

Seeds of Hope:

A Just Education for Young Children through Play, Imagination, and Picture Books in Early

Childhood Education: A Case Study

By

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"To Kubilay, my love, your unwavering support from the depths of your heart has been invaluable. Kursat and Selin, may your unwavering dedication and relentless determination illuminate the path to your success. Keep chasing your dreams. As for me, this marks the fulfillment of my lifelong aspiration!"

Abstract

This dissertation examines the meaning-making of children (ages 2-5) as they read and play with picture books related to social justice themes, such as identity and diversity, in a preschool and childcare center. The study goal is to investigate the analysis of children's meaning-making of picture books to understand the social world around them from the children's perspectives. In addition, I uncover children's use of interpretation tools across events to elaborate on critical thinking and social issues. Theoretically, my study sits within the larger field of research on children's imagination and picture book readings at the intersection of play theories, social justice theories, and sociocultural theories of literacy. I use those theories to help me locate a school that supports play and picture book reading with imagination skills. I found a university-based preschool (ages 2-5 years) in Madison, Wisconsin, explicitly following a play-based curriculum and anti-biased education approach. This school has been the research site for five months. I have been gathering data to theorize and document how socially and ethnically, and culturally diverse young children make meaning of social justice-related picture books to understand the social world around them from the children's perspectives. Recent incidents of racism in the last three years during the Covid-19 Pandemic speak to the importance of the social justice topic to American society. Schools need to nurture "social imagination, "and teaching with learning for democracy needs to be a transformative experience. Teaching with picture books can be the catalyst for making individual connections to democracy for children. Social imagination can help students imagine a socially just world through picture books. This case study's findings indicate that young children (ages 2-5 years) make meaning of children's picture books related to social justice themes such as identity and diversity. While they make meaning, they use their play activities, imagination skills, and funds of knowledge when the diverse texts come with teacher and peer scaffolding in

early childhood classrooms. These findings support the importance of teacher scaffolding and the need to provide time and space for free play activities.

Furthermore, it is also significant to provide picture books related to social justice themes with student-initiated and teacher-supported play activities around the picture book readings so that young children can enhance their imagination skills. These findings open up the possibilities of creating socially just classroom environments and refine ideas about the power of play within the enormous scope of children's imagination and meaning-making of picture books. Moreover, we understand the importance of forming the foundation of a theory of literacy, social justice, play, and imagination that encompasses creating a socially just world around young children in early childhood education classrooms. Recommendations from the study come for early childhood educators, curriculum designers of formal or informal learning environments, policymakers, and researchers who seek to better understand the relationship between literacy, play, imagination, and social Justice in contemporary classroom environments.

Keywords: Teacher scaffolding, play, social justice themes " identity and diversity," play-based curriculum, imagination, and children's picture books.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND



**Nile Room: Free Choice Time: Pretend to Play with Pretend Play
props: Scarves after reading “The Proudest Blue” (Muhammad, 2019).**



1.1 Purpose

This dissertation is about how these young students use these literacies, imagination, and play alternatives to make meaning of children's picture books related to two social justice

themes: identity and diversity. This is a case study of two classrooms of a university preschool and childcare center in Madison, Wisconsin. I call this school Awena school/program. Awena Program is a university childcare program serving students from 16 months to 8 years during the 2023-2024 school year. This study presents observations of two classrooms and the five educators as the lead teachers of these classrooms. The teachers promote literacy (picture book reading and imagining) through play in their classroom contexts. Their practice can be a starting point to promote imaginative play, picture book reading, classroom talk, and opportunities for sharing their and students' perspectives on creating a socially just world around them.

I have chosen to present children's (2-5 years) meaning-making of social justice themes related to picture book readings through their imagination and classroom play activities. My study aims to analyze how reading children's literature with social justice themes to young children (ages 2-5) in their early childhood classrooms may be the starting point for further play, conversation, and imagination activities. Furthermore, this may promote young children's understanding of social justice principles. I aim to understand how children make sense of their play and interactions with picture books from their perspective, spaces, language, and the sociocultural contexts that guide their actions.

By seeking answers to these questions, I hope to advance play-literacy-social justice research and offer new understandings of how children's picture book readings can be starting points for imaginative play, classroom talk, and opportunities for sharing their perspectives on creating a socially just world around them.

To gain a deeper insight into the intricate interplay of play, imagination, and picture book reading within the context of social justice themes in early childhood classrooms, it is imperative to scrutinize the pedagogical methods and classroom settings that either foster or inhibit

children's distinctive interpretations of picture books and playtime. It was I who meticulously organized the picture books in the classroom library, as opposed to the classroom teachers. In my capacity, I used these books as a tool for observing how children constructed meaning from the narratives.

During these interactions, it became evident that some children exhibited remarkable imaginative engagement. In contrast, others occasionally abstained from book-reading activities, instead opting for alternative pastimes such as puzzles or role-playing with kitchen toys. Within this dissertation, you will encounter diverse educators, each embracing their unique teaching approaches. The variance among teachers, including myself as a former preschool teacher, is entirely natural.

Throughout my interactions with students, I focused on discerning how they interacted with the books and how other teachers and peers within the classroom employed these literary resources. It is crucial to acknowledge that individual children may have varying preferences regarding books, and this diversity also extends to teachers.

Notably, some educators may approach children with a "deficit" perspective. In this dissertation, you will witness instances where children's imaginative capacities ebb and flow. My observations of these occurrences consistently center on the children's potential to engage with social justice themes and the underlying thought processes that drive their engagement. It is only by affording children the opportunity to explore these books in-depth, as I have advocated, that we can truly delve into their interpretations.

I aim to convey to the reader that within the pages of this dissertation, they will encounter a diverse spectrum of educators, books, and student interactions related to social justice-themed literature during free play, small group, and large group activities.

This dissertation can guide early childhood educators to "redesign" by taking what happens in early childhood classrooms as described in this study and making it better, leading to the reconstruction or deconstruction of early childhood practices and teaching strategies. With this study, we can also guide educators in new ways of thinking about picture book reading/meaning-making related to social justice themes (identity and diversity) by understating the power of young children's imagination skills with their understanding of their identities/diversities in creating socially just future educational contexts.

The following excerpt shows how a young child made the meaning of a social justice-related "identity and diversity" book:

"This is my mom! Look at this!" The little two-and-a-half-year-old curly, light brown haired cute and chubby-faced girl Bertha told me loudly and excitedly with joy pulling my arm to convince me that the girl in the picture was like her mother.

"Ohh? Does your mother look like her?" I responded to her curiously as I had never met with her mother before, although I did and introduced myself to her mother to discuss my research study. *"Yes,"* pointing at her hair by smiling and showing me how to wear a hijab with both hands since she had limited English language and was bilingual; her home language is Arabic. She is the one who talks gibberish from time to time while she does pretend to play in the housekeeping area most of the time. Suddenly, I also remembered that my daughter was doing the same things she was doing, like "speaking a language she had created," except when she spoke Turkish and English. This little girl's monologues mixed up with maybe another language but not Arabic, maybe the one she created during her playtime, making sense to no one but her.

The little girl Bertha in the Nile room is pointing at the brown girl covering her hair with a blue hijab in the "Proudest Blue" book by Ibtihaj Muhammad. The book is about "bullying." And it is a charming story of two sisters and their utterance of pride in their Muslim faith. The little girl with white skin color, curly hair, and a chubby face also has a mother who is wearing one of the head coverings while she comes to drop her off at school each day. She runs happily, goes by her classroom teachers, and stands by her, hugging her from her legs, smiling, and looking at teacher Corina's face cheerfully. The classroom teachers noticed Bertha running and walking around joyfully like she wanted to share with the world and screaming about her discovery. She had just discovered the similarities between the book and her life by examining the book cover and illustrations, seeing her mother in "The proudest blue." One of them, her teacher Corina says: *"Ohh, look, Derya. How did you do this? She seemed very excited about the book and loved it so much."*

Teacher Leila: *"They like your books and enjoy reading them. Thanks for sharing these with the children"* to me. I felt like I had something inside me that wanted to scream my joy that what I had been doing was worthwhile now in this classroom with young children. I want to scream to the world that I made a young child so happy by bringing my books, sharing them with all, expecting something worthwhile to exist, and turning them into magic with joy and excitement. This is what I felt as a mother, an immigrant to the U.S.A, an ex-preschool teacher, and a participant researcher. I empathize with Bertha and feel her feelings and experiences through this magical reading and imagining times. I told the teachers I was thrilled to see the children enjoying reading the books with their teachers and feeling the joy of reading in their classrooms.

Bertha made the meaning of this social justice-related "identity and diversity" book. She connected this book to her background like Mary who was 3.5 years old in Harvest room. Similar feelings occurred, but little differences with this student when we read "Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns" by Hena Khan.



Mary in the Harvest room picked the "Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns" book. We started reading it together. This book was teacher Kay's book from her classroom library. Mary pointed at the domes on the book cover and called them by a different name, "Mecca/Kaaba," that I could not understand, although I called the domes a mosque. She pointed at the woman on the page called "Momma." She excitedly pointed at the man's picture praying and told me her dad prays at home. She saw the picture where the girl and her mom were walking in the street, pointing at the mom with a head scarf, "My mom wears it, too." She pointed at the grandfather's drinking tea and coffee to me, saying, "They are drinking tea."

D: What are they doing?

Mary: They are praying. Praying is good, so Allah, if you pray, "Allah is going to give you a baby."

D: Ohh. If you pray, does Allah give you a baby?

Mary: Hmm, (Approval tone) Because you will do a good job. Allah likes people to pray.

I continued reading the book. She pointed at the domes as Mecca, and I tried to correct it to the mosque. I pointed to the minarets and called them "*minarets*."

Mary: Well, I think they are Kaaba.

D: Kaaba is an essential place in Saudi Arabia where Muslims visit and walk around it by praying to God and worshipping God. It is a safe place for them to unite and believe in God's superpower. Mecca is in Kaaba.

Mary pointed at the dates in the book and asked what they were. I told her they were dates and dates were dessert/sweets. She asked about the doll in a purple dress and told me she liked it. She pointed at the family picture on the last page and told me she had a big family. I asked her if she had aunts, uncles, cousins, and nephews/nieces. She said: "*Yes*."

The genre of the book above is fiction and informational, but the student can still enhance her critical thinking skills, and the text still supports the student's imagination skills. This book is informative and captures the world of Islam for young children. This book also can inspire questions and observations about world religions and culture for young non-Muslim children.

As I continued collecting my data and interacting with the students and teachers, I could see the influential parts of my study in students' lives as part of the daily routine. I aimed to spread "awareness" to young children about their diversity and identity, including the teachers, through enhancing their classroom picture book reading activities. I witnessed several excerpts from my data collection on how the students and teachers appreciated me bringing the books, doing activities with them, and supporting them in the classroom. When I entered the classroom, students screamed my name and asked me to "come again" with a few teachers before I left.

On the surface, the Nile classroom may seem very quiet early in the morning with a few students, but immensely noisy around after 9:30 am with the final student drop-in time. Although for individuals unfamiliar with preschool classroom settings, this classroom seems to look busy such as children walking or running around with noise. Someone familiar with this environment, especially when they pay attention to small details, might see a playful, fun, exploratory family style and a safe, meaningful childcare setting supported with literacy alternatives.

This university-based childcare site houses students and teachers that come from different countries. Awena school area has an important value since it is historically inhabited by the Ho-Chunk people who are also known as Hocak, Hoocagra, or Winnebago. They are a Siouan-speaking Native American People whose historic territory includes parts of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois ([Ho-Chunk - Wikipedia](#)). The school where it is landed was stolen from Native American people. I recognize that the land Awena school is located in the ancestral home space of the Ho-Chunk Nation. In the first treaty following the Indian Removal Act in 1830, the state government forcibly removed the Ho-Chunk from their home in 1832. The Ho-Chunk nation was completely removed from Wisconsin. Ho-Chunk wanted to come back to their land, and many returned home here to Wisconsin (Hassett and Gok Syllabus C&I 315). I honor their history of resistance and resilience. It is easy to see how this diverse community, staff, and students created these peaceful in-school and out-of-school environments for the education of young children, including after-school programs. Awena (Sunrise in Native American language) school was established in 1992 for university student families and their children to respond to childcare needs. Since 1992, Awena has grown a lot. The school moved to a large building from a small apartment. The number of students increased year by year. There are now six classrooms with seven age groups. There is one baby room, one toddler room, one full and one part-time 2-

4-year-old program, one 3-5-year-old program, one after-school program (up to 8 years), and one 4K program. The Awena program site is located on the northwest edge of UW-Madison's campus; Awena community is a community of apartment buildings surrounded by woods and Lake Mendota. It is contiguous with various picnic and playground areas and one of the oldest community gardens in the United States.

Nile classroom is one of the classrooms of Awena campus preschool and childcare center, which was a home to me for a long time. Being a part of this school made me very proud. I felt like a family with everyone working there and sharing joy, sickness, and sadness with all the students and families in an international community. This community has been very safe and felt like home to all the international people as part of this community. Thinking that my children used to be in these classrooms, too, made me remember all the joys and challenging times we had in this community. Yes, I missed being there once, and my personal and teaching life passed through my imagination from all those years.

Eventually, what was unique about this place? Why have I ended up there to continue my research after all those years of teaching experience? I once was a teacher here and am now a participant researcher. This unique international learning place is quirky with distinctive classroom names, all understood as being named "Yuva" in Turkish, which means a nest, but also in different languages such as Korean, Native American tribes, etc., welcoming all families and students from around the world. Welcoming diversity and different languages are a great start to being aware of others' identities. The classroom names and the "High Scope curriculum" program, a play-based curriculum with student-centered and teacher-supported activities, contribute to this unique international preschool learning program.

This program follows an anti-bias education approach and developmentally appropriate practices, too. The program emphasizes that we live in communities where unfairness happens quite often and that it is crucial to notice the inequities around us, especially in educational settings as teachers. Like Goodson (1998) noted in Kuby (2013), our fluid identities and ideologies influence how we respond to the incidents around us. As teachers, we can bring back and talk about these incidents to our students and make them conscious of others whose lives are marginalized in our communities. When we talk about these incidents occurring in or out of school environments, we need to follow age-appropriate teaching strategies in the consciousness-raising process, as Kuby (2013) mentioned in her book. We can still talk about differences and similarities the people have or unfair situations occurring in our communities in an age-appropriate way. Kuby (2013) calls these "consciousness-raising moments." These moments can happen at any time and in any way as part of the daily routine or activity times.

In addition, teacher scaffolding is crucial to students' understanding of these diversity and identity-related activities. Especially for very young children (2-5), not scaffolding these activities might not intentionally support student learning. I was observing two classrooms. I noticed that only leaving the diversity and identity books on a classroom bookshelf does not always support student learning more meaningfully. For example, I have seen students taking these books and turning the pages after scanning the pictures fast, leaving them on the floor for the next activity.

Besides the teacher scaffolding, planning activities around diversity and identity awareness as part of the daily routine makes student learning effective. We must support our students' continued learning through curriculum planning and daily routine activities, and teacher support is needed for student understanding of social justice themes (identity & diversity).

Further, Vasquez (2014) discusses the critical role of diverse ways of practicing literacy in the curriculum and daily routines. We continually read other people's worlds when we read the words in a text. The texts we read are socially constructed and allow readers to talk, think, do, and become in different ways. Texts can be constructed and deconstructed in different ways. Teacher support and scaffolding are crucial to student understanding of different texts (p.7).

Meanwhile, the daily routine in both classrooms welcomes diversity and student identity. One example is singing a daily "greeting song" in different languages during circle time. Here is an example from an excerpt of my observation about appreciation for diversity and student identity as part of the daily routines:

Teacher Corina: "Ok. Sit down now. It is circle time." She made sure all the children were sitting on the circle rug. Corina sang two different songs to invite the children to the rug. One was, "Here we are together, and the second was to come on over and sit right down. Corina greeted children in their home language," Ola, Nihao, Shalom, Bonjour, salam," one by one. "They sang Love Grows and ABC songs with a few student requests; teacher C. sang the ABC song fast and the other song slowly.

10:50 am Corina called the children's names with a game, asking specific questions about their characteristics, such as "If you have a brother, get a coat on and line up." The children lined up and got ready to go outside (Date: 12/1/2022/Thursday at 10:50 am/Nile Room)

According to its website, activities from Learning for Justice (LFJ) (1991) which Awena school uses, are designed to increase understanding of differences and their value to a respectful and civil society that actively challenges bias, stereotyping, and discrimination in schools and communities. The four goals of anti-bias education demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities among students. Learning about other cultures and religions in an international education setting supports student identity positively and reduces the stereotyping of unknown cultures and religions.

Learning for Justice mentions that teaching tolerance is vital to children to develop empathy and respect for each other and learn about others' backgrounds. Teachers can encourage anti-bias education programs by allowing students to work/play with and support one another. Reading texts from different cultures also supports student identity and appreciation of diversity. Like adults, children also experience differences and similarities in relating to one another; therefore, teachers need to maintain an anti-bias classroom. Anti-bias teachers are committed to the principle that every child deserves to develop to their fullest potential (Learning for Justice, 1991). This university preschool and childcare center also follows an anti-bias education approach which is meaningful with the curriculum activities, resources, and materials, including diverse teachers and students' backgrounds in my research site.

1.2 Objective and Research Question

The primary goal of this study is to examine the role of play and picture book reading/listening/imagining of young children in promoting social justice principles such as diversity and identity. I set the stage for a potential research study around play, imagination, and its influence. To better understand the relationship between play, imagination, and picture book reading around the social justice themes (identity and diversity) in early childhood classrooms, it is essential to examine the pedagogical practices and classroom environments that encourage or discourage children's unique meaning-making of picture books in different ways.

The following proposed research question intends to clarify ideas about play within the enormous scope of text/picture-reading and imagining through children's books. The research question of this study is: "How do young children understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in preschool (ages 2-5 years) classrooms?"

Using multiple theoretical lenses, I intend to identify a practical definition of play from the critical characteristics of different classical and modern play theories. I use social justice principles (identity and diversity) to analyze children's picture book reading and imagining related to social justice themes.

This study fills an important gap in the research on the pedagogical practices associated with the convergence of play, imagination, picture books, and social justice. No contemporary research includes all four concepts (imagination, picture books, play, and social Justice) in early childhood education literature. This study supports the literature on play, imagination, picture books, and social justice concepts. I aim to deepen the connections between scholarship and practice. This study can contribute to early childhood social justice and imagination literature, including play activities in early childhood classrooms. Children's play and imagining a socially just world through children's meaning-making of picture books is essential to early childhood education classrooms since we have more diverse student populations in contemporary times. Further, this research may contribute to opening spaces for critical literacy education as part of the education of young children in preschool (2-5 years).

I propose that my research question for my dissertation is

1. How do children understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in preschool classrooms?

Further questions that may be answered include:

1. How can play and imagination in ECE promote social justice principles such as identity and diversity?
2. How do children make the meaning of different texts related to social justice issues?

3. How do children tell their real-life experiences based on what they read and hear from the texts?
4. How do children question their real-life experiences?

1.3 Rationale

This section provides a rationale for research on play to show how young children develop literacy through picture book opportunities and play contexts. Play activities are valued for making meaning, meditating, and thinking critically beyond print literacy skills (Ashiabi, 2007; Zosh et al., 2017). My goal is to investigate the analysis of children's meaning-making of picture books to understand the social world around them from the children's perspectives. In addition, I will uncover children's use of interpretation tools across events to elaborate on critical thinking and social issues.

Recent incidents of racism speak to the importance of this topic to American society. Wolk (2004) claimed that people are unaware of social justice issues. They ignore the participatory part of democracy. Therefore, schools need to nurture children's social imagination, and teaching with learning for democracy needs to be a transformative experience. Teaching with picture books can be the catalyst for making individual connections to democracy for children. Social imagination can help students imagine a socially just world through picture books. Foundations of democracy describe the common good, cultural appreciation, social justice, caring/empathy and compassion, social imagination, moral decision-making, social responsibility, activism, community, and war/peace/nonviolence. Teachers must take the initiative to bring democracy to life.

Social justice and anti-racist pedagogies are essential today because the diverse student population in preschools and public schools has increased (Lopez Lopez, 2019, 2018). Baratz

and Baratz (1970) describe cultural differences as distinctions rather than deficits. Negative attitudes towards African American and other disenfranchised populations create institutional racism, and schools are part of this system.

Early childhood leaders are responsible for promoting anti-bias programs in their schools (Caper, 2015; Derman-Sparks et al., 2015). Teachers must know the issues that influence children's psychosocial development (Derman-Sparks, 2010). Since children's diverse backgrounds complicate our country, society, and schools, we must ensure that all childcare programs support diverse experiences. Ladson-Billings (1997) described schools as race-making projects, suggesting that schools create race issues resulting in students of color becoming school dropouts. Therefore, addressing race issues in early childhood stages in schools is crucial. This research study aims to demonstrate how scholarship on play and imagination can help create critical literacy and social justice opportunities for young children (K-2). Conventionally, critical literacy is limited to older students. I will explore how we might bring social justice pedagogy to early childhood classrooms. As teachers, when we encourage our students to respect others' opinions and feel free to discuss their ideas with their teachers and peers through classroom talk, students may enhance their critical thinking and literacy skills. These skills might lead them to advocate for underprivileged people in society. Advocacy and activism towards marginalized groups may bring society equal opportunities for everyone and support to decrease institutional racism. In this research, picture books, play activities, and supporting children's imagination with critical thinking skills are expected to create these socially just classroom environments for all students. Montessori (1989) supported diversity and unity of people stating, "Although religions and languages keep men apart, arts, sciences and industrial products try to unite them. Human unity is only possible through education" (p. 49). As a researcher, I also

believe in the power of education in erasing racism, sexism, ableism, and religious discrimination.

1.3.1 Is Play Important?

Several scholars argue the importance of play for young children's healthy development in early childhood literature. Zosh et al. (2017) describe playful learning experiences as joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive. Learning through play is essential for positive and healthy development, regardless of a child's situation. Children are better prepared for real-life situations through play (p.3). Ashiabi (2007) explains the crucial role of play in socioemotional development in preschool classrooms. Problem-solving skills, role-taking, cooperation, negotiation, perspective-taking, and social understanding are several benefits of play activities for children. Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) maintained that children use their imagination and engage with the three F's-fantasy, friendship, and fairness. Through fantasy play, children develop skills supporting literacy development across content areas and grades. Daily play is valuable for developing language and social skills (Paley, 1988, p. 107). Vygotsky (1978) said, "Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child" (p. 102). Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) suggested that play is the primary way children learn about their world (p.191). Play activities also encourage physical activity, specifically active play with child-led and unstructured contexts encourages physical activity. This type of play promotes the development of physical literacy skills and encourages active outdoor play (Houser et al., 2016). Play activities encourage relationships with peers. Peer play develops collaborative social relationships. Children become aware of each other. Influence one another, learn their own stories, and enrich their lives (Ridgeway, Quinores, and Li, 2020). Morrow et al. (2013) also supported the importance of play in child development.

Dramatic and other types of play are considered essential for early childhood instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) report, the National Early Literacy Panel (2010) report, No Child Left Behind (2001), and Race to the Top (2011) are policy initiatives and research that suggest the necessity for the acquisition of literacy skills in early childhood. Although children learn better by playing, many schools limit or remove play activities from explicit instruction (Ramstetter, Murray, and Garner, 2010), arguing that there is no time today for play or the benefits of play (Holt et al., 2015). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) recommended play as an essential part of child development in its accreditation standards. Children's play enhances cognitive development like memory, self-regulation, gains in executive function skills, and cognitive flexibility (p.101). Finally, play enhances young children's cognitive, psychological, physical, and social skills development, allowing them to use their creativity while developing their imagination and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is essential to brain development, socio-emotional learning, and academic skills development (Ginsburg, 2021).

