the information, and Refining initial understandings and beliefs to incorporate the new evidence. This study also concludes that critical literacy involves careful planning and is an ongoing reflective teaching practice. The teacher must consider how the text can encourage dialogue. The

teacher needs to focus on the children's curiosities, interests, and what questions they have in relation to social justice.

To access if such critical literacy methods were effective the teachers within the studies utilized various methods. Souto-Manning (2009) accessed her critical literacy lessons as teacher-researcher via observations, audio recordings, notes, fields, coding, and analyzing field notes of classroom observation/ conversations/ and student artifacts were utilized. In addition to transcripts and dialogues, Souto-Manning also notes student activism such as discussing social justice issues with the school principle as a sign of measuring if these critical literacy activities were effective in teaching for social justice. Leland, Harste, and Huber (2005) also utilized informal assessment such as listening to see if they have been impacted by the text read. Observation of student engagement from class discussions and drama learning activities were utilized to evaluate if this method was successful in teaching students about social justice issues.

Other studies highlighted aspects such as May et al.'s (2014) study outline some of the issues pre-service teachers had implementing critical literacy with kindergartens, such as the unease teachers experienced talking about politics. While, Cooper and White's (2012) focused on critical with students who were considered "at risk."

### **Other Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching for Social Justice in the Early Childhood Classroom**

The empirical research mentioned in the following section, includes studies of teaching for social justice employing pedagogical strategies other than critical literacy. In addition, little research is available regarding teacher or teacher-researcher perceptions on implementing these methods, in particular with preschoolers. However, other pedagogical

strategies found in the literature for teaching for social justice in early childhood classrooms include drama and theatre, interviews and field trips, guest speakers, photography, storytelling, and creating drawings about racism, teacher facilitated discussion/questions, and story time/picture books/read-alouds.

### **Drama and Theatre**

Drama and Theatre are found throughout the literature as a way to teach early childhood learners about social justice (Cathers & Schniedwind, 2008; Dishy & Naumer, 2010; Hyland, 2010; Tabone, 2003; Wohlwend, 2009). These studies range in their definition of drama and theatre, and seem to encompass a wide range from process drama, to dramatic play, to formal scripted theatre.

Cathers and Schniedwind (2008) empirical study comprises a third grade classroom, examining if dramatizing stories will increase student's diversity awareness. A similar study was done by Wohlwend (2009), examines how child directed literacy play and play/book writing can be utilized to explore social justice issues in a kindergarten classroom. Specifically, gender stereotypes and inequities were explored through the use of Disney literature, discussion, dramatic re-enactments, and then critical re-envisioning- by the re-enactments to offer an alternative interpretation of the story.

In Hyland's (2010) quasi-empirical study, brief examples are given for using drama and dress up with early childhood students as a method of teaching for social justice, while Boutte (2008) focuses on dramatic role-play and mock trials. With this Boutte states, "Children should be involved in projects, role plays, simulations, mock trials, and so on" (p. 170). The pedagogical implications provide guidelines for

implementing social justice pedagogy such as making it relevant to the lives of students, being culturally sensitive, academically rigorous, and participatory and experimental.

### **Guest Speakers and Interviews**

Guest speakers are mentioned in the literature as a way to teach for social justice in early childhood settings. For example, student's parents /family members as well as members from the community being invited to speak to the classroom. The literature implies this could include speakers discussing social justice issues directly with the children, or as a way for children to explore diversity indirectly by seeing and hearing about the diverse lives of various adults.

This includes children's family members (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Kohler & Christensen, 2012) and the benefit of learning from diverse families. However, these articles too remain highly theoretical with little attention or empirical data given. They do not make a definitive as to whether guest speakers are a sufficient way in teaching young students about social justice issues.

### **Field Trips, Community Service, and Food Drives**

In addition to young children interviewing others from diverse backgrounds, and having guest speakers come to class, partaking in field trips to explore diverse communities is also found in the literature as a way to teach young children about social justice issues. In her book, *Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom*, Souto-Manning (2013) details a study of a first/second grade teacher who used student facilitated interviews and field trips as a way for young children to learn about social justice issues. Methods to assess if interviews were a successful way to teach students about social justice included observations and documentation of request to

interview/thank you letters from the students. However, the quasi-empirical nature of this study, the lack of multiple teachers' perspectives, and reference to the first/second grade age demographic limit this study.

While Cowhey (2006) has had her students engage in activism, such as feeding the homeless and organizing can food drives. As she explains, "Food drives can be a developmentally appropriate activity for children when used as a vehicle to challenge stereotypes, teach about the complex causes of poverty, introduce local activists who are meeting needs and working on long-term solutions. It can also empower children to take responsibility in their community and remove the stigma of poverty (p. 23)."

### **Photography**

Digital photography is also referenced in the literature as a route to teaching young children about social justice issues. In Serriere (2010), Digital photos were taken of Kindergarten students during free playtime and then presented during circle time as conversation starters for exploring social justice issues, specifically issues present within the classroom and between the students themselves. This also included a discussion envisioning a better classroom and a better self and teacher prompted comments regarding fairness and equality in the classroom and during play with peers. The concept of imagining a better reality and acting it out is grounded in the work of Boal's (1995) Rainbow of Desire. The implications for this method with early childhood students is also seen in the work of Cathers and Schniedwind (2008) and Wohlwend (2009), particularly focusing upon critical literacy.

## **Storytelling**

Storytelling in this sense differs from read alouds or story time in the sense that it does not involve a book, but rather a personal story told by a teacher or student. (Phillips, 2012) looked directly at the level of activism (active citizenship) children partook in after taking place in social justice storytelling in the classroom.

### **Creating drawings about bigotry**

Child created drawings about racism and other forms of bigotry as well as positive images to counteract this are also commonly found in the literature as a way to teach for social justice with young learners (Boutte, López-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Cowhey, 2008; Kuby, 2012). In a study done by Boutte, López-Robertson, & Powers-Costello (2011), second graders explored racism through drawings and discussions after reading social justice picture books as a class. Children also described their pictures to the teacher-researchers and a caption of their response was included as empirical data. This valuable study incorporates evidence that the children learned about social justice issues through reading of social justice texts, discussion, and then drawing pictures.

Kuby's (2012) research also encompasses a multi-modal teaching method used by teacher-researchers to teach and assess five and six-year-old students understanding of social justice issues. This included stories pertaining to civil rights and social justice issues as read to the class by teacher-researchers followed by student participation in drama, classroom discussion, and creating paintings.

Cowhey's (2008) work highlights how early childhood students can use drawing as a modality to create positive images, in this specific case, religious tolerance.

### **Read-alouds/ Story time**

Teacher facilitated read-alouds or story time are a commonly referenced method of teaching for social justice in the early childhood classroom (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Cunningham, Egan, & Enriquez, 2011; Hawkins, 2014a; Hawkins, 2014b; Kelly, 2012; Mackey & Vocht-van Alphen 2016; Martin et al., 2012; Murphy, 2009). These could involve just reading the story and/or the teacher making social justice related comments or the teacher using the books as a springboard for social justice discussions. Although some of these existing studies incorporate read-alouds and story time with questioning, these are not referred to specifically as “critical literary” and they often involve utilizing text to explore specific social justice issues (Hawkins, 2014a; Hawkins, 2014b; Mackey & Vocht-van Alphen, 2016), rather than exploring the overt or covert sociopolitical implications of the text itself in the critical literacy sense. Although both utilizing text to explore specific social justice issues is sometimes referred to by theorists as “critical literacy”, I have separated these two definitions for the purpose of this literature review.

### **Teacher Facilitated Group Discussions/Questions**

Although teacher facilitated group discussions/questions can be a component of critical literacy, it is not always part of the critical literacy process. Specifically, if it does not involve teachers engaging students in a discussion of the sociopolitical implications of text/pictures in storybooks, it is not described as critical literacy. This early childhood literature focuses on general teacher facilitated group discussions/questions pertaining to social justice (Bentley, 2011; Boutte, 2008; Hyland, 2010; Sánchez-Blanco, 2015). For example, Bentley (2011) investigates how teaching for social justice can be explored in

the early childhood classroom, specifically through discussion but also through reading books and allowing children to do research.

## SUMMARY

Chapter two explored the literature pertaining to teaching for social justice in early childhood classrooms, this includes the philosophical/historical underpinnings of teaching for social justice and the theoretical backing of teaching for social justice and in particular critical literacy. Although some empirical data is offered within existing articles on the topic, many remain mostly theoretical or serve as teachers how to guide in implementing such methods. Although some of these articles include the researcher or teacher/researchers perceptions and experiences regarding implementing critical literacy with young children, thus is not the central focus of these articles. More importantly, almost none of these articles specifically look at teacher's perceptions implementing critical literacy with four-year-old children.

My study expands upon the existing body of literature pertaining to methods of teaching for social justice in an early childhood classroom. Specifically, teacher's perceptions and experiences implementing critical literacy with four-year-old preschool students are gathering, discussed, and analyzed. Chapter three provides an overview of the methods of research.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS OF RESEARCH

### INTRODUCTION

Due to the lack of research on the experiences and perceptions of critical literacy by preschool educators, I decided to focus my efforts on interviewing teachers themselves. I sought to gain a broader understanding as to how critical pedagogues of preschool children have implemented this practice. This research both gathered the perspectives of early childhood educators surrounding this topic and the specific pedagogical methods they have employed. This chapter provides a description of the research design and methodology, role of the researcher, questions and interview protocol, context of the study, measures for ethical protection, criteria for selecting participants, data collection and procedures, and how and when the data was analyzed.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Case study was selected as the primary research method since my main goal was to describe the perceptions and experiences of those who employ critical literacy in their early childhood classroom and how their pedagogy fits within and adds to the existing themes seen in the early childhood literature. For this case study, I drew primarily from Creswell (1994) and Stake's (1994) definitions of case study, implementing it as both a methodology, research strategy, and/or a choice of what is to be studied. This included employing *purposeful sampling* (Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990; Maxwell, 2013) to select the interview participants who met the criteria I sought. Purposeful sampling as a

participant selection method is recommended by Creswell (1994) to be utilized along with case study in order to help select participants that meet the specific criteria of your case. Since the objective of my research was primarily to gain understanding regarding these teachers' attitudes and experiences implementing critical literacy with preschoolers, my research involved a study of a specific aspect of the case, their attitudes and experiences teaching critical literacy, rather than focusing on the more general experiences or lives of these teachers. In this sense, my study more specifically follows Stake's (1994) model of an instrumental collective study, as unlike an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1994), which seeks to primarily understand the case in itself, the goal of an instrumental study is to develop at least some generalization about the phenomenon, issue, or theory (Malinowski, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1985; Stake, 1994; Von Wright, 1971; Yin, 2003). Therefore, an instrumental collective case study was a natural fit since one of my primary goals was to develop an understanding of the phenomenon (critical literacy practices) I was studying. This also specifically fits with Yin's (2003) notion that a case study can focus on a specific aspect of the case, rather than just a holistic analysis of the entire case.

Although some early theoretical insights and teaching implications have been generated through this study (SEE: chapter five), the general insight into the phenomenon paves the way for critical literacy practices in early childhood, rather than focusing specifically on developing theory. Additionally, drawing from Creswell (2003, p. 154) through a sample, "inferences can be made about some characteristic, attitude, or behavior of this population" (Creswell, 2003, p.154). However, as a qualitative research study it purposes remain to describe rather than to generalize.

Although I drew most heavily from Creswell (1994) and Stake's (1994) definition for case study, my research also falls under Hatch's (2002) definition of case, as being a bounded system, and Merriam's (1998) notion that much description and analysis of that system/case be provided. Additionally, Glesne (2011) explains, "Defining something as 'bounded' often remains ambiguous, though, with the researcher deciding what will and what will not be included within the boundaries," (p.22). I am specifically defining my case as South Carolina preschool Teachers who have implemented critical literacy and have obtained or are working towards an advanced degree in education. Although my case can be conceptualized as consisting of seven participants, in many ways each individual can also be considered a separate case within themselves, as comparison of their responses were at times analyzed amongst one another's through cross case analyses (Creswell, 1994),

Through the details provided by the participants, or of this case, or cases, I have developed a better understanding of the phenomenon (critical literacy practices with young children) and hope to pave to improve such teaching practices. In a broader, sociological context, the social phenomenon examined is that of resistance and challenging the status quo, specifically it is resistance manifested in the form of critical literacy practices of preschool teachers.

An ethnographic approach to this study was ruled out because although case study and ethnography may employ many of the same key components (Maxwell, 2011; Merriam, 1998; White et al., 2009; Willis, 2007) including descriptions of the cultural context and are at times used interchangeably or at least in conjunction with one another, this study differed from a ethnography or ethnographic case study (Madison, 2012) being

that it did not involve the characteristic of longitudinal design. According to Saldaña (2011) longitudinal design is a key component of ethnographic research.

A final notable characteristic of this research project is that it was situated within theoretical framework that Joseph et al. (2000) calls, confronting the dominant order. Although this draws heavily from Freirean praxis (1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987) and is situated largely within critical theory (Apple, 2013; Giroux 1978; Giroux 1984; 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren 1989; 2005; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995). It also draws from other theories that also confront the dominant order (Joseph et. al, 2000) including multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and anti-bias education (Banks, 1985; 1995; 2008; Derman-Sparks, 2008; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995;1997; Nieto, 1994; 2010), and critical race theory (Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

I am advocating for critical literacy as a form of resistance amongst early childhood educators to challenge the status quo and social injustice. This study sought to uncover the challenges and obstacles that often go alongside social justice oriented pedagogy, such as resistance from other staff, administration, and other sources of power. This provides additional insight into how power operates within the school institution and society at large, as well as how teachers internalize these power and hegemonic structures. Not only is an investigation of critical pedagogy and critical literacy by nature situated within the broader body of critical educational research, but this study also aspired to reveal power structures and liberate educators.

While critical components of this study were not employed through an in-depth field study such as ethnography; I have provided an understanding of the various perspectives of my collective case of participants to provide some insight into the phenomena (critical literacy practices implemented by preschool teachers).

My overarching researching question was, "What are preschool teacher's perceptions and experiences implementing critical literacy in the preschool classroom?" This question lent itself easily to a qualitative analysis since it seeks description and understanding of the perceptions of teachers, unlike within quantitative research. This qualitative study seeks to describe and examine the experiences of a specific group of individuals in a specific time and place.

The seven semi-formal interviews included all open-ended questions and follow up questions. Questions were asked in a funnel sequence (Maxwell, 2013; Singleton and Straits, 2010), meaning they started broad and got more specific as the interview progresses. These questions included both direct and indirect questioning (Singleton & Straits, 2010). The indirect questions tended to be geared for the more sensitive topics such as those regarding sexual orientation or religion. For example, participants were asked "What social justice topics do you most often explore through critical literacy activities?" rather than if they think topics specifically such as heterosexism or anti-Semitism should be explored with young children. This allowed them to share their ideas and information they chose to disclose that at times these was highly personal. Additionally, the questions asked in the interview were carefully devised and revised multiple times and strove to not fall under the trap of the unpopular double barrel questions.

## ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER/ POSITIONALITY

Within qualitative research, the role of the researcher in relation to what they study is often highlighted to give the audience some sense of how the researcher arrived at this topic and how their subjectivity impacts the research. Additionally, it is also encouraged for the researcher to reflect on his/her positionality and subjectivity in qualitative research through the process known as reflexivity. By examining personal beliefs and life experiences one can better understand how they impact the research they do. On this note, my commitment to social reconstructionist pedagogy and eradicating all the various forms of bigotry is what led me to pursue this study. I am a proponent of the idea that effective social justice education can be helpful at eliminating injustice and prejudice in the world for individuals of all ages. I feel it is especially important to start teaching children at the youngest age possible about these injustices, so that they do not develop these prejudices in the first place.

Additionally, in my own educational experience I have always been bored by strictly essentialist educators who teach as if there are simply all “wrong” or “right” answer. Although I believe in an eclectic approach to learning (one that incorporates essentialism, perennialism, constructivism, and social reconstructionism) I am most drawn to the social reconstructionist curricular paradigm (Rugg, 1929; Counts 1934). This has led me to focus on social justice issues and critical pedagogy as well as lend itself towards critical theory. I personally feel that critical pedagogy; in particular, critical literacy is crucial for any student and could be used as a way to teach young children about social justice issues.

As mentioned, it is my personal beliefs and professional disposition towards critical theory (i.e. Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Kress, 2011; McLaren 1989; McLaren, 1995; McLaren 2005; Quantz 1992) has also led me to conduct a critical case study (Maxwell, 2011). Additionally, I chose South Carolina since it is important to me personally as resident and University of South Carolina doctoral student.

Researcher's subjectivity and positionality can be both an asset and a detriment to the research, and mine are no exception, have acted as both strengths and weaknesses. While interviewing my participants I walked in two worlds, both as an insider and as an outsider. In the first sense, I was also an insider since they were mostly all current doctoral students like myself. Additionally, we all implemented critical literacy and other critical pedagogical practices. I was also insider in the sense that some of the participants I interviewed were females, graduate students, and we had all taught preschool. This included me being able to understand the preschool curricula and pressures teachers face from assessments, and administration. Our shared similar backgrounds may have allowed them to feel more comfortable with me and allow them to see me as trustworthy. However, I was an outsider in the sense that I was wearing the hat of researcher as well. Additionally, many of the participants were in an older age demographic than me, of differing races, religions, and places of origin, and some of them had decades of teaching experience.

Additionally, being a progressivist and social reconstructionist preschool educator myself, may have impacted my respondent's responses and therefore could have served as a weakness. I may have unintentionally revealed my biases through the questions, rhetoric, or the body language. Because of this, it is possible that my participants may

have not felt comfortable expressing a difference of opinion. However, during both the interview and analysis stage I worked to accurately depict the participant's responses, this included repeating their responses back to them and member checking. Additionally, my positionality may have been a detriment in the sense that I have a very negative overall opinion of essentialist teacher methods (Bagley, 1939) due to my own schooling experience as previously mentioned. This may have also greatly influenced the specific way in which my participants responded.

However, one way I was able to minimize the impact of my feelings or judgments on the participants during the interview process was trying to be cognizant of my body language and voice. I did however try (to my best ability) to put my preconceived ideas aside, and make the familiar strange, so that I could gather and describe their response as accurately as possible.

#### INSTRUMENT, INTERVIEW PROCESS, AND PROTOCOL

As previously described in Chapter one, my overarching question was, "What are SC critical preschool teachers who have or are working towards an advanced degree in education perception's and experiences implementing critical literacy in the preschool classroom?" Many of my interview questions aimed to answer this overarching question.

#### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This study consisted of in-person interviews that were between sixty and one-hundred-and twenty minutes in length and on-going follow-up e-mails (See Appendix). Although eight participants participated in the study, one withdrew during the middle, limiting the participants to seven. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured (Roulston, 2010). Semi-structure and non-rigid interviews are described in the literature

as being a highly effective way to engage participants in the interview process (Glesne, 2011; Roulston, 2010). Each interview began with informal warm-up questions, such as where are you from? Where did you go to school? And what degrees do you hold? Warm-up questions are advised to help the interviewee feel at ease before diving into more in-depth questions (Maxwell, 2013). Next, I provided each participant with the operational definitions of the term “Critical Literacy” and “Social Justice Issues” in order to confirm we are working from the same definitions, since these terms can be used very broadly. This included the Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) definition of critical literacy: “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple-view points, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382). Social justice issues were defined from Adams et al. (2013) text as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and anti-Semitism (Adams et al., 2013) as well as the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality and the multiple layers of oppression experienced (Crenshaw, 1989).

As the interview progressed I moved on to addressing the sub-questions I had devised, as I gathered in-depth information related specifically to teachers’ perspectives on the efficacy of critical literacy in the early childhood classroom. None of the questions asked were closed questions and all required more than a yes/no answer, two components that are needed for a quality interview (Roulston, 2010). Additionally, these questions were formulated to include openings/introducing of the topics, focus questions, and summarizing and closing questions (Roulston, 2010) to allow for a hopefully well executed and thought out procedure and order. For this, prepared open-ended discussion

questions were provided for the in-person interviews, all questions that lent themselves to elaboration by participants. The interview protocol is featured in the Appendix.

### CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

As detailed previously, generalizability for all SC preschool teachers was not the goal of this research, but rather to generate insight regarding teacher's attitudes regarding curricula and pedagogical strategies from this specific case. As also mentioned earlier, my data may have limitations even for making generalizations about all SC preschool teachers, within the county or state at large, since it is a very big and diverse county and state. Therefore, even though my data may not have internal generalizability within the county itself or the state at large, it may be able to offer some insight into curricula and teaching strategies of SC preschool teachers who constitute this specific case.

Additionally, I made a strong effort to let the data speak for itself and be willing to have my preconceptions about what I might find be challenged (Maxwell, 2013).

### MEASURE FOR ETHICAL PROTECTION

Ethical protection, is an issue that deserves unique attention within any form of research. Due to this I took a variety of essential measures to help ensure the study was ethical. This includes following the government's Institutional Review Boards (1974) five basic principles. On this note, this research was first approved by the participant's University's Internal Review Board (IRB). This was carried out by providing the participants with sufficient information as to what the study will be about, the right for participants to stop participating at any time without penalty, unnecessary risks are eliminated, benefits to the participants and society must outweigh risks, and experiments are only to be conducted by qualified representatives. In following these five principles I

also provided the participants with an informed consent form and printed information stating their rights including the right to withdraw from the study without penalty and what the study will be about and its intended purpose.

Several additional measures to ensure privacy of my participant's information were also taken. This included transcribing the recorded data as soon as possible. After the data was saved and transcribed it was stored in a locked and secure place.

Additionally, the data was kept confidential and not shared with anyone else.