1.4 Overview of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I argue that using picture books as part of the play activities and observing young children's classroom interactions related to the convergence of play, picture books, social justice, and social imagination is essential for children's healthy development. This meaningful interaction will likely support the preschool classrooms in enhancing literacy engagement to create a socially just environment.

Chapter One introduces the research purpose, problem, and rationale and identifies the research objective and questions I plan to address through a bounded case study research design.

In Chapter Two, I review the literature that will guide this study and help develop themes emerging from the data as I explore my research question. The literature review discusses and evaluates the historical conversations, conflicting definitions, and implications the role of play has on past and current notions of early childhood literacy. This literature review shows that play, historically, enriched children's healthy development (social, psychological, cognitive, and physical) and is crucial to children's constructing knowledge, meaning-making of the world, and engaging in real life.

In addition to these benefits, young children's play contributed to their language development. Children and teachers work together to create a meaningful world through literacy and play activities. I will discuss the definitions of play and the concept of play about language and imagination. I will continue to present a general discussion of early childhood play theories. I will classify play theories as Classical and Modern play theories in early childhood play literature. I will also review the impact of Piaget's Cognitive Constructivism on developing knowledge through play and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Constructivist perspectives on play as part of contemporary play theories. It is crucial to elucidate the theoretical frameworks undergirding young children's development of imagination through their interactions in play activities. Following the definition of the play concept and historical theories of play, I will explain four groups of research and studies focused on early childhood play, imagination, and picture book research.

In the second chapter, I delve into a range of studies encompassing children's play and its diverse investigative approaches, research on picture book reading and its implications for imagination, and the examination of critical literacy among older and younger children. Towards the conclusion of this chapter, I specifically address research that elucidates the role of schools as

critical literacy environments, as well as studies dedicated to the intersection of picture books and critical literacy education.

In Chapter Three, I initiate a comprehensive review of theorists who have significantly contributed to social justice, anti-bias education, and critical literacy pedagogies in early childhood education. This chapter is a foundation for the theoretical framework underpinning my research. In particular, I spotlight influential early childhood social justice and critical literacy scholarship figures, including Vasquez, Ladson-Billings, Derman-Sparks, Souto-Manning, and Comber. I aim to elucidate their respective theories and concepts that will inform and guide this study.

Vasquez's (2014) framework serves as a central pillar in my research, focusing on implementing and assessing critical literacy education within preschool settings. To unravel the intricate dynamics of children's meaning-making with picture books about social justice themes, I draw inspiration from the foundational theories of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, Bakhtin's concepts of dialogic becoming, and the significance of classroom discourse. These theories collectively illuminate the role of imagination skills in this process.

My research endeavor involves a profound exploration of the interconnections between children's meaning-making of their world through books, their capacity for social imagination, and their interactions with peers and teachers. This holistic examination unravels the inherent complexities of imagination, play, picture books, and social justice. Ultimately, it aims to forge a novel understanding of how critical literacies and meaning-making shape children's experiences.

Furthermore, I delve into the scholarship that informs social justice education for young children. These scholars' insights and perspectives shape the pedagogical approaches I explore within my research.

As a critical juncture, I integrate these theories into an analytical framework rooted in the foundational principles of social justice standards, including identity, diversity, advocacy, and justice. By classifying picture books within these thematic groups, I aim to create a systematic framework that will be instrumental in grounding and guiding my dissertation research.

Ultimately, my research endeavors to establish a robust theoretical foundation and shed light on the significant contribution of picture books to the social justice curriculum. This multifaceted exploration will be instrumental in advancing our understanding of the intersection between literature, pedagogy, and social justice in early childhood education.

In addition to the comprehensive exploration of existing literature, my review will critically address the gaps and voids that have emerged in academic discourse. These gaps not only represent areas of underdeveloped scholarship but also hold substantial implications for the direction and focus of my study.

The primary objective of this literature review is to synthesize the wealth of research that underscores the pivotal role of play, imagination, and social justice education within the context of early childhood education. By weaving together these strands of literature, I aim to construct a cohesive and comprehensive foundation that forms the bedrock of my research.

Furthermore, my review will draw attention to a conspicuous gap within the early childhood literature domain. In this void, all four fundamental concepts intersect meaningfully: identity, diversity, advocacy, and justice. This gap represents a critical juncture in our understanding of early childhood education, as it illuminates the intricate relationships and potential synergies between these foundational elements.

As such, this literature review endeavors to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing scholarship and emphasize the significance of addressing these gaps. By doing so, it

seeks to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse surrounding early childhood education, play, imagination, and social justice, ultimately enriching our understanding of these vital domains and their interplay.

In Chapter Four, I will meticulously delve into the research design's intricacies underpinning my study. After careful consideration, I have opted for a qualitative research approach, explicitly employing a bounded case study methodology. This method has been chosen as it offers the most suitable strategies for addressing my research question effectively.

Qualitative research, particularly in the context of a case study, provides a robust framework to explore and narrate the intricate stories that encapsulate children 's lived literate experiences. It allows for a nuanced examination of their genuine perceptions and interactions with picture book stories within the real-world context.

To ensure the reliability and validity of my study, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the data collection methods and procedures. This section will encompass critical aspects such as the research setting, participant selection, and measures for safeguarding human subjects. I will also offer insights into the specific data collection techniques, including participant observation, field notes, digital photographs, semi-structured interviews, classroom mappings, and artifacts.

The subsequent section, "Data Analysis Categories and Methods," will elucidate the structured approach I will employ to analyze the data collected. This will encompass a detailed examination of picture book reading, imagination, and play sessions, accompanied by a meticulous exploration of the emerging social justice themes and any intersecting themes that may surface.

To conclude this chapter, I will candidly address the implications and limitations inherent in my proposed study. These reflections will provide a transparent understanding of my research's scope and potential boundaries, allowing for a more comprehensive evaluation of its findings and contributions to the field.

In Chapter Five, titled "The Intersections of Picture Book Reading, Imagination, Social Justice, and Children's Play," I embark on a detailed exploration of the socio-cultural environment within the preschool where my case study was conducted. This chapter aims to comprehensively understand the contextual factors that shape and influence students' meaning-making experiences with picture books. The following aspects of the sociocultural context are thoroughly examined:

1. Community and School Environment: I delve into the interplay between the preschool's location within the neighborhood and the broader school environment. This encompasses discussing how the physical surroundings and community characteristics contribute to the learning environment.
2. Availability of Reading Materials: I highlight the significance of the availability of diverse reading materials within the preschool. This section underscores how access to a wide range of texts influences students' exposure to various narratives and perspectives.
3. Teacher and Peer Scaffolding: I draw insights from interviews conducted with both teachers and students to elucidate the roles of educators and peers in providing support and guidance during the learning process.

4. Student Home Background: I provide an illustrative example from a student's home background, shedding light on how familial experiences and cultural contexts can impact a child's engagement with literacy.
5. Daily Classroom Routine: I discuss the daily routines within the classroom setting, highlighting how structured activities and schedules shape students' interactions with books and their imaginative processes.
6. Teaching Strategies and Reading Processes: I explore the teaching strategies and reading processes integral to the classroom's literacy practices.
7. Purpose of Reading: I investigate the varied purposes behind reading in both classroom contexts, emphasizing the diverse motivations that drive students to engage with picture books.
8. Children's Play Activities: I examine children's play activities within the preschool and analyze how they influence their imaginative faculties, particularly concerning book reading.
9. Reading and Identity Awareness: I delve into discussions about developing identity awareness through reading experiences.
10. Reading and Diversity Awareness: I explore how reading contributes to students' awareness of diversity and different perspectives.

Throughout this chapter, I interweave insights from social justice, critical literacy, and imagination theories, aligning them with the findings from interviews with teachers and students. This holistic approach aims to provide a rich and multifaceted understanding of the complex interactions between picture book reading, imagination, social justice, and children's play within the unique sociocultural context of preschool.

In this chapter, I delve into the profound connections that emerge from my classroom observations, shedding light on the interplay between students' play, picture book reading, imagination, and the fundamental principles of social justice, identity, and diversity. My examination centers on how children's meaning-making experiences with these books actively shape their evolving sense of identity and growing awareness of diversity. Furthermore, these understandings ripple outward, extending to inform the students' perceptions of the natural world surrounding them.

Within the context of teacher scaffolding, I introduce five key figures from both classrooms, each playing a pivotal role in the educational journey unfolding at Awena play-based school. These individuals include Ms. Corina, Leila, Kay, Scarlett, and Mr. Daniel. Their contributions and interactions with the students are integral to my narrative.

I provide a comprehensive overview of the curriculum framework that underpins the educational environment at Awena. This curriculum fosters and supports diverse literacy practices, cultivating a collaborative classroom culture firmly rooted in a play-based approach. This approach prioritizes flexibility in both time and space, allowing for adapting daily routines to suit the needs of the students best. It adheres to the principles of anti-bias education and is informed by the High Scope curriculum, incorporating developmentally appropriate practices to facilitate a rich and holistic learning experience.

Finally, I draw connections between the historical insights of play, social justice, and critical literacy theorists and the perspectives and practices of these five dedicated teachers. By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, I aim to present a comprehensive narrative that showcases how play, reading, social justice, and children's imagination converge within the unique context of Awena's play-based school.

In Chapter Six, I embark on a comprehensive discussion that encapsulates the culmination of my research journey. This chapter serves as the platform for presenting and synthesizing the critical findings derived from my study. I strive to provide an integrated overview that bridges my research's theoretical and practical dimensions, shedding light on the intricate connections between critical literacy and social justice theories and the classroom practices I have meticulously documented.

Key aspects covered in this chapter include:

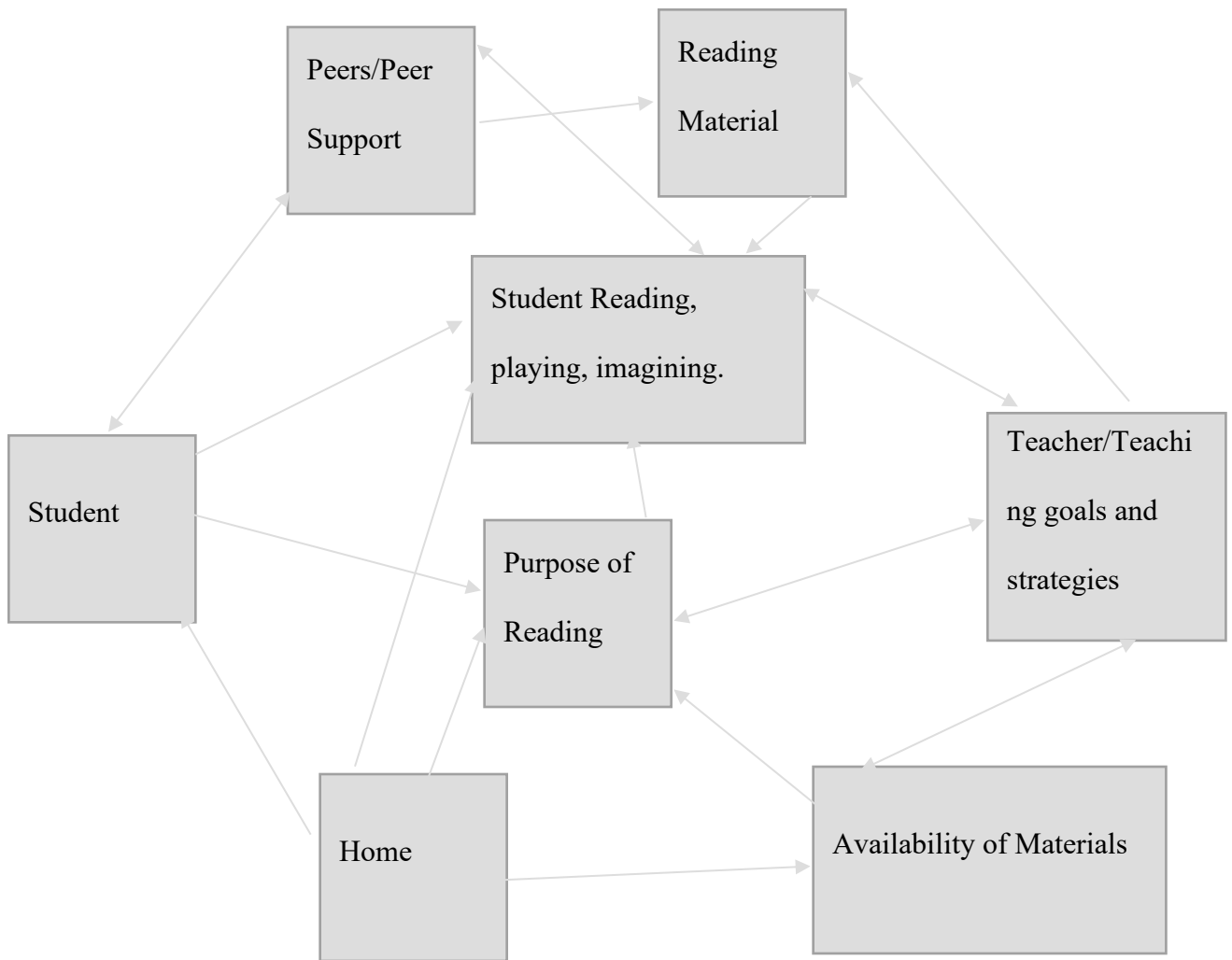
1. **Summary of Critical Findings:** I offer a concise, yet comprehensive summary of the critical findings unearthed throughout my research. This section is a culmination of the insights and discoveries that have emerged from my extensive study.
2. **Theoretical Implications:** I delve into the theoretical implications of my research, particularly in terms of how it resonates with and contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the realms of critical literacy and social justice. I aim to elucidate how my findings align with and enrich these theoretical frameworks.
3. **Practical Implications:** Building on the theoretical underpinnings, I discuss the practical implications of my dissertation study. This includes insights into how the findings can inform and shape early childhood education's teaching and learning practices, paving the way for integrating new critical literacies and social justice practices.
4. **Recommendations for Future Research Directions:** I offer recommendations for future research endeavors, highlighting areas that warrant further exploration and investigation. These recommendations inspire continued inquiry into the intersections of picture book reading, critical literacy, imagination, and social justice in early childhood education.

5. Conclusion and Final Remarks: In this section, I draw the dissertation to a close, summarizing my research's key takeaways and contributions. I provide final reflections on the significance and relevance of the study's findings.

Study Limitations: I candidly acknowledge the limitations of my study, providing a transparent assessment of the constraints and boundaries within which my research was conducted.

6. Future Research Directions: I reiterate the importance of future research directions and outline potential avenues for further exploration in this interdisciplinary field.

In essence, Chapter Six serves as the culminating chapter of my dissertation, offering a holistic perspective on the insights and contributions of my research while pointing the way forward for future investigations in the dynamic and vital intersection of early childhood education, critical literacy, social justice, and imaginative exploration through picture books.



CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The relationship between the four concepts, such as play, picture books, social justice, and social imagination, and how this intersection influences children's meaning-making in creating a socially just world requires a complex understanding of the interaction between these concepts through literature review. This literature review reveals that fostering a more significant analysis of play activities and using picture books as part of play activities that encourage the imagination and meaning-making of children (with themes related to social justice standards) is absent from the early childhood literature. However, the role of play, play theories, imagination and picture books, social justice in early education, and critical literacy-related research and studies are separately available in the early childhood education literature.

2.2 Contemporary Definitions of Play

There are different definitions of play from various aspects of literature. Grieshaber and McArdle (2014) discuss the process of defining children's play ethically, such as how the play might provide a means for children to form ethical selves instead of perceiving children's play as "one size fits all" (p.259).

Paley (2004) defined play as "children's work." Dewey (1990) described "play" as "a state of mind" and explained that play activities carry the child to a higher plane of consciousness and action, temporarily being the child's work. Vygotsky (1978) explained "play" as "the development of higher psychological processes and the internalization of social environment and the leading factor of child development" (p.101). The idea of free play leading to discovery and higher planes of consciousness is essential to my conception of critical literacy (Vygotsky, 1978, 2004).

Play promotes children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Houser et al., 2016; Ramstetter, Murray, and Gardner, 2010; Carr, 2014; Zosh et al., 2017). Play needs to fulfill the child's needs, motivate the child, create meaningful interaction opportunities for the child (Ridgeway, Li, and Quinores, 2020), allow fun and action, be a conscious process, encourage imagination skills, have a purpose, and address the child's needs to move toward the play purpose (Pyle and Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al. 2017). The in-play activities process needs to be more important than the product of the play activities (Holt et al., 2015). Briefly, play for children can be described as an activity engaged in their enjoyment, imagination, and growth.

My definition of play is a convergence of previous scholars' definitions. I defined imagination as higher-order cognitive skills involving cultural (social) and psychological functions that allow children to grasp their behavior by being active and part of their social environment.

2.3 Types of Play

There are different play activities for children: physical, social, constructive play, games with rules, and fantasy play. Smith (2010) grouped the types of play into six categories: (1) social contingency play (imitation of others/games), (2) sensorimotor play (banging and dropping objects), (3) object play (construction play), (4) language play (babbling or "you be mommy game"), (5) physical activity(exercise-related), and (6) fantasy/pretend play. These play categories help develop an understanding of the value different early childhood theorists place on different types of play. Additionally, these categories may help theorize the types of play a researcher may observe while "kid-watching" in the classroom.

2.4 The Concept of Play: Language, Imagination, and Creativity

An existing body of literature review reveals that the concept of play has varied and

shows the similarities and differences among philosophers, educators, and psychologists. Some argue that play needs to be studied as part of a child's cognitive skill development. Conversely, others claim that play activities are part of the whole child development (social, psychological, physical, and cognitive skills). Play's nature is holistic, contextual, and multilevel (Carr, 2014, p.623).

Dyson and Genishi (2009) identified language as a child's play; Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) characterized the play as “intrinsic” and “self-initiated”: the primary way children learn about their world using their experiences. Souto-Manning (2016) identified “play” as “expanding knowledge of the world and a literacy facilitator” (p. 67). Lynch, Pike, and Beckett (2017) explained that play is not only a childish or trivial pursuit. It helps us understand our existence's meaning and contributes to the whole child development (p.18).

Free play encourages creativity and discovery while allowing children to critique their environment in play activities (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Dewey, 1902, 1916, 1990; Froebel, 1908; Garrick, 2009; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Giardiello, 2014; McMillan, 1904; Montessori, 1974, 1966, 1976; Mooney, 2000; Paley, 2004; Quay & Seaman, 2013; Souto-Manning 2016; Tovey, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978, 2004). I also defined play as an integral part of early childhood (Pyle and Daniels, 2017).

For example, Dyson and Genishi (2013) focused on the role of language play by using sociocultural and dialogic theories to illustrate the relationships among “childhood basics,” like social talk and imaginative play, and “school basics,” like learning standard English, using conventional spelling, or working independently (p. 166).

Van Oers and Dijkers (2013) explain the importance of play in vocabulary acquisition. Carr (2014) focuses on the role of play activities in children's language, social and cognitive

development. For Dyson and Genishi (2009), children's "dramatic personas, told stories, plays on language, and child-invented jokes may slide into open spaces" (p. 60) that align with official school learning. Dyson and Genishi focus on the role of language-defining play.

In comparison, Paley (2004) explained the importance of language play but focused explicitly on fantasy play for developing different skills like imagination in children. The author elucidated that fantasy play serves as a child's developmental work, functioning as a tool to enhance creativity, imagination, as well as language, cognitive, and social skills. Paley offered examples from play activities and how these activities support children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills. Paley (2004) and Dyson and Genishi (2009) agreed on the functionality of play activities on children's development. When children play, they do not follow the script. Children use their imagination, enjoyment, interests, needs, and curiosity in play activities (Dyson & Genishi, 2009), which illustrates the characteristics of play that Smith (2010) outlined: flexibility, positive affect, nonliterally, and intrinsic motivation. "Flexibility" refers to the idea that external rules or social demands do not constrain play. Play needs to be intrinsically enjoyable for its own goal. "Nonliterally" refers to the "as if" or pretend elements. Behaviors do not have their ordinary meaning, like in pretend play. "Positive affect" refers to the fun part of play, such as "laughing" (p. 6).

In summary, the scholars in play literature assert that play activities encourage children's language, creativity, and imagination skills. The following review outlines the conflicting arguments, descriptions, and implications of the role of "play" in early childhood education and how past play theories intersect or differ with current play theories. This distinction is essential for demonstrating how play and imagination can promote social justice education for young children.

2.5 Historical Theories of Play

The historical discussion of play aims to offer a synopsis of the main theoretical approaches to children's play. Theorists of children's play most frequently do not have early childhood backgrounds, and most of them are psychologists like Freud, Hall, Berlyne, Vygotsky, Piaget, Klein, and Erickson; philosophers like Lazarus and Groos, occasionally anthropologists such as Bateson; and sometimes writers such as Schiller. Freud also never focused on play research but used it as a psychoanalysis tool and recommended that scholars use play to reveal children's unconscious thoughts during play therapy (Mellou, 1994; Takhvar, 1988).

The historical literature review of play theories may be classified into three groups by Takhvar, 1988 and two groups by Mellou, 1994. They are as follows: Takhvar's classification includes: A) Classical theories, originating in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; early scholars in the field include those who highlighted the existence and purpose of play activities and explained children's play as a transformation of reality through play activities (imitating adults or symbolically representing the world for adaptation), such as Schiller (18th century), Spencer (1820-1903), Lazarus (1883), Patrick (1916), Groos (1896-1901), and Hall (1920).

B) In early 20th century theories of play, "play" was considered a scientific topic and explained as a psychological concept; scholars of this category are Freud (1961), Hall (1920), Peller (1952), Erickson (1950), Piaget (1951), Vygotsky (1967-78), Klein (1882-1960), Berlyne (1960), Ellis (1973), Hutt (1979), and Fein (1981).

C) Recent theories of play explain children's play as means of improving cognitive skills and creativity, such as "arousal theory" (Berlyne, 1960; Ellis, 1973), "play as communication theory" (Bateson's Metacommunicative theory, 1955), "cognitive adaptation theory" (Sutton-Smith, 1966; Bruner, 1972), and "ethological theory" (Smith and Connolly, 1972; Blurton Jones,

1972). Mellou classifies play theories into two groups: classic and modern ones.

In my literature review, I follow Mellou's classification. While the first group explains play activities through children's assimilation/accommodation to the natural environment around them and examines play as its own justification for existence, the second group explains play behaviors as scientific. It looks for the reason behind the play activities as more psychological in a child's life. The modern group explains "play" as a personal response, like the information-seeking process and response to the world around us, and as a "learning to learn" activity.

In all three theories, if we critique the play literature, we see that each has its limitations and criticism by various scholars (Mellou, 1994). When we combine all these theories and synthesize them, play can be viewed as preparation for real life, fun, engaging, a creative activity, may support individual development, is expressive, and helps to relieve excessive/negative energy, bringing positive energy in terms of emotional well-being.

2.6 Classical Theories

Mellou (1994) discusses that classical theories explain why play exists and what goal it serves. The categories of classical theories are surplus energy theory, recreation/relaxation, practice/pre-exercise, and recapitulation theories.