Additionally, the teachers, schools, and any students that were referenced in the study were all assigned pseudonyms. To further secure the identity of my participants I did not record any of the warm-up questions within my case study description or analysis this included: where participants went to school, where they were from, and what degrees they held.

Glesne (2011) highlights the importance of striving to make sure that a research/interview relationship is not one that makes the participants feel exploited. One way I tried to carry out this important principle was allowing my participants to withdraw their information from the study at their will. Just as my research seeks to liberate educators, it would be antithetical to the nature of the research if those educators I was interviewing felt exploited in any way by the interview process.

#### CRITERIA FOR SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

Purposive sampling (Chen, 1981; Merriam 1998; Singleton & Straits, 2010) also known as *purposeful* (Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 1998) or *criterion based sampling* (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998) was employed to select the interview participants who met the criteria. Purposeful sampling is

recommended in conjunction with case study research (Creswell, 1994) in order to help select participants that meet the specific criteria of your case.

By employing this purposeful sampling, the seven teachers of this collective case study were those who met the following criteria 1) They were current or former preschool teachers of four-year-olds 2) they supported social justice instruction in particular held a belief that critical literacy should be implemented at the preschool level 3) and they implement or have implemented critical literacy lesson plans and 4) They currently held or were working towards a graduate degree in education (all of them happened to be working towards a doctorate or had a doctorate in hand during the time of the interview). Since the intention of this research was not to understand how South Carolina teachers view critical teaching practices, but rather how can critical teaching practices (i.e. critical literacy) be strengthened and what obstacles do these educators encounter, participants that supported social justice instruction for young children were purposefully selected. These participants included both male and female teachers of a vast variety of races, genders, ages, years of preschool teaching experience (ranging from two years to over ten years) in both private and public schools, and having other varying identity statuses that had agreed to participate in the interview process.

#### DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURES

As Maxwell (2013) asserts, and explained prior through the role of positionality the researcher's influence cannot be eliminated from the study. In this vein, I kept in mind the notion of reflexivity (Glesne 2011; Maxwell, 2013) during the interview process and data analysis and making a conscious effort to monitor added to the trustworthiness of the data (Glesne, 2011). Other ways I achieved this was by not asking leading research

questions and by repeating back what my participants have said to make sure I heard them correctly, a.k.a. Respondent validation/ member checking (Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, I crafted detailed notes to myself during each interview, specifically if what the participants said caused an emotional reaction in me. Journal activities such as this are important activity for instances when an interviewer or researcher experiences both positive and negative reactions, so that they can situate their bias and try to best understand how it can affect their data. Upon doing this practice, I could then refer back to these notes to try to gain understanding as to how my own personal reactions may have affected the data collection process or analysis. Additionally, I recorded any additional questions I had as they came up to make sure to have each participant clarify any remaining questions I still had at the end of the interview.

Ways I ensured the trustworthiness and rigor of the data was by triangulating the data using multiple data sources. (Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). This included five in-person interviews, two phone interviews, follow up e-mails to get more information/clarify/member check the information previously collected. Although formal lesson plans were also requested, none of the participants had formal lesson plans specifically related to critical literacy that they could share. However, of the participants that did share some other lesson plans they did, these were not included within this research since they were not directly relevant to critical literacy. However, by doing so I was able to get a richer and more accurate depiction of the teacher's pedagogical and curricular ideology.

The way validity and reliability is described in traditional quantitative research differs greatly from qualitative research. This is usually so that the data can be proven to

be generalizable. However, I sought to describe the data and look for patterns rather than making any definitive claims.

The interviews were conducted in the privacy of a conference room. To collect the data, I made an audio recording of the interview as well as took notes. This included writing down as much of the participant’s responses as possible. This is recommended so that the information will be backed up in case there is a technical problem with the recording. Backing up data in multiple ways is highly recommended. (Glesne 2011; Maxwell, 2013).

#### HOW OR WHEN THE DATA WAS ANALYZED

The Interview questions were designed to address my overarching research questions. These included:

**TABLE 3.1: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CORRESPONDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Research Question	Corresponding Interview question(s)
Research Question #1: What content (social justice topics) do South Carolina preschool teachers who hold or are working on an advanced degree believe should be explored through critical literacy and why?	Was answered by Interview question #13
Research Question # 2: Which specific pedagogical strategies do South Carolina preschool teachers who hold or are working on an advanced degree implement or think should be implemented for critical literacy instruction and why?	Was addressed by interview questions # 8, 9, and 12.
Research Question # 3: What are some of the advantages and challenges South Carolina preschool teachers have experienced implementing critical literacy in the preschool classroom?	Was addressed through interview questions # 10, 11, 14, 15, and 16.

## CODING

First the interviews were recorded on my iPad recording software, *Supernote*, as well as through hand-written notes. Although I strived for confidentiality, a breach of confidentiality is always a risk. As already described, to make the data as confidential as possible I transcribed the recorded data soon after each interview. Additionally, the data was kept confidential and not shared with anyone else. I then began with an initial analysis; this also guaranteed that the information would be vivid in my memory. By coding the transcribed data immediately and then destroying and shredding the original documents or locking them away, allowed me to further guarantee confidentiality. Pseudonyms of all the teachers, school names, and any students were also used in the study; with this I encouraged all participants to think of their own pseudonym. Shortly after transcribing the interviews I then begin the initial process of coding.

When doing my analysis, my goal centered on understanding each case in detail but also looking for common themes (Yin, 2003) amongst the collective case of seven participants, or by what is known as cross case analysis (Creswell, 1994), etc. In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013) and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013) were used to analyze the interview data. Descriptive coding involves summarizing the data into a word or short phrase while In Vivo coding involves using the participant's own words (Saldaña, 2013). For a great deal of my coding descriptive coding was employed.

During the initial coding process, I looked over the data and started by doing coding mapping, compiling a list of possible codes. This then segued into a complete initial round of coding of each interview document. Following that, sub codes for each of

the codes were devised. Saldaña, (2013) recommends using sub codes as a way to further analyze descriptive data.

At a later point, I revisited the data, doing what Saldaña (2013) calls a cross case analysis, where I compared the codes and sub-codes between transcripts. During this I looked for the ones that were the most salient within a multitude of the interview transcript data to create my next round of analysis. The similarities between the interview transcripts varied, some were striking others bared little or no resemblance. These similarities, differences, salient points, and themes are described in great detail in my analysis that follows. Additionally, analytic memos were compiled to reflect upon some of the things I heard or thought about in relation to the interviews. This also involved thinking of names for the new cross case codes and color-coding the relevant transcribed data so that I could group similar themes across the interviews together. During this round of coding cycle, I also moved on to a more in-depth coding process, where I had to jettison some of the previous codes as I reanalyzed the data. As noted by Saldaña (2013), “Second cycle coding methods, if needed, are advanced ways or reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods” (p. 207).

As I continued to analyze the themes and codes within the existing body of related literature this research process became highly non-linear. This included an ongoing and rigorous search of new related literature that I could reference or make inferences within my analysis to. As Maxwell (2013) explains, qualitative research is not linear and the design/can change as the study evolves. This non-linear process continued for many rounds of coding, where data was continually re-grouped and organized. The on-going e-mail correspondence with my participants allowed me to follow up with participants in

case I had any questions, discrepancies, or needed additional information regarding the interview data recording. Additionally, this provided me with an opportunity to ask additional questions if needed and do a member check to make sure the information I gathered was accurate and I understood them correctly.

For each additional coding cycling the number of codes/themes became quite lengthy. I finally organized the data into the following three broad categories: Part 1: direct critical literacy implications, Part 2: the broader picture: general teaching for social justice implications with preschool children, and Part 3: critical literacy and teaching for social justice with preschoolers: challenges and considerations.

Part 1: direct critical literacy implications includes the following sub codes/categories: critical literacy through read-alouds and critical questioning Including: 1) Pre-prepared or spur of the moment questions based on *teacher's* interests, 2) Pre-prepared teacher questions based on *children's* interests, backgrounds, and classroom events (including: critical literacy as culturally relevant pedagogy, bibliotherapy, progressivist/based on their interests) 3) Having students formulate their own emergent critical literacy questions, and 4) Based on parent's/guardian's input.

Additional topics/codes in Part 1 also include: critical literacy to explore multiple perspectives (including: historical events, non-traditional fairytales, and other types of fiction, and additional ways. The types of books/read-alouds the interviewed teachers utilized (including common children's stories/fairytales, social justice/diversity books, historical/ non-fiction texts, and other types of books), text other than read-alouds, and taking direct social justice action.

Part 2: the broader picture- general teaching for social justice implications

with preschool children includes: 1) developmentally appropriate social justice topics (including: race/ racism, sexism/gender, sexual orientation/family structure/heterosexism, cisgenderism, fairness, socioeconomic status/ economic inequality, ableism, religious differences and holidays, intersectionality, issues within the classroom and school, issues concerning their larger community, privilege, and socio-environmental justice and environmentalism.

2) Additional ways to teach for social justice with preschoolers other than critical literacy (Including critical multicultural education and multicultural education as celebration, exposing children's preconceived stereotypes, culturally relevant pedagogy (including valuing different dialects and languages, and equity pedagogy,) free playtime, creative drama, multicultural materials, music, lesson/lecture/discussion, current events, family and community involvement.

Codes/categories developed for Part 3: critical literacy and teaching for social justice with preschoolers: challenges, considerations, and assessment include: 1) people and structural constraints (including: administration, other staff, parents, required curriculum, lack of resources and age appropriate social justice texts, and lack of pre-service teacher training), 2) implementing constructivist and progressivist pedagogy (including: child centered curriculum, based on children's questions and inquiry) and 3) other developmental considerations (including: young children's limited attention span, cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium, not within their zone of proximal development including too advanced/egocentrism) and 4) other teacher considerations (including: planning and preparation, transitioning into social justice/critical literacy, guilt, prerequisites for critical literacy with preschoolers (community building and school-wide

culture and student's examining their own identities), and 5.) the assessment and effectiveness of critical literacy with preschool children.

#### CONCLUSION/TRANSITION

This chapter explains how my in-depth semi-formal interviews and follow up e-mails were carried out. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perspectives of a specific group of SC preschool teachers regarding critical literacy as a pedagogical tool in teaching preschool aged children about social justice issues. With this it included a semi-informal interview as well as follow up e-mails.

This chapter includes an overview of the research design and methodology, role of the researcher, questions and interview protocol, context of the study, measures for ethical protection, criteria for selecting participants, data collection and procedures, and how and when the data was analyzed.

Chapter four will describe the research findings, where a detailed overview and analysis of the information gathered from the interviews is provided. While, Chapter five presents an additional discussion, conclusion, and summary of the study.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### OVERVIEW

For this qualitative research project, I selected seven former or current preschool teachers of four-year-olds who also currently held or were working towards a graduate degree in Education (at the doctoral level). Through this research my overarching question entailed “What are preschool teacher’s perspectives and experiences of critical literacy as a way to teach four-year-old children about social justice issues.” Though in-depth interviews and follow up e-mails, I gathered vast information and insight in regards to their perspectives implementing critical literacy with young children and pertinent information surrounding their critical literacy and teaching for social justice practices. Although critical literacy itself often involves or at least includes exploring the sociopolitical implications of text (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Flint, Lewison & Van Sluys, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Shor, 1999) this then extends itself to more general multicultural education and teaching for social justice curricular and pedagogical practices. Additionally, critical literacy involves multicultural education and teaching for social justice, as they are interwoven and cannot be separated.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

All of the participants were selected due to the fact that they defined themselves as social justice educators. They included seven past and current preschool teachers who

were assigned or gave themselves the following pseudonyms: Shambu, Carl, Jill, Bob, Bruce, Mac, and Elizabeth, all of who were of diverse races, ethnicities, ages, genders, and other identity statuses. All of the participants had or were working towards a doctorate in education and had taught or were currently teaching preschool to four-year-old children. They had a range of experience teaching young children and four-year-olds spanning a few years-to numerous decades. Many participants worried about their anonymity and the sensitive nature of some of the data, therefore a detailed biographical sketch of the participants is intentionally not provided in order to further ensure their anonymity within the research, nor is it integral to any of the research questions. Additionally, as educators committed to social justice who all expressed interest in teaching children about all forms of bigotry (racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) the focus of these interviews was to learn *how* they carry out these practices and what obstacles they face while pushing the envelope with curriculum. However, a table is included that provides anonymous demographical data about the participants.

**TABLE 4.1: DEMOGRAPHICAL DATA OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Demographic Data</b>	<b># of Participants</b>
Race: African American	2
Race: Caucasian	5
Gender: Female	4
Gender: Male	3
Years Teaching Early Childhood: 1-2	1
Years Teaching Early Childhood: 3-5	2
Years Teaching Early Childhood: 5 or more	4
Age: Under 30	1
Age: 30-40	1
Age 40+	5
Currently Teaching Preschool: Yes	1

Currently in an Administration Position for Early Childhood Education	2
Full-Time Doctoral Student and not currently working in prek-12 schools	4

When interviewed they raised some similar and some different issues and ideas about implementing critical literacy and teaching for social justice pedagogy with this age group. Their insights are discussed and analyzed below through a cross case analysis.

### PART 1: DIRECT CRITICAL LITERACY IMPLICATIONS

After some general warm-up questions and background demographical and biographical questions, each participant was then provided with a working definition of Critical Literacy (the same which appears in this dissertation under the OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS) that included: *Critical Literacy*-Paulo Freire (1970) known for planting the seeds for critical pedagogy can also be credited for planting the seeds of critical literacy (McLaren, 2011). One of the most common definitions involves exploring the sociopolitical implications of the text (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lewison; Shor, 1999). According to Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) critical literacy specifically involves “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple-view points, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382).

One of the main purposes of the interviews was to see how each of the participant’s fostered critical literacy within a preschool classroom with four-year-olds. Therefore, a definition helped to ensure we were all using a similar working definition of critical literacy.

## CRITICAL LITERACY THROUGH READ-ALOUDS AND CRITICAL QUESTIONING

Although the participants had varying levels of experience implementing critical literacy, as social justice minded educators they all shared some familiarity with it.

Teacher/ circle time read-alouds were expressed by all participants as the primary time for critical literacy practices to take place in a preschool classroom. Specifically, via critical questioning (also known as “problem posing” (Freire, 1970) or “question posing” (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012)). The participants detailed how they engaged their preschoolers with critical literacy questions before, during, or after teacher read-alouds. In addition, to these questions occurring at different intervals throughout story time, this critical questioning/problem posing was implemented by the participants in other numerous ways, including 1) teacher pre-prepared or spur of the moment discussion questions based on the *teacher’s* ideas and interests and/or 2) teacher pre-prepared questions based on the *student’s or* classes’ interests (also known as Freire’s (1970) notion of “re-presenting”).

Method #2, teacher pre-prepared questions based on the *student’s or* classes’ interests has been broken down into two even smaller categories of analysis, a) progressivist curriculum and b) critical literacy as culturally relevant pedagogy. This progressivist pedagogy, based on the children’s interests, entailed the teacher mentioning previous social justice topics/questions/issues their students discussed, asked or dealt with at a previous class time, ones that they had previously observed amongst the children during free playtime or lunch. They then re-presented these questions or issues

to their class through the context of similar themes within children's books and asking related questions.

Many of the teachers interviewed incorporated culturally relevant pedagogy ( Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995) in a number of ways throughout this critical questioning process. This included the teacher's drawing from the student's lived experiences, frames of reference/ways of knowing, and cultural capital/knowledge.

The last two ways that these educators expressed implementing this critical questioning was by 3) creating emergent child centered critical literacy practices, as they managed to scaffold the *children to generate their own questions during story time* or 4) based on the parent's/guardian's input.

These four methods of critical questioning/problem posing, 1) teacher pre-prepared or spur of the moment discussion questions based on the *teacher's* ideas and interests, 2) teacher pre-prepared questions based on the *student's or classes'* interests, 3) scaffolding the *children to generate their own questions during story time* and 4) basing critical questions off of the parent's/guardian's input, as well as the sub categories for critical questioning are explored in great detail below.

Pre-prepared or spur of the moment questions based on *teacher's* interests

As social justice oriented educators many of the teacher participants explained how they carefully planned critical literacy questions *ahead* of the lesson/reading of a book to make sure there was a social justice focus or discussion with preschool students. For others these questions came to the teachers in a spur of the moment way to make the story critical, thoughtful, and engaging and help the children develop a social justice

mindset. However, this was not emergent curriculum, in the sense that it was not based on the children's interest, but on the teacher's.

My first participant, Shambu seemed to have utilized critical literacy somewhat frequently with her preschool students, and during the interview it came about that she implemented it in a variety of ways. In regards to teacher-generated questions, Shambu stated, "But we can ask them about y'know what they think is right wrong, cause even at four- years-old they know right/wrong and y'know asking them questions like why is the person poor?" She continued by saying, "I think the whole point of critical literacy is to engage our students in thinking beyond the content. To question, to examine, um more closely to what, when, who, why, and how come, some h's in there also. No matter what the political view is." It is also key to note that here Shambu's question of "Why is this person poor?" remains an open-ended question, rather than one with that could be answered with a simple yes/no, which is later explored in greater detail.

Another participant, Jill described critical questioning similarly and noted that it is a core part of the critical literacy process. According to Jill, "critical literacy crosses the gamut. Whose voice is heard? Whose voices are silenced? Seeing what's there and what's not there. So it's just looking at what's there and what's not there?" Mentioning that we need to explore "does it (the text) perpetuate stereotypes?" Jill seemed to mean who is privileged by this interpretation and who is marginalized. She then gave the specific example of Reading *Dick and Jane* books and asking her students various critical questions. Some of these questions she asks them remain open-ended and vague, such as "What are we seeing?" With this, she says, children might then reply: 'There is, a mom and a dad and a dog and a house'.... But she then asks them even more direct questions

such as “Do all girls wear dresses?” Jill urges, “You analyze it for stereotypes, gender, family, culture, and race.” By expressing “You”, Jill seemed to mean the children with the teacher’s help. Asking questions such as whose voice is missing, whose perspective is shown, is defined as a key component to the critical literacy process (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

Bob, the next participant, described a great deal of his critical literacy practices as developing critical questions for students for read-alouds as well. While some of this seemed to mean critical questioning in general such as by using the Socratic method, he also seemed to imply that it is vital to look at social justice issues and “isms” within critical questioning. As mentioned earlier, “critical” in the context of critical literacy, stems from critical theory and focuses specifically on the sociopolitical, rather than critical thinking in general. For these critical questions, Bob mentioned reading books, looking at pictures, and asking children social justice related questions pertaining to power/ oppression such as racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism, etc. in relation to the book. A primary focus for Bob entailed asking students these critical questions while reading nonfiction texts such as books about Martin Luther King Jr. and other social justice related books that he intentionally selects.

Another participant, Bruce also frequents critical literacy pedagogy through the use of engaging the students in a critical questioning process of the classroom books during read-alouds. For Bruce, this includes making a concentrated effort to ask his students to question different points of view, stereotypes, and the other hidden sociopolitical implications of the text. Bruce uses critical questioning before, during, and after the story. For example, before the story he might take them on a “picture walk.” A

picture walk includes looking at the cover and illustrations of a story before it is read to give the children a sense of what the book is about (Meller et al., 2009). During this picture walk Bruce asks them critical questions about the illustrations to get them thinking critically about what they see before they even read the story. Labadie, Wetzel, and Rogers' (2012) study shows how critical literacy can be done before reading a book through book introductions as well. In addition to critical questioning occurring before a book is even started, the critical questioning also or could occur, at least in the way Bruce describes it, during and after the story too. Bruce highlighted the benefit of keeping these critical questions as open ended as possible, and asking his questions, "What do you think the authors purpose is?", "What do you see?", "How did it go?", "Why?" And "what is wrong with this?" If the students give him simple answers such as "because," he then prompts them further by asking more questions such as, "How do you think they felt?" On another note by asking students questions such as "How would you feel if this happened?" or "How do you think this made them feel? Sad? Angry? Happy?" Bruce places significant emphasis on guiding this process by focusing on the children's feelings. "I try to get their opinions on it." He feels this is a successful critical questioning tactic that can be incorporated with both fiction and nonfiction books.

With historical books, Bruce's critical questions often seem to take the form of "do you know why this happened?" or relating historical events to those of the children's own lives. Bruce guides them in what appears to be the method of extension (Machado, 2016), where a teacher expands a child's existing knowledge with added new information. In this case, Bruce does this by saying things such as, "Well you know how this happens well it's like that but it's worse. Everybody had this way of thinking."

Even though, the next participant, Elizabeth seemed to place the bulk of her critical literacy emphasis on what Meller et. al. (2009) terms selecting quality social justice books, Elizabeth did mention that she has utilized some of the regular classic books too, such as books by Dr. Seuss and Eric Carle. “Some of the books may be more of the classic literature,” Elizabeth said, “but the conversations you have about these books is what’s important.” Examples of the critical questions Elizabeth would ask include “Is this a fact? Is this an opinion?” She mentioned another example of critical questions she did in relation to her unit on African queens where she asked her students “Who can be a queen?” And if all queens look like Disney Princesses. Like Bruce, many of these critical questions also focused on feelings. For social justice lessons and critical literacy, she would ask them, “how did you think that made people feel?” or “how did your grandmother feel?” Although Elizabeth recognizes not every student is going to be interested, she seems to think that talking about the student’s everyday life is the best place to start and then as a teacher you can help them build off that and “dig deeper.” Additionally, she also stressed the importance of children learning to put themselves in other people’s situations. Based on the socio-psychological egocentric nature of children this may be difficult and would involve scaffolding (as is later discussed later under challenges and considerations).