Surplus energy describes the play as (Schiller and Spencer) an expression of surplus energy and provides an outlet for children to spend their energy; during play, children discharge excessive energy. A philosopher and poet, Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), defined play as an aimless and nonproductive activity discharging excessive energy. His ideas contradicted those of Herbert Spencer and the Darwinian evolution theorists. Herbert Spencer (1903) explained play as an uncontrollable desire of organisms. His theory connects the play to evolutionary theories (p.92).

The Recreation theory: Moritz Lazarus (1883) described play as an activity originating from an energy deficit. The child feels refreshed, gets recreation during play activities, and discharges energy. Lazarus and Spencer assumed that play lacked a cognitive function.

The Practice Theory: Karl Groos (1896) proposed the imitation of adults as the central element of child's play. Here, play serves as practice for adult activities, adaptation to the natural environment, and preparation for real life. For example, a boy may pretend to be a father. Groos believed that when children pretend to be adults in dramatic play, they practice their adaptive activities.

Mellou asserts that surplus energy and pre-exercise theories differ regarding pre-exercise theory linking play to children's learning, but surplus energy theory does not link play to learning. The recapitulation theory (Stanley Hall): Racial and individual development are parallel to each other. Hall believed that the individual's development reenacts the species' development.

Children pretend/reenact the developmental stages of human race in their play, such as being a baby, a parent, or an early American. Children act on their primitive instincts. The difference between the surplus and the recapitulation theory is that Hall considered children's play a product of evolutionary biology and not a means of energy regulation. Practice and recapitulation explain play in terms of instincts. Play is either expressing energy or instincts.

Briefly, although classical theories are criticized by Mellou (1994) and Takhvar (1988) for different reasons, they still create a basis for our understanding of other approaches to predict the achievable goals of play. Children rehearse their ancestors in play activities (primitive/history of ancestors). Play is a cathartic activity that eliminates inappropriate primitive instincts that may have been passed down through heredity (p.93). Whatever the play goal, children enjoy the play activities and continue discharging their restored energy through play; they may use the play

activities to construct things or pretend parenting practices or occupations, but they still have fun and need play activities. Like Paley (2004) mentioned in her book *A Child's Work*, play is a child's work, whatever the reason. It is what they do, and they learn through playing (p.8).

2.7 Modern Theories

Modern theories go beyond acknowledging play's mere existence in child development; they delve into its intricate role and significance in shaping a child's growth and development. One prominent shift in contemporary views on play is integrating empirical research, which provides empirical evidence to support and refine these theories.

For instance, psychoanalytic theories, while foundational, offer valuable insights into the psychodynamic aspects of play. However, modern theories build upon this foundation by incorporating empirical research findings to substantiate their claims. This empirical approach allows researchers and practitioners to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of children's play behavior.

The contribution of these modern theories lies in their ability to offer a more comprehensive and evidence-based perspective on how play functions in child development. They provide a framework for interpreting and analyzing play behavior as informed by empirical data and contemporary research methodologies. Ultimately, this approach helps educators, psychologists, and caregivers better support and nurture children's development through play, making it a valuable tool for understanding and enhancing the lives of young learners.

These modern theories include Psychoanalytic Theory, Arousal Modulation theory, Bateson's Metacommunicative theory, and Cognitive theories. Psychoanalytic theory: Sigmund Freud (1961) founded this theory. The role of play is explained as cathartic and essential to a child's emotional development. Through play activities, children discharge their negative energy

and dispose of negative feelings related to traumatic events.

One example is if a parent hurts a child, the child hurts a peer or someone close to the child. Later in this process, the child releases the tension/anger, reflects it, and releases it on someone else. Erickson extended this theory and contributed to normal personality development by arranging plays to combine three aspects of life: the past, the present, and the future (Mellou, 1994). Peller (1952) explained the psychoanalytic theory as connecting child emotions to play activities and suggested a link between psychosexual development and play structure. Takhvar (1988) explained play in psychoanalysis as concerning the “ego,” “wish fulfillment,” and “anxiety.”

The Arousal Modulation theory: This theory was created by Berlyne (1960) and subsequently modified by scholars such as Ellis (1973), Hutt (1979), and Fein (1981). These theorists are called “drive” theorists.” Play is explained as the result of “motivation and instinct needs.” These needs, including those of an individual, such as enjoyment and thirst, motivate us to fulfill our needs through play activities. A few survival needs are hunger and thirst, the basic needs for humans or animals. Berlyne described the play as caused by a need/drive in our central nervous system to keep arousal at a desirable level. The specific exploration needed to search the sources of arousal, such as insufficient arousal, causes an individual to seek stimulation. Too much arousal may cause the individual to decrease their personal arousal levels.

Ellis defined play as a stimulus-seeking activity, and using new objects or actions in unusual ways may make children imagine. In this process, play increases the stimulation and level of arousal. Mellou (1994) explains the difference in emphasis between Ellis and Berlyne’s models of play as Berlyne’s model would “produce” stimulation while Ellis’s model would “seek” such stimulation. Ellis and Berlyne’s theories influenced Hutt's (1979) and Fein's (1981)

theoretical views. According to Hutt (1979), when a child plays, if the child's arousal motivation is moderate, the play activity will be either symbolic play or problem-solving. Fein (1981) viewed play as a response-related activity when it is at an average level of arousal and grounded in a familiar environment. In a familiar environment, the child produces a new situation if there are no biological needs or social demands. Mellou asserts that arousal theorists define play as a mechanism relating to exploration and regulating one's level of arousal. Briefly, a child needs to be motivated to conduct an activity of play and feel the urge to explore his environment through such activity.

Bateson's metacommunicative theory (1955) explained play as a contradiction. When children pretend to play, they make sure others know their actions are not actual. When children play, they behave in one of two ways. One way is using their identities, others' identities, and natural objects in real life. The second way is to pretend the meanings of objects and actions. Children watch these children's play as outsiders take play as natural and respond accordingly. Bateson also mentioned that play texts and activities are generally influenced by contexts and the environment in which the play occurs. A child's social class influences their play behaviors.

Takhvar (1988) claimed that the perceptual relation between context and text is equivalent to the relationship between communication and metacommunication (tone of voice, gestures, and mimes). Mellou (1994) contended that Bateson referred to play as the metacommunicative context of the text of reality. One example of Mellou's assertion is that when children play, they use their tone of voice, gestures, and other cues to talk to each other about the context of the play activities. All these actions influence the children's play activities and how they make meaning of them about real-life events. This kind of view was accepted as a psychological perspective on the function of play in children's cognitive development in child

development.

Jean Piaget: Cognitive Stages of Active Learning: Jean Piaget (1896-1980), a psychologist and Swiss scientist, viewed “the child as an active learner.” Piaget, however, focused on children’s “cognition.” In the 1960s, Piaget created cognitive developmental stages and expressed that child created knowledge and explored the world through their “imagination.” Mellou (1994) explained Piaget’s views on children’s play as children’s intellectual development matches their play development; in other words, play contributes to and reflects a child’s level of cognitive development. Children use assimilation, accommodation, and adaptation stages to practice recently learned skills in play. Children consolidate recently discovered skills but do not learn new skills during play.

According to Mooney (2000), Piaget's work focused on “the children's thought processes” and “How children created knowledge.” (p.78). Garrick (2009) argued that the role of the teacher in early education is as a supporter of children's active learning in considering the critical application of Piaget's cognitive functioning levels of children, especially in the first two stages, from birth to 7 years. Mooney (2000) asserted that Piaget's basic concepts help teachers to plan curricula for children in classroom settings.

Piaget emphasized that children’s play was interacting with construction materials and learning through this process. His ideas concerning “operation,” “ordering,” “counting,” or “measuring” are all benchmarks against which the children's play and learning can be taken forward (Jones and Holmes, 2014).

Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) contended that Piaget viewed children as capable thinkers/creators/discoverers/motivated and naturally curious individuals. From a constructivist approach, Piaget maintained that children build new knowledge on previous knowledge. Conkbayir and

Pascal (2014) noted that Piaget's contribution to child development is developing and thinking in framed mental structures (or schemas). These schemas show/explain how children understand the world around them and how they acquire knowledge. The stages of cognitive development are sensory-motor (Birth-2 years), pre-operational (2-7 years), Concrete operational (7-11) years, and Formal operational (11 and up). Children think egocentrically and have difficulty taking the viewpoint of others between the ages of 2-7 years. Children think abstractly after 11 years in the formal operational stage to solve problems and address proposed/ future/ideological problems.

Piaget also used assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium/disequilibrium concepts in child development. How children use their knowledge in previous and new knowledge is explained with assimilation/accommodation or equilibrium concepts. When knowledge is assimilated, the child is in equilibrium. When the child cannot incorporate new knowledge into their understanding, they show disequilibrium. The process of taking new information into previously existing schemas is assimilation. Accommodation is the adaptation of new knowledge into the existing schemas. How children learn, understand the world, and construct their knowledge are all of Piaget's contributions to understanding child development.

Piaget also believed that children learn from their experiences through hands-on techniques, and teachers/parents must allow children to play freely and independently. Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) claimed that assessments and observations of children's play are needed to improve learning. Focusing on learning processes and not only the product are also viewpoints on children's learning shared by Dewey and Piaget. Real-life experiences, the importance of play, the role of open-ended play, and parent participation in children's learning were all Piaget's contributions to early education literature.

Like Piaget, another scholar/theorist contributing to children's cognitive skill development is Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). His ideas encompass active learning and the role of teachers in supporting children's learning and supporting teachers in creating a curriculum children need. An emergent curriculum is a process in which teachers plan activities and projects based on children's needs, skills, and experiences. Vygotsky's work focused on learning through social relationships. He established the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes scaffolding as an approach to bringing a child to the next level of learning. A teacher's role is to provide activities and opportunities for learning with appropriate scaffolding to carry a child to the next level of learning and development (Garrick, 2009). Vygotsky and his colleagues Leont'ev and Luria formulated the cultural and historical theory of human development to clarify the development of human consciousness in the first part of the twentieth century (Van Oers, 2014).

Vygotsky expressed a realistic and dialectical approach to the imagination and believed in the role of literature and the development of a cultural approach to psychology and education. Vygotsky talked about play as imagination in action, suggesting that a creative process develops in play because an actual situation takes on new and unfamiliar meanings.

Vygotsky emphasized the role of family and community support in children's learning. Children who interact with other living and nonliving things and people around them (teachers, peers, and community members) need adult support (teachers, parents, or others) for meaningful environmental interactions. Children's meaningful interactions with adults are possible by understanding children's ability to acquire higher-order thinking (Garrick, 2009). Like Piaget, Vygotsky observed that learning occurs when children play and construct their knowledge. However, Vygotsky emphasized children's making their knowledge with the influence and

support of their cultural environments. Vygotsky claimed an essential connection between children's use of language (e.g., songs, stories, books, rhymes) and their development. When children play, they constantly use language.

As a result, Vygotsky influenced ideas about curriculum planning, language development, emergent curriculum, the role of social interaction, and peer support in early childhood education literature (Mooney, 2000). Pascal and Conkbayir (2014) suggested that Vygotsky contributed to early childhood education by describing “cooperative problem solving” between teachers and students using the zone of proximal development and scaffolding concepts during play, supporting children’s engagement in symbolic play activities. Finally, Vygotsky influenced ideas about children’s familiarity with playing materials and tasks. He also influenced how we think about abstract thought and symbolic play relations as critical in children’s development (Vygotsky, 1978).

A difference between Piaget’s constructivist theory and Vygotsky’s theory of play is that Vygotsky believed that play directly supports children’s cognitive development, and Piaget claimed play was a byproduct of cognitive development (Mellou, 1994). Vygotsky’s ideas on play also differ from Freud's, who claimed that play originated within the individual rather than the social environment (Mellou, 1994). Freud believed that unconscious thoughts of human beings’ stem from anxieties/tensions related to the social environment and form an individual’s thoughts in his or her mind.

Vygotsky, Piaget, Sutton-Smith (1967), and Bruner (1972) emphasized how play promotes creativity and flexibility (Mellou, 1994; Takhvar, 1988). These theorists (Sutton-Smith, 1967; Bruner, 1972) believed that play supports children in discovering new behavioral combinations, and the play process helps children understand some strategies and ideas.

Dramatic play creates new environments in representing reality. Like pretend play and symbolic play activities, children “treat” things “as if” in the play process and develop “alternative symbolic instructions.” Children show mental flexibility and engage in role reversal during play; they break open some ideas, create new ones in unusual ways, and develop divergent thinking abilities. During play, children do not try to achieve a goal (process vs. product discussion); this flexibility in behavior is essential in play activities. Both scholars assert that play contributes to creative development; flexibility and discovery are essential to creating new skills (Mellou, 1994). For example, if children’s play is controlled by adults and directed excessively by them, children’s creativity and critical thinking skills are harmed by that oppression/pressure. Teachers have a great responsibility here.

2.8 Discussion

Except for Schiller, Freud, Hall, Groos, and Spencer, other scholars such as Piaget, Sutton-Smith, Bruner, and Vygotsky, who are cognitive and constructivist theorists, considered the child an active learner and believed play activities promote children’s development. Vygotsky, however, focused on the social environment (peer effect, teacher and parent support, and community support) in young children's learning. Vygotsky (1978) characterized a child’s play as a conscious activity that fulfills needs and motivations and is meaningful, pleasurable, action-oriented, imagination-oriented, and purposeful (p.103).

Sutton-Smith and Bruner focused on the child’s creativity during the play process and the role of the play process versus its products favoring children’s healthy development. Constructivist theorists’ contribution to our notions about problem-solving, critical thinking, consideration of the real-life and social environment in child development, and play activities are

essential milestones in the development of play research; these views align well with the current early childhood education literature.

Psychoanalytic theories' contribution to play analysis explains why children's play behaviors stem from "cathartic" ideas, which release potential negative energy and replace the body with more positive energy.

Concerning the role of play in early childhood education programs, Freud, Hall, Schiller and Spencer, Sutton-Smith & Bruner, Berlyne, Vygotsky, Lazarus, and Bateson contributed substantially to our understanding of play and its role in child development. These scholars supported children's free play as part of child development for different reasons. Each of their approaches has its limitations.

Play can be thought of as anticipatory "preparation to real-life"; recapitulatory, which means play supports "individual development and promotes child development"; and the interpretation of play activities can be "an expression of emotions and release psychic energy." These scholars' views can be considered when considering why children play and its benefits and functions as children's work.

Regarding imagination, Bruner, Sutton-Smith, Vygotsky, and Piaget readily agree that free play activities that are specifically child-initiated encourage children's imagination and creativity skills by giving children more freedom to create, think critically, and discover. Piaget proposed that children cannot think critically about real-world issues until they are 11. Furthermore, Vygotsky maintained that young children must be introduced to real-world events/issues since they can work on their imagination/critical thinking skills with adult scaffolding within a zone of proximal development.

Recent scholarship on children's free play suggests that free play activities support children's healthy social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development, which is signified as "whole child" development (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Garrick, 2009; Giardiello, 2014; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Mellou, 1994; Paley, 2004; Souto-Manning 2016; Takhvar, 1988; Tovey, 2013).

Classical scholars such as Lazarus, Schiller, and Spencer view the child's play as "cathartic," which is based on releasing energy (energy regulation); Groos and Hall focused on the "imitation of adults (instincts)." Still, we must look at their connection to one another regarding how playing is seen as part of instincts and expressing energy. These theories have weaknesses (Mellou, 1994; Takhvar, 1988). Play cannot be seen as only discharging negative energy or reflecting anger on certain people as a tool, explained only with motivation and evolution/existence theories. Classic theories are accepted as outdated by Mellou and Takhvar.

A modern theory appeared because it could explain the role of play in child development, especially in terms of psychological, physical, social, and cognitive powers on the child's well-being. Modern theorists such as Vygotsky placed the most value on the social environment in shaping young children's learning and education as part of society. On the other hand, Piaget proposed that young children construct their knowledge with their past and previous experiences as independent beings.

Research generally supports the notion that children are a part of society, influenced by their social context, and need adult support in their play activities (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers also play a significant role in shaping students' learning environments. Finally, young children are encouraged to discover their world with free choice activities, child-initiated learning/teaching, and teacher support. Planning and

organizing children's education in early childhood settings can positively influence imagination skills.

Language skills are also a part of the child's cognition and social skills. Children can imagine and create things using communication skills, engage in dialogues with peers/ teachers/ community, and enhance their critical thinking skills.

In my summary of the play and imagination scholars' views on play, I am interested in using the definition of Vygotsky's play as part of the socio-cultural-historical theory in my research study. In Vygotsky's (1978) notions about play, role-playing, and imaginary situations are planned, and there are rules for participating in play (pp. 92-104). The pioneer psychology scholars such as Lazarus, Hall, Spencer, Groos, and Schiller (poet and philosopher) did not emphasize the relationship between imagination, social justice, and play activities for young children. Instead, they focused on the reason why the play activities existed. This is a gap in early childhood social justice and imagination literature. Sociocultural theorist Vygotsky was the only scholar emphasizing children's imagination skill development through play activities and its influence on promoting critical thinking skills in young children. Vygotsky's ZPD and scaffolding concepts are critical elements of this understanding. Social justice scholars (i.e., Derman-Sparks, Vasquez, Souto-Manning) focus on these key concepts as explained in the following section.

2.9 ECE Play, Imagination, and Picture Book Research and Studies in the Literature

In early childhood play, picture books, social justice, and imagination literature, the studies and the research did not contain all four concepts in a single study. I grouped the studies and researchers as seen below and explained them separately.

2.10 Children's Play and Its Role in Child Development

Numerous studies have focused on children's play and its role in child development, such as Ashiabi (2007), Bilewicz-Kuznia (2016), Holt et al. (2015), Houser et al. (2016), Lai et al. (2018), Oers and Duijkers (2013), Pyle and Daniels (2017), Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008), Wanless and Crawford (2016), and Weisberg et al. (2016). These studies focused on children's play activities and their influence on cognitive, social, psychological, and physical development.

Oers and Duijkers (2013), Wanless and Crawford (2016), Pyle and Daniels (2017), and Lai et al. (2018) examined the critical role of play on child development through play-based education by examining 43 papers for their review. Lai et al. conducted a research study on the use of non-digital games in early childhood literacy development. Lai et al. (2018) asserted that children develop cognitive skills through non-digital game playing. These authors focused on non-digital games, such as board games and games with rules, and their influence on children's cognition. However, picture book reading, and social imagination were not the focus of the literature review in their work. These scholars looked at the influence of non-digital games on children's cognitive development. However, we need to acknowledge that picture books are a part of play activities, and they not only contribute to the imagination of young children concerning cognitive abilities, but they also support the development of the ability to assume others' perspectives, which is considered a part of social-emotional development (Mathis, 2016, p.623).

Interestingly, in their paper reviews, many researchers have excluded picture book reading as part of dramatic plays and other types of play. At the same time, they categorized play activities such as sand play, dramatic play, block building, explorative play, and play with rules

as contributing to dramatic play. They only listed literacy-related play as part of cognitive development and categorized reading, writing, and language development as part of cognition (Lai et al., 2018, p.629-630). These researchers recommended future research to focus on the social development of children.

Lai et al.'s research study highlights an interesting finding regarding the types of games used in the collected studies from 2004 to 2013. Nine of the papers reviewed focused on games with rules, such as chess, board games, Monopoly, and basketball (p.638). This study expands the concept of literacy, emphasizing that the conventional role of literacy is not only writing and talking in early childhood classrooms. This article also argues that literacy development supports cognitive, socioemotional, and physical development. Literacy is not all about writing and talking in early childhood classrooms. Literacy development is not only part of cognitive development. Socio-emotional development and physical development are also a part of literacy development. While Lai et al. analyzed the findings, they classified cognitive and communicative outcomes separately from psychomotor and emotional development outcomes. Lai et al. examined the literature and found that studies about non-digital games for preschool children say non-digital games impact various aspects of child development. These findings showed that the 2009 and 2013 studies on cognition and play activities were the highest compared with affective, psychomotor, and communicative studies for non-digital games. There were also more qualitative studies about cognitive learning outcomes with children ages 4-6. There has also been a significant growth in non-digital games publications since 2009 (p.635).

While Lai et al. (2018) focused on non-digital games and cognitive development, Pyle and Daniels (2017) examined the lack of play-based instruction in 15 kindergarten classrooms

using qualitative research methods and its potential negative influence on whole child development. Pyle and Daniels focused on a fundamental problem preschools face: academic skills vs. play activities. It is thought-provoking to consider play activities as not part of academic skill development by kindergarten teachers in Toronto, Canada. Although the researchers found two types of teachers claiming different attributes of play, the first group said that play is separate from academic skills (learning), and the second group said play can support academic learning and teachers need to support children's play needs in the classroom. Pyle and Daniels claimed that immersing literacy materials within play settings in kindergarten classrooms causes children to use these materials to develop their literacy skills with increased motivation (p.276). To explain this better, adding picture books, pencils, note pads, papers, markers, and small bulletin boards to scribble and draw will contribute to young children's development of their literacy skills like reading, writing, talking, and listening. I cannot entirely agree with the teachers who claimed that play activities were not a part of academic skill development. When children play with blocks, they practice math skills; when they pretend to cook with peers, they practice social skills with language skills; when they practice communicating with each other and discussing their play plans, they practice literacy skills with cognitive skills. When children play with sensory materials, they practice their science skills, such as emptying and filling containers with different materials. This list can get longer. When children play, they learn and practice many skills such as creativity, critical thinking, talking, singing, problem-solving, enhancing large and fine motor skills, being physically active, etc.

Oers and Duijkers (2013) asserted that a play-based curriculum perhaps influences children's vocabulary development more than a teacher-directed curriculum. In addition, they asserted that play-based learning as a collaboration between students and teachers leads to

positive academic outcomes. Some scholars claim that when a teacher has the most control over play activities, young children lose their meaning of the play activities, resulting in decreased motivation and enjoyment with creativity (Bruckman, 1999; Oers and Duijkers, 2013; Pyle and Daniels, 2017). As Pyle and Daniels explain in their article, children should not feel that teachers hijack their play and take their fun away. Besides focusing on the importance of a play-based curriculum, Oers and Duijkers claim this kind of play affects children's language and vocabulary development. These scholars emphasize play and literacy and their benefits on child development. For example, children (grades 1-4) showed improved language skills during free play activities in Dutch primary schools. Teacher support is mentioned as an essential part of this observational study. Oers and Duijkers (2013) also mentioned the importance of language development in young children while noting Vygotsky's "good learning could promote development" notion. They also emphasized the essential role of language development in connection to playing activities and how learning and play cannot be separated (p.516). The researchers explain the tools teachers use in the play-based curriculum to support their students' play in their classrooms, such as orienting, structuring, broadening, contributing, and reflecting (p.519). Finally, the article explains that teachers in Dutch schools generally use teacher-directed, play-based curricula.

Nevertheless, the success of language development during play activities with a teacher-directed curriculum depends on teacher guidance. Teacher support includes using available information about a specific topic and deepening it or elaborating it to a certain extent so that students can ask questions, raise problems, and use new tools and relevant words. Students can appropriate by imitating within the context of the current activity, such as children making pies in kitchen play, so they need a recipe and directions to do it. Materials are also needed. The

teacher can regulate shared activities among children. We understand the importance of the teacher's role in supporting children's learning related to play activities to develop their literacy skills (p.523).

Ashiabi (2007) also claims that teachers have a role in making play a developmental and learning experience through teacher-guided play (p.206). Both article authors, Ashiabi and Oers & Duijkers, agree on teacher support of children's play. Unlike Oers and Duijkers, Ashiabi focuses on the socioemotional developmental value of play in child development in her article. The researcher asserts that there might be barriers to implementing play in early education due to teacher perceptions. Teachers are observers, mediators, recorders, participants, facilitators, designers, and organizers of the play activities. While Oers and Duijkers' article focuses on vocabulary development during play in Dutch kindergartens, Wanless and Crawford (2016) discuss the importance of picture book reading in play activities to create a culturally responsive classroom, emphasizing the importance of reading for young children. Using conversations with peers relating to multicultural text reading is beneficial for young children's healthy development as part of identity development (p.14).

Crawford and Wanless give examples from an early childhood classroom (multicultural) with their observations of children's play. These scholars mention the importance of discussing race and identity, the essential role of having a diverse classroom for teachers, and hint about addressing race in early childhood classrooms. They also mention that children as young as three months know racial differences (p.9). The researchers assert that having racially relevant children's literature in the classroom is crucial to healthy development and effective learning. All these scholars agree on the benefits of picture book reading and play activities connected to

young children's positive literacy skill development. Some of them discuss the influence of vocabulary development, while others mention the role of cognitive development. While Lai et al. (2018) focus on cognitive development, Oers, and Duijkers mention the role of vocabulary development in young children due to play and literacy connections. Wanless and Crawford focus on identity development as a part of the play and multicultural picture book reading activities.

In their research, Weisberg et al. (2016) asserted the importance of guided play with structured teacher directions by giving teachers lots of autonomy to direct children's play for academic skill learning and development. Shockingly, Weisberg et al.'s perspectives about the teacher-directed curriculum approach in learning academic skills in early childhood classrooms are explained with these words: "Children cannot learn letter-sound pairings or addition by running around on a playground" (p.177). These scholars also undervalue the power of play by saying, "Children cannot learn academics by running around" (p.177). They explain their words in the previous sentence by arguing: "It is important to temper enthusiasm for play with considerations of what play cannot do" (p.177). They also advocate for a middle-ground: teacher-directed guided play melds exploration and child autonomy (p.177). These authors advocated for teacher-directed guided play, which focuses on adult mentorship and academic learning outcomes as if children cannot learn through "free play" activities. These authors value the power of direct instruction, which I believe takes away the power of play and fun with children's motivation during play activities. For me, most learning occurs during play activities while children are having fun and motivated to do what they do (Bruckman, 1999; Oers and Duijkers, 2013).

While Weisberg et al. claim teacher-directed guided play and the benefits of this kind of play for young children's academic skills development, a group of scholars such as Houser et al. (2016), Holts et al. (2015), and Bilewicz-Kuznia (2016) assert the importance of free play for children. Houser et al. (2016) recommended active children's play through outdoor play for young children's healthy physical development.

Houser et al. asserted the critical role of active play in children's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Opposing the work of scholars such as Weisberg et al., Houser et al. recommended that children have unstructured play so that children can actively enjoy free play while developing all other skills. The authors explain the risks and limitations of unstructured active play, specifically outdoor play, causing children not to move around adequately. Teachers and parents must increase unstructured outdoor playtime in all settings (p.782). Nowadays, the often-sedentary lives of young children do lower their physical activity. Structured play with teacher-led activities is different from child-led and teacher-followed activities. Child-led and teacher-followed activities are thought to improve children's decision-making and discovery skills (p.782).

Houser et al., Holt et al. (2015) also recommended that young children have active free play. The reason was that "play is purposeless and occurs for its own sake because, to children, the means are more important than the ends" (p.73). These words are meaningful, as Holt et al. explain here the importance of unstructured play that is child-initiated and teacher-supported. They give examples of the benefits of this kind of play for children's well-being and the development of their fundamental skills as cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical skills. In terms of active play, Holt et al. and Houser et al. agree on its benefits when play is unstructured.

In Holt., et al.'s study, 13 young adults in Canada were interviewed to understand the importance of active childhood free play. Study results showed that these adults viewed outdoor play as decreasing significantly due to potential risks and adult safety concerns. Holt. et al. recommend that adults support children's outdoor free play for children's well-being and remove the obstacles limiting this kind of play.

One of the free play supporter scholars is Bilewicz-Kuznia (2016), who conducted a study in ten preschools in Poland, observing ten groups of children playing in their classrooms with peers aged 3 to 6 years. Findings showed that children's free play activities were more intensive in the morning, and play dropped by half in the afternoon. Children use more toys in the morning than in the afternoon. Children had free access to various toys, educational materials, and props. Children mostly played in construction and theme play, with pretend play being the children's favorite. Teachers kept themselves busy with documentation and organizational activities during free play and did not engage in children's play. When teacher support was needed, teachers were involved with child interactions as both appreciation and approval to the children (p.265). In Polish preschools, the researcher claimed that teachers tended to focus on academic skill teaching, and there was intense pressure on children concerning academic skill learning. Teachers used afternoons to introduce academic skills in teacher-directed instruction to prepare children for primary school. Teachers rarely became involved with children's free play except for intervening in conflict resolution. Preschools in Poland generally do not stress the importance of play.

Samuelsson and Carlsson's (2008) article explained the critical role of play and learning in Swedish preschools. Play and learning are connected in Swedish preschools, but instructional

time is seen as separate from play. This article gives examples from Swedish classrooms to show how the play was children's work and how that learning related to play activities. Nevertheless, public school instruction does not accept this notion in Sweden. Schools are where instruction occurs; however, when it comes to playing, recess is the time for it. Learning and play are not accepted as things happen simultaneously and in the same place together. The author's words illustrate this notion: "Play is fading away in favor of learning (p.626)." Samuelsson and Carlsson claim that quality play is possible through ongoing teacher-student interactions. Both the child and the teacher must be engaged in this process by communicating with each other, and teachers need to be aware of their own and children's perspectives in supporting children's play.

Interestingly, Bilewicz-Kuznia (2016) claimed that the classrooms she observed in Poland did not have teacher-student interactions except for supporting conflict resolution with students and the appreciation needs of the students. Polish classroom observations of teacher interactions reminded me as a previous preschool teacher of classroom observations of schools where I worked in my 21 years of experience, witnessing most teachers not getting involved with their students unless there is a conflict between them, or a need/appreciation requested by them. Carlsson and Samuelsson's conclusion section asserts that "play is not the same as learning." The authors do not perceive play as learning, but they accept that there are play dimensions in learning and learning dimensions in play (p.635).

The authors recommend a new pedagogy for children that does not separate play from learning and has space for creativity in play and learning. Carlsson and Samuelsson claim that play and learning are part of each other and meaningful, so creativity has a space between these two for healthy child development.

2.11 Picture Book Reading and Imagination Studies/Research

Like Wanless and Crawford, scholars such as Dyson and Genishi, Spencer, and Pelittari agree that young children must play and imagine social issues' realities. This kind of curriculum is necessary to understand the social issues around them. Like Dyson and Genishi (2013), these other scholars see picture books as essential tools to make this happen.

Studies about children's picture book reading and imagination (e.g., Dyson & Genishi, 2013; Shank, 2016; Spencer, 2002; Pelittari, 2017) explain the crucial role of text reading/listening and its contribution to children's text comprehension and understanding social issues around them.

Shank's (2016) study does not involve picture book reading. However, it focuses on possibilities for claiming space for imagination as "the most powerful and energetic of learning tools" in early education in Kenyan public schools. Shank focuses on literacy education and integrating imagination and multimodal literacies in the public-school curriculum for the future citizens of Kenya. She expects a more socially just curriculum with space for critical literacies. The author asserts the need to include "imagination-based pedagogies" such as storytelling, creative play, poems, drawing, and painting, and how all can support the development of critical literacies in young children. In her article, the pivotal role of imagination in education is underscored as a means of nurturing children's creativity and fostering open-mindedness in the context of future generations. The essential role of critical literacy is explained concerning supporting children's cognitive development. Shank also explained the vital role of having multimodal literacies in public schools to help children's critical thinking and creativity skills.

Shank agrees on integrating imagination and multimodal literacies in young children's literacy education in public schools since public schools are, as Freire (1970) mentioned, places that inhibit creative power, and all they do is "maintain the submersion of consciousness" with banking education (p.81). Dyson and Genishi (2013) give an example from observations of a kindergarten class on imaginative play and social talk as teachers limit their students' imaginative play in a public-school setting. Their teachers perceive the students as "unruly children who did not follow the mandated curriculum" (p.165). The authors discuss the official curriculum vs. unofficial (children's) curriculum followed by the teachers and students in the classroom (p.167). The authors claim that students do not just do as they are told (p.167) because they transform their worlds as they interpret them and resist reality by exercising their agency. Children's agencies create the school culture; classrooms are not free places where children exercise their freedom. There is a different competitive world in the classrooms regarding literacy classes, such as "my [letter] H is better than yours"(p.167-168). The authors agree that finding time and space for talk and play is problematic in early childhood classrooms. Their teachers did not encourage children's imagination using multimodal literacies in this study (p.179). Both authors, Shank and Dyson, and Genishi, agree that public schools need to give space to multimodal literacies and the "imagination" of young children, specifically in literacy classrooms.

Spencer (2002) claims that the importance of imagination in young children's language development and literacy education focuses on vocabulary development, such as scholars Duijkers and Oers. Through play, the imaginative interpretation supports children's vocabulary development and comprehension of the texts (Spencer, p.538). Like Dyson and Genishi, Spencer also points out the essential role of play, making sense of the world as a part of the role of symbolic play concerning the meaning-making of picture books by children. Spencer asserts that,

like Genishi and Dyson, imagination is not separate from the reading and writing of children or literacy education.

Another scholar who believes there is an essential role of imagination in literacy education is Pelttari (2017), who agrees on the role of imagination in text comprehension, learning about self and others, enhancing reading instruction, engaging in the world depicted through the text, and making sense of the text as drawing on five vital uses of imagination. Pelittari, like Spencer, Dyson, and Genishi, believes that school instruction is moving away from symbolic play and picture books (Pelttari, p.107). As a final assertion in her article, she recommends a need for continued research on imagination related to literacy education and the effects of imagination on literacy learning (p.116).

Picture book reading and imagination scholars such as Pelittari, Dyson, Genishi, and Shank have similar ideas on the role of imagination in the literacy instruction of young children. The influence of this kind of education is specifically on reading comprehension, which supports young children's critical thinking skill development.

2.12 Younger Children and Critical Literacy Research/Studies

While there has been some existing research on critical literacy for older age groups of children (e.g., Chaplin, 2016; Hagood, 2002; Medlock Paul, 2016; Molin, Godhe, and Andersson, 2018; Musser, Coles, and Roock, 2021, Stopka, 2010; Wexler et al. 2020; Winn et al.), the research on young children and critical literacy are examined by these scholars: for example, Bishop (2014), Comber (2018), Harste (2014), Janks (2012), Leland et al. (1999), Norris, Lucas & Prudhoe (2012), Pantaleo (2017), Vasquez (2014), and (2019). Janks (2012)

explained the importance of critical literacy in schools in her article, and it is essential to give space and time to critical literacy education in today's world. She concludes that critical engagement with different texts makes us consume the meanings of others without questioning the truth so that a group of people is dismissed, and another has privileges because of this act. Therefore, we must value and support critical literacy education in schools (p.159).

Like Janks, Harste (2014) also agrees on the role of critical literacy education in schools and explains its benefits, such as supporting its use for creating a more democratic life for people. When critical literacy does that, we must include art and integrate it with language arts to make it more effective for students' understanding (p. 101).

Besides Harste and Janks, Vasquez (2014) claims the role of critical literacy in student success and well-being in schools, giving an example of a kindergarten student dealing with school bullies using critical literacy. She acts like a researcher while defending her rights and advocates for other girls bullied by boys.

Comber (2014) claims that the role of critical literacy in young children's education is to create social change and be aware of the social issues around them. Unlike researchers like Vasquez and Janks, she focuses on poverty and social justice, which are also a part of critical literacy education and intertwined with it (p.358).

Norris, Lucas, and Prudhoe (2012) also claim the role of critical literacy in children's education, recommending preparing teachers to use critical literacy in the early childhood education classroom (p.59). Differing from the other scholars, they focus on teacher education. Bishop (2014), differing from the scholars above, claims that there is limited research on

practicing critical literacy (p.51). We need critical literacy to make children and older youth conscious of liberation (p.52). Bishop (2014) asserts that there are also limitations to critical literacy projects in schools. These limitations include the rethinking of classroom practices required, teacher control, student hesitation to get involved with critical literacy topics, the school structure, and power struggles (p.57-58).

Leland et al. (1999) points out the role of critical literacy in schools and gives an example from a classroom observation on reading aloud time. While the teacher reads the novel *Whitewash* by Ntozoke Shange to her students, all the students pay attention to the story and try to make meaning of the text. In this example, the authors claim that reading these texts to students makes students aware of how systems of meaning and power influence people and their lives (p.70). While Leland et al. (1999) examines the role of critical literacy in schools like other scholars such as Vasquez, Harste, Bishop, and Comber, Panteleo (2017) discusses critical thinking and young children's integration of making art to accompany their picture book reading. She researched with second-grade students to understand the text meaning-making of children using picture books. After reading the picture books, children created their multimodal print texts. The authors mentioned the role of picture books in supporting the development of understanding, interpretation, and creativity in children. The authors concluded that teachers have a significant role in reflecting the oral language they model, encourage, and support as their interactions with students explore critical thinking about visual images (p.166).

2.13 Older Children and Critical Literacy Research/Studies

There have been several research studies conducted focusing on critical literacy for older age groups of children, such as those of Andersson (2018), Bishop (2014), Chaplin (2016),

Hagood (2002), Medlock Paul (2016), Molin, Godhe, and Stopka (2010), Musser, Coles, and Roock, (2021), Wexler et al. (2020), and Winn et al. The critical literacy research articles on older children and youth mainly focus on the importance of heightening critical literacy as part of literacy education in public school settings.

Hagood (2002) focuses on how the texts used in schools shape student identity and how teachers perceive these identities in schools. Hagood (2002) discusses one adolescent male student's in-school literacy practices related to popular culture texts and how these texts formed the teen's identity development with their subjectivity construction. She focused on the "formation of self-imagined within post-structural theories" (p.247).

While Hagwood focuses on adolescents' reading texts and how reading them forms their identity development, Musser et al. (2021) focus on critical literacy education and how this kind of education forms youth linkages in both school and incarceration settings. Like Musser et al. (2021), Chaplin (2016) focuses on developing a social justice curriculum for youth to foster social justice awareness through critical literacy education. Musser et al. and Chaplin claim the benefits of empowering youth and creating social justice awareness through critical literacy education in public schools.

Scholars like Wexler et al. (2020), Medlock (2016), and Stopka (2010) focus on enhancing critical literacy instruction in middle schools for youth through reading comprehension, lesson plan preparation, and other projects. Stopka's ten-novel reading project in a school district supported student literacy skills in critical literacy. They all agree that teachers are prominent supporters of critical literacy education.

Unlike all the other scholars, Winn et al. (2011) and Musser et al. (2021) focus on restorative practices of public schools in redirecting youth related to disciplinary issues in another way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Critical literacy may be beneficial in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline so that youth can focus on their literacy education for their success at school. Winn et al. (2011) and Musser et al. (2021) argue that literacy education is a right for everyone, including marginalized students.

Regarding critical literacy and digitalized classrooms, Molin et al. (2018) focus on examining literacy activities in digitalized classrooms and their influence on communicative pattern changes, specifically in middle school classrooms. 13–14-year-old students were observed using tablets in Swedish classes. Study findings revealed that different opportunities to develop critical literacy evolve in different activities, and digital technologies can become a resource in students' work. Teacher influence is significant in practicing critical literacy in digitalized classrooms. Molin et al. (2018) agree that different ways of reading and writing about social problems create awareness of real-life events in educational settings and are crucial to children's healthy development. Other scholars concur, such as Comber and Nixon (2008), Janks (2010), Shank (2016), and Vasquez (2017).

2.14 Schools as critical literacy places

I discuss why "public schools are considered unsuitable for critical literacy practice spaces." Several scholars such as Bishop (2014), Comber (2014), Greene (2008), Hagood (2002), Musser et al. (2021), Vasquez (2019), and Winn et al. (2011) claim that practicing critical literacy is challenging in public schools because of power relations. Popkewitz (2015) explains power systems and how these work in the U.S. very well in his articles and books. In

the following section, I give examples from scholars' early childhood and adolescent critical literacy literature articles to explain why schools may not be suitable places to practice critical literacy. Comber (2014) contends that establishing fresh environments, including extracurricular settings, offers an avenue for honing critical literacies among young children.

In contrast, Vasquez (2019) explores using traditional classroom spaces as she seeks innovative methods for cultivating critical literacies in early childhood education. Popkewitz tells us that U.S. history is rooted in colonialism/slavery and influenced by the Eugenics movement and how these systems of power shaped our schools and influenced our students and teachers not to embrace diversity in the classrooms. Musser et al. (2021) claim that the same power systems administer schools and prisons and are not different. Because of that, schools feed the school-to-prison pipeline. I have my own teaching experiences in preschools and parenting experiences related to public schools to show that teachers do not always welcome differences in schools. While my own children did not need to be identified as students with special needs, they were almost identified as having learning disabilities in a public school system. At that time, as young children, one was reading at the high school level and the other at the middle school level. They were bilinguals, and one of my children was working on learning two other languages in elementary school, yet their talents and skills went unrecognized by numerous teachers and specialists. One of my children is multilingual and speaks six languages now. Another has three.

Bishop (2014) claims that "literacy is a political battleground," and it is challenging to be a "border crosser" using critical literacy. Social justice is also ingrained in critical literacy; because of the power relations in schools and the U.S., it is challenging to practice critical

literacy education and make people aware of social justice issues to create activism about them (p.51-58).

Comber (2007,2014) and Comber and Nixon (2008) advocate that one solution to this issue is creating a new space with new literacies in out-of-school environments for Comber, calling it "place-pedagogy." Other scholars, including (Comber, 2013; Musser, Coles, & Roock, 2021; and Vasquez, 2019), argue that schools may not be appropriate places to practice critical literacy due to power relations among groups. Musser et al. (2021) claim that the same people who control the school system have controlled the prison system and the whole social system since slavery in this country (p.1).

Popkewitz (2015) explains "the reason for Cosmopolitanism as part of colonization" in his book *The Reason of Schooling: Historicizing curriculum studies, pedagogy, and teacher education*. In his book, Popkewitz tells the history of education in the U.S. and how colonialism is rooted in the education system, prioritizing dominant (European American immigrants, specifically Anglo-Saxon roots) groups to have a better education relevant to their roots and privileging their success more than that of marginalized groups.

The education system was established for the success of Western European immigrants while ignoring other races and ethnicities. The order in the U.S. was established historically according to the success of the dominant group. The schooling, sciences, and reforms were around this framework (p.1-3). The social inequities and asymmetries in the context of public schooling are ingrained in public school education through conservatism (unquestioning inscription of the contemporary frameworks) that order and classify what has been well and what, therefore, should be (p.5). Popkewitz also claims that knowledge, social groups, teacher

education, and schooling politics established within the traditional education system did not change much over time and were rooted in colonial times (p.6). Even when educational reforms were created, they were created to discover the future good citizens of the U.S. The reason for the progress, agency, and governing was creating an "ideal American citizen." This Western European immigrant is an upper or middle-class, productive, and intellectual citizen who serves his country. The marginalized people (non-Western European immigrants) were excluded from society and government institutions such as schools. People were categorized according to socioeconomic levels, intelligence (as assessed by intellectual tests/standardized tests), gender, ethnicity, religion, and so forth in American society. Normalizing and differentiating the qualities of people on a continuum of value was produced. The most radical was the Eugenics movements prominent in the U.S.A. With this kind of classification system in sciences, specifically in psychology and pedagogy, the child who lacks self-esteem and motivation is classified as "incapable." These disadvantaged children need to be integrated into the community and schools because of the "fear of the future." " Respecting diversity was all about "protecting social wrongs as aspirations of equity and equality"(p.9-11).

Popkewitz points out that the only way out of correcting the issues of public schooling rooted in colonial times is "the rethinking/restructuring of the education system." So, this rethinking regarding change goes against the grain of Anglo-American social and educational traditions (p.15). Changing the educational system is challenging since knowledge building, family, society, art, religion, morality, and so on all reflect the colonial system and are ingrained in it (p.16). The ideal American citizen was not heterogeneous but homogenous with a common culture, such as different cultures melting together in a so-called "melting pot." Horace Kallen

(1915) proposes cultural pluralism—democracy versus melting pot which was a study of American nationality.

Assimilating the immigrants into American culture aimed to make the ideal citizen happy, productive, and assimilated in schools and government institutions (Popkewitz, p.95). Social control was possible with schooling, and this kind of control would bring moral order since, at that time, "moral order" was what some people thought was out of control with robberies, assaults, killings, and addictions (fueled by causes such as alcoholism) (p.100).

Within particular perspectives, individuals have been dichotomized into "civilized" or "uncivilized" categories, which often align with notions of educated and uneducated citizens (p.100-101). This division has significantly influenced the development of textbooks, educational institutions, pedagogical tools, and academic disciplines, all structured around these presumed distinctions among human groups (p.104). Popkewitz, for instance, noted how a prevailing belief in American exceptionalism led to the mission of civilizing the western territories once inhabited by Native Americans and Americanizing immigrants hailing from non-Protestant backgrounds (p.105). During the same historical period, the educational focus primarily emphasized teaching over fostering a culture of learning (p.107). In some instances, children were even categorized based on their musical preferences, with distinctions drawn between those who appreciated jazz and those inclined toward classical music (p.109). Popkewitz (2015) claimed that finding the truth in education involves recognizing differences and including others through collaboration and communication. He believes institutional racism is ingrained in the American system with the colonization process. In the globalization era, when more immigration is expected due to wars and global warming in the future, the educational truth

of internationalizing educational knowledge is possible with more diverse and immigrant-friendly policies and practices in the American education system. To change these circumstances, Musser et al. (2021) recommend that schools give voice to marginalized students, treat them equally, support them through education, and give students power and control. Since the schools will be decolonized, these students can practice critical literacy as part of their literacy education. Students will be empowered through their academic skills. Teachers are responsible for creating this free space for their students (p.12).

Winn et al. (2011) assert that although literacy education is a civil right for all, marginalized students do not get enough support for school success and literacy education due to societal inequalities.

Greene (2008) explains that power and privilege make race and class central to the relationship between schooling, literacy, civil rights, and citizenship. We must ensure that our education system empowers all students equally to achieve in schools (Winn et al., p.147). Since every student has a right to be literate in schools, Winn et al. mention that students with different cultures, special needs, and incarcerated youth are exempt from this right. Denial of literacy as a civil right feeds the school-to-prison pipeline in the U.S. (p.148). Musser et al. (2021) explain that literacy is connected to the continuum of incarcerating youth (p.2). Public schools follow "White supremacy" ideologies, and these ideologies are antiblack and a part of "racial capitalism," which has roots in slavery times of the U.S. history with colonialism (p.2).