For Mac, her pre-prepared or spur of the moment questions seemed to be based on the materials they had in the classroom, as she explained it was the materials themselves, that drew her to engage in critical literacy practices. In this sense she wasn’t coming in there with a pre-prepared agenda to do critical literacy, but it was rather the books that her school had available to her that led her to critical questioning during read-alouds with

her preschool students. Mac described that in one preschool she worked out there were horribly outdated resources, and this included books that depicted disturbing racial and gender stereotypes. For Mac, critical literacy and this critical questioning seemed to be a necessity in order to not perpetuate these blatant and overt stereotypes through the text and illustrations of these books. She also alluded to the fact that these books made critical literacy an easy process since the narratives and stereotypes needed to be interrupted. Like Shambu, Mac asked her students critical literacy questions such as “Can women do this?” or “Can someone of a different skin color do this?” when the books portrayed photos of white men working white collar jobs or other stereotypical images.

### **Pre-Prepared Teacher Questions Based on *Children’s* Interests, Backgrounds, and Classroom Events**

#### **Critical Literacy as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as a key way to teach for social justice came up frequently during the interviews with most of the participants. Culturally relevant pedagogy is described as using “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective” (Gay, 2000, p.29). Culturally relevant pedagogy involves teachers fostering a classroom that is similar to students lived reality. It also celebrates student’s diverse cultures. Here critical literacy as culturally relevant pedagogy is discussed in regards to making connections between text and community/home life in a critical questioning process. Culturally relevant pedagogy is later discussed in even more general terms and in the broader picture of teaching for social justice with young children.

In regards to culturally relevant pedagogy utilized within a literacy framework with emerging readers, this could be conceptualized as building off of earlier models of child centered learning. For example, although not a critical approach, the Language Experience approach (Allen, 1969; Machado, 2016; Morrison, 2014) or a Natural Approach to reading (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Fields, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Machado, 2016) involves reading instruction to be informal and based on children's own interests, questions, and experiences.

Shambu alluded to culturally relevant pedagogy and topics as a way to foster the critical literacy/ critical questioning process. As Shambu says, "Providing a classroom that reflects the student's real world experiences for them. Real world experiences for them what they are going through in their lives. And when I say reflections, I mean it is mirroring. Where students can see where they are." This notion is similar to the concept of creating a Hybrid/ third Space to make the classroom match the student's home life. López-Robertson and Schramm-Pate (2012) explain that this third/hybrid space is needed to combine both the official space of school and the un-official space of home, so children can engage in curriculum that is relevant. Bhabha (1994) outlines that through this "hybrid space" the gap between school and home life can be closed or lessened. This is crucial, especially for marginalized students who do not feel represented in school and often experience a particular disconnect between school/home lives. Seeming to build upon this idea of the third/hybrid space, Shambu reiterated: "I think one of the things I would do in my classroom and try to do is to first of all make it real life, real world experiences, engage a curriculum or develop a curriculum that is relevant to the students

or even if it's not if the curriculum calls for something historical make it relevant to the students.”

Shambu also detailed how she specifically links culturally relevant pedagogy to critical literacy with children's literature during read-alouds. For this she takes common children's stories or fairytales and guides them and makes them culturally relevant with critical literacy questions. “What would Cinderella look like in your neighborhood? Y'know have them look at it that way,” she explains. Since part of Shambu's teaching experience included working with preschool children from low income families she was often led to challenge stories that only portray middle class families. By explaining “In *your* neighborhood” she means relevant to children's families socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity. Other studies on critical literacy have been done that implement a similar critical literacy technique of having students re-image text to make it relevant to their lives, such as that done by Jones (2012). In Jones' study students in the observed classroom were predominately from a lower socioeconomic status as well, and were asked to re-imagine the characters and stories that related to their own lived experiences. Like Shambu's pedagogy, this allowed the students to create their own sort of a counternarrative based on their lived realities, and served as an extension activity to the critical literacy questioning. This would also fall under one of Boutte's (2002) Guidelines for Critical Discussions about Books, including 5.b. which includes the example of children making connections within the book their own lives.

Similarly, Bob's implementation of CRP can also be understood in the context of creating a third space or hybrid space (Bhabha, 1994) as well. On this regard, Bob emphasized the merit of encouraging students to talk about their home life and

neighborhood both within the general context of teaching for social justice and specifically within read-alongs as a form of critical literacy. López-Robertson (2011) highlights how children can make connections with text by “re-tellings of events that impacted them either directly or indirectly” (p. 58). In Bob’s preschool teaching experience, he has focused on prompting students to make these connections. This includes making classroom text- to home life connections. These types of connections can also be characterized within Miller’s (2002) types of text connections including text- to- self and/or text-to-world. This was also apparent in Shambu’s description, where she expressed the value of helping the student’s make connections to other types of class materials.

Facilitating preschool lessons, including read-alouds that have relevance to her student’s community and home lives was a theme within Jill’s interview as well. “Well it’s in the context of the children’s lives,” Jill says, “and the community lives. So making sure people’s voices are heard across all the board.” By community she seemed to mean their neighborhood, friends, family, etc. For Jill, using CRP also functions as a way to value each children’s unique lived experience and make them feel represented in the classroom. She also mentions that each student has their own “rich knowledge” based on their lived experiences. This echoes Howard (2003) idea of valuing all students’ cultural capital as equal. In practice this means that teachers strive to validate all of their student’s frames of reference or ways of knowing equally. By allowing all student’s experiences and backgrounds to have equal importance in the classroom, teachers are able to help eradicate hegemonic ideals of knowledge, such as those that privilege the perspective of dominant groups such as white, middle class, nuclear, American families. Jill also

emphasized that knowing student's backgrounds and experiences is essential to forming good relationships with them.

Elizabeth raised the issue of how not every student is going to be interested in every topic, but she believes that talking about the student's everyday life is the best place to start. In terms of critical literacy, Elizabeth, like many of the participants also seemed to imply that she asks students questions about the book that could relate to their own lives.

Culturally relevant pedagogy in terms of bridging the gap between school and home life was described by Bruce as well. Like many of the other participants previously discussed he also noted this vast significance. In regards to critical literacy in particular, Bruce would specifically bring in various forms of text and issues to discuss that were related to the demographic of his students. For example, the majority of his preschool students were African American so he focused frequently on issues pertaining to race including black history and current events. "For example," he says, "trying to get them to see if there are any differences between what goes on in the book and at home." This is explored in more detail later under the discussion relating to the types of books selected by the participants.

### **Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy uses literature as a way for children to understand difficult experiences (Thibault, 2004) and can work in conjunction to critical literacy (Mankiw & Strasser, 2013). Such topics could include reading a book pertaining to the death of a loved one, an illness, or a divorce. Book topics could also include social injustice issues such as racism, poverty, and/or sexism. Such bibliotherapy could be employed as a means

to discuss general and common at-home or life issues and challenges children experience. However, if teachers make a concerted effort to observe children's social interactions, conflict, and overall socio-emotional, they can find books pertaining to the topics as they arise within the classroom and then re-present (Freire, 1970) the issues they observed through a book and critical literacy discussion. As Lim (2004) highlights, teachers, "ought to create or look out for children's struggles with difficult social issues within their play activities (e.g. fairness, equality, punishment, reward, or competition) and engage them in real conversations and authentic problem solving" (p.400).

During the interview with Bruce he discussed how issues of sexism have appeared frequently in his student's dramatic play. This involves children perpetuating gender stereotypes such as with dramatic play clothes and role they choose to act out (i.e. girls playing dress up in dresses, girls pretending to be mom's with baby dolls). Bruce implied that he then takes these themes and makes them into critical literacy lessons, such as reading a relevant book about sexism and asking relevant critical literacy questions. By doing so he makes these issues into a teachable moment, which can also be therapeutic for the children. Jill practices a similar method, by asking children a critical literacy type question in this crucial moment such as "Do all girls wear dresses?" However, by re-presenting these issues back to students during read-alouds and questions students can have a more in-depth understanding of these sociopolitical issues. This method also shares similarities to Serriere's (2010) *Carpet Time Democracy*, where digital photos were taken of Kindergarten students during free playtime and then presented during circle time as conversation starters for exploring social justice issues, specifically issues and conflicts that had occurred within the classroom and between the students themselves.

However, unlike in *Carpet Time Democracy*, the issues/events that occurred are remembered by the teacher rather than through photos and then explored in the broader sense with a book and relevant questions.

### **Progressivist/Based on the Children's Interests**

Interview participants such as Bruce, Bob, Jill, and Shambu all placed emphasis on listening to the topics children are discussing throughout the school day in order to make social justice lessons relevant to the student's interests. This means it doesn't have to be an issue that directly impacts them such as discussed previously with the bibliotherapy approach, but rather a question they have or maybe something they are portraying and acting out in dramatic play. Bruce, Bob, Jill, and Shambu again seemed to mention the notion of re-presenting (Freire, 1970) these topics that sparked the children's curiosity back to them, which served as a way to make teaching for social justice progressivist based.

In order to base critical literacy questions on children's interest's teachers need to be in tuned to what children want to learn about and what they have questions about that relate *specifically* to the sociopolitical. However, none of the participants seemed to give very specific or direct examples of how they could re-present these sociopolitical topics of interest later through the form of critical literacy.

Bob mentioned that he really hones in on what the children are saying. "Really tapping into what the children are saying to me and my assistant," he explains, "What are the children most concerned about in their own community and we want to use that as a launching pad to explore the issues that are most important to children," he says.

### **Having Students Formulate Their Own Emergent Critical Literacy Questions**

Some of the participants expressed how *children* themselves could formulate their own critical literacy questions, and be allowed to ask them before, during, or after story time. For instance, Shambu explained, “When I think about critical literacy I think of engaging um, students in questioning what they understand about the reading. What question they have and just to think outside of the box to be interrogating the literature, the story, whatever it is, to ask questions.” However, by having students generate questions when introduced to a story, during, or after it seems difficult for many of these opportunities to lend themselves to exploring the sociopolitical rather than just critical thinking in general. This remains a worthy topic of investigation that would need more exploration for how to implement it in practice and is explored later in the Conclusion/Discussion in greater detail.

### **Based on Parent’s/Guardian’s Input**

Another method Bob employs to generate critical literacy questions is based on the input of the children’s parents or guardians. “We also send out a survey that is about exploring your community. It allows parents and guardians to let us know what they are concerned about or at the same time what they (the parent/guardian and child) celebrate in their community.” He mentions issues range from poverty to playground safety. He elaborates, “Instead of projecting our own values we try to tap into what the parents and children are saying.” Upon analyzing this data, it become apparent, just as with some of the other types of critical questioning strategies detailed thus far, that teachers could then generate critical literacy questions around these issues and re-present them with a relevant text. Derman-Sparks (1989) highlights the importance of building a positive

relationship with a family in order to develop effective anti-bias education for young children. This entails including the family within the learning community in many ways.

#### CRITICAL LITERACY TO EXPLORE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Teachers showing multiple perspectives and viewpoints through the text was also a common practice/theme mentioned by most of the participants for their critical literacy instruction. Shambu, Jill, Carl, and Bruce explained that exploring multiple perspectives was a key way in which they incorporated critical literacy. This included scaffolding students to explore multiple perspectives of historical events by incorporating a variety on nonfiction texts, presenting non-traditional fairytales that showed alternative viewpoints or lifestyles of the character, or simply exploring multiple perspectives within any book by the critical literacy questions generated.

#### **Historical Events through Counter-Narratives**

Counter-Narratives of history also emerged as a theme during the interviews. Counter-Narratives (Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso 2002) provide stories by marginalized points of view that challenge the dominant narrative. The role of incorporating a diverse selection of books including those that had an Afrocentric take on history was expressed by many of the participants. As Boutte (2002) describes, “Presenting primarily Eurocentric literature gives children only one perspective of the world, which may lead them to hold misconceptions about other cultures, and possibly result in prejudice and stereotypes.” (p.150). Counter-narratives of the victories and accomplishments diverse populations would also fall under what Jackson & Boutte (2009) call “liberation literature.”

Both Shambu and Elizabeth provided the example of reading books that portray multiple perspectives of the Thanksgiving story. “For Thanksgiving,” Shambu says, “We talked about the Native Americans and the pilgrims and talking about that in a different framework than we traditionally think about it, y’know asking them questions, so what do you think happened at the first thanksgiving just to ascertain what they heard before. To get a gauge on what their thinking is.” This echoes the idea that teachers need to be mindful of how curriculum tends to be focused on dominant Eurocentric ideas (Banks 2008; Howard, 2003) and teachers must help students become aware of this and provide additional resources that show alternative views, through what Banks (2008) calls “The Knowledge Construction Process.” The Knowledge Construction Process is one of Bank’s five dimensions of Multicultural Education and he describes it as, “the procedures by which social, behavioral, and natural scientists create knowledge and how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways that knowledge is constructed within it. The knowledge construction process is an important part of multicultural teaching. Teachers help students to understand how knowledge is created and how it is influenced by the racial, ethnic, gender, and social-class positions of Individuals and groups” (p. 91). Concerning multiple perspectives of historical events, the knowledge construction process would fall under questioning the implicit cultural assumptions or frames of reference, as noted by Banks (2008). Showing diverse perspectives is also crucial as Boutte (2016) explains, “In K-12 schools, the history of African American students is limited, one sided, and often inaccurate, and typically begins with slavery” (p.65).

“Counter-narratives” Shambu exclaimed, in regards to exploring the Thanksgiving story from an underrepresented view. Such counter-narratives would involve learning the story from the Native American’s perspective or through a non-Eurocentric lens. According to Lewis-Charp (2003) history class is an ideal setting for students to investigate social and political inequality and develop an understanding of such issues.

Elizabeth would frequently begin her year by teaching about Native Americans, and then when Thanksgiving rolled around the class would segue into learning the Thanksgiving story from the perspective of the Native Americans as well. However, Elizabeth received criticism for this activity and a discussion on that is included under the challenges and considerations section.

### **Through Non-Traditional Fairytales**

Some of the participants frequented different versions of fairytales and popular children’s stories to show multiple viewpoints. This included mentioning books such as *CinderEdna* (Jackson & O’Malley,1988).

Carl frequently read alternative versions of traditional fairytales as a way to get multiple perspectives and to provide counternarrative for his students. A more detailed discussion on this follows later, with the general discussion of how using fairytales and children’s stories within critical literacy can be implemented.

Bruce too utilized non-tradition and traditional fairytales in conjunction with one another to get students to think about multiple viewpoints. This includes versions of the fairytales as told from around the world. For this practice, Bruce specified how he usually

starts with reading the traditional fairytale to the children and then they would read the nontraditional spinoff of the fairytale.

### **Additional Ways to Explore Multiple Perspectives through Critical Literacy**

Shambu and Jill use virtually any book to show multiple perspectives. For Jill this ranged from social/justice diversity books to popular fairytales. As even if the book shows the typical perspective, for Shambu and Jill it seems to be all about the questions that can get them to really try to grapple with another's perspective. For example, when reading the traditional version of Cinderella, Shambu asks, "What would Cinderella look like in your neighborhood?" this culturally relevant example mentioned earlier also fits for exploring multiple perspectives. Elaborating upon this, Shambu provided additional insight into this teaching practice:

"I think for children who have been marginalized or their families have been marginalized, it uh, it's only been recently that I've thought about it for children who have privileged status. That I've seen the significance for them as well, but when you have children who live in poverty, you want to give them the opportunity to give them to think a little differently and think about life in a different sphere and now I've had more education about critical literacy and social justice I think all kids need it and it's not about the privilege, as much as social justice is about the privilege, the part about being a critical thinker has probably nothing to do with social justice but just that you grew up being able to think for yourself and not being indoctrinated into any system and when the two come together, the critical thinking and social justice and wow then that's great and then we do have some advanced thinking moving beyond the status quo."

Elizabeth expressed great enthusiasm for exposing young children to varying perspectives too. "Critical literacy allows one to do that," she says, "whether you're talking about various religious perspective or people who are racially or ethnically different than ourselves. It gives us the ability to analyze the truth and analyze stereotypes." By exploring multiple perspectives children can learn about various racial ethnic and social economic statuses she says. Expressing her concern that young children may already have a lot of existing stereotypes and misconceptions about other groups of people she feels this is especially significant. An example, of Elizabeth getting her students to explore multiple perspectives through critical literacy is when she showed them the different types of queens through children's books. This included learning about African queens.

Like Shambu, and Elizabeth, Jill also expounded upon multiple perspectives as a way to do critical literacy with preschoolers. "Well it's on a daily basis you build a class community that understands we're in this together. So knowing all ways is valid". This also seems to fit with the James Banks (2008) notion of the Knowledge Construction Process as described above as well.

Bruce, a strong advocate of exploring and discussing feelings with his preschool students, employs discussions revolving around feelings when exploring multiple perspectives as well. "It wasn't as hard to do as I thought," he told me, "I could ask them, how would you feel if that happened to you?" and "How would *you* feel?" With this he gets the multiple perspectives of his students themselves, rather than multiple perspectives through various text sources, such as with the Thanksgiving example.

However, the early childhood literature notes that it is often hard for young children to try to put themselves in the perspective of others due to their egocentric nature (Morrison, 2014), and this is explored later as well.

Carl too mentioned that by guiding the children through multiple perspectives by asking the children the types of questions where they had to attempt to put themselves in the place of others may be difficult for young children. With this he seems to be alluding to the egocentric nature of young children, which was considered with great importance during the coding of many of these interviews as well (SEE: Challenges and Considerations).

#### TYPES OF BOOKS/READ-ALOUDS

As already touched upon all of the teacher's descriptions of critical literacy with four-year-olds involve teacher read-alouds, including both fiction and nonfiction books alike. While critical literacy can revolve around what Meller et al. (2009) describes as "high quality social justice books" for children, traditional and untraditional versions of fairytales, popular children's books, as well as books that show stereotypes can also be valuable for critical literacy inquiry. While some of the teachers interviewed had limited resources at their disposal and thus had no or little choice to use stereotypical children's books, others selected such books purposefully in order to deconstruct them.

Additionally, some of the interviewed teachers were not limited by outdated books, but faced other challenges with book availability, due to the fact that they had a pre-set book list they needed to draw from, such as Carl expressed. (SEE: Challenges and Considerations).

### Using Common Children's Stories/Fairytales

Within a critical literacy framework and employing multiple perspectives or critical questioning, one of Shambu's tactics is to draw from traditional children's stories such as *Robin Hood* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. "I'm thinking like Robin Hood stories or the three little bears," Shambu replied in regards to which type of books she uses for critical literacy, "I'm thinking about just general stories where you can ask those questions." Shambu seems to mean a teacher can successfully pose questions to the students about topics such as socioeconomic inequality in a way that is age appropriate for young children, such as through reading books like *Robin Hood*. As noted previously, it seems that Shambu did not seem to by any means specific social justice oriented books were a necessity for critical literacy, but rather it was the questions the teacher asked that mattered.

At one point in the interview, Jill shed additional great insight, when she explained she wouldn't simply just do a lesson on critical literacy but rather she would make it a key component of every day. "Again," she told me, "I wouldn't *do* a lesson critical literacy. It is about living it in a daily basis so one can take a look at who is represented and who's not. So let's read the *Dick and Jane* books." She would then ask her students the quintessential critical literacy questions such as "Who is represented?" Similar to Shambu, Jill seems to imply that a preschool teacher can read a common children's storybook to preschoolers during a class read aloud and make critical questioning an integral part of the traditional story time. Along this notion, Jill implies this critical questioning can occur before, during, or after the story is read to the class, as much of the research suggests.

### **Non-Traditional Fairytales**

As described previously, many of the participants are drawn to non-traditional versions of fairytales for critical literacy instruction. Some of these non-traditional versions of classic story books could also be categorized as “teaching for social justice books” or “multicultural” books, but in order to provide the most in-depth description of the various types of books they are given their own book category in this analysis.

As discussed earlier within this summary and analysis, Carl highlighted his fondness of alternative versions of fairytales such as *Sleeping Bobby*, *Cinderfella*, *CinderEdna* to read and deconstruct with his students. However, he mentioned this presents a challenge, as some children were confused and had a hard time reading different versions than what they were familiar with. This is discussed in greater detail within the section on cognitive dissonance/disequilibrium.

From what Bruce described in the interviews he too frequents non-traditional fairytales but also the traditional classic versions as well for critical literacy practices. Bruce described using various versions of fairytales from around the world. As a strong advocate for reading versions of fairytales that are both Eurocentric and Afro centric to juxtapose them, he noted that this practice actually complimented some of his standards that he was expected to meet working in a public 4K South Carolina preschool. The set of specific standards he refers to were created by combining the *Good Start, Grow Smart* pre-k standards along with the South Carolina Kindergarten State Standards. Specifically, he explains, it fit with the required standard of making connections between books (text - to- text connections).

### **Social Justice/Diversity Books**

Although Shambu reiterated many times and really stressed the fact that critical literacy conversations do *not* need to rely on social justice books, she is in fact a proponent of utilizing them. Shambu says, “Y’know also include different books, with groups of different people, people of different race, different nationality, different stories, so giving them multiple stories. I grew up with all the princesses’ white and all of them had blonde hair and blue eyes and all the princes’ had blonde hair and blue eyes. Today there is really no excuse for us to not have more diversity in our books.” With this Shambu indicates that it is essential for a teacher’s book selection to encompass a wide variety of diversity relevant to the real world.

Jill too frequently mentioned the fact that critical literacy does not have to involve social justice oriented books. Additionally, I again note that throughout the interview Jill also accentuated her belief that critical literacy and social justice do not have to be a formal lesson, asserting that it is most effective if not done in a formal lesson. Rather, she believes critical literacy and social justice topics/lessons should be interwoven into the daily curriculum. “We don’t have to say, ‘Let’s talk about sexual orientation.’ Instead you could read *Tango and Me*, a great example of a male-to-male relationship with penguins. And what do you think about it? They are very capable of having these conversations.” On a side note, and what is later explored in this analysis, is that many of the other participants additionally mentioned being inclusive of sexual orientation with preschool lessons but not having a “direct” lesson about it. Within this research, a further analysis of the participant’s beliefs on the developmental appropriate

of various social justice topics is included in the section: “developmentally appropriate social justice topics”. However, additional research would be needed to determine if this is a pattern and if so to uncover the specific reasoning.

As noted previously, the non-traditional versions of fairytales Carl and others talked about (i.e. *Sleeping Bobby*, *Cinderfella*, *CinderEdna*) are versatile and fit into critical literacy in great multitude of ways, including being categorized as “teaching for social justice texts” as some of them challenge hegemonic norms and dominant power structures. Other types of multicultural texts are also frequented by Carl, such as Mendez’s (2014) *Separate is Never Equal*.

Elizabeth expressed the importance of selecting books that have positive images of African-Americans and other populations. “I enjoy seeking children's books that provide multiple skin tones,” she says. Elizabeth really seemed to place great importance on utilizing diversity and social justice themed books, such as Small’s (1999) *Kevin and His Dad* or *the Visiting Day* about visiting a parent in prison.

#### Historical/ non-fiction texts

A large portion of the non-fiction books the participants mentioned pertained to historical events such as slavery and segregation. Bob posited the importance of questioning historical texts. His critical questioning strategies for non-fiction texts involve scaffolding students to help them understand the texts’ potential historical inaccuracies. “For example, the books I have read to my students about MLK and Harriet Tubman seem to skirt around the deeper issues and struggles,” Bob replied. This notion was troubling, as he wants his students to understand the real stories of the oppressed people and not a “sugar coated version.” This however, often presents a

challenge, as it is difficult to come across children's literature that portrays these deeper issues, he explains. It is of note, that during my own literature review pertaining to teaching for social justice books and historical texts for preschoolers, there does not seem to be an abundance of resources available for very young children. Additionally, many of the ones that are on the market do not often explore events in detail or examine power structures. On a final note, these books that are available are often from small presses and are not readily available at libraries, within schools, or bookstores.

Bruce, who has previously been established in this overview and analysis as a very strong advocate of historical and non-fiction books for teaching for social justice and critical literacy focused read-alouds, often selects books that highlight the oppression of African Americans. He includes many read-alouds pertaining to discrimination based on the color of people's skin such as enslavement and civil rights. Bruce also detailed the way counter-narratives about historical events are important to show people who fought against oppression and accomplished incredible things. Bruce shared that he finds this easy to talk about as an African American himself as well as teaching a class of predominantly African American students, as I previously explored in greater detail.

The focus on topics such as African queens has shown that Elizabeth also includes non-fiction books within her critical literacy curriculum. She also focuses on race, both of African Americans, Latinas, and Africans, she tells me, including ones outlining the scientific explanations for skin color, such as what she called the "I am Black" or "I am Latina" book series, where differing shades of black and brown are explored. Nieto's (2010) work shows how it is beneficial and important to encourage young students to ask such questions about differences such as skin color. These

conversations should not be shut down, and are a part of a healthy inquiry process that enables children to learn about and appreciate differences. Additionally, Derman-Sparks (1989) explains how it is key to respond to young children's questions about differences. With this they should teach children to develop a "color-filled celebration" rather than a "color blind denial" viewpoint (Derman-Sparks, 1989). However, it is unfortunate that in reality many teachers do not feel prepared to address such conversations and end up steering away from such sensitive topics (Lewis-Charp, 2003), this issue is further discussed under the "Discussion and Conclusion" section to follow shortly.

### **Other Types of Books**

As mentioned participants such as Jill, Shambu, Mac, and others stressed again and again that it is the *conversation* that matters rather than the book. For example, while these participants draw from social justice oriented books as described previously, they also demonstrate a very child-centered and progressivist focus with these books. As many of the participants can and have been quoted already on this:

Elizabeth: "But the conversations you have about these books is what's important."

Mac: "What matters most is that you are using books that the children are engaged with," or when Shambu asked: "What would Cinderella look like in your neighborhood?" (which could be used while reading the traditional fairytale of Cinderella.

In all these examples, and others this means that the books must be child centered, (Morrison, 2014) and be interesting and relevant to the students.

## READING TEXT OTHER THAN READ-ALOUDS

Although the teacher's interviewed described read-alouds as the most viable way to engage their preschool students in critical literacy, the interviewees have also implemented critical literacy with other texts and in additional ways as well. "For example," Jill explained, "Let's say we go to the cafeteria and it has pork and beef but we have children who are vegetarians. That is the point of critical literacy, we teach children to question everything. So we start thinking what else could this mean. So children don't say 'that's weird', but rather 'it's just different.' It has to be something you believe as the fabric of your classroom, the books you read, and the thing you do." Jill extended the notion of critical literacy to critical questioning of everything is seen within some of the literature, such as the research findings of Stribling (2014) and her notion of creating a "critical literacy milieu." With this both Jill and Stribling illuminate that critical literacy is something that permeates the whole classroom environment and student/teacher interactions, it is not just something that takes place in isolation while having story time. Additionally, with Jill's mention of the cafeteria it seems she means examining the menu and the sociopolitical implications of not having vegetarian options. Perhaps by using methods such as Socratic questioning and asking the students things such as, "Why are there not more vegetarian options?" and "Who decides this?" as teachers can read the menu to students and then examine it critically, just like they would a classroom story to see who it is including and who it is leaving out.

Surprisingly, none of the teachers mentioned critical literacy as occurring during a 1:1 or small group reading strategy, such as through a 1:1 Language Experience approach (Allen, 1969; Machado, 2016; Morrison, 2014) or 1:1 Natural Approach to reading

(Ashton-Warner, 1963; Fields, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Machado, 2016) which could involve a teacher reading with a student and basing the reading instruction and perhaps critical literacy questions on the children's own questions and curiosity, which would work well with 1:1 reading time with children during free playtime or throughout the day.

### TAKING DIRECT SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTION

As part of Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) definition of critical literacy, it also includes "taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382), and somewhat analogous to this is Level 4 of James Banks' (2009) Levels of Multicultural Education, "The Social Action Approach" which he describes as "Students make decisions on important issues and take actions to help solve them" (p. 40). On this note, while all of the participants explicitly promote social justice in the classroom, some of them mentioned promoting activism as well. For instance, Mac expressed how critical literacy should be used as a way to impact the world and make change, however, no specific concrete examples of activism were included. This too remains another worthy topic of further investigation.

## **Part 2: THE BROADER PICTURE: GENERAL TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPLICATIONS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

Although critical literacy, teaching for social justice, and multicultural education share many of the same and similar components and are interwoven, I have tried to separate them within this analysis as much as possible in order to explore the implications of critical literacy in the greatest detail possible. However, I felt it beneficial to ask participants some more general questions about teaching for social justice with young children, due to the fact that critical literacy practices are relatively uncommon and more

general methods of teaching for social justice may be very helpful in shedding additional light on social justice curricula for young children. On this regard, this portion of the analysis is broken up into: developmentally appropriate social justice topics and additional ways to teach for social justice with preschoolers (other than through critical literacy).

#### DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE SOCIAL JUSTICE TOPICS

Although developmentally appropriate practice is most commonly found within constructivist and progressivism (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), and it is criticized by critical scholars because they believe nothing can be developmentally appropriate for all children of diverse backgrounds and abilities (Lubeck, 1996; Sexton et. al, 2012) some critical scholars such as Cowhey (2006;2008) however take it into consideration.

As social justice minded educators, it was not a great surprise that all of the participants I interviewed seemed to imply most social justice topics would be well suited for teaching four-year-olds. For example, when asked what topics are appropriate Shambu said, “Just about any topic you can think of you. You can think about it in terms of right and wrong values and characters.” These topics are discussed in the context of critical literacy implications as well as teaching for social justice in the more general context as duly noted. The topics mentioned by participants have been coded into the following categories: race, social class, gender, sexual orientation/family structure, cisgenderism, ability status, religious differences and holidays, intersectionality, privilege, socio-environmental justice, issues within the surrounding community, culture, and current events. However, most of the participants alluded to or specifically said that they did not all feel as though these social justice topics should all be presented as formal

“topics” or “lessons” inserted into the preschool curriculum, as they seemed to be proponents of progressivist and emergent curricula. Instead, some of the interview participants explained that these ideas could just be woven throughout the class or dispersed amongst classroom read-alongs. Along this point, Mac elaborated that it is of immense importance to discuss all social justice topics because kids notice things early on. They get the societal messages from home and the media. For example, I’ve heard my students say things such as, “you can do that because you're a boy.” Jill too seems to think no topics are off limits. She says she has “no limits or reservations. We talked about issues of sexual issues,” she said, “homosexuals- if somebody has too mommies or daddies, racial issues, cultural no limitations. I think it’s all developmentally appropriate. Young children are more capable of dealing with issues than adults. You just have to bring it down to their level.” Expressing, a somewhat different perspective, Bruce mentioned that, “with certain social topics you don't have that much flexibility because you have to watch what you say,” he said. This is explored later with his mention of what he calls the “No Promo Homo” laws within South Carolina. This fits along with Brant’s (2016) research that has found that teachers have many worries about addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom. This is unfortunately the case for social justice educators who feel strongly about the importance of speaking about LGBTQ issues with young children, such as Bruce, yet worry they will be penalized.

Additionally, salient is that while all participants mentioned all social justice topics being developmentally appropriate, when asked to provide specific examples of what topics they had used in their classroom, not all topics were mentioned with equal frequency.

## **Race/ Racism**

Race was agreed upon by all participants as a developmentally appropriate social justice topic to explore with four-year-olds. Although all seemed comfortable talking about it, their level of comfort with it seemed to differ from participant to participant.

While discussing implementing race with preschoolers, Jill told me, “this notion of I don’t see color, everyone is the same- we know that’s not good, that color represents a part of their identity.” Shambu also mentioned exploring Native Americans and non-Eurocentric ideas. While Carl highlighted how non-traditional fairy tales can be used to explore racism. By nontraditional he seems to mean counter-narratives of historical events or socio-political concepts told in the form of fairytales. Bob too mentioned the topic of racism as a developmentally appropriate social justice topic with his key examples of reading biographies on Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman. With this he employs critical literacy to explore the issue of racism through the aid of these historical biographies. For example, he has his students reflect critically on the events themselves but also as mentioned previously exploring these texts for inaccuracies, and trying to help students understand why these texts might be inaccurate and whose voice these books might be representing and whose voice they might be ignoring.

Unlike some of the other participants interviewed, Bruce feels race is often the easiest to talk about. He explained this was due to the fact that his students were mostly of color like himself. Bruce discussed race through critical literacy through the books and questions he asked about the books. Often his books focus on race and the history of race and racism. He also explored race by discussing current events, such as the murder of Walter Scott.

Elizabeth focused heavily on race and nationality as developmentally appropriate social justice topic to explore with preschool children. This was highlighted in her focus on learning about African queens, exploring the 1960's and Martin Luther King Jr., slavery, and skin color. Like Bruce she focused on exploring race often through the lens of history, such as the Civil Rights Movement and slavery.

### **Sexism/Gender**

Issues of sexism and gender were frequently mentioned by the participants as developmentally appropriate social justice topics to explore with four-year-old children as well. For example, Jill referenced gender when she told me she would ask her student questions such as, "Do all girls wear dresses?" when it came up during dramatic playtime. Mac also specified, sex and gender were developmentally appropriate topics to discuss with preschoolers. Mac did this through critical literacy while reading children a story that portrayed sexist stereotypes, such as with the example she gave about a doctor and asking their children, "Can women do this?" in relation to varying professions portrayed in her literature.

Bruce also frequently explores sexism and gender with his preschoolers, including allowing the kids to wear whatever they want during dramatic play, regardless of if it seems geared towards boys or girls and discussing this with children when they comment on this.

### **Sexual Orientation/Family Structure/Heterosexism**

Sexual orientation was another topic that all participants mentioned as developmentally appropriate, but also seemed to have differing levels of comfort including it.

“And normal is two dads” says Jill, “normal is mom and a dad, those standards need to be debunked and demystified.” As Jill made very clear in the interviews, she would not do a formal “lesson.” However, she seems to feel this should be done in a subtle way. “Do you have to beat someone over the head with this?” she says, “We don’t have to say, ‘Let’s talk about sexual orientation’ Instead you could read *Tango and me* [as was mentioned in an earlier section of this analysis] a great example of a male-to-male relationship with penguins. And what do you think about it? They are very capable of having these conversations. Carl also mentioned reading *Tango and Me*.

Bruce said that he unfortunately does not feel comfortable diving into sexual orientation discussions and family structure with his students. While he explained that he thinks it certainly is developmentally appropriate and of vital importance, he sadly does not feel comfortable talking about it, due to what he calls “No Promo Homo” laws. Within South Carolina, a law states that, for health education outlines, “the program of instruction provided for in this section may not include a discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases.” S.C. Stat. § 59-32-30(5). At the time of this research, these laws exist within eight states, including Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah. For example, in Alabama, the law states, “Classes must emphasize, in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state.” Alabama State Code § 16-40A-2(c)(8). While Arizona mandates that “no district shall include in its course of study instruction

which... (1) promotes a homosexual life-style...(2) portrays homosexuality as a positive alternative life-style...(3) suggests that some methods of sex are safe methods of homosexual sex.” AZ Rev. Stat. § 15-716(c).

### **Cisgenderism**

Carl was the only participant to mention cisgenderism as a social justice topic. For example, he reads books such as *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014), about a transgendered child. Although he does mention this may be controversial and receive backlash from parents he still thinks it is developmentally appropriate and should be covered.

### **Fairness**

“Young children are so concerned with fairness,” Jill said, “Oppressive kinds of thoughts are passed down. 9/10 times with adults it’s passed down. Young children are very capable; they don’t have the hang-ups adults do.” she said. For Carl, another popular topic he frequently explores is issues of fairness. Carl, employs the topic of fairness as a general framework and then includes more specific issues within that, such as segregation, desegregation, gender issues (girls can do what boys can do, anyone can wear a dress, etc.)

### **Socioeconomic Status/ Economic Inequality**

Shambu explored socioeconomic status frequently with her students. For example, as previously noted, while reading children's books such as *Cinderella* she guides children through the critical literacy process by asking, “what would Cinderella look like in your neighborhood?” Socioeconomic inequality is also present within her

example of reading stories such as *Robin Hood* and posing questions related to money at the children about the story.

Bruce has felt that holding discussions around socioeconomic statuses and economic inequality has been quite difficult for him when teaching students from families of lower socioeconomic statuses, because he does not want to make them feel badly. Elaborating further upon this, he worries about making his students feel shame and examining “money versus not money.” He says can be tough, since a lot of his students live in government housing.

### **Ableism**

Ableism and exploring special needs was mentioned by Bob. Bob described his efforts talking about ableism with his students, in the context of one of his previous schools where some of the children with special needs were marginalized. He provided the specific instance of how the students at his school were treated poorly and did not have a school with accessible resources for those with physical impairments such as wheelchairs. Bob also talks with his students about abilities and disabilities in a more general sense. Again this goes back to Bob's idea of making social justice issues directly related to student's everyday experience as well.

### **Religious Differences & Holidays**

Bruce discusses religious holidays with this students including but not limited to Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. During such discussions, he reads non-fiction texts about the holidays to his students and facilitates a discussion comparing and contrasting differences between various holidays.

Although, Elizabeth doesn't seem to remember the topic of religious differences coming up very frequently, whenever it did manifest itself within the children's conversation or play she would encourage the children to talk about it. She also asked her students questions like "How does your family celebrate, do you go to church, not go to church, and what do you believe? She focused on religion based on what was going on in their lives and what questions they had in regards to the practices they had seen amongst their families. Elizabeth only remembers having a winter celebration once. For this celebration they focused on Kwanzaa. Her preschool students learned about Kwanzaa and then did a presentation for parents during a PTA meeting that included constructing a giant Kinara out of chicken wire and paper-mâché, while the children pretended to be candles and had red, black, and green flames made out of paper and fabric on their heads. Elizabeth also gave insight as to how holidays can be explored as a developmentally appropriate way to explore multiculturalism and social justice topics with preschoolers. For example, although not a religious holiday, she highlighted Thanksgiving, as mentioned previously. For this she began talking about Native Americans long before Thanksgiving approached and then once Thanksgiving approached she read the book "The True Story of Thanksgiving," that tells the story of Thanksgiving but with mice.

### **Intersectionality**

Bruce appeared to be one of only interview participants who highlighted incorporating intersectionality within a critical literacy framework. For example, when reading *Peter Pan* he had students reflect on the fact that Peter Pan was both white and a boy. Along this notion I inferred that Bruce seems to think it is important to explore intersectionality within critical literacy readings/lessons. Some of the other participants

such as Shambu alluded to intersectionality being a developmentally appropriate social justice topic as well. For example, when Shambu mentioned that she asked the students “what would Cinderella look like in your neighborhood?” this might prompt children to think about dual or more identities, such as race *and* social class.

### **Issues Within the Classroom and School**

For Bob it is essential for children to participate in engaging discussions in relation to what's going on in their local environment, particularly he highlighted the school and the classroom. For example, he mentioned how one student made an observational comment about the fact that it was mostly African-American boys that were in school detention and he discussed this with the students. Although this was within the school at large, many theorists such as Wohlwend (2009) explain how having young children reflect on social justice issues within their classroom can be a beneficial curriculum topic for exploring social justice issues. More specifically, Wohlwend takes photos of the children having a conflict and then has the students discuss what they could have done to resolve the problem. This topic, like others starts with the children's direct experience and what they know, and can therefore be a key example of developmentally appropriate practice.

### **Issues Concerning Their Larger Community**

Issues within the community, such as student's neighborhoods, city, or town were also specified by many of the participants as additional developmentally appropriate social justice topics to explore with four-year-old children. Bob devotes a great deal of time listening to his students throughout the school day and trying to figure out what they are most interested in and what most concerns them. “Tapping into what the children are

saying to me my assistant or student interns I can have an idea of what children most concerned about in their community.” he says. While expanding upon this, Bob provides a rationale that talking about community, family, or neighborhood is more relevant to their lives rather than just explaining to them problems in the world or what's not right. In this sense he elucidates focusing on children’s lived experiences, a common theme found throughout this analysis, in line with progressivist teaching practices. By making sure students are interested in the social justice topics and that it is relevant to their own lives and interests such young children can be more engaged with the topics rather than having a teacher just decide what social justice issues to explore with their students.

Shambu and Jill named issues within the community frequently throughout the interviews directly and indirectly. Like Bob, this was in accordance with centering social justice lessons around children’s lived experiences and interests. They both shared that this topic was a useful social justice topic to explore with children and it often included a discussion of what was happening at home or in their neighborhood. For young children this could also make social justice topics more concrete, which is helpful for young learners who have trouble with more abstract social justice ideas.

### **Privilege**

Bob uses books such as Dr. Seuss's (1953) *The Sneetches* to explore privilege. In this classic story, some of the characters have privilege and some do not, and those who have privilege are given a star. This story sounds like a more humane way to teach kids about fairness and Injustice such as the classic study *Eye of the Storm* (1968) where some early childhood students were given certain privileges while others were not. The topic of fairness is a very common social justice issue to explore with young children because it's

spans such a broad range of social justice issues. Additionally, it is a very concrete for young children to grasp since they are just developing their ability to share, self-regulate their behavior and emotions, and engage in other pro-social behaviors.

#### Socio-Environmental Justice and Environmentalism

In addition to focusing on social justice issues in the school and the environment, Bob expressed that this should not be limited to humans. His beliefs have lead him to focus on the rights of all living things such as plants and animals. Expressing great enthusiasm for this type of inquiry, specifically in the context of broadening the scope, so discussions and activities about the environment include substantially more than the “thematic” types of ecosystems covered by teachers (e.g. the rainforest, the desert). Rather, he proposed this could also range from exploring the backyard and immediate surroundings. Bob believes this will foster a sense of caring for the environment and having students evolve into environmentalist. He drew attention to specific environmental practices he has implemented ranging from having students compost apples from the school cafeteria and learning how to garden on the playground.

#### CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY ON TOPICS

This portion has provided a summary and analysis of the social justice topics that were viewed as developmentally appropriate for four-year-old children by the participants. While none of the participants seemed to think that any social justice topics were off limits, they did however provide different examples that encompassed different topics. These examples were mentioned for a direct critical literacy discussion or less directly such as by reading a book that incorporates the topic and are summarized in the following chart:

**TABLE 4.2: SOCIAL JUSTICE TOPICS ADDRESSED DIRECTLY BY PARTICIPANTS**

	<b>Shambu</b>	<b>Carl</b>	<b>Jill</b>	<b>Bob</b>	<b>Bruce</b>	<b>Mac</b>	<b>Elizabeth</b>
<b>Race/Racism</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Sex/Sexism/Gender</b>			X		X	X	
<b>Sexual Orientation/Family Structure</b>		X	X				
<b>Cisgenderism</b>		X					
<b>Fairness</b>		X	X				
<b>Socioeconomic Status/Socioeconomic Inequality</b>	X				X		
<b>Abelism</b>				X			
<b>Religious Differences/Holidays</b>					X		X
<b>Intersectionality</b>	X				X		
<b>Issues Within the Classroom/School</b>				X			
<b>Issues Concerning Their Larger Community</b>	X		X	X			
<b>Privilege</b>				X			
<b>Socio-Environmental Justice and Environmentalism</b>				X			

Additionally, it is important to note that the participants seemed to express differing levels of comfort discussing certain topics with young children. For example, this was evident in various instances, such as when Bruce mentioned not feeling comfortable exploring issues of sexual orientation, due to factors relating to what Bruce called the “No Promo Homo” laws.