Musser et al. (2021) argue that racist policies, policing, school testing, and discipline in schools are a part of White supremacy ideologies and have roots in eugenics. Literacy forms "school and incarceration linkages" and is a web of intertwinement (p.5). Literacy assessments,

ideologies, labels, restrictions, and practices are central aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline and continuum leading to incarceration (p.5). Musser et al. argue that researchers must advance interventions for our "racist society rooted in colonization" (p.13). Educational research needs to focus directly on people who have experienced incarceration (p.13). Winn et al. agree with Musser et al. that it is significant that we find ways to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through critical literacy education in schools and exercise agency in youth learning, such as reading and writing, to disrupt this cycle (p.163). Winn et al. also recommend using restorative practices in schools instead of punishments. The article discusses several critical issues related to racism, education, incarceration, and critical literacy. The authors also discuss White Supremacy Ideologies and Eugenics. They suggest that racist policies, policing, school testing, and discipline in schools are rooted in White supremacy ideologies, which have historical connections to eugenics. This highlights the deep-seated nature of racial inequality in various aspects of American society.

Winn et al. claim that literacy and the school-to-Prison Pipeline are connected to the concept of "school and incarceration linkages," emphasizing how literacy is intertwined with this phenomenon. It argues that literacy assessments, ideologies, labels, restrictions, and practices play a central role in the school-to-prison pipeline, which is a system that disproportionately funnels students of color into the criminal justice system. The authors recommend interventions and offer more Educational Research on this topic. The essay advocates for researchers to develop interventions to address the racism deeply ingrained in society, particularly within educational systems. It calls for educational research to focus on individuals who have experienced incarceration, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and justice-oriented approach.

The article aligns with the viewpoint that critical literacy education in schools can be a potent tool for disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. It suggests that empowering youth through reading and writing can help break the cycle of injustice and inequality. In addition to critical literacy education, the essay recommends using restorative practices in schools rather than punitive measures. Restorative practices aim to foster dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation rather than punitive actions, aligning with efforts to disrupt the cycle of incarceration.

Overall, this essay highlights the interconnectedness of racism, education, and incarceration and the importance of critical literacy, research, and restorative approaches in addressing these deeply rooted societal issues.

Hagood (2002) highlights a case where a middle school teenager faced negative perceptions from his teachers and lacked support in his literacy class, specifically in a critical literacy class focused on reading comprehension and text discussion. Despite the student's success, he was unfairly labeled as "lazy" by his educators. Implementing restorative pedagogical practices could play a pivotal role in nurturing the academic growth of young individuals who have often been subjected to repeated disciplinary actions, fostering a culture that prioritizes college readiness (p.167). Comber recommends that teachers create out-of-school environments to develop critical literacy practices. Vasquez (2017) suggests that critical literacy across the K-6 curriculum is possible through teachers' "emergent teaching strategies." Her recommended classroom activities include picture books, reading, discussing power and social justice issues, and questioning privileged groups and injustices. She recommends that teachers create critical literacy spaces, interrogate the texts, and analyze and deconstruct them. She

extends her activities with other curriculum subjects like art. She also explains her critical literacy framework in five stages: understanding critical literacy, assessing readiness, planning, implementing, and evaluating all its features. Comber (2007) also argues that her place-based pedagogy includes emergent teaching strategies. Her noted activities are around literacy teaching and learning, like creating texts, investigating social issues around student lives, and interrogating texts with the deconstruction of them to develop new literacies for marginalized students.

Comber and Vasquez both focus on the literacy education of marginalized students. The frameworks and pedagogies they created serve this group of students' literacy skill development. The difference is that Vasquez points out improving critical literacy education in the classrooms with teacher support and strategies.

In contrast, Comber points out school spaces and their value on critical literacy education since the in-school places do not reinforce but discourage the critical literacy and space-based pedagogies for marginalized students for the "power struggles reasons" mentioned above by different scholars. Vasquez and Comber agree on the power of literacy education and offer new strategies and literacies for marginalized groups. Still, they differ on what kind of spaces, either out of school or in-school, need to be created for new literacies for marginalized student populations.

2.15 Picture Book and Critical Literacy Education Research/Studies

Except for Comber and Vasquez, the other scholars who examined the role of picture book reading and critical literacy education in early childhood include Callow 2017; Hyland,

2010; Kim, 2016; Lysaker & Miller, 2012; Mathis, 2016; Miller 2012; Peach & Papen, 2021; Pesonen, 2013; Soundy & Drucker, 2010; and Wolk, 2004.

Peach and Papen's (2021) study investigated picture books and critical literacy using multimodal interaction analysis to investigate children's interactions with picture books concerning war and child refugees. The children's emotional reactions to the books revealed that their words, gestures, postures, gazes, and voice quality showed their "emotional collisions" in provoking their affective reactions and critical engagements with their intellectual curiosity. If children can read picture books about social issues, they are curious to learn about what is happening around them. They also have an opportunity to know about their emotions. Mathis's (2016) study also intersects with Peach and Papen's study on agency development by children and the effects of picture book reading.

Lysaker and Miller's 2012 research underscores the profound impact of reading on various facets of children's development, including the cultivation of their "social imagination" (p.147). In a complementary vein, Callow's 2017 study delves into the interplay between global and critical literacy within the context of picture book reading. It further affirms the value of harnessing both written and visual modes to heighten students' awareness that various texts endeavor to influence our perspectives (p. 235).

According to Soundy and Drucker (2010), it is possible to see "peer collaboration and understanding" connecting art with literacy in the classroom. This way, children can examine the meaning-makings of the texts and learning processes by reviewing the sociocultural influences on their drawings that are extended through picture books and peer interactions (p.447).

At the same time, Pesonen (2013) focuses on multiculturalism and belonging in Finnish literacy education and the role of picture books influencing the production of future Finnish citizens, which is also a part of social imagination and social justice issues in Finland. All the studies emphasize the critical role of picture books in creating certain types of citizens in their respective countries.

Kim and Wolk concentrate on critical literacy in schools through picture book reading. This kind of literacy is essential to make children aware of social injustices. Wolk and Kim assert that young children must be informed about social issues as part of their society. While the articles used in this research all agree that young children need to play as part of their healthy development, picture books are also crucial to informing the children about social issues as part of their community.

While Hyland (2010) asserts the importance of culturally relevant teaching practices in preschool classrooms, Dyson and Genishi (2014) claim the necessity of play, social justice, and imagination through picture books in preschool and public schools. Hyland, Dyson, and Genishi advocate for marginalized students' school success. They guide teachers and administrators to investigate public school social justice curriculum needs.

2.16 Discussion

As I understand from my literature review, studies that I found do not emphasize all four of my research themes in a single research text, such as imagination, play, picture books, and social justice. There are limited research studies that exist on young children's (K-2) meaning-making of picture books using their imagination around social justice principles. Studies around

play and imagination or picture books and social justice themes do exist. Still, age groups are generally older, upper elementary or middle school participants found in most studies. There are no classroom observations on children's meaning-making from picture books at younger ages or as a group related to social justice themes.

My study has an essential value because I aim to observe a classroom full of young children in their natural settings while they play with their peers and toys and their usage of picture books. I am a participant observer in this study. Being a participant observer (a researcher) and taking notes while interacting with young children is challenging since I am the only researcher in this study. The one advantage will be my position as an ex-teacher at this school; knowing the teachers and some children might be advantageous and disadvantageous to my research.

CHAPTER 3 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

3.1 Social Justice Education and Definition of Social Justice

Learning for Social Justice (1991) describes social justice education as redefining what it means to have educational equality. Social justice in education demands equity for all students but also allows space for student growth through diversity. Social justice promotes equal economic, employment, and educational opportunities in a nation where everyone feels safe and secure.

3.2 Teaching Tolerance and Learning for Justice Organization

Learning for Social Justice (1991) describes “teaching tolerance” as a core principle as envisioned by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) (1971). Celebrating diversity and promoting contact theory was critical to this early work. Gordon Allport developed contact theory in the 1950s; this theory explains that contact between two groups can promote acceptance and tolerance under certain conditions, such as equal group status within the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support (Pettigrew, 1998, p.65). Teaching Tolerance (1971) focused on the difference one teacher can make. As an organization, “Learning for Justice” offers resources for creating classrooms where all children can succeed. Learning for Justice celebrates identity, diversity, and advocacy and focuses on “justice” by providing strategies for student action. Its audiences include students, school officials, preschool staff, parents, and communities.

Learning for Justice (LFJ) (1991) offers to counsel marginalized students, families, and communities. LFJ training topics include religion, ability, class, immigration, gender, and sexual identity, bullying and bias, and rights with activism. LFJ encourages students to cultivate positive identity formation on race and ethnicity, explore the diversity of religions, reject ableism

and support students with special needs; understand class and immigration; find strategies to support immigrant students/families; learn about LGBTQ youth; promote empathy to eliminate discrimination; and teach student activism/advocacy. This organization plans educational activities to teach students about slavery and its societal influence. LFJ teaches students about the Civil Rights Movement and provides anti-bias education, tolerance through digital literacy, Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and civic life social studies state standards (Learning for Justice Organization, 1991).

3.3 The Social Justice Framework and Standards

The Social Justice framework and standards serve as guides to see and educate to resist unfairness and inequality while enhancing freedom for all. Schools generally reproduce the social exclusion and oppression seen in the larger society (Learning for Justice, 1991). The standards for anti-bias education in K-12 public schools interrupt the perpetual reproduction of injustice and systematic racism in U.S. educational institutions. The teaching tolerance social justice standards are 20 anchor standards and 80-grade level outcomes organized into four domains: identity, diversity, justice, and action. These domains reflect the desired impact of successful anti-bias education on student individual and social skill development (Learning for Justice, 1991).

According to its website, LFJ is designed to increase understanding of differences and their value to a respectful and civil society that actively challenges bias, stereotyping, and discrimination in schools and communities. The four goals of anti-bias education demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities among students. Teaching tolerance is vital for children to develop empathy and respect for each other and learn about others' backgrounds. Teachers can encourage anti-bias education programs by allowing students

to work/play with and support one another. Like adults, children also experience differences and similarities in relating to one another; therefore, teachers need to maintain an anti-bias classroom. Anti-bias teachers are committed to the principle that every child deserves to develop to their fullest potential (Learning for Justice, 1991).

3.4 Early Childhood (EC) Social Justice Scholars

3.4.1 Gloria Ladson Billings: Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices

Ladson-Billings is a teacher educator, professor, and pedagogy theorist whose research interests include Critical Race Theory (CRT), culturally relevant pedagogy, multicultural education, and teacher education (<https://www.google.com/search?q=who+is+gloria+ladson+billings>). Ladson-Billings' work has informed socially just, anti-biased, and critical literacy pedagogies in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Ladson-Billings developed CRT pedagogy in early childhood social justice literature to encourage a socially just world in schools.

3.5 Culturally Responsive Teaching Definition and Elements with Teaching Strategies

Ladson-Billings (1995) defined “culturally responsive teaching” as students accepting and affirming their cultural identity and working towards their achievement in schools (p. 469). Ladson-Billings (1992, 1995, 1997, 2009, 2014) described CRT pedagogy as recognizing the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Hyland, 2010). CRT is a research-based approach to teaching. It connects students' cultures, languages, and life experiences with course content, which helps students access the rigorous curriculum and develop higher-education skills. For CRT to succeed, teachers must establish inclusion, develop positive attitudes, enhance meaning, and foster confidence. Elements of CRT include student success, cultural competence, and understanding/critiquing social order. In CRT, cultural

competence encourages students to maintain cultural integrity while becoming successful learners. There are multiple CRT strategies for teachers, such as learning about students, interviewing students, inviting guest speakers, and involving parents.

Ladson-Billings (1995) claimed that Black feminism created culturally relevant practices. Pérez and Saavedra (2017) proposed using Chicana and Black feminism to re-center global South perspectives in the diverse EC theory of knowledge. Pérez and Saavedra argued that the theory of knowledge in early childhood was a production of colonialism in the United States and the world. This kind of knowledge accepts the marginalized child as a “deficit.” However, when we reject the deficit view of children of color and value their identity and background (Ladson-Billings, 1994), we inspire new imaginaries and possibilities for equity in the ECE field. Similarly, South global perspectives accept the child as "multicultural/ multilingual" and value the child's background (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). According to Ladson Billings (2000), Euro-American views “are not the only legitimate way to understand the world” (p. 258).

Numerous scholars have identified systemic and institutional racism, including the following: Christensen, 2009; Chu, 2014; Hammond, 2015; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Souto-Manning and Martell, 2016. Ladson-Billings (1995) made the CRT approach more accessible to all teachers, especially those with different cultural understandings, knowledge, and experiences. Essential elements of CRT pedagogy include student-teacher relationships, connection with all students, developing a community of learners, and encouraging students to learn as a team and support each other. CRT has three central concepts: self and other, social relations, and knowledge. Culturally responsive teaching is a step toward closing the gap between home and school (Ladson-Billings, 1995, pp.119, 483).

Early childhood social justice literature scholars frequently cite Ladson-Billings regarding culturally relevant practices. These scholars discuss the importance of practicing culturally relevant practices for students and teachers and describe how culturally relevant practices support marginalized student groups and teachers. For example, Nganga (2015) discusses the effects of CRT on student success and conducts qualitative research to explore culturally relevant practices. Hackman (2005) explained the essential role of CRT in preparing teachers as social change agents. Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning (2011) argued for a central role of diversity in teacher education and its relationship to CRT. At the same time, Greene (2008) described how CRT influences social change. Citing Ladson-Billings, Wanless and Crawford (2016) addressed race in teaching practices as “challenging us as educators to reconsider what the educators mean by ‘good teaching’ (p. 163).

3.5.1 Louise Denman-Sparks: Anti-Bias Education

As a Jewish-American, Louise Derman-Sparks is an educator and social justice activist. As an EC teacher, childcare center director, and professor in the EC field, Denman-Sparks’ experience with the Perry preschool project in Michigan supports her understanding of diversity. This interest in diversity has continued throughout her teaching experiences and grown into an anti-bias curriculum approach for early childhood education programs.

3.6 Anti-bias education approach

Derman-Sparks (2015) has observed that diversity among children in childcare centers has increased (U.S. Census Bureau,2012), which adds complexity to our country, society, and schools. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (1992) identified a growing interest in multicultural education and multiculturalism in colleges, public schools, childcare centers, private sectors, and

government institutions. The authors suggest that social change and continuous immigration to the United States must ensure that childcare programs support children's diverse experiences.

Derman-Sparks (2010, 2020) described an anti-bias curriculum approach to foster learning. It teaches children to understand/accept/embrace all human beings with their personalities, identities, race, ethnicity, family background, religion, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and age differences. Derman-Sparks identified four goals for children through anti-bias education (ABE): identity, diversity, justice, and activism. Identity strengthens children's sense of self and family; diversity supports joy in human diversity; justice enables children to gain the cognitive, social, and emotional tools to recognize hurtful behavior; and activism teaches children to work with others to build inclusive, fairer ways of being in the community. These goals protect children from harmful prejudices and biases and support equal social opportunities for children. Society, families, children, teachers, and other community members need to work together to ensure fundamental human rights, including the right to survive, the right to develop as a whole person, the right to protection, and the right to participate in social life (Derman-Sparks, 2010, 2020).

Derman-Sparks (2020) opined that inequity is embedded in the American system with advantages and disadvantages for specific races deeply rooted in history. Similarly, Sri Prakash and colleagues (2020) and Baratz and Baratz (1970) argued that racism controls divide and classifies people and their social, political, economic, and knowledge rights. Derman-Sparks, Wanless, and Crawford (2016) describe teacher attitudes towards race, stating, "Children's ideas about their race or others' races are forming in early years, regardless of whether the topic is addressed/suppressed or ignored in their classrooms" (p.9). Derman-Sparks (2020) discussed the

importance of integrating anti-bias curriculum programs in schools, noting that society and the family environment gradually shape young children's race ideas.

McDermott and Varenne (1995) claimed that many marginalized students fail in schools based on a deficit thinking model. Dumas (2014) claims that the school system needs to be examined instead of blaming the students for failure. Gomez and Rodriguez (2011) suggested that students benefit from practices and policies that support diverse teaching staff. Other scholars such as Hawkins (2014), Ladson-Billings (1995), Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning et al. (2019), and Rodd (1996) have recommended that administrators and policymakers put in place social justice programs. Other scholars, such as Derman-Sparks (2011) and Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011), argue that anti-bias education programs should be prioritized.

Additionally, researchers such as Gomez (2014), Gomez, Rodriguez, Agosto (2008), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Thomas (2020) emphasize the role hiring teachers of color might take in creating socially just classrooms. Chaplin (2016) articulated the benefits of including a social justice curriculum that fosters social justice awareness and empowerment. Students then can feel empowered and academically engaged as diverse groups. Goals for teachers include increasing awareness, examining differences and similarities across lines of human diversity, and getting to know their advantages /disadvantages /stereotypes/prejudices and those of others. Anti-bias education must be part of a daily curriculum program for all students. Anti-bias education is not a recipe but needs to be part of a teacher's daily planning. Furthermore, teachers need to pay attention to children's daily lives and scaffold anti-bias education classroom materials and activities.

Various scholars have described the importance of anti-bias education programs in their research (Chu, 2014; Compton-Lily, 2015; Hawkins, 2014; Hyland, 2010; King, 1991). Nganga

(2015) conducted qualitative research to explore culturally relevant practices in an anti-bias curriculum program for pre-service teachers. The researcher found that teachers better understood these curricula and gained self-awareness in teaching that incorporated diversity concerns. Reid et al. (2019) examined anti-bias education programs for diverse student groups in a kindergarten classroom by investigating program effects on student groups following early learning and development standards. The researcher found that these programs supported diverse student success and well-being.

Numerous researchers, including Compton-Lily (2015), have discussed the importance of investigating Culturally Relevant Practices in Teacher education. Researchers have also concluded that culture is essential to student learning (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) claimed that teachers must learn how student culture influences their learning methods. Early Learning and Development standards must also be adopted in anti-bias education programs. However, these standards are not flexible enough to support diverse students' learning in infant through kindergarten classrooms.

Sparks et al. (2009) described equity issues that influence children and families who struggle to access health, education, shelter, food, financial security, and neighborhood security. Even very young children were aware of these family issues, which influenced them internally and externally as a part of their development. Authors have offered recommendations for teachers to support their students in terms of value-based biased messaging about SES. Bal (2012) noted that race and the effects of SES have resulted in lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates among students of color. Bal and Mawene's (2020) research demonstrated how marginalized student groups face unequal educational opportunities, including spatial

arrangements for learning in classrooms in their schools and general “othering” in the education system regarding their race, ethnicity, and social class.

Derman-Sparks (1993) claimed that teachers must be aware of how their cultural heritage can affect their opinions and attitudes about the upbringing of young children. There might be conflicts between teachers, parents, and children due to different expectations, attitudes, and practices. Therefore, teachers must be aware of their prejudices and actions and how they may interfere with nurturing children's development (Rodd, 1996). Derman-Sparks and Jones (1992) recommended that teachers follow anti-bias education programs. They noted that integrating anti-bias education into developmentally appropriate programs takes time, courage, patience, and persistence.

Derman-Sparks (1999) described the markers of anti-bias education programs/multicultural programs as those including furniture, books, staff, materials, curriculum, and teaching strategies. Within this framework, Derman-Sparks advocates for warm and understanding teacher and student relationships, a classroom curriculum that reflects diverse student needs, and parent-teacher cooperation. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2005) offered strategies for teachers who have all-white student groups in their classrooms. These strategies include teacher curriculum planning and materials and guiding/supporting the students, familiarizing students with multiculturalism, introducing various activities to students, and engaging parents in collaboration. According to these authors, culturally relevant pedagogy and anti-bias education programs can create future citizens who believe in creating a socially just world for everyone.

3.6.1 Discussion

Educational scholarship and research about culturally relevant practices and anti-bias pedagogies demonstrate that Ladson-Billings and Derman-Sparks significantly contributed to early childhood education, social justice literature, and programs. Social justice standards like identity, diversity, justice, and action are critical aspects of culturally relevant practices and anti-bias education programs. Ladson-Billings and Derman-Sparks created theories of CRT and anti-bias education programs to support young children as the citizens of the United States. Both scholars agreed that teachers and other adults must create equal classroom environments for all children regardless of their backgrounds. Additionally, Ladson-Billings and Derman-Sparks support student achievement by encouraging all students to achieve/develop cognitive skills for higher-order thinking.

The achievement gap has denied underserved students of color and English learners' opportunities to develop the mental skills and processes necessary to become independent learners (Hammond, 2015). Theories such as those proposed by Ladson-Billings and Derman Sparks pose challenges in public schools and early childhood programs due to teacher resistance. It is challenging to practice critical race pedagogy (CRP) in schools due to the lack of consideration of student identity and culture. Furthermore, because of state-mandated high-stakes testing, teachers do not have sufficient time to focus on critical pedagogy. As a result, teachers cannot devote time and energy to developing content and skills-focused curricula (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 83). Ladson-Billings (2014) described one practical issue of culturally relevant pedagogy, "The fluidity and variety within cultural groups have been lost in discussions and implementations of CRP. A few people have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work.

Instead, they either omit it or reduce its critical edge” (p. 77). The following section discusses the work of scholars who contributed to critical literacy for early childhood teachers and students.

Three contemporary scholars (Vasquez, Comber, and Souto-Manning) contributed to critical literacy by recommending strategies/programs and materials for the classroom with young children in K-2 grade levels. Bakhtin also contributed to this scholarship through his work on dialogue and dialogic thinking.

3.7 Bakhtin: Dialogic Thinking

Any discussion of critical literacy begins with Bakhtin since the scholar’s views influenced both child and adult critical literacy, especially with dialogic becoming, dialogues, and classroom talk concepts. Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and scholar who developed literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=who+is+bakhtin>.

Bakhtin (1981) argued that a dialogic perspective is essential for understanding aspects of reading. According to Bakhtin, when an individual reads an author’s ideas and feels the story characters’ feelings/thoughts and self-voice, a conversation occurs between the characters, the reader, and the author. The reader engages with comprehensive and relational events during the reading process, and a dialogic exchange occurs. Bakhtin (1981) claimed that all thinking is related to dialogue.

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981) argued the role of the sociocultural environment in endorsing student reading and comprehension skills. Not just student funds of knowledge influence student reading, but also playing, imagining, the purpose of reading, material availability, teaching goals, and strategies influence student reading and meaning-

making. Bakhtin focused on the role of dialogic thinking and talking, and Vygotsky focused on the sociocultural environment affecting the student's imagination, playing, and learning.

The table below, which I created as a research model on the role of sociocultural context influencing student reading, shows how sociocultural context affects student meaning-making of picture books in schools as part of the community. Peer and teacher support in school places and parent support in out-of-school places encourage or discourage student comprehension of picture book reading.

Table: Sociocultural Context: Factors influencing students' meaning making of picture books.

Community and School



Lysaker and Miller (2012) described Vygotsky's theory concerning the dialogic exchange between the voices of the self and the text. I have summarized some key points related to Vygotsky's theory of the dialogic exchange between the voices of the self and the text and Bakhtin's concept of dialogism.

Bakhtin (1981) claims that an individual's talk in dialogue reflects the author's adaptation to reality. Internalization of conversation with others actively builds upon a reader's perspective of physical and social reality. Furthermore, new perspectives collected from others within the self-result in a new multifaceted consciousness, creating a new social resource for the future. This is especially true with fiction, which fosters critical thinking and supports children's imagination skills. Bakhtin (1981) used the term "dialogic" to introduce the concept of dialogism. Dialogism is the use of conversation or shared dialogue to explore the meaning of something. Bakhtin's notions of the dialogic demonstrated that all languages are dynamic, relational, and engaged in endless re-descriptions of the world.

Vygotsky's theory (Vygotsky's dialogic exchange) emphasizes the importance of dialogue and interaction between an individual and the external world, including texts. According to Lysaker and Miller (2012), the self and text voices are internalized within an individual's cognitive space. This means that when we engage with texts or have conversations with others, we incorporate their ideas and perspectives into our thinking process.