## ADDITIONAL WAYS TO TEACH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH PRESCHOOLERS (OTHER THAN CRITICAL LITERACY)

The participants were also asked what other methodologies besides critical literacy could be used to teach preschoolers about social justice. This question served the purpose of expanding the conversation to gain additional insight about social justice practices with young children. The hope was also that some of these ideas generated could lead to more insight for how they could be combined with critical literacy pedagogy.

The ideas mentioned by the participants were coded into the following categories: critical multicultural education and multicultural education as celebration, culturally relevant pedagogy: valuing different dialects and languages, equity pedagogy, exposing children's preconceived stereotypes, free play, creative drama, multicultural materials, field trips, parent and community involvement, music, mini lecture/explaining, and exploring current events.

### Critical Multicultural Education and Multicultural Education as Celebration

During various times throughout the interview Bob espoused upon multicultural topics and learning about various identity statuses as a form of celebration rather than as just "education" or just "understanding". A direct example he provided was how children's literature should celebrate topics such as same-sex marriage rather than just show it. Such a notion is supported by diversity theorists and researchers, such as MacGillivray (2004) who also asserts that students need to be taught to value GLBTIQ diversity rather than just respect it, as simply "respecting" it is not enough to change a school culture and really make students feel supported. Key multicultural educational

theorists concur. According to Banks (2008) multicultural education cannot be an “add on”, falling under what he termed the “contributions approach”, or what Nieto (2010) refers to as the “Heroes and Holidays” component, or what Vinz (1999) terms the “Shopping Mall approach.” According to Banks (2008) In order to have education be truly multicultural it needs to be multi-dimensional. This includes going beyond just including multicultural content and also includes a multicultural “Knowledge Construction Process”, “Equity Pedagogy”, “An Empowering School Culture/Social Structure”, and “Prejudice Reduction.” In other words, the whole structure of the curriculum needs to become multicultural as well and focus on teaching for social justice

#### Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Valuing Different Dialects and Languages

The participants alluded to culturally relevant pedagogy both for critical literacy and as a more general teaching for social justice practice with young children. The notion of valuing differing dialects was mentioned by Bruce with great enthusiasm. He provided examples of teachers using what he referred to as “African-American language” together with standard or academic English. Although he would *like* to make this part of his multicultural education and social justice practice in theory, Bruce himself regrets that he has not had an experience implementing this in his classrooms. “We did not use the different forms of English. That was actually one thing that I wished we did. If I could go back, I would take the time to teach them a little about different variations of English and how they compare to Standard English. However, I made sure to not overcorrect any of my students or make them feel that their accents and dialects were inferior to Standard English.” This idea supports Howard’s (2003) concept of valuing all students’ cultural

capital. Howard describes cultural capital as their native dialect or way of knowing and viewing the world.

### **Equity Pedagogy**

According to Banks (2008) equity pedagogy is one of the five key dimensions of multicultural education. Equity pedagogy implies that a teacher incorporates multiple perspectives into the curricula and pedagogy. This would include Afro-centric views of history rather than just Eurocentric ones (Skerrett 2011; Wright, 1992). Bruce draws upon this notion of equity pedagogy by making sure to call on students of various races and genders equally and self-monitoring his body movements to make sure he is reacting to all students in a similar manner. “Also watching word choice and make sure you say families instead of mom and dad.” he says. By not privileging nuclear families and making his body movements the same to all students this is also in line with Howard’s (2003) notion of treating all cultural capital as equal as discussed previously.

Additionally, many studies have been done that show that teachers call on boys more frequently (NEA, 2007). By focusing on giving students equal treatment he seems to be helping to eradicate this type of sexist class practices.

### **Exposing Children's Preconceived Stereotypes**

Bob shows picture cards from a *Padaiea* curriculum set. These picture cards have photos of faces from various races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses. He then has the students guess the person's occupation based solely on their face. To carry out this teaching practice he asks his students "who is this person?" and “what do you think this person does for a living?” He begrudgingly expressed that through this activity he has directly seen how young children already have stereotypical ideas set in place. He

recounts that when showing images of women, the children always say they think she is just a mom or a nurse. Then when he reveals the whole picture to them and he says, “she is a police officer” or “she is a doctor” and asks "did you expect that?" he finds that the children are often shocked but excited. "Do it again!" they say, meaning they want to guess another image. This notion of exposing children’s pre-conceived stereotypes fits in conjunction with another one of James Banks (2008) five dimensions of multicultural Education, “prejudice reduction.” As previously described, prejudice reduction is especially important at a young age because children start picking up on overt and covert racism right away (SEE: Rationale).

One way Bruce exposed children’s preconceived stereotypes was by observing his students and the stereotypes they were saying, this included sexist stereotypes such as children saying that only girls should wear dresses and pink as well as cultural stereotypes and inaccuracies such as that everybody who was Asian was from China. To combat these stereotypes, Bruce encouraged the children to dress in whatever clothes they wanted to in the dramatic play center. To specifically counteract the racial stereotype of every Asian person being Chinese he left symbols of different Asian languages all around the classroom to help them expand their schema.

### **Free Playtime**

In addition to detailing how free playtime can provide a tool for authentic assessment of critical literacy understanding (SEE: Assessment and Effectiveness and Developmental considerations: Child Centered Curriculum) by the interview participants, free playtime was mentioned by Bruce and Elizabeth as another way to explore social justice issues in itself.

Bruce guides the children's play to help them explore social justice issues as they occur naturally through the child-directed activity. This includes finding emergent teachable moments as the children deal with gender stereotypes in their play. "For example," he says "boys can wear the dresses and also make sure we had a lot of dolls of different colors." Additionally, Bruce incorporates different cultures within the dramatic play and center areas. He illustrated this with the example of including symbols from varying Asian and Russian languages. "This is to give them more exposure," he says.

Four-year-old children should be given adequate time each day to learn and grow through dramatic and free choice play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Van Hoorn et. al, 2011;). Such child-directed free playtime should make up a large portion of the day for four-year-olds. Many early childhood theorists from some of the earliest days of early childhood education such as the notable Pestalozzi and Froebel asserted that this is a pivotal way for young children to learn a multitude of skills.

Drawing from Constructivist theory, Piaget (1983) also highlight the necessity of play in early learning. According to Piaget, dramatic or symbolic play provide children an opportunity for assimilation, where children can practice what they know about the world (Brophy, 1988). While Vygotsky (1978) highlighted how actual new learning can take place through play and dramatic play itself (Kuyk, 2011).

Elizabeth highlights how providing multicultural materials and having the children bring their own objects from home dramatic play and easily lend itself to critical multicultural education and having students explore social justice issues. This is explored in greater detail under multicultural materials (SEE: multicultural materials).

## **Creative Drama**

Drama pedagogy, process drama (O'Neill, 1995; Douville & Finke, 2000), educational drama (Bolton, 1979), drama for learning (Bolton & Heathcote 1995) or drama in education (Schonmann, 2005) was mentioned by some of the participants. Although sharing many core components, drama, in the form of a creative impromptu processes rather than formal theater, which has a clear audience/performer and elaborate practice and preparation is suggested for school learning purposes (Douville & Finke, 2000).

Bruce in particular elucidated a creative drama technique to teach about social justice issues. For this he would describe a situation to his students, and then they would act out the scenario “using I receive vs. you messages.” Next Bruce would restate a scenario and have the children act it out while he guided them by asking them what was the right thing to do. This also sounds a bit like Augusto Boal’s (1995) drama technique “Image Theater” where participants first act out an oppressive scenario and then revise it and re-act it out with a better and liberating outcome. Additionally, in this sense creative drama is a “Process centered form of drama, guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences” (Davis & Behm, 1978, p, 10).

## **Multicultural Materials**

Carl highlights that the materials themselves should be multicultural. Some of the specific materials Carl mentioned included providing students with various paint colors to be used for varying skin tones to create a family portrait and as a way to expose children to different cultures.

The example Bruce gave of the bilingual symbols and words left around the classroom mentioned previously, is an example of a teacher created multicultural material. In addition, constructing the Kinara for Kwanzaa, as done by Elizabeth would also be another example of a teacher created material. Such teacher or class-created multicultural materials are highlighted as useful resources by Derman-Sparks (1989).

Morrison (2014) highlights how including multicultural materials within the early childhood class can be a very effective way to include a great variety of cultures in the classroom. These materials can and should include items such as: dolls, food and utensils, dress up clothing, fabrics, and furnishings (Huber, 2000). Multicultural materials in the sense of non-gendered play items can also help counter gender stereotypes (Aina & Cameron, 2011).

### **Music**

Elizabeth was one of the only participants that described music as a viable outlet for exploring social justice issues with her students. Elizabeth's music based social justice lessons were comprised of songs about peace and social change, including uplifting ones from the 1960s like *My Friend Martin* and songs by Woody Guthrie. These songs worked as a launching point for discussions about topics such as fairness or oppression from a historical perspective. Within these songs it seems that students would raise questions such as 'Who was JFK?' or 'What did MLK do?' and they would then discuss it and learn about these historical figures as well as the struggles of the times. Elizabeth also made this musical process multi-modal was by writing the lyrics on chart paper and reading them out loud before or after the song.

### **Lesson/Lecture/Discussion**

Most of the participants did not mention using a heavily didactic way of teaching to explore social justice topics with preschoolers. However, facilitating a mini lesson before reading a critical literacy text could be an effective way to gauge children's prior knowledge (Meller et al. 2009). This could involve constructing a KWL chart or a discussion of current events. However, Carl explains social justice issues can be explored through class discussion

When Bruce suspects that his students do not understand an aspect of the social justice related text, he seizes the opportunity to do some explaining to children. Often times he found that the only social justice books he could locate were very over the student's heads so he would have to explain it in a way that made sense to them.

### **Current Events**

A proponent, of incorporating current events into his critical literacy and social justice discussions and activities, Bruce feels it is important for children to learn about what is going on around them and the problems of the world. "I tried to explain the Walter Scott shooting in a child friendly way during morning meeting," he told me. While teaching current events he makes sure that it is not with what he referred to as generating "a full-fledged fear" within students, but to get them to think about bigger issues. "I wish I had a teacher who had those talks with me," he said.

Alongside Bruce- Shambu and Elizabeth also include social justice events into their general social justice curriculum. This includes current events that occurred in newspaper articles and discussions about the happenings within their community.

## **Family and Community Involvement**

Family and community involvement was yet another way the participants broach social justice issues and diversity with their four-year-old students. Special guest parent/family members coming in to visit and class field trips and interviews were mentioned by Elizabeth. History museums seem to be one of her favorite types of museums to explore with her students. PTA meetings were another avenue for her to get parents involved in teaching about social justice issues.

### **Part 3: CRITICAL LITERACY AND TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH PRESCHOOLERS: CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS**

The participants were all asked what they perceived as the main challenges and considerations when implementing critical literacy and teaching for social justice with preschool children. To the participants, the people and structural constraints that posed a challenge to implement such pedagogy and curriculum included: administration, other staff, parents, required curriculum, lack of resources and age appropriate social justice texts, and lack of pre-service teacher training. Implementing constructivist and progressivist pedagogy within a critical literacy framework was another challenge of the critical literacy approach. More specifically the interviews illuminated how critical literacy can be done within child-centered curriculum, basing critical literacy on children's questions and inquiry.

Developmental considerations and challenges discussed by the participants included young children's limited attention span, cognitive dissonance, topics/concepts being too advanced (including: not in their zone of proximal development and the

difficulty of egocentrism). Other teacher considerations included planning and preparation, transitioning into social justice/critical literacy, and considering the type of guilt that may arise with these types of discussions. Prerequisites for critical literacy with preschoolers (including: community building and school-wide culture and student's examining their own identities), and the assessment and effectiveness of critical literacy with preschool children were also mentioned by participants and are explored within this analysis.

### PEOPLE AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Within the existing body of literature, parents, administrators, and other staff members are also highlighted as potential obstacles or challenges for those educators that do want to implement social justice pedagogy (Lewis-Charp, 2003). While, all the participants interviewed are devout social justice educators, these challenges do not deter them implementing social justice pedagogy. However, these obstacles do cause them difficulty.

#### **Administration**

Some of the participants directly stated that administration could or did present various obstacles or hurdles for their social justice or critical literacy practices. Bruce, who worked in a public 4K preschool, described this in terms of, "Making sure that you're not stepping on toes and that you're doing something within the parameters of what your school district says you can do." Especially in regards to issues like sexual orientation, he said. Because of this Bruce explains that topics such as sexual orientation made him nervous to discuss with the children, in particular he seemed to imply it made him weary about his job security.

Administrators have often been a challenge for Elizabeth and Mac as well. In some instances, they seemed to feel the administrators were disapproving gatekeepers, trying to derail their critical literacy practices. Elizabeth reported often feeling nervous about whether or not administrators would deem her critical literacy or social justice instruction “appropriate.” However, this did not by any means seem stop her from going on and implementing them.

Although not pointing to any specific instances in particular, Mac highlighted how administration has presented her with challenges to her critical literacy instruction. “The leadership of the school might not understand,” she told me. She also expressed how while this could still be doable, it could also create a great challenge, when a teacher has to directly state his or her goals to the administration and explain how it (critical literacy/teaching for social justice) meets specific standards. In this day of standardized tests, this is a very real obstacle many teachers try to work around.

### **Other Staff**

Many participants reiterated that other staff at their schools/preschools also created an additional obstacle or challenge for implementing critical literacy. Carl mentioned administrators as potential challenges but the specific example he shared was pertaining to the opposition his co-teachers presented. Along this notion, the disapproval included them expressing to him that they did not want to explore social justice issues. He explained how this created a real problem, because he feels both teachers need to often be doing the same thing in order to make the class run consistently and smoothly. “Teachers may not think about it in the same way,” he explained. Even in a more general sense there can be a disconnect between the knowledge base and/or beliefs of other staff

members. For example, Carl mentioned that in relation to anti-bias lessons his co-teacher brought in the book, *My Old Bike* to explore ageism. Carl however did not seem to think this was sufficient for anti-bias education. He mentioned issues with other staff as well but did not provide any other specific examples.

Bob explained that a backlash is always possible when a teacher puts himself out there to teach about sensitive or social justice related topics. He too has struggled with the worry of job security. Never being certain as to how the parents or administrators will respond, he explains, "You never know how much support you will receive. That's what makes it so tricky you can underestimate or overestimate." This is in line with the literature regarding teachers as technicians rather than professionals such as that highlighted by Giroux (1990). However, in spite of these challenges, Bob feels morally obliged to embrace critical pedagogy and take a stand against social injustice, regardless of the support he will receive.

Elizabeth remembered the challenges she encountered one year when her assigned mentoring teacher disapproved of her critical inquiry techniques. Although this mentoring teacher worked in another classroom, she frequently observed and advised her. Their differing views on social justice manifested themselves in varying ways. For example, when Elizabeth taught her students about Thanksgiving by reading *The True Thanksgiving Story* by Steven Kellogg her mentoring teacher disapproved. According to Elizabeth her mentoring teacher did not see a place for that kind of thing in an early childhood education program. He wanted her to use a traditional Thanksgiving story and make pilgrim hats, she told me.

## Parents

Carl explained the reality that reading books such as *And Tango Makes Three* and *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014), may receive backlash from parents. However, Carl has read these books regardless of this fact.

Mac lamented that the family can be a real barrier to implementing critical literacy and social justice curricula especially with young children. Families may create a roadblock or at least a real challenge to having these conversations she explained. Since Mac highlights the need to have constructivist and emergent curriculum based on the children's interest she says a good way to do this is to let parents know ahead of time that children may be discussing sensitive topics in your class, so that the parents can be notified in advance. This way as a teacher you can allow these conversations to emerge naturally without having to inform parents specifically about each topic. This could include sending home a newsletter in the beginning of the year notifying parents of the kind of topics you will be covering and the projects that you are open to allowing in your classroom. Open house or back- to-school night also presents an opportunity for this. She explains, "I let them know from day one this is the kind of climate established. I let them know that most likely will be conversations related to races cultures genders etc. so they will probably hear about this I also let them know to please not hesitate to visit our classroom. I like to have this level of transparency." By establishing this tone, her parents can be informed and lessons can happen on the spur of the moment with incidental teaching and critical literacy questioning. "Sometimes parents call me or come see me with many questions," she explains, "I just do a lot of listening then and a lot of head nodding." She tells me that she takes the parents comments and complaints into

consideration but she has to stand behind what she does and that's what social justice is about to her.

Although, Bruce was the primary participant who expressed the pushback from parents or the potential pushback from parents, which often led him to steer away from topics such as sexual orientation, if the kids themselves engaged in non-traditional gender roles he supported it. “Sometimes with the dramatic play area,” he says, “like with the gender roles I’d be like ‘I’m just not quite sure this is gonna fly with the parents’ but I don’t remember it becoming a problem. And if they ever did come into complain I would know how to defend myself.”

There was one instance where Elizabeth had to deal with a lot of opposition from a parent. The example she shared occurred one year when she only had one white female student in her preschool class. The student’s parent asked Elizabeth during a parent-teacher conference when they were going to talk about “white culture” and the parent seemed upset that they were not talking about white culture enough. During this encounter she tried to explain to the concerned parent that they would be exploring a lot of differing perspectives over the year and that the parent could come in and talk about their experiences and that the class would love to hear them. She recalls how she had been afraid she had done something wrong after this encounter ended.

As mentioned prior, Bob’s ongoing struggle also involved wondering how parents will perceive his lessons. “Parents are particularly protective of four- year-olds,” he says. However, as he clarified previously in the interview his moral duty is to carry out social justice lesson plans regardless of anyone’s disapproval.

Additionally, within the literature on leadership in early childhood education Mosso-Taylor's (2016) ethnography of early childhood leader Meir Muller highlights the importance of hearing parent's complaints and viewing them as "stories that need to be heard" (p.155). With this, rather than viewing parent's concerns as a negative thing or obstacle, Muller sees them as an opportunity to offer assistance and guidance to parents.

### **Required Curriculum**

At the preschool level in South Carolina, along with the development of the public 4K preschools, required curriculum has become an increasing obstacle for implementing critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Interview participants, Carl, Bruce, and Elizabeth all spoke of this challenge. This included the challenges of the *First Steps* program and *Good Start, Grow Smart* Standards (SEE: Chapter five regarding background information on *Good Start, Grow Smart* and the *First Steps* initiative). Although Bruce did not teach at a First Steps preschool, it was a public school and they therefore had to follow the *Good Start, Grow Smart* standards. Bruce said one of his biggest obstacles was keeping up with standards and pacing guides. Although he did implement critical literacy in his classrooms he says that because of the rush of the pacing guide he didn't feel like he dove into it as much as he would have liked to. Bob was also teaching at a public preschool but did not mention the challenge of standards for implementing critical literacy on this regard.

Carl, expressed the difficulty standards presented when working at both public and private preschools in South Carolina and within other states. Some of these schools had required book lists. While he was teaching at a public preschool in the mid-west that

utilized *DLM Early Learning Express* for their literacy program he was required to work with a preset booklist. As Carl explains:

“DLM express uses specific books and themes each week that are prescribed.” With this he reiterates, “There are no social justice books on the current list or were there any on the list when I had to use it. We could use other books if we wanted, but it was strongly suggested by the administration (which changed every year for the preschool program due to district politics, so how strongly it was suggested depended on the year) that we use the DLM books first and then supplement with our own collection of books. We could order from Scholastic books at times and I remember that we were able to accumulate points from Scholastic for free books for having a book fair at school, but this still limited our selection of books that we could choose to the books that scholastic had available for early childhood. Needless to say I don't think I used or saw anyone use any books that were explicitly social justice although I suppose some teachers could have used books to pursue social justice themes on an individual basis.”

The LGBTQ books Carl mentioned along with other multicultural education or social justice oriented books were not on the approved book lists. Although this didn't prohibit critical literacy practices, he explained, it may limit the number of texts that focus on multiple perspectives or counter-narratives. Additionally, it seems these books could potentially be representing stereotypes, he warned.

Elizabeth also asserted the trouble with standards, stating that while she understands that standards do need to be met, the standards do not cover all that need to be included. Specifically, social-justice related curriculum.

### **Lack of Resources and Age Appropriate Social Justice Texts**

Lack of resources or age appropriate social justice texts proved to be a very common challenge to implementing critical literacy for the majority of the interview participants. Some not only faced a dire lack of critical texts within their schools but also books with troublesome stereotypes. Although critical literacy does not by any means require social justice texts, many participants highlighted that they saw it as problematic that they did not have access to these books. This included the books available to them both through the school and the children's literary market. Again, many of them emphasized, they were not appropriate for four-year-olds.

Mac had a lot of trouble with the fact that her books were outdated, however she utilized the books as a springboard for critical literacy discussions. At the first preschool Mac taught it, most of her students were from extremely economically disadvantaged homes. There was a real lack of resources and she had to use what was donated. This included very old books. These books depicted many gendered stereotypes such as doctors and postal workers portrayed only as men. "However," she explains, "I had to take what I what I was given. This led me to engaging the students in a lot of critical literacy discussions." As Aina and Cameron (2011) conclude, "rather than eliminating all books with stereotypes, teachers can guide children to recognize stereotypes and increase independent thinking about gender and perceptions of gender" (p.16).