Bakhtin, in 1981, introduced the concept of dialogism, which emphasizes the role of conversation and shared dialogue in exploring the meaning of something. Bakhtin suggests that language and meaning are not fixed or static but dynamic and constantly evolving through interactions. This view implies that all languages are engaged in ongoing re-descriptions of the world.

Bakhtin (1981) claimed the role of conversation in building perspectives. Internalizing conversations and interactions with others contribute to an individual's understanding of physical and social reality. This process helps individuals develop new perspectives and insights. These new perspectives are integrated into the self, creating a more multifaceted consciousness.

In this text, Bakhtin (1981) mentioned that fiction plays a significant role in this dialogic process. Fictional texts often encourage critical thinking and imagination. Individuals engaging with fiction are exposed to various narratives and viewpoints, further enriching their cognitive and social resources.

In summary, Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of dialogue and interaction in shaping an individual's understanding of the world, while Bakhtin's concept of dialogism emphasizes that language and meaning are dynamic and evolve through conversations. These ideas underscore the significance of social and textual interactions in shaping our perspectives and cognitive development.

For Bakhtin, meaning-making combines perspectives/ideologies, themes, or discourses and includes all voices. For example, young children retell stories from picture books. When children retell others' opinions/ideas, they also add meaning-making to the text (Harste, 2014). Bakhtin referred to this as “double-voiced” narration. Bakhtin (1981) stated, “The tendency to assimilate other's discourse takes on an even more profound and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming. The text we read and memorize becomes our ideological interrelations with the world” (p. 342).

Bakhtin’s contribution to critical literacy is notions concerning dialogic thinking and conversations, vital in early education classrooms to support young children's literacy and language skills in creating socially just classroom environments (Bakhtin,1981; Dyson &

Genishi,2009; Freire, 1970,1971; Giroux,1993,1996; Johnston, Ivey, and Faulkner, 2011; Lysaker & Miller, 2012; Nichols,2014; Souto-Manning, 2016; Wells, 2009). Researchers, including Giroux (1993,1996), Lysaker & Miller (2012), and Souto-Manning (2016), assert that young children learn to listen to others and feel valued and respected through dialogical talks, which supports positive identity development.

3.7.1 EC Critical Literacy Curriculum Scholars

3.7.1.1 Vivian M. Vasquez: In-Class Spaces for EC Critical Literacy

Vasquez is an early childhood education professor at American University whose research includes negotiating critical literacies with young children. Vasquez (2007) defined critical literacy in the following way:

Critical literacy curriculum is a part of daily experiences. It arises from the social and political conditions that unfold in the communities in which we live. As such, teachers teach critical literacy in a nontraditional way. In other words, as teachers, we need to incorporate a critical perspective into our everyday lives with our students to find ways to help children understand the social and political issues around them (p. 7).

Vasquez (2017) described the importance of critical literacy in K-6 years and suggested that students be aware of their social issues. Students and teachers use language to exercise power and social justice in critical literacy and question privileged groups and societal injustices. Therefore, teachers need to create spaces for engaging in pleasurable and powerful critical literacies with students using art and daily texts with issues of everyday life. Texts can be interrogated, deconstructed, and analyzed to uncover views of the world they represent (pp.115-123). Vasquez argued that teachers need to support critical literacy curricula to ensure marginalized groups are made visible in texts, songs, movies, and ads.

To support a critical literacy curriculum, teachers must be flexible, follow social justice and equity in teaching strategies, and be respectful and caring (Vasquez, p.123). Vasquez (2017) recommended teachers follow these recommendations for conducting critical literacy in schools: engage and follow students' interests, create a space for students to work and learn, use language to question practices and injustices, critically analyze popular culture as teachers, teach students how to analyze and synthesize popular culture texts, and teach students self-reflective practices. Vasquez suggested that teachers look at which group of people signify American people in media or ads, including picture books and other texts. Picture books representing diverse groups of people and multicultural books are a great addition to the classroom library.

Citing Vasquez et al. (1999), Bishop (2014) described procedures for practicing critical literacy in early childhood classrooms, such as asking specific questions to make children think deeply about social issues and real-life incidents. Specific questions might include: "How does the text construct reality? What worldviews are represented or not? What is the purpose of the text? How does the text try to position the reader? Whose interests are or are not served by the ideas in the text?"

According to Vasquez et al. (2019), critical literacy focuses on unequal power relations and social justice and equity issues supporting marginalized school students. Vasquez et al. (2019) supported Vasquez's previous work regarding the importance of appreciating and welcoming the different languages of marginalized student groups, "Taking the languages they bring with them to school seriously and understanding how multilingual children are treated unjustly when their linguistic repertoires are excluded from classrooms" (p. 302). Vasquez's role in early childhood critical literacy is invaluable (Rowallah, 2011). Many scholars cite Vasquez's

work and critical literacy framework for early education. Her EC critical literacy framework is the one that I draw on for my research.

3.7.1.2 Mariana Souto-Manning: Marginalized Students and Critical Literacy

Education

Mariana Souto-Manning is a professor at Columbia University whose research examines inequities in early childhood and teacher education, focusing on theoretical and methodological issues and conflicts with marginalized communities. Souto-Manning's contribution to teacher education is guiding teachers to help young children become critical learners in critical literacy <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/ms3983/>.

Souto-Manning argued the importance of relating student background and culture to school literacy activities so that students can see their lives reflected in the school curriculum and have meaningful learning opportunities that include real-life experiences. Since critical literacy needs to include lived experiences and sociopolitical perspectives of students from across groups in society, teachers must incorporate a critical perspective using students' lives and experiences into their pedagogical practices. Souto-Manning, Ghim and Madu (2021) and Souto-Manning (2014, 2016) identified multiple strategies, tools and approaches to support public school teachers in grades K-2 including the following: using culturally relevant teaching; accepting and appreciating the diversity of students; bonding with students, parents, and the community; considering developmentally appropriate curriculum; applying best practices; being aware of individual differences for each student; believing and practicing social justice and peace in educating young children; moving away from the standardization of teaching; valuing many languages and multiple literacies; giving priority to student choices, using observation and documentation in literacy practices; being considerate of student knowledge; loving

storytelling/history/art; creating a classroom community; fostering awareness and curriculum inclusion about socio political issues in the country; considering the cultural nature of writing/reading/talking; encouraging classroom dialogues and critical discussions; using different texts to practice literacy skills; listening to the stories and experiences students tell; valuing student history, racial identity, names, and voices of students; reflecting on diverse literacies; and creating a classroom environment/curriculum/teaching strategies/library organization that considers the diversity of students.

Souto-Manning (2016) offered similar strategies for bilingual and multilingual children's literacy education by "honoring and building on the rich literacy practices for multilingual learners" (pp. 1-9). Souto-Manning (2016) recommended critical discussions in the classroom, including read-aloud techniques to question inequities displayed in texts. Through critical conversations, students learn to problem-solve, think critically, appreciate others' opinions, listen, challenge different issues related to race/culture/identity/religion, become familiar with social issues, understand systems of power and their influence on citizens, and (re)envision their racial/cultural identities (Souto-Manning, 2016, p. 95).

For example, Souto-Manning (2014) asserted that if teachers want students to develop agentively, they must position conflict at the front and center of curriculum and teaching (p. 6). Another benefit of critical literacy is student belonging, which means students feel welcome in the classroom. Souto-Manning et al. (2021) identified a need to restructure early literacy education in schools to respond to the success of all students from diverse backgrounds (pp. 489-491).

3.7.1.3 Barbara Comber: Out-of School Spaces for Critical Literacy Education

Barbara Comber is a University of South Australia School of Education professor. Comber's research interests include literacy development, teaching, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Comber's contributions to language and literacy teacher education are rooted in research conducted in the United States, Australia, and Canada (<https://people.unisa.edu.au/>).

Comber (2014) discussed the influence of poverty on children's education in public schools in Australia. The author claimed that everyone gets low-level group literacy pedagogies, texts, and tasks in communities where everyone comes from low SES groups. Therefore, it is possible to see the pedagogies of poverty and minimum versions of the literacy curriculum (Comber, 2012).

Comber's investigations of critical theories of social justice have informed educational policy, practice, and research. Comber recommended that schools be reconceptualized as meeting places using spatial theory in literacy research. Comber (2014) states that when teachers support students as researchers and incorporate daily participation and texts with discussions, even young children can take agency and produce texts questioning the status quo. Students combine semiotic resources to understand and argue for fairness and commit to access understandings and capabilities. Comber noted that teachers have significant responsibilities in supporting students in poverty, which can be achieved in the context of challenges and opportunities in the local environment (p.6).

Comber (2014) also highlighted students' success stories using critical literacy education. In one example, in considering a new school building design, all students worked hard towards creating a thriving school community using critical literacy. Students who were English Language Learners (ELL) or third language users acted like journalists by conducting interviews,

investigating the changes occurring in their education place, preparing a list of questions, planning, organizing, and using audio recordings. Teachers regarded students as co-researchers in the critical literacy project. Teachers supported their students to become critical readers, writers, and researchers. Teachers and students worked on issues that mattered to them and the community and, through collaboration, met curriculum and learning goals (p. 6).

Through the literacy projects, Comber prompted readers to understand the benefits of critical literacies for young children's literacy development and their knowledge enhancement through literacy activities of today's concerned/aware citizens of the world.

According to Comber (2001), one of the best ways to approach critical literacy is, to begin with multiple sources and opposing views to interrogate their construction by specific individuals (p. 54). Comber and Simpson (2001) outlined the five overlapping components/core principles of critical literacy: (1) mobilizing learners as social actors with knowledge and skills to disrupt the mainstream, (2) conducting a research/analysis/interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue, (3) identifying issues focused on socio political realities in the context of the lives of the learners, (4) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom, and (5) reflecting upon actions taken and creating viewpoints for future projects.

Commenting on Comber and Simpson (2001), Norris et al. (2012) noted the following about critical literacy, "All forms of communication are social and political acts that can be used to influence people and can lead to social change" (p. 59). Comber (2016) claimed that education's nature and democratic potential are central to critical pedagogy approaches.

Comber (2006, 2013. p.58) and Comber et.al. (2019) argue that teachers play a significant role in providing a critical literacy repertoire of practices of analysis and interrogation

in schools. Comber et al. (2019) and Comber (2016) suggests that space and place with literacy studies are essential and create opportunities for designing and enacting a culturally inclusive curriculum to support the demands of diverse students. Spatial, place-conscious, and socio-material analysis provide teachers with excellent resources to work on student questions and issues across the curriculum.

Comber (2016) recommended finding ways to engage with multi-modalities and new technologies to lend credence to place-based pedagogies (Comber, 2016; Comber & Nixon, 2014). According to Comber (2014), there is no correct or universal model of critical literacy. However, teachers and students develop tools, models, philosophies, and attitudes of critical literacy in everyday classroom interactions and through life challenges.

3.7.2 Discussion: Convergence of Educators/Philosophers in Young Children's Critical Thinking

While adopting a critical literacy perspective in the ECE curriculum is uncommon and challenging, some researchers have conducted studies and projects within critical literacy. Nevertheless, the literature is limited. Most research on critical literacy occurs in secondary and high school levels than in primary schools (upper- grades). Scholars like Comber (2007, 2014), Kuby (2013), and Souto-Manning (2014), and Vasquez (2014) agreed that it is challenging to practice critical literacy at the early childhood level and in schools due to power, politics, and socioeconomic factors. The literature on play and imagination in ECE can promote an understanding of social justice for very young children using picture books as tools. Young children's imagination through play activities may support their creativity/critical thinking skills, allow them to see the real world, and understand its issues, including social justice and anti-racism, developing them as socially just individuals for society.

Comber, Vasquez, and Souto-Manning are the primary contemporary early childhood critical literacy scholars. These authors contributed to early childhood critical literacy through projects, research, curriculum planning, and written texts. As creators and developers of critical pedagogy and youth and adult literacy, Freire and Giroux also contributed to early childhood critical literacy education with theories and approaches for guiding young children and their teachers to benefit from literacy activities focused on democracy/equal opportunities and liberation through words: (Bishop, 2014; Comber, 2016; Dyson and Genishi, 2009; Freire, 1970, 1971; Giroux, 1993, 1996; Hagood, 2002; Harmon, 1975; Janks and Comber, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lysaker and Miller, 2012; McDaniel, 2004; Vasquez, 2019; Wells, 2009). Many other researchers have elaborated the importance of what Bakhtin called dialogic thinking and “dialogic circles.” Vygotsky’s thinking about the imagination of young children and scaffolding within a “Zone of Proximal Development” supports students' critical thinking, creativity development, and finding solutions to real-life problems.

The scholarship of Vasquez, Comber, and Souto-Manning serves as ideals that are beneficial in imagining critical literacy in early childhood classrooms. Comber focused on “place-based pedagogy and conscious space” for young children and emphasized looking at “space” with a critical eye in early childhood classrooms. Vasquez’s EC critical literacy classroom framework and Souto-Manning’s focus on ELL and marginalized students in EC classrooms offer recommendations for reconceptualizing teaching strategies for young children. This literature review suggests that children's play and imagination skills in ECE promote critical literacy, critical thinking skills, tolerance, empathy, cultural competence, higher-order cognitive skills, empowerment, and awareness of social justice. These are facets of four important social justice principles: identity, diversity, justice, and action.

3.8 Conclusion

This literature review showed an opening for using children's literature as a source for imaginative play around social justice and critical literacy principles.

3.8.1 Picture Books and Their Contribution to Social Justice Curriculum

Husband (2019) asserts that student populations are more diverse than ever before in U.S.A schools. Teachers are hesitant to teach children about race and race issues. Multicultural picture books should be used to spread awareness of racial justice among young children instead of following colorblind approaches to race and racism in their classrooms. The author recommends multiple ways of teaching young children about racism and race using multicultural picture books in schools. Husband (2019) claims that many multicultural picture books were written by U.S authors who share the same cultural and racial identity as the book characters. There are also books written by non-U.S. authors, too. These books are also written by people who do not actually share the same cultural/racial identity, yet have a deep understanding of the experiences, histories, and cultures of diverse groups in society. There are multiple benefits of these multicultural books for young children. They promote racial justice in the classroom and serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors for children (Sims-Bishop, 1990). Young children see that their culture is appreciated and welcomed in their classrooms. Students from dominant cultures can learn about the experiences of people who have different racial identities in the classroom and the broader society. The following books are categorized into four themes following the social justice principles. I reveal the names of the books I used in my classroom observations. These books belonged to the school of education. They were shared with me by my adviser Professor Hassett from the Gomez-Hassett Racial Equity Initiative. It was me who arranged the picture-books in the classroom library, not teachers of the classroom. While I was

interacting with children, I used these books to observe their meaning-making of the stories. Some of the times children were imaginative but there were times that a few did not participate in book reading activities and preferred other activities such as playing with puzzles or kitchen toys in the kitchen. **1. Identity Picture Books:** Barnes (2017) “*Crown*,” Bogan (2021) “*Where is Rodney?*,” Brown (2011) “*Marisol McDonald does not match!*,” Bruchac (1997) “*Thirteen Moons on Turtle’s Back: A Native American Year of Moons*,” Byers (2018) “*I am enough*,” Cherry (2019) “*Hair love*,” Curry (2019) “*Parker looks up*,” Elliot (2016) “*Milo’s Museum*,” Love (2018) “*Julian is a mermaid*,” Mallard (2019) “*Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story*,” Mendez (2019) “*Where are you from?*,” Muhammed (2019) “*The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family*,” Myers (2009) “*Looking Like Me*,” Nyong’o (2019) “*Sulwe*,” Perry (2016) “*Skin Like Me*,” Phi (2017) “*A Different Pond*,” Robinson (2020) “*You Matter*,” Scotto (2018) “*Jerome By Heart*,” and Sima (2017) “*Not Quite Narwhal*”. **2. Diversity Picture Books:** Ada (2004) “*I Love Saturdays Y Domingos*,” Barnett (2012) “*Extra Yarn*,” Boelts (2018) “*A Bike like Sergio’s*,” Ewald (2002) “*The Best Part of Me: Children talk about their bodies in Pictures and Words*,” Gomi (2018) “*I really want to see you, Grandma*,” Lennon (2019) “*With a little help from my friends*,” Ludwig (2013) “*The Invisible Boy*,” McGhee (2017) “*Come with Me*,” Mr. Mault’s Class (2018) “*The Best Part of Me*,” O’Leary (2016) “*A Family is A Family is A Family*,” Olsen (2016) “*Our Class is a family*,” Smith (2003) “*I am America: Rise and Shine*,” Sotomayor (2019) “*Just Ask!: Be Different, Be You, Be Brave*,” Woodson (2012) “*Each Kindness*,” Woodson (2018) “*The Day You Begin*,” and Yamada (2018) “*What Do You Do With A Chance?*”. **3. Justice Picture Books:** Sotomayor (2019) “*Just Ask! Be Different*,” Mendez (2019) “*Where are you from?*” Muhammed (2019) “*The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family*,” Willems (2013) “*A big guy took my ball*” and Willems (2011) “*Should I share my ice-*

cream.” **4. Advocacy Picture Books:** Barnett (2012)” *Extra Yarn*,” Olsen (2016)” *Our Class is a family*,” Woodson (2018)” *The Day You Begin*,” Woodson (2012)” *Each Kindness*,” Ludwig (2013)” *The Invisible Boy*,” Perry (2016)” *Skin Like Me*,” Mendez (2019)” *Where are you from?*”, and Muhammed (2019)” *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family*”.

CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss my research question, case study research, case overview and site selection, participant selection and site visits, human subjects safeguarding and the data collection methods and procedures of my research study.

4.1.1 Proposed Research Question

Given the variance among definitions and theories regarding how play and imagination promote social justice principles, the following proposed research question examines ideas about play and imagination consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, the social justice principles of Ladson-Billings and Derman-Sparks, and the critical literacy framework of Vasquez. Through my dissertation research, I seek to advance discussions about how the intersection of these concepts can better promote connections between scholarship and practice. The following research question guides this research:

- How does literature on play and imagination in early childhood promote an understanding of social justice education for very young children?

4.2 Case Study Research

Conducting this research as a qualitative study will allow me to understand the phenomenon of play and how children perform literacy (Lysaker & Miller, 2012). I aim to understand how children make sense of their play and interactions with picture books from their perspective, spaces, language, and the sociocultural contexts that guide their actions. Case study methodology will help me tell the complex stories of children's lived literacy experiences in the

guidance of social justice principles as part of play activities, reading, and listening to picture books with social justice themes.

In this research, I propose observing children's free play and documenting how this kind of play influences their text reading and listening by using their imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills to promote social justice principles. Hassett and Schieble (2007) claimed that images and printed text work together in multiple ways. Readers extend three cueing systems, semantic, graphophonic, and syntactic, to negotiate multiple levels of meaning in a visual text. The texts, with images, graphics, and placement of the print, help change the sociocultural plane so that readers make sense of the text (p. 63).

Case study methodology helps me better tell the complex stories of children's lived literate experiences and observe their real-world perceptions of picture book stories. Spencer (2002) described how children use imagination skills to make sense of texts in picture books and weave stories with their other life experiences. Callow (2017) also argued for the importance of selecting books to explore themes of cultural diversity in children's lives. Callow explained that the texts in picture books awaken empathy and awareness of being marginalized (p.135). Pelittari (2016) argued five critical uses of imagination within literacy instruction: Comprehension of the text, engaging in the world depicted through the text, making sense of narrative and descriptive texts, learning about self/others, and enhancing reading. Imagination is essential to meaningful reading. Pantaleo (2017) claimed the importance of visual art and design in picture books and how children make meaning of these using their art and critical thinking skills (Soundy and Drucker, 2010). Garcia-Gonzalez, Veliz, and Matus (2020) conducted a research study to see the effects of arts-based approaches and their intervention in a school with students and teachers to decrease xenophobia and issues of racism in Santiago, Chile. A picture book promotes tolerance

and friendliness to others (Papen and Peach, 2021). The authors argued that art-based pedagogies provide opportunities to work against racist feelings and discussions and act for change.

Lysaker (2012) and Lysaker and Sedberry (2015) claimed that picture books could promote empathic understanding, raise cultural sensitivity, and help children explore others' feelings and situations. This is important if we aim to work for social justice in classrooms. Picture book retellings are contexts for exploring personal meanings of race and culture. Children comprehend the texts, analyze them, and enhance their critical thinking skills. Finally, they become activists or try advocacy for social injustices. Retellings, discussions, and follow-up activities help promote critical literacy skills and create socially just school environments. Empathy and social imagination develop through picture book retellings, discussions, and related activities (p.110-111). One of the scholars claimed the role of teacher scaffolding in emergent literacy teaching/learning. Wells-Rowe (2010) emphasized the value of teacher support in early literacy for young children as a part of social practice. Teacher and student interactions are very crucial for student learning.

There are several definitions of a case study as a research strategy. Stake (1995) defined case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within critical circumstances” (p. xi). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) defined a case study as “a research study to enhance our understanding of contexts, communities, and individuals in academic research (p.3).” A case study includes an in-depth or detailed multifaceted examination of a specific case/or a complex issue within a real-world context. The general purpose of a case study is to explain an individual situation, which is a case, identify the critical points of the case, and analyze the case using relevant theoretical concepts from an individual's area of research (p.2-5).

There are also different kinds of case studies—Merriam (1998) depicted case studies as ethnographic, historical, psychological, and sociological. Ethnographic case studies examine how individuals behave in social settings—for instance, the culture within the classroom. Historical case studies look for evidence to grasp a context over time—for example, establishing and developing a private school. Psychological case studies often investigate the emotions of individuals and how these emotions influence their behaviors—for example, Piaget's research about children's cognitive developmental stages. Finally, sociological case studies focus on social relations, contexts, and constructs and how these influence children living in various socioeconomic differences and attend a particular school.

Stake (1995) also identified intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies. Intrinsic case studies examine the researcher's interest and inquiries about a research topic. Instrumental case studies examine a person/an organization, or a specific group to develop a perception of a particular issue. With collective case studies, the researcher investigates the similarities and differences in multiple cases to understand a concept.

4.2.1 Instrumental Case Study Research

The proposed case study approach combines aspects of all ethnographic, intrinsic, and instrumental case studies. I focus on how young children create a socially just world through reading and imagining texts in picture books using their critical literacy skills. I also focus on children and observe how they develop social justice perceptions and make meaning related to texts in picture books.

This study will contribute to the research literature about the intersection of critical literacy, social justice/imagination, and picture books. There is limited research on young children in the confluence of all three concepts, including theories and approaches. The primary

sources of data include an in-depth description of the environment, including picture books and types of texts used; direct observations by assessing children's activities during play, reading, and writing for negotiation (teacher-directed and child-directed) and processes (playing, talking, collaboration, and creation); observational field notes; memos of children during play and literacy activities; semi-structured interviews and informal talk with both teachers and children; as well as children's artwork and productions. I introduced picture books with social justice themes into the classroom for reading and discussion purposes. These books encompass various social justice themes, including identity, advocacy, diversity, and justice, and you can find a comprehensive list of these books in the Appendix section.

4.2.2 Case Overview and Site selection

School Site: The school site I will research is a campus childcare program in Madison, Wisconsin: Awena School. I chose this campus school because of my previous teaching experiences in this school and familiarity with a few teachers and administrators. This campus school enrolls international students from around the world.

My observations include how teachers and students co-plan curriculum and select books for children's reading and understanding. Finally, as a researcher, I analyze my observations drawing on inductive and deductive themes (Graue & Walsh, 1998), searching first for inductive themes that emerge from the data across observations and second, deductively, applying those themes which draw on early childhood critical literacy.

4.2.3 Participant Selection and Site Visits

The number of subjects that will be recruited at the University Site for which UW Madison is serving is 37 students and teachers from two classrooms. Inclusion criteria: The age group: 2-5-year-old children in two different classrooms in a campus childcare center in

Madison, Wisconsin. In addition to the students, other participants in this research are teachers who volunteered to participate in this research study. Participants' gender, ethnic background, and health status were not considered. Any children participants (age range 2 to 5 years old) are students in the participating teacher's classroom who have parental consent, and children who have volunteered and provided oral assent to participate in this research study. Site visits occurred weekly Monday through Friday from 7:30 am to 11 am in November and December, and 2-3 days a week from 7:30 am to 11 am January through February, 2022-2023.

Study recruitment: Participation was voluntary, and the study team directly recruited subjects. The study team recruited adult participants (teachers) in person/face to face/by mail. The study team will recruit minor participants by sending home a message to the parents explaining the research study, including an attached consent form with the student's "backpack mail" and e-mail message. Totally, 37 teachers and children will be recruited in this study. As the researcher of this study, I will ask for access to the site (childcare center) from the center's director. I will complete the consent forms. I will distribute the parent consent forms to the teachers of the classrooms after the access is approved. I will collect the consent forms from the two classrooms. Once parents have provided consent, an oral assent will be read to each child about the study. The information will be given to the teachers, students, and parents who need extra information about the study. I will visit the classrooms to get to know the students and the teachers. I will meet with the children to describe what I plan to do in the classroom as part of my research process. Some of the families and all teachers and administrators might know the researcher personally and should feel comfortable allowing their children to participate or choosing to not participate. Those who are interested will be chosen for the study until we have reached 37 children and teachers, or at least enough children who, after initial data analysis, have

provided us with a data set rich enough to have reached saturation. Teachers who have volunteered to participate in this study will be interviewed regarding student meaning-making of picture books and play activities. Teachers will participate in lesson plan activities with the students and the participant researcher.

4.2.4 Human Subjects Safeguarding

Young children between 2-5 years old will be included in this research study since this study will be conducted in two different classrooms of an early childhood school. I confirm that no child in a potential participating teacher's classroom would be 6 years old or older during the study. In addition, including children in this study is crucial to understanding children's literacy performances and their perspectives of play as they engage in the meaning-making of picture books. There is a parental consent form and a student assent process. Children with parental consent and child-verbal approval (assent) will be interviewed using semi-structured questions to obtain insight into their thinking, imagination, and picture book usage as they play. Participating in this research will minimize potential risks to students' rights. I follow the safety measures of the IRB to protect children's identities, such as using pseudonyms for all people, places, and other identifiable things and no audio and videotape recordings will be used in this study. Original information gathered from this research can only be accessed by the researcher and the PI and will not be released for any purpose or to anyone.

4.3 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

I use multiple tools to deductively analyze these data, including Vasquez's (2014) critical literacy framework for implementing and assessing critical literacy. Vasquez's framework highlights the implementation of critical literacy within an early childhood curriculum. First, as a

researcher, I will follow Vasquez's essential understanding of literacy and observe children's readiness to engage in critical literacy and teacher-child as a team planning activities.

Stage 1: Understanding the seven features of critical literacy: Validation of critical literacy, motivation, participation, children's voice, social justice, and equality, environment, transformation through reflection, and power dynamics. I will observe if teachers and students know CL practice in the classroom. Are they aware of social issues around them? Are they ready to discuss them? Are they supportive of CL practices? Are they motivated and willing to participate in conversations/dialogues? Are they aware of social justice issues? Are they reflecting on each other's opinions? How do the power dynamics work in the classroom? Is this power dynamic supportive of classroom talk and dialogues?

Stage 2: Assessment of readiness for critical literacy: Some considerations (teacher, children, environment, social issues within local community, curriculum). I will assess CL readiness in the classroom regarding teachers, children, community, and curriculum.

Stage 3: Planning and negotiation: Some considerations (Children's involvement, curriculum requirements, resources, environment, children's interest, diversity). Do teachers have planning time with their students and with co-workers? Do teachers follow the curriculum requirements? Are these requirements an obstacle to critical literacy practices? Are there enough resources available? Are children interested in CL? Is the student population and teacher population diverse? Is the classroom setting suitable for CL practices?

Stage 4: Critical literacy in action: Implement all seven critical literacy features within the curriculum, reflection, evaluation of learning activities, and seven critical literacy elements (teacher and children). Is it possible to implement all seven CL features? What are the obstacles? What stage is impossible to practice? How do the students reflect on each other/teachers related

to social issues in their lives using picture books and play activities? How do the teachers evaluate learning activities?

Stage 5: Assessment of critical literacy in action: Using the seven features, validating critical literacy, motivation, participation, children's voice, social justice, and equality, environment, transformation through reflection, and power dynamics. Assess all the features and document CL in action.

I want to draw on culturally relevant pedagogy and an anti-bias curriculum for social justice theories. I will observe student and teacher interactions and note if these interactions reflect CRT principles and anti-bias education program principles. I will observe interactions, classroom settings, curriculum programs, teacher professionalism, and behavior management techniques. Additionally, I want to consider Vygotsky's ZPD and scaffolding theories for imagination through picture books. I want to use ZPD to understand how teachers' support and scaffolding take their students to a higher level of their learning and how children may use the knowledge from a book to construct something new.

Additionally, I incorporate Bakhtin's "ideological becoming," dialogue, and classroom talk, which describes how people take the voices (authoritative discourse) of others and make them part of their vocabulary. This research study will observe and document student-student and student-teacher conversations about social interactions and classroom instruction. I will document how students make meaning of picture books and communicate with each other about the books, story theme, plot, characters of the story, and more. I will also observe how students' meaning-making with their teachers and peers intersect and discuss how this comprehensive and relational event creates a new understanding of picture books related to social justice themes.

My research study questions are as follows:

1. How do children make meaning of different texts related to social justice issues?
2. How do children tell their real-life experiences based on what they read and heard from the texts?
3. How do children question their real-life experiences?
4. How does the sociocultural context influence a classroom environment, affect children's critical literacy skills, and shape their literate lives?

Spencer (2003) argued the role of “poetic imagination” in child development. “Play, narrative stories, and poems are ways by which children’s imagination grows together with their increasing grasp on the world and their more general paradigms of advanced thinking (p.111)”. Mathis (2016) suggested that our imagination becomes assimilated through play. I will observe children practice language and actions in their imaginative play and explore how they learn to reshape their lives through imagination in the classroom setting. Mathis (2016) also argued that children place themselves in diverse imaginary roles by listening, reading pictures; creatively developing new ideas, engaging in new insights, and taking on new occupations, hobbies, and relationships. Chaplin (1982) claimed that readers’ feelings and attitudes are awake in the imagination (p.151). I want to observe how children make meaning of all these actions and turn them into new insights using their play and imagination skills with picture books in promoting their understanding of social justice themes and events regarding real life.

In conclusion, the research from this study might contribute to a new consideration and integrated understanding of play/imagination/social justice/critical literacy concepts in early childhood settings. This will allow young children to engage with "picture books" as valuable curriculum materials and provide an understanding of the sociocultural interactions that occur as children interact with the books, teachers, and peers in literate early childhood settings. As a

researcher, I expect these interactions to create beneficial critical literacy and social justice environments for young children. Without critical thinking skills and critiquing social issues and the world around us, we cannot create social change and a socially just world for everyone. Literacy is the tool to make this happen (Chaplin, 2016; Freire, 1973, 1996; Giroux, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McLaren, 1999). Thus, the implications of this study might enhance young children's early literacy skills and support their critical literacy learning, help children understand social issues related to texts they read, encourage social interactions, and integrate picture books into early childhood classrooms.

4.3.1 Participant Observation

Interactions/Observations with study participants will be conducted in the classroom in front of the teachers and the children. No video recording/photographing will be done in the regular classroom, but interviews will be conducted in a space agreed upon by the administrator or classroom teacher where the participant can control their privacy. Data collection will be limited to the amount required to achieve the study's goals. If the participant provides unnecessary personal and sensitive information, it will be removed from the research record immediately. All communications regarding the research activities will have consented with the research participants, and privacy will be maintained. Protection of the personal and private information of the participants is essential for this research. Research will be conducted with students at their childcare center as a normal part of a regular school day. All communications regarding research activities will either be directly with the consented participant and from a location where privacy can be maintained or be general enough to protect the personal/private information of the participant.

4.3.2 Field Notes

The researcher will take notes using a pen and a notepad.

4.3.3 Digital Photographs

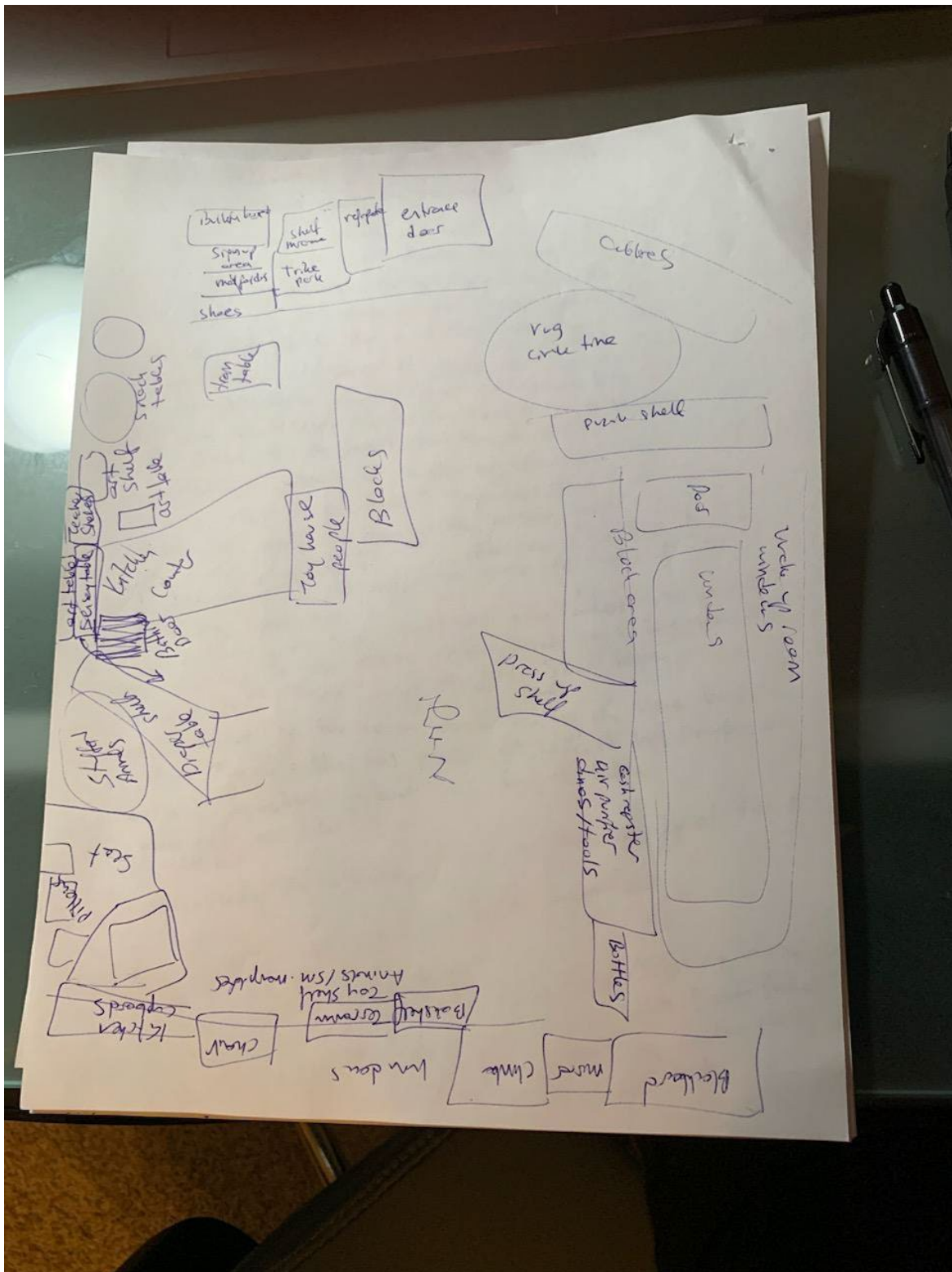
The camera will be used to take classroom pictures and if there are student pictures, their faces will be blocked from the picture with a black color marker. The pictures will be removed immediately from the camera and will not be stored.

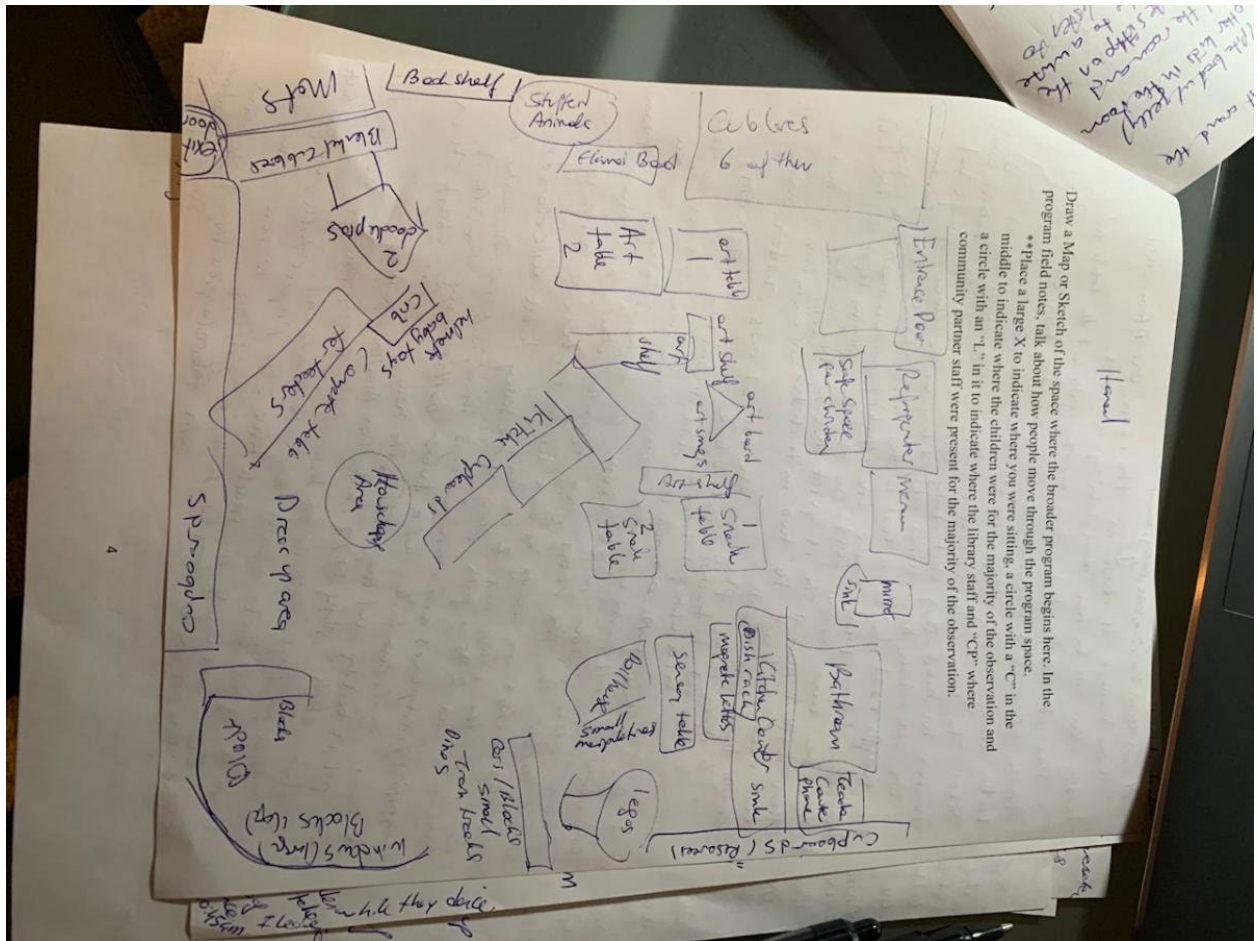
4.3.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviewing: Adult participants will not be identified by name during the interviews if they choose. A pseudonym will be used if adult participants do not wish to use their real names. The name of the school will not be used for presentations, during conferences, seminars, professional meetings, peer publications, and dissertations; therefore, there is no probability the teacher will be identifiable. Participants may choose not to respond to the questions or leave the study at any time. During the interviews, if a participant or a participant reveals any personal, sensitive, or identifiable information about a third party or reveals highly personal or sensitive information about themselves during an interview, that information will be deleted and not included in notes, transcripts, or publications. Interviews with consenting adults will be handwritten and not audio recorded at all. Semi-structured interviews with children with parental consent and oral assent will occur during non-instructional times in a space agreed upon by the administrator or classroom teacher. If Children Become Upset: There will always be two other teachers in the classroom that a child who is upset may go to. The other teacher can begin new and different activities with any child who wishes to stop participation. If Adults Become Upset: If an adult gets upset during the interview s/he can leave the interview process anytime.

4.3.5 Classroom Mappings

I drew a map of both classrooms and took pictures of the rooms.







Pictures of Harvest and Nile Rooms

4.3.6 Artifacts

Student artworks are examples of the artifacts.



A student collage



Bingo Marker Art



A painting



Glue Activity with foam shapes



Making cards for friends

4.4 Data Analysis Categories and Method

After each visit to the school site, I diligently reviewed my collected data in search of emerging themes. My research question remained at the forefront of my analysis: "How do young children comprehend and express social justice themes within the context of literacy practices, imagination, and play in preschool classrooms (ages 2-5 years)?" To gain deeper insights into young children's grasp of social justice themes in the context of literacy practices, imagination, and play, I meticulously examined my field notes, interview transcripts, and other pertinent data. As I continued my analysis of observational data, I honed in on coding for evidence of literacy engagement through children's interactions with picture books, play activities, and imaginative play scenarios. To ensure consistency and precision in my analysis, I employed the following definitions as guiding principles:

4.4.1 Picture Book Reading

To gain a deeper insight into the intricate interplay of play, imagination, and picture book reading within the context of social justice themes in early childhood classrooms, it is imperative to scrutinize the pedagogical methods and classroom settings that either foster or inhibit

children's distinctive interpretations of picture books and playtime. It was I who meticulously organized the picture books in the classroom library, as opposed to the classroom teachers. In my capacity, I used these books as a tool for observing how children constructed meaning from the narratives.

During these interactions, it became evident that some children exhibited remarkable imaginative engagement, whereas others occasionally abstained from book-reading activities, instead opting for alternative pastimes such as puzzles or role-playing with kitchen toys. Within this dissertation, you will encounter diverse educators, each embracing their unique teaching approaches. The variance among teachers, including myself as a former preschool teacher, is entirely natural.

Throughout my interactions with students, I focused on discerning how they interacted with the books, as well as how other teachers and peers within the classroom employed these literary resources. It is crucial to acknowledge that individual children may have varying preferences when it comes to books, and this diversity extends to teachers as well.

Notably, some educators may approach children with a "deficit" perspective. In this dissertation, you will witness instances where children's imaginative capacities ebb and flow. My observations of these occurrences consistently center on the children's potential to engage with social justice themes and the underlying thought processes that drive their engagement. It is only by affording children the opportunity to explore these books in-depth, as I have advocated, that we can truly delve into their interpretations.

I aim to convey to the reader that within the pages of this dissertation, they will encounter a diverse spectrum of educators, books, and student interactions related to social justice-themed literature during free play, small group, and large group activities.

Picture books can help children develop literacy skills such as understanding what the text says, vocabulary, and fluency. Picture book reading is the activity of reading and looking at books with pictures and text. The illustrations and the text work together to tell the story. Bakhtin (1981) argued that a dialogic perspective is essential for understanding aspects of reading. According to Bakhtin, when an individual reads an author's ideas and feels the story characters' feelings/thoughts and self-voice, a conversation occurs between the characters, the reader, and the author. The reader engages with comprehensive and relational events during the reading process, and a dialogic exchange occurs. Bakhtin (1981) claimed that all thinking is related to dialogue. When Bertha was reading *The Proudest Blue* or the other books, they made her feel and see her cultural background in the story characters' feelings, thoughts, and self-voice. She engaged with comprehensive and relational events during the reading process, and a dialogic exchange occurred between the authors and herself. She was able to see her cultural background in this story, which made her excited and happy. She wanted to share this reading experience with her teachers so that they knew what she felt and thought. After reading this story, she became another individual who was proud of herself and her background, such as her mother also wearing the same head covering as the story character in the picture book. She made the meaning of this social justice-related "identity and diversity" book. She connected this book to her background like Mary who was 3.5 years old in Harvest room. Similar feelings occurred, but little differences with this student when we read *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns* by Hena Khan. Mary had a dialogic talk with me as a teacher/participant researcher. At the same time, we read the book together and made meaning of what we read and saw in the illustrations of this picture book which informed us about the "Muslim religion." We both exchanged information

while discussing the text and trying to make meaning of the author's purpose in writing this text for young children.

Lysaker and Miller (2012) describe Vygotsky's theory on the dialogic exchange between the voices of the self and the text. They noted how these two are internalized within the internal cognitive space. Bakhtin's claim on an individual's talk in dialogue reflects the author's adaptation to reality. We talked about the author's purposes, including thinking about Muslim prayer spaces such as mosques as being part of the natural world, the importance of women covering their hair, traditional tea drinking as part of the culture, the importance of praying to God to ask things from God and the role of five times for daily prayer in this religion.

The authors' purpose is to inform young children who have the same religion or different ones about the Muslim religion rules so that people, in general, do not have negative stereotyping about this religion. An internalization of conversation with others actively builds upon a reader's perspective of physical and social reality. Our conversations with Mary and exchange of knowledge also inform us about the author's goals in writing this text and illuminate this religion for us both. We both have the same religion but differing levels of trust in this religion. As a participant researcher, I am a secular individual from a secular family background. I still respect my research participants and their views about the same religion. I also know I should not try to change what they believe or follow since I need to respect her religious background.

Furthermore, as Bakhtin mentioned, the new perspectives collected from others, in this case from student Mary, result in a new multifaceted consciousness (before reading the text vs. after reading the text) and create a new social resource for the future. A new multifaceted consciousness is especially true with fiction, which fosters critical thinking and supports children's imagination skills (Lysaker and Miller, 2012). Although Bakhtin, who is a literary

theorist, is rarely applied to early childhood education, I will be using here how dialogic ways of bringing students talking together supports their critical thinking skills. In this excerpt, Mary could imagine her family background and religious standing in her own words: “If you pray, Allah gives you a baby. Allah likes you to pray. My grandpa drinks tea like this. This is my mom (pointing at the woman with a headscarf in the picture).”

As teachers, we all have stories to tell and share with others. We experience stories differently. Our meaning-making of these stories shapes our interpretations of these stories. Bringing awareness of our own and our students' identities to the classroom is significant to students' lives. Our experiences and student experiences shape our educational decisions and interactions with our students (Kuby, 2013, p.22). Kuby (2013) mentioned in her *book Critical literacy in the early childhood classroom* that Goodson (1998) describes over time our self-changes, and we do not embody a fixed entity. Our perceptions and the way we also think change.