Echoing similar to Mac, Elizabeth had similar problems with adequate resources at times. This was especially true when she first started teaching. She said, "I didn't really have that many books, mostly what was left behind. The books did not represent the racially and socioeconomically diverse students that I had. They weren't mirrors of who

they were they were in these classic stories, I didn't think my students could find themselves in those books,” she says. “I think it's extra important when we look at those windows and mirrors she says we have to be able to connect with what we are reading and see ourselves in there.” Scholars highlight the importance of children seeing themselves in the books they read (Bishop, 1990; Bishop, 2007; López-Robertson, 2011; López-Robertson & Haney, 2017; Nieto, 2010). As López-Robertson and Haney (2017) explain, “multicultural literature enhances the reader’s sense of identity and self-empowerment” (p.49).

Over time Mac was able to successfully build a classroom library of teaching for social justice books and books that represented the diverse demographics of her students. She also made connections, including reaching out to people in the nearby community. This included knowing someone who lived on a nearby Native American reservation to come and talk to her children “I was lucky to have connections and access to people who she could call on to help,” she says.

The concerns raised by Mac and Elizabeth also point to issues of access and equity. This exemplifies an additional problem, that poorly funded public schools, or private preschools that require lower tuition may not have access to updated books. Outdated books and lack of supplies, can not only reinforce negative stereotypes as presented by my interview participants, but this inequity in resources also continues to perpetuate the opportunity gap for children (Kozol, 2005; Morrison, 2014; Ryan et. al 2016).

In addition to the fact that Carl mentioned that there were not social justice oriented books on his required book list at one of his schools as described above, Carl

also exposed the fact that there is not as many books as he would like on the literary market that center around social justice that are geared at the four-year-old comprehension level. Carl explains that even books like *Separate is Never Equal* (Mendez, 2014) or *I am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014), although picture books the vocabulary is for a higher-grade level. So, for him it is often hard to find social justice text that are age appropriate.

Bruce felt a little different about this issue, having his own concern. For him it was not in regards to having appropriate social justice texts, lack of school resources, nor lack of easy to comprehend books on the literary market. To him the problem resided with what he termed “watered down text.” Bruce felt the problem resided with a lot of textbooks and nonfiction books especially for young children making historical oppression appear not as bad as it was. "They change things without a hundred percent accuracy," Bruce says, "or only provide short sentences about it," he says. Bob too mentioned this as a problem, as he could not find books geared for young children that explain the real harsh realities of social injustice. Instead he found books that made it seem not as bad as it was. He struggled trying to find books that were authentic and age-appropriate. This would fall under inaccurate text and misconceptions about history (Boutte, 2016). Due to this, Bob oftentimes had to adapt books designed for older children and skip the pages and look at the photos and put in his own words so the children would better be able to understand. "As we were reading if the words were too hard we would look at the picture," he says, and he would then try to explain the historical events using words they can understand. With informational text he says it was

quite hard to find books that they could understand. They were either, "like an ABC book," he says or, "too over their heads."

### **Lack of Pre-service Teacher Training**

Most of the participants do not report having much if any pre-service teacher training pertaining to teaching preschoolers about social justice issues or multiculturalism during their bachelor's or master's degree. Additionally, none of them specifically mentioned critical literacy education in their bachelor's or master's. This is a problem as Brant (2013) explains, because educators need to be taught this in their pre-service teacher education.

Elizabeth did not recall having any preparation related to social justice during her bachelor's and master's degrees in early childhood. She said it was whole language based and inquiry based, but there was no direct conversation or dialogue about social justice.

Carl mentioned that during his bachelor's and master's program there was only one class on multiculturalism and that was it. "But it wasn't explicit in terms of teaching," he says, rather teachers would model some forms of pedagogy and he would observe but, it was mostly limited to just that one class.

Mac seemed to think her bachelor's and master's degrees lack of focus on social justice or methods such as critical literacy was because she received the degrees a long time ago before these were popular teaching practices. "I guess some might be introduced in your master's a bit, but they weren't in the Early Childhood program I was in." She says. However, the participants who just graduated with their master's a few years prior to the interview expressed similar concerns. For example, Bruce who just finished his master's degree within the last few years responded, "Honestly, I didn't have much at all.

The closest I got was looking at family and family structure and how schools can create a partnership.” He told me. Mac did gladly highlight that social justice topics were introduced within her doctoral studies, but she lamented the fact that they were not introduced earlier.

In Bob’s bachelor’s and master’s coursework the social justice component was framed in terms of poverty and special needs. That was the whole extent of it, at least what he remembers. Additionally, he mentioned it was not called “social justice” he explained.

### **Implementing Constructivist and Progressivist Pedagogy**

#### **Child Centered Curriculum**

Just as general literacy practices with young children can be made progressivist (although not critical) by a teacher implementing a Language Experience approach (Allen, 1969; Machado, 2016; Morrison, 2014) or a Natural Approach to reading (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Fields, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Machado, 2016), although at times a challenge, similar approaches can also be implemented with a critical slant such as critical literacy practices in particular.

Within the interviews many of the participants directly mentioned or alluded to the challenges of keeping critical literacy and more general teaching for social justice practices based on child’s interests and child-centered.

We need to do things in a child-centered manner when teaching young children, Mac pointed out. This includes how critical literacy instruction should be implemented. She explains how we can't just have a cut and paste teacher guide for how to implement critical literacy. It isn't some “pre-packaged” curriculum she says. According to Behrman

(2006) critical literacy must be an organic process and there is no set way to do critical literacy. Along this notion, a great deal of Mac's curriculum has to be based specifically on the children's interests. These interests can lead to a whole project, such as that utilized by the project approach, a popular learning modality in preschool classrooms. She stressed that social justice educators shouldn't just go into a classroom of young children and say, "okay class we're gonna talk about sexism." Instead, it would have to be based on the children's questions, she clarified. This means we can guide them and help initiate these conversations, but in order for it to be effective and engaging for the children, Mac feels strongly that it cannot just be out of nowhere. She reiterated again and again that the curriculum has to be based on the children's interest. This is in line with Dewey's (1938) notion of progressive education and curriculum forming from the children's own interests. This can include the conversations and experiences that they've had as well as the ones that are currently taking place in the classroom. Since all the research on early childhood illustrates that children learn through inquiry and questioning rather than simply being told, social justice lessons have to be based on children's real meaningful experiences. Mac also highlighted the natural sense of wonder children exemplify and how questions lead to more questions. "We need to engage children in real experiences and real-life problem solving in their own classroom," she said. One way she has done this is by having her and her co-teacher take notes anecdotal notes and record what her students were saying and the questions they were asking around all issues and then discussing these as a class during circle time and through stories. This is also in line with constructivist education models which are popular in preschool classrooms, such a method is known as "re-presenting" (Freire, 1970) and is also utilized by

theorists/educators such as Souto-Manning (2017) in the context of critical literacy practices as well as multicultural education discussions (Boutte,1996).

As a progressivist educator as well, Bob pinpointed the need to select books and class discussion topics related to previous questions the children have posed. Bob believes it is important to spend a great deal of the day listening to students and what they have to say and learning what they're interested in. Drawing from progressivist and child-centered education for students, where the children help determine the curriculum, he will then prompt discussions by saying, "You remember when you said...?" Sometimes this can be used as a phrase to segue into exploring topics students had expressed interest in and then relating it to a read-aloud or class discussion.

Bruce's employs such progressivist pedagogy as well. Similarly, for Bruce this entails an effort on his part to find out what the students are interested in and develops their ideas into a social justice lesson. He would do this through the day-to-day interactions he had with them. By this he seems to mean informal assessment such as observation, listening to students during dramatic playtime or out on the playground is an ideal opportunity for this. Additionally, he had the student's family's fill out student inventories. These inventories were forms that would be filled out at the beginning of the year to get to know the students and their families better.

Elizabeth's practices of communicating with parents and learning about children's home life from the first day of school allow her to make social justice pedagogy child-based. You need to let the students talk about their lives she says. She continues this theme throughout the school year so that with each social justice lesson she does the topics can be relevant to the children and their lives.

### **Based on Children's questions and Inquiry**

As previously espoused upon, all of the teachers seemed to directly or indirectly identify as progressivist educators. Elizabeth's strategy for making social justice lessons based on children's inquiry required her being very in tune to the questions her students were asking. She says that the inquiry topics that came up frequently were those relevant to what was going on in their lives at school and at home, as touched upon in the previous section (SEE: Implementing Constructivist and Progressivist Pedagogy: Child Centered Curriculum). Like Bruce she would then build the social justice lessons around these topics of interest and get books pertaining to their ideas. While thinking pensively about this, she seemed to imply that the children's questions would naturally lend themselves to critical literacy discussions. However, it seemed that she used their questions for more general social justice lessons, than specifically critical literacy. Depending on the type of questions the students asked she would often do one of two things. "If it was a deep question she says that might have a deep response, I would let families know that this question came up today in class and because of that we were going to read a book on it or discuss it," she says. However, if it was a less personal question she seems to have more of an emergent curriculum type of approach to exploring these less sensitive social justice questions. For her this might include discussing it during circle time and having the children talk about how they feel. She explains that teaching social justice issues through the lens of feelings and emotions often seems helpful for young children. By exploring it in a way that is relevant and directly meaningful to them they can come up with valuable insights. This could be as simple as asking them, "Have you ever experienced this?" or "How did it make you feel." Since Elizabeth places such a strong emphasis on the

students exploring their own identity this seems to fit well with that notion. Elizabeth explains how she would continue to explore social justice issues out of class activities. Constructivist early childhood researcher and theorist, Piaget (1963) who called children “little scientists” (p.21) explained that children actively seek their own knowledge and are born with an innate curiosity about things and learning. This suggests that we can work from Piaget’s ideas to let children’s own questions guide our critical literacy, rather than having teachers implement pre-described questions. However, as a progressivist, Dewey explained such student lead and teacher lead learning does not have to be a duality, but instead learning can be a process both guided by students and teachers. Such scaffolding can take place through critical literacy.

### **Other Developmental Considerations**

#### **Young Children’s Limited Attention Span**

Carl found formal lessons and long conversations to not be very effective, since four-year-olds may have no frame of reference on specific social justice issues. Because of this a lot of time he leans toward implementing lessons in a non-formal manner. For example, he mentioned that trying to explain segregation to four-year-olds can be difficult. The limited attention span of young children was also expressed by Mac. Others alluded to it indirectly when they mentioned things like the need for active engaging activities. However, more specific examples of this is needed as to how this can be done for a limited attention span.

Piaget (1959) outlined the cognitive development of young children within three of his four stages of cognitive development, including what he calls sensorimotor, preoperational, and concrete operations. According to Piaget, typically developing four-

year-olds would be in the preoperational stage. This includes the need for them to have hands on learning and for play to be a large part of their learning. In this sense, Piaget and the early childhood literature centering on developmentally appropriate practice would not advocate for lectures and much auditory learning. Additionally, young children are just beginning to be able to self-regulate, and manage their emotions and behaviors. Therefore, expecting them to sit quietly and listen to a teacher for more than a brief period of time is not developmentally appropriate and unreasonable.

### **Cognitive Dissonance or Disequilibrium**

Additionally, looking at Piaget's (1963) *Adaptation of Mental Constructs*, young children take in new information by having it fit with what they already know (assimilation), and when that doesn't work they then change their existing categories to fit new information or create new ones (accommodation). Therefore, it seems likely that hearing new versions of familiar fairytales may lead to difficulty in children's ability to assimilate these into their existing schemas for that fairytale or character. In this sense, teachers may have to think of an effective way to scaffold the children's learning to help them accommodate the new information and form a new schema or alter an existing one. This can be a challenge and as Carl explains can result in cognitive dissonance for the children.

Another hurdle Bruce has experienced is that some children have a hard time conceptualizing race, for example when teaching lessons about skin color, and talking about being black some children would say "but I'm brown." With this young child will also need the scaffolding to expand their knowledge and existing schemata.

## **Too Advanced**

### **Not Within Their Zone of Proximal Development**

Bruce seemed to deplore that social justice texts for young children provided water down accounts of the ugly truth of American History. He often struggled with reading his student's more advanced texts. He felt these texts seemed to be too advanced for students to grapple with. In his own words he worried it would "go over their head." For example, trying to explain abstract rather than concrete concepts was a challenge. Bruce recognized that abstract topics are difficult for children to understand. However, he navigated this by using a model that helps them learn how to engage in higher order thinking. This model he explained included having his preschoolers make connections, first text- to-text connections, second text-to- self third text-to-world. After speaking with Bruce I discovered this model was made popular by Miller (2002) as three text connections to promote deep comprehension.

Elizabeth's concerns echoed Bruce's, as sometimes she too would be weary that the children couldn't comprehend the social justice topics. She worries it was out of their scope. "Sometimes I fear it's over their head," she says, using almost the same language as Bruce in a prior interview.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) highlights the concept of the Zone of Proximal development, where content is neither too hard nor too easy for children, but rather what they can accomplish with the help of an adult or more advanced peer. Through such scaffolding children have the potential of reaching their highest level of cognitive, physical, or social-emotional understanding. In the case of critical literacy, when children are learning more abstract content or things they cannot understand constructively

through their own direct experience it might be difficult to scaffold them. This is further discussed in the Conclusion and Discussions portion in the following chapter.

### **Egocentrism**

Additionally, another challenge seems to be the egocentric nature of four-year-old children. Piaget (1959) described egocentrism as one of the hallmarks of the preoperational stage (ages 2-6 or 7). This means that it is difficult to take on the viewpoint of others. However, as Carl explains by scaffolding children through the critical literacy process it can help them to slowly become less egocentric. While children at this age are egocentric, he still believes that critical literacy can be used to help children begin to see that other people have perspectives and experiences that differ from their own. It can also help them develop an awareness of others. He really thinks it's important for them to begin to learn that other people have other experiences.

Bruce navigates this to the best of his ability by telling the students "how would you feel if this happened to you?" or "What would you do if this happened?" He reported that his four-year-old children are able to put themselves in the perspective of another when he frames it in terms of them (by telling them "you").

The topic of sharing books surfaced in the interview with Mac as an additional and practical challenge when implementing any literacy practice. She explained that sharing the books could be a difficult task in itself for preschool aged children. This too is in line with the research on how young children are egocentric and have difficulty sharing and are unable to take the viewpoint of other children, such as that somebody else might want the book as well (Morrison, 2014).

## **Other Teacher Considerations**

### **Planning and Preparation**

Another challenge expressed specifically by Bruce was making sure to allot planning time for the questions that you ask. “So I would have to put little sticky notes in my book.” he says, “Stop here to ask this question. Or bring this point up.” The idea of early childhood teachers planning questions to ask is actually quite in line with John Dewey’s notion of Progressivism, as teachers and children should both help determine the curriculum, as it is both what the children want to know *and* what the teacher wants to teach them, rather than an either or.

### **Guilt**

Bruce seemed to express substantial concern about the idea of un-intentionally making his students feel guilty or ashamed for things they had not done. With this he asserted, it is a challenge for teachers to try to “make sure you are not promoting any type of guilt” while teaching about social injustice. While the notion of guilt within equity and equality talks is very common, the fact that he mentions how this can be a bad thing with young children is important. According to Erik Erikson’s (1950) third stage of psychosocial development “Initiative vs. Guilt” which Erikson claims occurs frequently between the approximate ages of three-five, is a time when child need to be given opportunities to be productive and engage in exploration and inquiry, rather than be shut down or criticized. The end-goal of this stage is that children develop an overarching feeling of initiative rather than guilt. However, this does not mean that they should never feel guilt, as some guilt is okay and can even be helpful. In Erikson’s terms, children should not be made to feel vast amounts of guilt. This is another important challenge

raised by the participants when it comes to when discussing injustice with young children.

### **Prerequisites for Critical Literacy with Preschoolers**

During these seven interviews a couple of the participants explained or alluded to pre-requisites or necessities for successfully establishing any kind of social justice pedagogy, or as Stribling (2014) termed creating a “critical literacy milieu” within a classroom. The most visible of these themes included community building and a school-wide culture and student’s examining their own identities.

#### **Community Building and School-Wide Culture**

For Elizabeth community building appeared to be one of, if not the most important aspect of teaching within preschool, as she mentioned it frequently and passionately throughout her interview. Prior to implementing critical literacy practices, multicultural education, or any sort of teaching for social justice practices, Elizabeth strives to create strong community. She defined a strong community as a classroom community, a school-wide community, relationships with students, as well as relationships with parents and family members. As Martinez-Roldán and López-Robertson’s (1999) and Short’s (1990) research has demonstrated critical discussions of literature will only be effective if a positive caring relationship is already established between the teacher and students.

Elizabeth also seemed to explain that a community and positive relationship is key with both students and family members. Getting to know and bringing in family members is a useful way for children to connect school to home. From what Elizabeth detailed bridging the space between school and home was a two sided process, as just as

she would have family members and household items frequent her classroom she also sent regular information home to parents so they knew what was going on in the classroom. In addition to keeping parents informed by sending home these regular newsletters, families were encouraged to talk to their children on the multitude of topics that their children were learning about in preschool. Additionally, families would come in and work on the class community garden outside.

Elizabeth also had her students create a museum of African American and African history. The museum consisted of artifacts and items that were brought in by parents and families that transformed the classroom to feel like a museum. During this activity, Elizabeth had open regular communication with her parents and let the parents/families know the great things their children were doing in her preschool class. She also used these artifacts and home items within the dramatic play corner. Boutte (1996) highlights how cultural artifacts can be brought into the classroom from parents as a way to provide multicultural dramatic play materials.

As explained by Elizabeth, building a support network with parents is of immense importance and she believes it will lay the foundation for a more stable and parent friendly groundwork for social justice minded educators. According to Piccower (2011), such a support network if established effectively can also help empower critical educators. As Weber (2010) also explains building allies can create a school institution a community of resistance. A community network between parents and teachers can also work towards creating an altogether more supportive school culture.

Bob echoed Elizabeth's sentiment about community, but focused on the value of having other teachers support what you are doing. Schoorman and Bogotch (2010)

highlight how creating a school wide culture that supports and values diversity is key. Other theorists concur and outline that this needs to include curricula, school policies, behaviors, and ideologies of the school. “Significant school transformation will require more than changes in structure- the policies, programs, and procedures of a school but also a transformative of the school culture (the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the people of the organization” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2004, p.11).

Bob feels it is essential that critical pedagogy is a part of a school and that teachers should challenge the students to think deeper about social justice issues. An empowering school wide culture is also highlighted within the literature, including within one of James Banks’ (2008) Five Dimensions of Multicultural Education. However, Bob also did admit that although he himself is an advocate for such practices, he doesn't think that teachers should be forced to engage in critical pedagogy.

### **Student’s Examining their own Identities**

According to interview responses, preschool students examining their own identities was in some ways a foundational building block for critical literacy and social justice pedagogy. Take for instance Elizabeth’s initial (beginning of the year focus) on individual’s identities as a core part of her teaching practices. She emphasized how students need ample time to reflect upon and share about their own identities *before* they can move forward with other critical literacy and social justice practices. Elizabeth is a proponent that preschool children need to first start with who *they* are in relation to the world and examine their own identities. Like most preschool classes, Elizabeth explains how she would implement this at the start the school year with an “All About Me,” unit.

However, unlike other preschool classes they would focus on discussing things like race and skin color. “This included looking at different skin shades such as brown or black from a scientific view. We even read non-fiction books about this,” she said. She seems to make a conscious effort to help the students feel good about themselves as they do this and talk about things they like about themselves. Additionally, she also has her students compare their similarities and differences to each other. Stribling (2014) and Beach and Cleovoulou’s (2014) practitioner based research involved having early childhood students engage in critical literacy by first reading books about differences in skin color and then having students create drawings or write autobiographies about their skin color.

### **Transitioning into Social Justice/ Critical Literacy**

#### **A Survey**

Both Bob and Bruce made the suggestion of starting the year by sending home a survey/questionnaire to parents. This provided not only a way to break the ice with parents and welcome them to their class, but allowed them as teachers to better understand the issues and concerns the *families* deal with in their community. Bob explains he then begins social justice and critical literacy lessons based on survey results filled out by parents and guardians about their specific community. He shared the following examples with me, “the children were upset that somebody's house in the neighborhood had been burned down and parents and kids wanted safer equipment on the playground.” He didn’t go into specifics about how he explored this with the children, but he mentioned this as a primary example of an issue in the community that was brought to his attention through the take home survey.

Bruce had the student's families fill out what he termed "student inventories." These inventories were forms that parents completed at the beginning of the year, for him to get to know the students and their families better. Vasquez, Long, and Souto-Manning (2016) also reveal the importance of making sure families voices are heard as well as the possibility of joint action between parents and teachers as an effective approach for early childhood educators to take a stand against social injustice.

#### Assessment and Effectiveness

One of the main interview questions was did these teachers view critical literacy as an efficacious way to teach four-year-old children about social justice issues? The participants were directly asked if they thought this pedagogical method was effective as well as how they assessed its efficacy. Bruce and Elizabeth outlined how observing children during free playtime through informal assessment served as an effective way to see if they have retained any of the content from the critical literacy lessons. Rowe (2000) explains playtime is a key time for children to practice behavior they have learned from books. Bruce mentioned that by engaging in this informal assessment he was able to gauge the effectiveness of his critical literacy lessons. "During center time I would see what they would say to see if they pulled anything from the questions I asked." I would also wait and see if they brought up the same issues we discussed again with another text by making text comparisons. When asked to elaborate on this Bruce re-told the example of the children making sexist comments during dramatic play regarding what gender role they choose to act out (i.e. how girls and not boys should play dress up in dresses). Bruce implied that he then takes these themes and makes them into critical literacy lessons, such as reading a relevant book about sexism and asking relevant critical literacy questions. He

then smiled reporting that after the critical literacy lesson on sexism, he didn't remember hearing the students make sexist comments. "I don't remember hearing it after we talked about it," Bruce says.

Elizabeth also evaluated their comprehension and the impact of these lessons through informal authentic assessment. Like Bruce, she too frequently observed her students during dramatic play. Many of them would act out what they had read or talked about during dramatic play and other center time activities like within the block corner. For example, during the Africa unit the children built thrones and headdresses. Elizabeth expressed that exploring social justice issues and Multicultural Education through books was an effective way to teach children and social justice issues and help them develop a social justice oriented mindset. In addition to observing children's dramatic play, Elizabeth also assessed her student's ability to process a critical literacy or multicultural education discussion and gauge its effectiveness through the visual art they would create during art time and free choice time. This included things such as finger painting images of what they heard or saw in the books or the discussions they engaged in based on what they read. For example, after discussing the different types of queens, she saw students create images of African queens. While working on the artwork students also dictated responses pertaining to what they heard. She would record these responses on chart paper.

The existing literature of practitioner/researcher findings that evaluate the successfulness of critical literacy also highlight informal and authentic assessment, such as observation of children's play and discussion. This includes theorists such as Leland, Harste, and Huber (2005) who utilized informal assessment of children's conversations

after reading such books/ having such critical literacy discussions. However, additional studies are needed to empirically prove the efficacy of critical literacy as a way to teach for social justice with preschool aged children.

#### CONCLUSION/CHAPTER SUMMARY

Through descriptive and in vivo coding, I saw many salient themes emerge within the qualitative data compiled from the seven in-depth interviews. Most of my participants described that critical literacy could take place through teacher read-alouds and teacher or student guided critical questioning.

After many cycles of coding and re-coding and an in-depth cross case analysis, the final themes/codes I categorized the data by : Part 1: direct critical literacy implications includes the following sub codes/categories: critical literacy through read-alouds and critical questioning including: 1) pre-prepared or spur of the moment questions based on *teacher's* interests, 2) pre-prepared teacher questions based on *children's* interests, backgrounds, and classroom events (including: critical literacy as culturally relevant pedagogy, bibliotherapy, progressivist/based on their interests) 3) having students formulate their own emergent critical literacy questions, and 4) based on parent's/guardian's input.

Additional topics/codes in Part 1 also include: critical literacy to explore multiple perspectives (including: historical events, non-traditional fairytales, and other types of fiction, and additional ways. The types of books/read-alouds the interviewed teachers utilized (including common children's stories/fairytales, social justice/diversity books, historical/ non-fiction texts, and other types of books), text other than read-alouds, and taking direct social justice action.

Part 2: the broader picture- general teaching for social justice implications with preschool children includes: 1) developmentally appropriate social justice topics (including: race/ racism, sexism/gender, sexual orientation/family structure/heterosexism, cisgenderism, fairness, socioeconomic status/ economic inequality, ableism, religious differences and holidays, intersexuality, issues within the classroom and school, issues concerning their larger community, privilege, and socio-environmental justice and environmentalism. 2.) additional ways to teach for social justice with preschoolers other than critical literacy (including critical multicultural education and multicultural education as celebration, exposing children's preconceived stereotypes, culturally relevant pedagogy (including valuing different dialects and languages, and equity pedagogy,) free playtime, creative drama, multicultural materials, music, lesson/lecture/discussion, current events, family and community involvement.

Codes/categories developed for Part 3 included: critical literacy and teaching for social justice with preschoolers: challenges, considerations, and Assessment include: 1) people and structural constraints (including: administration, other staff, parents, required curriculum, lack of resources and age appropriate social justice texts, and lack of pre-service teacher training), 2) implementing constructivist and progressivist pedagogy (including: child centered curriculum, based on children's questions and inquiry) and 3) other developmental considerations (including: young children's limited attention span, cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium, not within their zone of proximal development including too advanced/egocentrism) and 4) other teacher considerations (including: planning and preparation, transitioning into social justice/critical literacy, guilt, prerequisites for critical literacy with preschoolers (community building and school-wide

culture and student's examining their own identities), and 5) the assessment and effectiveness of critical literacy with preschool children.

All of the seven participants were advocates of exploring a wide variety of social justice topics with four-year-old children. This was in the context of critical literacy implications as well as more general teaching for social justice lessons. These topics mentioned by participants are listed above. However, most of the participants alluded to or specifically said that they did not all feel as though these social justice topics should all be presented as formal "topics" or "lessons" inserted into the preschool curriculum.

In regards to teacher's perspectives on the efficacy of critical literacy as a tool for teaching for social justice with preschool aged children, no large scale generalizations can be made from this research study, as it remains qualitative in nature and simply aims to describe some teacher's perspectives on the topic. Although the participants engaged in informal observation to make claims about the effectiveness, none formally assessed the efficacy. However, it is important to note that such a formal assessment, such as that carried out with a paper and pencil test is only one of the many ways to assess student's learning and a way not developmentally appropriate for preschool children (Morrison, 2014).

These conversations elucidate that all of the participants felt critical literacy was an important and useful teaching strategy itself and that it is developmentally appropriate for preschool children, operating under the assumption that the teacher is the one reading the story to the children, since many four-year-olds cannot read yet.

Additionally, since Critical Literacy remains somewhat expansive and includes many principles (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Flint, Lewison & Van Sluys, 2002; Lankshear

& McLaren, 1993; Lewison; Luke & Freebody,1999; Shor, 1999) I in turn asked interview questions pertaining to multicultural education and teaching for social justice with four-year-olds to gain additional insight.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### OVERVIEW

This research has added to the existing body of literature of critical literacy and teaching for social justice in the early childhood classroom and provided great insight into the implications for using critical literacy with young children. From the collected data much insight has been generated for practice and theory. This conclusion section consists of a discussion regarding implications for practice, researcher reflections, and a final conclusion.

#### **The Research Questions**

The over-arching research question that guided this research was: what are South Carolina preschool teacher's perceptions and experiences implementing critical literacy with four-year-old children The sub questions which included: Research Question #1: What content (social justice topics) do South Carolina preschool teachers who hold or are working on an advanced degree believe should be explored through critical literacy and why? And Research Question # 2: Which specific pedagogical strategies do these teacher's implement or think should be implemented for critical literacy instruction and why? And Research Question # 3: What are some of the advantages and challenges South Carolina preschool teachers have experienced implementing critical literacy in the preschool classroom

## DISCUSSION

### THEORETICAL INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The following topics explored previously have been selected for further discussion and suggested implications for practice. These include: making critical literacy child centered and constructivist based (including both general inquiry pedagogy and the role of play), a focus on quality rather than duration of discussions for young children, critical literacy extension activities, working within required early childhood standards (including: standards and assessments in South Carolina preschools), the need for pre-service teacher training that centers around critical literacy and critical pedagogy and suggestions for professional development for early childhood teachers, and setting clear teacher objectives for lesson plan/ discussions.

#### **Making Critical Literacy Child Centered, Constructivist, and Inquiry Based**

Throughout this research process the topic of developmentally appropriate practice continued to surface. Although a somewhat subjective term, it is hard to refute the vast research that supports constructivist and progressivist curricular models for young children. This means that young children learn best through hands on sensory based experiences (i.e. Pestalozzi; Comenius, Piaget, Dewey, 1918). Additionally, progressivist learning means learning needs to be child-centered. In a broad sense, social reconstructionist or teaching for social justice pedagogy can be combined with constructivism and progressivist learning by building off progressivist literacy strategies such as by implementing a Language Experience approach (Allen, 1969; Machado, 2016; Morrison, 2014) or a Natural Approach to reading (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Fields, 1987;

Johnson, 1987; Machado, 2016). In the case of the Language Experience or Natural Approach to reading, literacy instruction is based off children's interests and questions. However, in regards to including critical literacy or teaching for social justice within these practices, I am calling this strategy "a critical literacy focused natural approach" or a "critical literacy centered language experience approach." This approach ensures literacy questions and activities are based on children's interests, and in particular they are based on children's interests that are relevant to social justice issues and literacy. It could also include children's questions or experiences that lend themselves to critical literacy child centered progressivist-reading practices.

Additionally, it seems that critical literacy in the form of critical questioning/problem-posing is not only a social literacy practice (Kim & Cho, 2017; Labadie, Pole, & Rogers, 2013), but by teachers scaffolding of students as they ask them questions during read-alouds it is also directly social *constructivist* in nature (Vygotsky, 1978).

Inquiry pedagogy and progressivist learning can be based on any of children's natural curiosities/ interests/questions, while critical literacy inquiry would entail children's questions specifically related to issues of injustice and the sociopolitical through read-alouds or looking at picture books.

Through a non-linear research process of interviews, coding, re-coding, e-mailing with the participants, an ongoing literature review, it appears that progressivist and constructivist pedagogy can easily fit hand and hand with social reconstructionist pedagogy and curricula in a multitude of ways. In summary, the major theoretical and practitioner take away points generated from this research include:

## The Role of Play

Play, both a constructivist and progressivist-learning model for young children lends itself to various learning and assessment opportunities within a critical literacy framework. This includes:

- 1) Teacher observations of free playtime to generate a theme/topic for a critical literacy lesson. By informally observing children's free-play, teachers can then identify children's interests and shape curriculum (Morrison, 2014). In the case of critical literacy, it will shape the books/topics and questions they select as a teacher. As teachers should always be observing and documenting children's play, observing play for social justice context, involves a teacher making a concerted effort to notice when this occurs. This could take place through the imbedded sociopolitical issues that manifest through the roles they play or don't play (e.g. portrayal of gender stereotypical roles), the direct socio-political issues they explore in their play (e.g. pretending to pay for groceries with food stamps), and/or through their social interaction with classmates (e.g. name calling). This would fall under what Van Hoorn et al. (2011) calls "Play- Generated Curriculum" (p.89). However, in this case the teacher is looking for *social justice* related play generated curriculum and then re-presenting (Freire, 1970) what they saw back to the students. This way critical literacy discussions can be based off of topics that the students themselves were interested in. As Beach and Cleovoulou (2014) explain, student's questions and ideas that revolve around social justice issues can then be brought up by the teacher through relevant texts and questions.

- As is also elucidated by Souto-Manning (2017) or as Vasquez (2004) highlights critical literacy topics can be developed out of children's experiences.
- 2) Free-Play as an extension activity to critical literacy. As Boutte (1996) highlights multicultural and nonsexist props can be paired with book content and made available for students to explore during free playtime. A teacher providing play materials related to the social justice topics (e.g. non-gender specific dress up clothes following a critical literacy lesson on gender stereotypes, creating a dramatic-play center for volunteering at a pretend soup kitchen following a critical literacy lesson on homelessness, bringing in a Kinara or a Menorah after discussing various winter holidays) to enhance free play or as a small group extension activity for critical literacy. This would also fall under what Van Hoorn et. al. calls, "Curriculum-Generated Play" (p.89), however, it would be specifically *Critical Literacy Curriculum-Generated Play*. These could also hopefully move beyond play context and lead to current classroom student activism (e.g. having a canned food drive) or future activism in real life.
  - 3) Teacher observations of Free-play *after* a critical literacy lesson. After a lesson/activity informal and/or authentic teacher assessment (Morrison, 2014) can be used to see *if* and *how* the children's play has been impacted. In this case how their play has been altered by the critical literacy lesson. This would be done through teacher observation, photos, and anecdotal notes.

### **Guiding Critical Literacy: Quality not Duration of Discussions**

While critical literacy with older children focuses on a continual and extensive dialogue between students and teacher, as well as ongoing questions, this method might

not be developmentally appropriate for young children who are not yet ready to have lengthy discussions. In addition, it might not be appropriate due to limited attention span and lack of self-regulation, and difficulty sitting on the carpet for read-alouds during long intervals. On this note, the focus of critical literacy with young children should remain then not one of *length* of discussion but the *quality* of the discussion. Some examples of this include: Teachers asking open-ended questions- rather than simple yes or no questions, the early childhood technique of extension (Machado, 2016, p. 497) where teachers “expand the children’s information by adding new, additional, related information or meaning” could be utilized. Or as Labadie, Wetzel, and Rogers (2012) point out, critical literacy discussion can be extended through purposeful prompts. Additionally, these critical literacy topics can continue through “extension activities” (i.e. play, drawing, writing, drama. SEE: Extension activities). These extension activities are a good way to continue the critical literacy process in a less structured and more active way. As young children should be up and actively exploring and creating, rather than sitting and learning through a primarily discussion based model. Therefore, the insight provided by these teachers and through the review of the existing body of research highlights how what begins as a critical literacy question can then be further explored in an active hands-on way through what I call a “critical literacy extension activity.”

### **Critical Literacy Extension Activities**

Some of the participants seemed to indicate that critical literacy extension activities could be carried out in addition to the circle time read-alouds and problem posing questions. These critical literacy extension activities can be as simple as a teacher providing relevant materials (based on the topics generated) for children to utilize during

free playtime (SEE: the above example under the “Role of Play.” *Critical Literacy Curriculum-Generated Play extension activities*)

However, within my interviews not much focus was given by my participants on using a *teacher directed* extension activity to further the critical literacy process.

However, literacy or literary extension activities are frequented in the literature for the early childhood classroom. For example, Gordon and Browne (2017) highlight what they call “Literary Extensions” where teachers utilize a book or read-aloud to create other curriculum. Here these teacher-directed critical literacy extension activities are discussed in terms of drama and visual art based activities.

### **Drama**

Drama, in the form of teacher directed learning should not be confused with either dramatic playtime or formal theatre. In this sense drama in the classroom takes the form of process drama (O’Neill, 1995; Douville & Finke, 2000). For young children this could include activities such as flannel boards, acting out a story, puppetry, and book games. Such extension activities are mentioned by other early childhood researches such as Machado (2016). Drama as an extension activity for critical literacy is also frequented in the literature (Burke & Peterson, 2007; Chun, 2009; Enciso, 2011; Hasty & Fain, 2014; Honeyford & Zanden, 2013; Jowallah, 2015; Perry, Wessels, & Wager, 2013; Rozansky & Aagesen, 2010; Rozansky & Santos, 2009; Sweeney, 1997; Wolk, 2009) but often involve more advanced techniques such as Tableaux, Hot Seating, Monologue, Creative Writing, Image Theatre, Missing Scenes, Writing in Role, Play Writing, and Reader’s Theatre, which are mostly too advanced for very young children, since they often involve many rules and guidelines. According to Piaget (1945) children’s play that involves

games with rules is common after age seven and Parten's (1932) classic study, illustrated that "cooperative play" where children played together as the result of the teacher's orchestration was rather uncommon at the preschool level.

However, Marengo (2001) points out that drama fits hand in hand with Knobel and Healy's (1998) characteristics of critical literacy. This means drama allows critical questioning, examination of language as a social practice, analysis, and social justice and change (Martello, 2001). Additionally, some of the participants mentioned teacher directed drama activities during group time as a way to extend critical literacy with young children. Although more research is needed to explore how teacher directed process drama can be utilized as a critical literacy extension activity, basic drama strategies could be implemented with young children to extend critical literacy activities, for example after reading a book about someone getting bullying for being different, the teacher could provide simple drama prompts (i.e. "Show me what it looks like when you're sad"). Techniques such as tableaux could be used in a simplified form to re-enact the book (e.g. "pretend to be Cinderella crying.... and freeze!") Or as Wohlwend (2010) highlights doing re-enactments of the story to explore possible new endings. Such Boalian (1979) style techniques which have been displayed in the literature pertaining to drama and critical literacy in older grades such as with "Image Theatre" (Rozansky and Aagesen 2010; Rozansky and Santos 2009) which can be a way for teacher's to further scaffold the critical literacy process. These techniques could also be modified for use with preschool children. In this case, provided by Wohlwend (2010) and described by my interview participant Bruce, these text-based drama activities can help children learn to take the

prospective of another. This also an important skill for them to learn as they grow socially-emotionally and gradually become less egocentric.

### **Drawing and Writing**

Although many children lack writing skills, ideas could be dictated to teachers and pictures could be drawn. Kim and Cho (2017) highlight how drawing and writing can be utilized as an extension activity for critical literacy with preschool children. Although the participants also shed some light on how this can be done, additional research is needed to examine its full potential.

### **Other Critical Literacy Extension Activities**

There are clearly other extension activities that remain un-explored that would be helpful and constructivist based for young learners. Additionally, such critical literacy extension activities can make social justice ideas more concrete, by allowing children hands on learning rather than just hearing about abstract ideas during the critical literacy discussion.

### **WORKING WITHIN REQUIRED EARLY CHILDHOOD STANDARDS**

As expressed by many of the participants, standards play a big role in learning even at the preschool level. Within private preschools these standards remain more flexible and open to the individual school or daycare administration, while in public (4K) preschools they have pre-set standards. Such standards can present hurdles for preschool educators trying to teach for social justice or incorporate critical multicultural education.

However, some standards actually give attention to multicultural education practices. For example, as Klen and Chen (2001) point out, this is the case with many NAEYC standards, "Today developing cross-cultural competence is a professional

standard and is related to NAEYC- identified critical professional competencies in early education (a) providing learning opportunities that promote each child's development; (b) recognizing and understanding the child as part of a family, culture, and society; (c) developing and maintaining collaborative relationships with families (p. 38).” By looking at the NAEYC standards, teachers can find those that relate to Multicultural Ed and incorporate a complex multicultural learning opportunity. This might involve a backward curriculum planning model that starts with the social justice issue students want to know and then figuring out which standard it could be included within, rather than starting with the standard/subject first. In this sense it is a student-centered curriculum approach (Parkay, et al., 2008). However, this might be more difficult to do with all standards but can be done as well.

### **Standards and Assessments in South Carolina Preschools**

In South Carolina there are currently three ways public preschool programs are funded. These include, *Head Start*, *First Steps*, as well as some that are district funded. The majority of these public Pre-K, or 4K classes are run by the state through the First Steps initiative.

Head Start is a well-known federal education initiative that began in 1965 to give low income children a head start in their early learning experiences before they entered elementary school. It is a free preschool program for children aged zero-five that provides free lunch, medical and dental care ([headstart.org](http://headstart.org))

Early Head Start began in 1995 expanding head start for younger children, ages zero-three and their mothers. The goal of Early Head Start included helping pregnant women, infants, and toddlers (Morrison, 2014).

## **South Carolina Head Start**

Head Start began in South Carolina in 1966, recently celebrating its 50th anniversary. As of May 2016 (the time when the interview was conducted with a Head Start representative) there are currently 13,536 children in 228 Head Start centers or home settings (South Carolina Head Start Collaboration Office, 2016). In order for preschoolers to qualify for Head Start a family must be 100% at the poverty level, this means having an income of \$15,930 or less for a family of two.

The goal of these South Carolina early childhood agency programs is to get children aged zero-four, including children with special needs kindergarten ready.

### **Assessment and Standards**

Head Start programs are required to implement federal performance standards and each school develops its own curriculum based on the standards.

### **Curriculum**

In 1999 and 2000 the largest percentages of Head Start programs used either High Scope or Creative Curriculum (Gao.gov).

### **First Steps**

First Steps started in South Carolina In 1999, and has been re-authorized every seven years until 2016-2017 school year (when the interview was conducted). The expansion of 4K, started in 2006, with about sixteen or seventeen schools all located on I-95 corridor (as a response to *Corridor of Shame*) and according to one First Steps representative on the basis of Abbeville county suing the state of SC because they said the state was not giving them enough money. The legislature looked at everything and

decided to give state money to 4K programs due to the Corridor of Shame. Five school districts were added in 2013-2014, and in 2015-2016 it became completely statewide.

### **Curriculum/ Standards**

The public SC preschools funded by the district and through First Steps all *use Good Start, Grow Smart* for their standards.

### **Assessments**

However, for assessment the First Steps and public SC preschools have some options such as for reading readiness they can choose between *Teaching Strategies Gold, my igdis, Pals Pre-k*, etc. For other subjects the assessment options include: *Language and lit, Pals Pre-k, Ygdis, my igdis, Teaching strategies Gold*, and Readiness assessments.

### **Differences between First Steps and Head Start**

Head Start differs from First Steps primarily in the sense that it is a federal initiative. Head Start is also specifically based in child care centers that serve low income families, mostly based on the income a family of two (\$15,930 or less for a family of two to qualify). This income bracket is at the 100% poverty level.

As mentioned First Steps on the other hand is a specific statewide South Carolina initiative. First Steps has chosen to serve lower income families who make \$29,471 (and qualify for free or reduced lunch a family of two) for free, but also can serve all children as well, by paying for tuition.

First Steps locations can be in childcare centers, homes, public schools, or a variety of other diverse settings. As of fall 2015 there are currently one-hundred-and-ninety-one First Step schools to serve a minimum of ten students and 50% of the students

are paying for tuition.

At the time of this research, First Steps schools have no wait list. In Richland district 1 alone, there are thirty childcare centers. However, to be eligible you must live in the school district, for example if they live in Richland 1 then you can go to a First Steps school in Richland 1. Some of the schools have transportation.

## **Discussion**

The Language and Literacy Standards for Head Start (ELOF) for four year-olds focus greatly on pre-literacy and emerging literacy skills including phonological awareness, print, and alphabet knowledge.

Language and Literacy Standards from The Good Start, Grow Smart standards, utilized by the First Steps preschools are much more in-depth. While some of them could lend themselves to critical literacy such as: ELA-4K-1.10: Begin to ask questions about the causes of events they observe or hear about in books, ELA-4K-2.2: Begin asking “how and why” questions when looking at texts, ELA-4K-6.1: Ask “how” and “why” questions about things in books and their environment, and ELA-4K-2.3: Relate information from texts to personal experience. However, a teacher would have to modify them to make them more specifically lend themselves to critical literacy. For example, the “how and why” could focus specifically on the sociopolitical, such as “Why is the little girl wearing pink? Who wears pink?” or “Why does the family in the book have both a mom and dad? What other types of families are there?” Additionally, like the Head Start standards, many of them also focus on pre-literacy and early literacy essentialist skills such as ELA-4K-1.6: Begin to identify significant words from text read aloud,

ELA-4K-3.14: Beginning to understand that letters can represent speech sounds, and  
ELA-4K-3.13: Identify several letters and their general order in the alphabet.

The focus of standards such as these can be linked to the strong essentialist and at times the still common progressivist leanings in early childhood education, rather than a focus on critical thinking or teaching for social justice. While the rapid recent mass expansion of public preschools in South Carolina due to First Steps can be a way to close the opportunity gap for children by providing free education, there is still some room for criticism, as the push towards required standards provide obstacles for social justice educators. This is in addition to the other challenges previously explored such as resistance from administration, parents, and other co-workers.

The Need for Critical Literacy and Critical Pedagogy Professional Development for Pre-Service Early Childhood Teachers.

Many of the participants mentioned that their undergraduate and master's education hardly supported teaching for social justice if at all. Although all the teachers selected for this study had implemented some form of critical literacy in the past, other teachers may want to implement critical pedagogy, yet feel as though their pre-service teacher education left them ill prepared. Even if they received instruction in college this may not always translate to the actual school environment they will teach within. Additionally, they may not be adequately prepared to deal with the challenges that may go alongside implementing such an approach. This is known as the theory practice gap (Hardee and Reyelt, 2009).

Critical pedagogy and critical literacy needs to become a much greater focus in pre-service teacher training. Teachers in Prek-Higher Ed need to be exposed to liberatory

teaching practices. This needs to include how teachers can work through obstacles and opposition (Long et. al, 2014). Piccower's (2011) work on critical pedagogy provides insight as to how the teacher will implement critical pedagogy with the challenges of Neoliberal school agendas. Along this is refusing to teach in a state of fear, building a support network of colleagues, faculty, parents, etc., and camouflaging critical pedagogy (i.e. having a unit on "families" that really focuses on LGBT or socioeconomic inequality). Common themes that have been proven to be helpful for educating pre-service teachers on Multicultural Education includes exploring the implications for their future classrooms (Barnes, 2006; Lafferty & Ooka Pang, 2014; Smith, 2009), allowing them to engage in critical self-reflection (Barnes, 2006; Howard, 2003; Krummel, 2013, Lafferty & Ooka Pang, 2014; Smith, 2009; Thomas & Vanderhaar, 2008), working as a role model/mentor and implementing multicultural education within the university classroom itself (Krummel, 2013; Thomas & Vanderhaar, 2008), and providing opportunities for them to further their own knowledge on diversity racial justice/injustice (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). Jeffries (1998/1999) highlights how pre-service teaching also needs to include community activism.

## CREATING A SCHOOL WIDE SPACE THAT SUPPORTS MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

### **Building a Support Network**

Building a support network of allies can also help empower teachers that are teaching for social justice (Piccower, 2011; Vasquez, Long, and Souto-Manning, 2016; Weber, 2011). Teaching about subjects that are perceived as controversial or are not encouraged by administrators can seem like a grueling task. Being seen as a critical

professional, may result in teachers fearing being reprimanded or even losing their jobs (Giroux, 1994). However, by building alliances with other teachers and even working together to formulate critical pedagogy and critical multicultural lesson plans can be the key to a teacher continuing on this challenging journey. Weber (2011) calls this forming ‘communities of resistance’, where co-workers realize the power in numbers and work to be change agents. Additionally, by allying with other teachers, parents, and co-worker’s teachers can also work towards creating an altogether more supportive school culture. Teachers can also learn from each other, and discuss ways they incorporate multicultural topics into their daily lessons. By doing so they help each other think of ways to disguise their critical pedagogy, incorporate critical components into the mandated curriculum, and discuss how to handle parent or student questions/concerns, and even work together to go public or engage in activism.

### **Building Family and Community Relationships**

Many of the participants such as Elizabeth and Bob discussed the importance of building a community with children’s families. Others also highlight the importance of this. In this case the diversity and challenges family members experience can also help to shape the curriculum, as Vasquez, Long, and Souto-Manning (2016) state “Find out about social justice issues *from* families” (p.181). For these communications simple things can also be done to be inclusive of all parents and types of families, by just writing ‘Dear Friends and Families’ rather than ‘Dear Parents’, as mentioned by Bruce and early childhood researchers (Morrison, 2014). Teachers also need to be mindful of other types of diversity within their student’s families this means being mindful of varying socioeconomic statuses. This includes establishing parent support groups, home

visitations, and skyping with parents, and leaving the school doors open later to allow ample time to meet with parents/ families (Morrison, 2014). Lareau's (2000) research also highlights how teachers need to be more understanding of parental involvement in families of varying socioeconomic statuses. Key take away points from Lareau include: schedule constraints may prevent parents from being more involved, teachers should not think that parents care less when they may actually just not be available, and some parents may view the role of the teacher differently.

### **Forming Mentoring Relationships**

Teachers who are critical pedagogues can learn from other more seasoned teachers and get ideas how to implement critical pedagogy. Novices of any type of teaching technique can benefit greatly from more experienced teachers (Eau, 2011). Educational research highlights how teachers can form mentor/mentee relationships to collaborate (Bubb and Earley, 2009; Hargreaves, 2007; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) state that lateral (peer lead leadership) is also highly effective.

If enough teachers are engaging in critical literacy/critical pedagogy this could shift the school dynamics and make the whole school a more social justice oriented place.

### **Creating a School Wide Culture that Values and Supports Diversity**

As mentioned previously if enough teachers begin to implement critical literacy/critical pedagogy practices this can help start a school-wide initiative for critical pedagogy and teaching for social justice. Professional development and teacher in-services could also really help facilitate a school-wide culture that values teaching for social justice practices. All these things can help create a school-wide culture that

implements critical pedagogy. Within the classroom and school institution, educational leaders can help to transform a school culture or classroom environment in a vast variety of ways. As Weber explained, building allies can create a community of resistance within a school institution (Weber, 2010). The goal is to hopefully have a school-wide philosophy that values diversity (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). According to Hass (1961) students and other members of the community such as parents can also be empowered by participating in a shared classroom decision-making process.

This research has focused on critical pedagogy in terms of critical literacy practices in particular. However, other multicultural and teaching for social justice curricula and materials are also essential. Extracurricular activities offered by a school are also important. This can include a LBGTQ alliance group (MacGillivray, 2004) or other diversity clubs. Additionally, even little gestures such as teacher leaving a rainbow sticker in the classroom LBGTQ flyers on a bookshelf out can make students feel supported (Baker, 2002).

Changing a school's climate is not easy and depending on the current culture and beliefs of the staff and community it can be very difficult. Teachers may need to change their self-perception, and the organizations must change as well (Wagner & Kegan, 2013). Additionally, staff needs to investigate all aspects of the culture of the school and try to work toward replacing the oppressive elements of the school culture with more productive ones (Barth, 2011).

### **Schools as Professional Learning Communities for Teachers**

As a starting place, professional development initiatives can help to make the school a professional learning community. It is also essential that this professional

development does not involve deficit views of any culture. For example, teachers need to explore how socioeconomic inequality is a systemic problem; they need to debunk person blame and culture of poverty theories, such as advocated for by Ruby Payne (Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2008).

DuFour (2004) explains to create a professional learning community faculty must:

- 1) Ensure that students are really learning material, this includes asking important question such as “What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulties in learning?” (p.33).
- 2) Instill a culture of collaboration and
- 3) strive for hard work and commitment. Additionally, school leaders should aim to build a staff of lifelong learners.

A critical multicultural approach to learning must be taken. To instill a culture of collaboration teachers, need to learn how to work together and learn from each other. “Teachers learn best from other teachers, in settings where they literally teach each other the art of teaching” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 141). This is more effective than hiring a charismatic leader as a motivational guru (Hargreaves, 2007).

### **Collective Leadership & Leadership**

It is crucial that educational leadership for pre-service Early Childhood teachers and current teachers not only focuses on pertinent social justice issues in the school and larger community, but that the leadership style itself is empowering and liberatory to others. A key component of this includes sharing leadership responsibility rather than using a hierarchical model of leader and followers. Lateral leadership or collective leadership (Berry, 2013; Brubaker, 2004; Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013) might be a key way to accomplish this. “Traditional leadership literature often focuses on the ‘executive’

aspects of leadership, drawn from the world of business that rely on formal organizational authority and power. Schools and other social justice and social action organizations are more likely to operate from a legislative perspective or one that relies on shared interests and the ability to deal with difference” (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013, p. 112). This type of leadership allows individuals to share in the responsibility and co-lead, as they share diverse perspectives and leadership attributes. It is a respectful, critical, and collaborative process (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013, p. 120 citing Benham 2005). Not only is this type of leadership liberatory, but in an educational setting, collective leadership is ideal, since schools tend to be comprised of a very diverse community, and it can allow a group to generate a great diversity of views. Additionally, it can allow a group to develop trust and community (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013), rather than a surface level community or “pseudo community” (Brubaker, 2004). A sense of community and trust is crucial to the success of a group. There is also power in a variety of perspectives (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013). Together a group can define a vision, set a direction, and lead and influence (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013; Wagner & Kegan, 2013). Additionally, in a diverse team of leaders, differences can be embraced as a source of creativity. (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013).

### **Going Public with Critical Pedagogy**

Taking a stance and going public to other teachers, administrators, or parents that you are implementing critical pedagogy and teaching for social justice is remains a challenge. As expressed by the participants, even though they all implement critical pedagogy and specifically critical literacy, they often wonder how it will be received by others.

Although activism is outlined by Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) as one of the components of critical literacy, according to Piccower (2011) getting students involved in activism and going public should be the final step. Although many teachers might feel worried about administrators, parents, or other teacher's perceptions and if there will be repercussions, going public also has many potentials of building a supportive network and creating a school climate shift and could even be the catalyst in changing oppressive school policies. While a teacher may decide to go public without a strong support network, it may ultimately be more successful if they have first built support from other teachers, families, and/or administrators.

### **Teachers as Activists**

Teachers need to lead as activists (Vasquez, Long, & Souto-Manning, 2016) and “must connect their practice of classroom teaching to the operation of power in the larger society. At the same time, they must be attentive to those broader social forces that influence the workings of schooling and pedagogy” (Giroux, 1990, p.271). One of the key components of both critical pedagogy and critical literacy is activism. This means that teachers who are true to teaching for social justice need to view themselves as activists both inside and outside of the classroom. Activism does not have to involve writing letters to politicians or protests. The Arts can be a great way to bring the ideologies of critical pedagogy to the mainstream public. Music, drama, and visual arts provide an outlet for activism as well. These can be group efforts such as Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979), El Teatro Compesino, and Act up AIDS coalition. Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, was able to help politically and socially disenfranchised populations such as those in Ecuador and Peru under the military

dictatorship of the 1960's-1970's empowered themselves through the use of drama/theater.

Music provides a venue for challenging the status quo and brings critical pedagogy to the masses. This was seen frequently in the 1960s counterculture when folk singers such as Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell encouraged the public to critique inequities and challenge the mainstream assumptions through their lyrics and music.

### **Cultural and Paradigm Shifts about Teaching**

In many schools there may be a very top down approach, where teachers may be afraid to take on active leadership roles in fear of it adversely affecting their job security. According to Giroux (1990) "There is a deep suspicion of any attempt to open up the possibility for educators to address pressing social justice issues" (p.270). Not only do teachers need to feel their job is secured if they take action, but also view themselves as change agents. Teaching cannot be viewed as a semi-profession (Berry, 2013), instead teachers need to view themselves as public intellectuals (Giroux, 1990). At the same time, they must be attentive to those broader social forces that influence the workings of schooling and pedagogy" (Giroux, 1990, p.271). Therefore, a culture that empowers other teachers both by helping them understand the oppressive societal structures at the macro level and at the micro psychological level, and how they may be internalizing oppressive structures and ideologies needs to be achieved. The teachers may need to change their self-perception, and the organizations must change as well (Wagner & Kegan, 2013). Within a community of resistance (Weber, 2010) teachers can collectively try to resist domination and oppression; "Individuals within them can participate in the development of a positive definition of the self in the face of dominant culture oppression" (p. 40). We

need to re-think the way things are done and replace these old ways with new and improved ways (Barth, 2011).

### **When all else fails: Camouflaging Critical Pedagogy**

Through critical pedagogy teachers can help students understand injustices within society and challenge notions of hegemony (Apple, 1982; Banks, 1997; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1984; Howard, 2003; McLaren, 1989; Nieto, 2010). However, teachers must bear in mind that any form of critical pedagogy, including critical literacy can be very unwelcomed by those who do not want to challenge the status quo. In early childhood settings many administrators and staff members may be especially weary of critical pedagogy techniques. However, by disguising critical pedagogy, teachers may have an easier time beginning to implement it. As Picower (2011) suggests teachers can hide their critical pedagogy so that it still appears to cover many of the mandated curricular benchmarks. As mentioned NAEYC does include multicultural standards and critical pedagogy and critical literacy could be included as well. This means it could appear that teachers are teaching students just to respect differences, but they could also be teaching them to value these differences, name problems (such as bullying and inequity), reflect on these problems, and take action. Since much of early childhood education should be focused on teaching through inquiry, by having the lessons based on student's own questions and concerns and then re-presented (Freire, 1970) to students through the form of critical literacy this can also help justify the use of such social justice oriented themes to parents and administrators. In this case, rather than it appearing as the *teacher's* social justice agenda which may not be welcomed at every school, it can be explained to staff and parents as the *children's* interest/ questions, as the teacher will select the topics out of

the student's questions. Additionally, if it is based on the *children's* questions and issues they experience, such books/discussions will steer far away from being lumped into "indoctrination."

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

### **Clear Teacher Objectives for Lesson Plan/ Discussion**

It has also been brought to my attention just how essential it is that teachers who implement critical literacy understand *themselves* what critical literacy entails, and that it explores the socio-political implications of text. In particular, it examines and seeks to dismantle the various manifestations of oppression (i.e. issues of power/oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.). Additionally, while some of the participants and the literature mentioned employing a critical literacy strategy that involved students taking on perspectives of those in positions of power, such as within the context of fairytales, and with the example of telling the story of Cinderella from the view of the Evil Step-Mother (Kim & Cho, 2017), this could involve looking at the systematic problems that have caused this character to be evil, however, in order for it to be truly critical literacy, solely exploring the perspective of those in power or *legitimizing* their oppressive behavior, if it did in any form, would *not* be critical literacy. As the purpose of critical literacy is to help liberate and empower those who are marginalized/oppressed and/or explore unfair systematic problems. Therefore, the teacher's goals/objective for the lesson plan has to be clear as to not make this potentially highly problematic error. As it remains *essential* that critical literacy challenge these dominant power structures. Therefore, questions that are phrased in terms of legitimizing

unfair power structures, or emboldening those who are oppressive, would make this *not* in fact critical literacy.

### **Not a Cut and Paste Approach**

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that doing critical literacy should not be a one size fits all method (Behrman, 2006). Within an early childhood context and constructivist learning model, critical literacy should greatly come organically from the children's interests and questions. This makes such the practice inquiry based (Beach & Cheovulu, 2014).

### **Concluding Thoughts on Critical Educators**

For many of the participants it seems that they may have implemented critical literacy before naming it as such, as many of them explained they were not introduced to the term until their doctoral studies. And thus many had taught critical literacy-like practices prior. On this note I want to highlight that while graduate studies in education is by no means the factor that *leads* a teacher to become critical and implement practices such as critical literary, more teacher preparation would seem a viable way to better prepare educators for such practices. To recap, participants with higher degrees were chosen to help elucidate what teacher preparation they had had on the topic during their academic career.

### **The Need for Additional Research**

This research endeavor has provided a very in-depth look into the perceptions and experiences of seven South Carolina critical pedagogues who have taught pre-school and who hold or are working towards a doctorate in education, and their specific views and practices for critical literacy instruction with four-year-old children. While it provides a

lengthy and detailed overview of the multitude of ways in which critical literacy could be implemented for young children and grapples with some of the challenges, much more research is needed to dive deeper into how this process could be implemented most effectively.

## RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

### MY POSITIONALITY

Throughout this qualitative inquiry, my positionality has clearly influenced my research from start to finish. Impacting all aspects of my study, this has included everything from the topic I selected, situating my study largely within a critical theoretical framework, the purposeful sample of participants, the way the data was coded and analyzed, and every other aspect of the study. As a qualitative study it has remained crucial that I engage in reflexivity so I can be as aware as possible of my positionality and how it shaped this research endeavor. It is key to keep in mind that this project involved my interpretation on what my participants have told me and it is through my own unique lens that their responses have been coded and analyzed.

It is also relevant to note that my positionality led me to feel it was important to gather a purposeful sample all of individuals with or working towards graduate degrees in education. This was because I thought they would be familiar with the concepts I use and be able to provide great insight to this much-needed field of study. However, I was therefore already gathering a sample of people who were likely to have had a similar background to me and were more likely to agree with me epistemologically and politically.

My commitment to critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and teaching for social justice has played a large part in the way my participants have described their views to me. Additionally, drawing from critical literacy and critical pedagogy has also greatly shaped how I interpreted my participant's responses.

I have continued to reflect on my relationship with my participants and how I can make sure to honor them, value their insight, and strive to make it a reciprocal and non-exploitative process.

On a final note in regards to my positionality, I have also realized the great understanding and complexities involving in interpreting data. Due to the fact that participant's perspectives are often times very complex and cannot fit neatly into a box or one specific code, as researchers we need to make sure we stay mindful of this. I need to continue to keep an open mind and not try to fit everybody's interpretations into an existing schema of mine, but rather continue to think outside the box.

## CONCLUSION

This research has hopefully provided valuable insight for social justice oriented practitioners and researchers who focus within the realm of early childhood. Specifically, it has explored the perceptions and experiences of social justice minded South Carolina preschool teachers who also hold or are working toward an advanced graduate degree regarding their implementation of critical literacy with preschool children. Through my interviews I have also gathered significant insights lending themselves to more general multicultural education and teaching for social justice implications when working with young children.

Successfully implementing critical literacy at the preschool level remains a key topic of investigation. All the participants in this study were selected due to their commitment to teaching for social justice with preschool children as a viable way to eradicate bigotry, and in doing so this research endeavor has provided key insight as to *how* this might be successfully carried out. It has also provided a detailed look into the challenges educators face implementing such pedagogy and the specific challenges for this age demographic. This research has elucidated that although a challenging practice, helping young children learn to think critically about text and examine the sociopolitical implications can certainly be done and in a great multitude of ways. The early childhood classroom presents its own unique challenges for implementing critical literacy and social justice pedagogy and curricula, however critical educators continue to believe that one must learn to simultaneously read both the “word” and the “world”(Freire & Macedo, 1987).

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## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview questions will include but are not limited to:

### Background Questions

- 1.) Where were you born?
- 2.) Where else have you lived (if applicable)?
- 3.) Where did you previously go to school? What degrees do you hold (or are working toward)?
- 4.) What grades/ages have you taught?
- 5.) How do you define social justice issues?
- 6.) How do you define critical literacy?

*(working definitions of social justice and critical literacy are provided in handout. These are the same as defined in the operational definitions page).*

### Teaching for Social Justice in Early Childhood

- 7.) Tell me about your pre-service teacher preparation (if any) that explored teaching for social justice in the early childhood classroom.
- 8.) Tell me about employing methods of teaching for social justice in your preschool classroom?
- 9.) What pedagogical strategies do you think are appropriate or most appropriate for teaching for social justice in preschool classrooms with four-year-olds?

Follow up questions:

Why?

### Critical Literacy in Early Childhood

- 10.) What are your views regarding teachers engaging students in critical literacy?
- 11.) What are your views regarding teachers engaging students in critical literacy within the early childhood classroom, specifically with four-year-old children?
- 12.) Have you implemented critical literacy in your preschool classroom

Follow up/sub questions:

If so, how?

Can you give me some specific examples?

13.) What topics are most appropriate for critical literacy activities with four-year-old children?

Follow up/sub question:

Can you give me some specific examples?

What specific topics have you explored?

14.) Do you think this worked as an effective way to teach children about social justice issues?

Follow up/sub questions:

Why do you think this?

How did you assess the lesson (formal/informal?)

15.) What were some of the benefits if any of utilizing critical literacy as a tool to teach for social justice with preschoolers?

Follow up/sub questions:

Why do you think this?

Can you give some specific examples?

What were some of the limitations?

Can you think of a particular example where you experienced an obstacle in regards to your lesson before, after, or during the critical literacy lesson?

16.) Anything else you would like to add?

## APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Informed Consent: Interview

Title of Study: Teachers' perceptions and experiences on implementing critical literacy in the preschool classroom

Purpose: I am conducting a research study to better understand critical pedagogy implications within the early childhood classroom, particularly at the preschool level. There is limited research pertaining to this topic and therefore a lack of resources for teachers who wish to implement such critical pedagogical practices. This interview seeks to describe the perceptions and experiences of those who have taught preschool and implemented critical pedagogy, in particular critical literacy.

Procedures: By choosing to participate in this interview, you will be asked semi-structured and open-ended questions regarding your perceptions on teaching for social justice and critical literacy in the early childhood classroom. The interview will be recorded.

Amount of time: This interview will take approximately one hour.

Rights: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to refuse to participate, or withdraw at any time. During the interview, you can refuse to answer any of the questions.

Confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality of the data, you and the name of your school will be assigned pseudonyms that will be used in the researcher's notes and data analysis.

I have reviewed the consent form and understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point during the course of this study without consequence. I also understand that any information resulting from this study will be completely confidential. I realize that I may ask for additional information regarding this study at any time.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records. I agree to participate in the study.

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Participant signature

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Date

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Printed name of Participant