Specifically, it is easy to see all these changes in both classrooms in Awena School. When I mentioned my study to the teachers and parents, they did not seem to understand the whole point of doing it and could even think this was just "a study" like the others conducted before. One parent recommended that I not conduct this study in these classrooms. The idea behind her assertion was that young children would not understand or talk about identity, diversity, justice, and advocacy, which are social justice principles. She mentioned that children do not understand social justice, and I waste my time at Awena School. She also added that the young children could barely talk and express their feelings and needs. I did not try to defend that I disagreed with her. I listened to her ideas respectfully and preferred to stay quiet and not have a conflict with her since I was collecting parent signatures for the parent consent forms.

Piaget's opinion that “young children cannot think critically until the age of 7-11” is due to the child's egocentric thinking until seven years. Children at this age will not use abstract thinking. According to Piaget, logical thinking starts to develop at this “concrete operational stage. The child can only apply logical thinking to physical objects ([Piaget Theory: Childhood cognitive developmental stages \(cognifit.com\)](#)). Conventionally, critical literacy and social justice issues are thought of for older students, most likely because instrumental early childhood scholars, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, held ethnocentric and universalist theories of early childhood learning and development (Matusov & Hayes, 2000).

My analysis delved into the realms of play, the engagement of picture book reading, and the role of children's imaginative play in constructing meaning from these books. In crafting lesson plan activities, I focused on integrating picture book reading experiences. These books revolved around four central themes: identity, justice, advocacy, and diversity. My intention was not to impose a specific set of books upon the children but rather to provide them with choices. To achieve this, I made use of both the books available on the classroom shelves and those I introduced. Collaborating closely with classroom teachers, I was able to access their library books with social justice themes, ensuring a diverse selection of literature in the classroom to cater to the children's varied interests. I developed lesson plans that aligned with the children's interests, focusing on activities involving picture book reading and play, which are discussed in this dissertation. Throughout this process, I closely observed and documented how children utilized their language skills, paying particular attention to the outcomes or creations generated by the children during these activities.

4.4.2 Play

Dyson and Genishi (2009) identified language as a child's play; Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) characterized the play as “intrinsic” and “self-initiated”: the primary way children learn about their world using their experiences. Souto-Manning (2016) identified “play” as “expanding knowledge of the world and a literacy facilitator” (p. 67). Lynch, Pike, and Beckett (2017) explained that play is not only a childish or trivial pursuit. It helps us understand our existence's meaning and contributes to child development (p.18). I actively engaged in play activities alongside the children and their teachers in both classrooms. These activities encompassed various forms, including pretend, symbolic, constructive, and rough-and-tumble. The children engaged in solitary, parallel, cooperative, and onlooker play activities. After reading the books, the children engaged in discussions about the story. Subsequently, they participated in activities directly tied to the narrative I observed. Importantly, it was at the children's discretion whether or not to continue with these activities related to picture books. The choice was either initiated by me as a teacher-researcher or offered by the children themselves, ensuring a flexible approach to book-related reading and play.

4.4.3 Imagination

Vygotsky explained “imagination” as the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play. For example, if a child is playing the role of a mother, play is constructed in such a way that there are imaginary situations. Imagination is a new psychological process for the child; it is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Imagination arises from action. A child creates an imaginary situation in play (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 93 & 95). Throughout my observations in both classrooms,

children engaged in discussions about their identities as we read books and explored the storylines together. These narratives seamlessly extended into our play activities, where we collectively constructed meaning. The children leveraged their imaginative abilities to convey insights into their identities and cultural backgrounds, serving as valuable inputs for me as a researcher and teacher. Most of these conversations revolved around their families, friends, pets, or reflections on elements within the picture books that resonated with their own lives.

4.4.4 Social Justice Education and Themes

Learning for Social Justice (1991) describes social justice education as redefining what it means to have educational equality. Social justice in education demands equity for all students but also allows space for student growth through diversity. Social justice promotes equal economic, employment, and educational opportunities in a nation where everyone feels safe and secure.

The fundamental principles of social justice are equality, equity, rights, and participation. Social justice is a normative concept centered on fairness and the principles of equality, equity, rights, and participation. While there is not complete consensus on the meaning and scope of the term, social justice is commonly associated with the creation of a just society, with the underlying assumption that justice implies human welfare through equal rights and sharing of benefits, fair treatment, recognition of cultural differences, and equitable access to resources and opportunities (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

A. EQUALITY: Fair access to goods and services is a fundamental principle of social justice. Based on the belief that all human beings are equal before God and the law, the notion of “fairness” as related to access is often linked with the notion of “equality” to imply that all people, regardless of their gender, race, age, class, language, religion, and occupation, are

entitled to benefit from public goods and resources. These include access to livelihood, capacities, education, information, health services, employment, and job opportunities. In democratic societies, the concept of equality also includes the political sphere, with effective decision-making processes in place to ensure an equal voice for all citizens (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

B. EQUITY: The principle of equity derives from the recognition that the concept of fairness as equal or uniform distribution is not always possible or implementable, mainly because of existing injustices that have prevented or reduced the ability of specific individuals or groups to gain equal access to public goods, resources and opportunities in the first place (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

C. RIGHTS: Rights as a critical principle of social justice can be divided into the following two sub-groups: (a) legal rights, which include inherited rights, and other lawful rights, such as the right to receive payment for one's jobs according to agreed terms; and (b) moral rights, which include people's fundamental human rights, liberties and such entitlements as the right of "giving people a say in affairs that concern them" and the right of certain groups to particular geographic territories. In socially just societies, even without legal guarantees, moral rights are protected by adequate procedures, norms, and rules, some of which are universally accepted, as is the case with human rights, for instance (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

D. PARTICIPATION: Participation in the context of social justice means involving people in decisions that govern their lives. This includes engaging them in deciding on the kind of public services needed in their areas and ensuring their full participation in political and cultural life (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

In my analysis, I thoroughly examined various social justice principles and theories to gain insights into how children interpret and internalize social justice themes. Based on my classroom observations, it became evident that children strongly emphasized themes related to diversity and identity instead of themes concerning advocacy and justice. Interviews with teachers and children revealed that younger children demonstrated a heightened awareness of their identities and the significance of diversity in their lives. In contrast, among the older age groups, children also discussed concepts such as "fairness/unfairness" and "advocating for each other" within the classroom context.

The data coding process encompassed both inductive and deductive approaches. Initially, open coding was employed to identify emerging themes. Subsequently, these codes underwent a process of reorganization and merging as connections between them became apparent. It is important to note that the codes that emerged from the data were not independent of the pre-existing theories outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. Instead, they were influenced by these theories. Ultimately, the themes derived from the existing literature and the data collected converged, creating a pivotal intersection point that facilitated the attainment of theoretical saturation.

4.4.5 Overarching Themes

In their work from 1998, Graue and Walsh outlined a research process consisting of three levels: the everyday observable, rich description, and theorized explanation, aiming to uncover the hidden and unobservable aspects of a phenomenon (p. 93). In the course of my research, I followed this framework, combining observations guided by the theories of play, imagination, social justice, and critical literacy with direct interactions with children to obtain comprehensive and detailed descriptions for my study. Managing multiple responsibilities during this process proved to be quite challenging.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) state that participant observation is considered the primary method of ethnography and involves direct observation and field notes, informal interviews, participation in group activities, prolonged immersion in a setting, identification, and review of relevant resources of information, including documents and artifacts, engagement in discussions, and so forth (p.19). In this ethnographic research, as a teacher-researcher, I spent significant time in this childcare setting with participants to decipher embedded cultural meanings and generate rich, descriptive data that emerged through in-depth relationships developed with my participants, young children from ages 2-5, and their teachers. I used multiple data sources needed for participant observation and wrote detailed observational field notes. My observation was theory-laden, so I interrogated and articulated the ways in which theory informs my research.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), ethnography primarily relies on participant observation, involving activities such as direct observation, the creation of field notes, informal interviews, active participation in group events, prolonged immersion within the studied environment, the identification and examination of pertinent information resources like documents and artifacts, as well as engaging in discussions, among other methods (p.19). In my capacity as a teacher-researcher within the context of this ethnographic research, I dedicated a significant amount of time immersing myself in the childcare setting, cultivating profound connections with the participants, including young children aged 2-5 and their teachers. I initiated a systematic process to make sense of the collected data, which comprised field notes, transcripts, and artifacts. Initially, I grouped the data into converging themes: play, imagination, social justice themes, and picture book reading.

Following this, I transitioned into the data analysis phase, utilizing these overarching themes as a foundation to generate open codes, often referred to as In Vivo codes. I meticulously applied codes to every discernible aspect of the data within this open coding process. As I delved deeper into the In Vivo codes, I recognized discernible patterns and significant variables directly related to my research question.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) noted that in an open coding process, data naturally condenses from the initial corpus into a more refined dataset that continues to undergo analysis. However, the specific research questions and chosen research approach significantly influence how this phase is approached (p.237). In the context of this research study, I honed down my data corpus using my research questions and the chosen case study approach.

These central variables, namely imagining, reading, and playing, were intricately intertwined with the real-life narratives of children in connection to the meaning-making of the fictional or nonfictional stories involving the study participants.

These core variables, namely imagining, reading, and playing, assumed a central role in guiding my research. To comprehensively analyze the data, I implemented a multi-step approach that involved multiple readings and various data analysis strategies such as coding, connecting strategies, and fostering dialogic engagement. Through this process, I identified and generated themes and categories.

To ensure the robustness and validity of my findings, I meticulously reviewed these themes and categories, conducting multiple readings and actively seeking alternative explanations. This rigorous approach to data analysis aligns with the principles outlined by Ravitch and Carl (2021, p. 255), where systematic interpretation of the data is maintained throughout the research process.

Additionally, I developed a model (Sociocultural Context: Factors that influence students' meaning-making of picture books), which is included in the Appendix section, to visually represent the data and enhance the clarity of my interpretations. This visual tool proved invaluable in synthesizing and conveying the significance of my findings.

I aimed to unearth the underlying cultural meanings through these relationships and gather detailed, descriptive data. I employed multiple data sources to facilitate participant observation and meticulously recorded comprehensive observational field notes. Importantly, theory-informed my observations, and I critically assessed and articulated how theory shaped my research approach. I employed a multifaceted approach in my research, drawing upon critical literacy, imagination, play, and social justice theories as analytical tools to examine how children constructed meaning from picture books during their play activities. This allowed me to gain insights into how children incorporated these books into their play and establish connections with the historical foundations and theories underpinning play, social justice, imagination, and early childhood literacy environments within preschools.

Within this framework, I identified specific lesson plans wherein the children's artistic creations and other outputs served as the outcomes of enriching literacy activities. While observing and interacting with the children, I remained attuned to their interactions with both teachers and peers, with these interactions being thoughtfully guided by the principles of social justice and sociocultural theories.

In addition to this, the influence of play theories shaped my observations and guided my interpretation of research data, shedding light on the reasons behind children's play and the ways in which they engage in play. Moreover, I emphasized the pivotal role of critical literacy and its

advantages for young children in my lesson planning and dialogues with the children regarding play activities and books.

Throughout my research, I also integrated Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding concepts, which provided valuable guidance during my observations and interactions with the children in my role as a teacher-researcher. I utilized Vasquez's critical literacy framework to assess children's and teachers' readiness to evaluate texts critically. This approach helped me discern whether the groups of children and teachers were prepared for critical text analysis. Subsequently, I worked to create meaningful critical literacy environments within both classrooms, ensuring the availability of appropriate materials for the lessons and fostering collaboration with teachers to facilitate this enriching educational experience. During the data analysis phase, I employed a method of constant comparison to meticulously assess the data for its appropriateness, significance, and potential for adjustments. This analytical process was significantly influenced by several theoretical frameworks, including sociocultural theory, critical literacy, social justice theories, as well as imagination and play theories.

These frameworks not only guided my analysis but also aided in pinpointing the specific argument I aimed to articulate within the data. The findings of this research study will serve to immerse me in leading ideas, enhance my understanding of the theoretical frameworks central to this study's focus, and facilitate a thorough analysis of the case I have examined.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Limitations

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I implemented several rigorous measures:

1. **Data Saturation:** Before concluding data collection and coding, I meticulously ensured that I had amassed sufficient data, achieving data saturation. This practice bolstered the overall validity of my data collection.

2. **Extended Time at the Research Site:** I dedicated more extensive time periods at the school site, allowing me to observe various aspects of the environment and participants at different times.
3. **Building Relationships:** I actively fostered connections with students, parents, teachers, and administrators, cultivating rapport and trust within the research community.
4. **Data Accuracy Verification:** A stringent process of data accuracy verification was executed, encompassing meticulous checks of the data collection steps to maintain precision and reliability.
5. **Validation Through Collaboration:** To further enhance the validity of my data collection and interpretations, I collaborated closely with teachers and students, seeking their insights and feedback. This collaborative approach ensured that my findings were rooted in validity and accuracy.

According to Carl and Ravitch (2021), achieving validity in research involves adopting systematic approaches to enhance the study's rigor and complexity (p.167). They propose that several criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, serve as standards to assess a study's validity. Credibility essentially aligns with the concept of internal validity.

As a qualitative researcher, I strived to develop valid approaches that harmonized with my study's research questions, objectives, and contextual intricacies. I diligently considered and navigated the various complexities that arose, particularly those involving intricate patterns that posed challenges in terms of explanation. In my role as a researcher, I aimed to draw meaningful inferences from instruments designed to measure precisely what they intended.

Carl and Ravitch (2021) contend that internal validity is intimately tied to research design, the researcher's instruments, and the collected data. Additionally, I implemented member checking, which involves participant validation, as a fundamental component of ensuring validity and credibility.

Moreover, I upheld the importance of data collection accuracy, ensuring that it accurately reflected student observations. The presentation of a rich, detailed description was integral to validating my research, particularly concerning my classroom observations. This approach was pivotal in bolstering the validity of the study.

Furthermore, my extended engagement within the research site supported the study's validity. I underscored the importance of addressing complexity within the research design and the real-life complexities inherent in a childcare center environment. My stringent criteria for site selection and sampling strategies contributed to an authentic representation of the context.

Ultimately, aligning my guiding research questions with the chosen research methods underscores the credibility and validity of my research study.

Transferability in qualitative research is closely tied to the specific context in which the research is conducted. Its aim is to generate descriptive and contextually relevant statements. Essentially, transferability assesses the extent to which the findings of a research study can be applied to other contexts, demonstrating the study's generalizability. It falls under the category of external validity, as defined by Ravitch and Carl (2021). The transferability aspect in my study is applicable because the insights gained from examining young children's interpretation of picture books regarding social justice themes within play activities can be applied to different educational settings.

Confirmability, on the other hand, pertains to the objectivity of the research. While qualitative researchers do not seek pure objectivity, the findings should still be capable of being confirmed. Utilizing a triangulation strategy, which involves using multiple sources or methods to corroborate findings, can enhance the objectivity of a study. In my particular research, I was the sole researcher. However, I was able to draw on such triangulation strategies as employing multiple methods to collect data: interviews, observations, and surveys.

Acknowledging and addressing personal biases and prejudices is crucial for researchers. As a conscientious researcher, I recognize my own biases and prejudices and consider them an essential aspect of my research. My positionality, which encompasses my various roles as a mother, teacher, researcher, daughter, parent, wife, immigrant, and Turkish-American citizen, played a significant role in how I interacted with both the children in the classroom and the teachers and students involved in the study.

Dependability, as defined by Ravitch and Carl (2021, p. 171), pertains to the consistency and reliability of the data. In essence, dependable data is synonymous with reliable data. In my study, I can confidently assert that my data is both dependable and reliable. This assertion is supported by a well-reasoned argument regarding my data collection methods, which align consistently with the study's objectives. The dependability of my data underscores its capacity to address my research questions effectively.

Furthermore, to bolster my research study's validity, I transcribed the data. Additionally, I conducted accurate observations and gained a thorough understanding of the pedagogical practices, the school environment, and the children's literacy-play performance, all within the scope of the collected data.

I acknowledge that the results of this study are not entirely devoid of subjectivity. As a participant researcher-teacher, my personal beliefs about early childhood literacy education and play undoubtedly shaped my interactions with the study participants and influenced my interpretation of the data and analysis. It's worth noting that various theoretical frameworks, such as play theory, sociocultural theory, social justice theories, and critical literacy theories, also significantly impacted how I interpreted the data, contributing to the richness and depth of the analysis.

This study has certain limitations, primarily stemming from my subjectivity, which involved the incorporation of my personal beliefs about early literacy experiences and the role of play. It's essential to acknowledge that the results reported in this research were not entirely devoid of subjectivity. Additionally, my interpretations of the data were influenced to a degree by theories related to social justice, critical literacy, play, and imagination.

Furthermore, the scope of this study was confined to the observations of five teachers and their respective classroom practices. The experiences, pedagogical approaches, knowledge, teaching techniques, and classroom cultures observed in this limited context cannot be readily extrapolated to a broader population. It's important to note that this study was conducted exclusively within a single preschool in Madison, Wisconsin, and did not encompass public school settings. The diversity of students and teachers at Awena school may differ significantly from the more academically focused and regimented environments typically found in public schools. Consequently, conducting a similar study in a public-school setting may yield distinct findings and outcomes.

CHAPTER 5 – RESULTS: THE INTERSECTIONS OF IMAGINATION, PICTURE BOOK READING, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

5.1 Social Justice Themes: Common Themes Identity & Diversity and Less Common Themes Justice and Advocacy in the early childhood classrooms

My dissertation research topic is based on the influences of the previous years' local, national, and global incidents on racial protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and the acts of police brutality against people of color in 2020. It is difficult to disrupt the cycle of racism in the U.S.A public and private institutions. I focused on finding a topic for my dissertation to disrupt this ill cycle of racism, especially at the early childhood level. I wanted to contribute to the research on socially just teacher education, learning, and how to support and reconstruct preschool and public-school education for preservice teachers and children so that diverse student groups do not struggle with racist teaching ideas and practices in schools. I hope to disrupt racist ideas and create a socially just learning environment for young children. One way to do this is to support children's picture book readings about social justice themes and their imagination skills in creating this kind, empathic, and just world for all.

Therefore, addressing race issues in early childhood education and supporting critical literacy education is crucial. Children are confronted with racism daily in their lives, and the ongoing pandemic of racism is an alerting sign of the importance of this matter in American society. This is the reason that social justice and anti-racist pedagogies are essential today. I examine how young children make meaning of identity and diversity themes- social justice books as part of their play activities and imagine their own and others' identities and diversities. I want to understand how these children, after the murder of George Floyd, positioned themselves in school settings as part of their communities and how we can support them as

educators starting with the awareness level of social justice issues so that we can involve them as future adults to advocate against marginalization in the U.S. I believe the awareness step is a considerable one to pass to the next level of human understanding of ourselves and each other.

I want these young children to be “present” and aware of the things happening around them. I do not wish them to be “absent” about what goes around them. This research study focuses on utilizing picture books as a foundational tool for initiating discussions rooted in social justice principles. The study encompassed two separate classroom settings, where I conducted observations during picture book readings and imaginative play activities. Throughout these observations, I primarily concentrated on the exploration of diversity and identity principles as integral themes within the context of picture book reading. In comparison, I observed justice and advocacy principles to a lesser extent. These enlightening conversations unfolded among children aged 2 to 5 years old, and they occurred within both the Harvest and Nile classrooms.

5.2. Sociocultural Context: Factors that influence students' meaning-making of picture books

Below I share one of the excerpts from my observations of Harvest classroom with student Bertha, a member of an international student family from an Asian country. Both parents are graduate students at UW-Madison, and this family is seeking a place for themselves in a new country. The family has been in Madison for a few years. This family has been stressed with temporary visa issues recently. This situation also has been influencing the student, too. Bertha has been missing school for two months, although Bertha enjoys school time and being with their friends.

I put Where is Rodney? Parker Looks Up, The Fry Bread, and Crown books on the classroom's bookshelf. Bertha picked the I love my Daddy because... book. M asked me to sit by her on the couch.

B: I read you listen.

D: It sounds great!

B: I love my daddy because he plays with me (She did not use finger pointing and read the book fast and correctly with correct sentences: It seems like she memorized the book. She added a few more sentences to a few pages)

D: Do you play with your dad at home?

B: No, I play with Mom. Dad is busy.

D: What kind of play activities do you do?

B: We cook together, and I help her. We go shopping and play with dolls and stuffed animals. I like blocks. Mom sits by me. I play. Mom goes to school.

D: So, your mom and dad are busy.

B: Yes. We sometimes play with Mom. She continued to read the book (Day 26 Harvest Observation:9-10:30 am).

Bertha is also a multilingual student in Russian, her Russian language, and English. As an ELL student, Bertha's English language is good enough to communicate with teachers and friends. Bertha's classmates are also ELL students, except for a few of the students. As an ELL student, Bertha is a student who is learning English and is also seen as an "other" or as a speaker of other languages by her peers and teachers. Bertha is a quiet student who follows the teacher's directions closely. Bertha is interested in art, reading books, block play, pretend play, and sensory play. Bertha enjoys playing with E most of the time. The rest of the time, she enjoys solitary play.

Bertha has student parents who frequently are busy studying, as seen from the excerpt above. She does not have any relatives in Madison, Wisconsin. M. depends on her parents as part of her social environment and school friends with teachers. Her mother mentioned that they do not have close friends around them here. Bertha's family and school friends are her only social

environment. Since her relatives and close friends are far away, this family does not have many chances to socialize. This situation might influence Bertha's language skills, too. I witnessed Bertha's practicing memory reading, reading aloud with teachers, pretending to read, storytelling, vocabulary work (asking for new words in texts), rereading the favorite texts, predicting the story elements, retelling the story, and imagining the story characters/elements/plot.

All these background characteristics of Bertha influence her reading of picture books. Bertha's reading of a text is also influenced by multiple factors such as her peer interactions, teacher interactions, her teachers' choice to bring diverse books to the classroom library, her interests, background, play activities, teacher attitudes/interests/expertise, teaching goals/strategies, encouragement of classroom talk.

5.2.1 Community: School and Neighborhood

Awena community is a student community, and the school is located there. Several activities are arranged with the community members and school members, including the parents of the students, students, and teachers with the administrators. For example, there is a Pancake Breakfast in the Fall semester, a garden picnic/picking produce time, an ice cream social in the summer, and potlucks two times a year arranged by the staff who work with this community. There are also occasional activities like art-cart travels to Awena community and school, a university barbeque in the summertime, or international celebrations happening in the big gym of the community center. There are tutoring opportunities for the students who are a part of the public school and this community.

This university-based childcare site houses students and teachers that come from different countries. It is easy to see how this diverse community, staff, and students created these peaceful

in-school and out-of-school environments for the education of young children, including the After-school programs. Awena's establishment was in 1992 for student families and their children to respond to childcare needs. Since 1992, Awena has grown a lot. The school moved to a large building from a small apartment. The number of students increased year by year. There are now six classrooms and seven programs. There is one baby room, one toddler room, one full and one part-time 2-4-year-old program, one 3-5-year-old program, one after-school program (up to 8 years), and one 4K program. The Awena program site is located on the northwest edge of UW-Madison's campus; Awena community is a community of apartment buildings surrounded by woods and Lake Mendota. It owns various picnic and playground areas and is one of the oldest community gardens in the United States.

Mary's teachers are "white" American teachers from Wisconsin. One is a female in her mid-30s, and the other is a middle-aged male teacher. The classroom shelves are full of adequate materials except for the art shelf, which is out of paper occasionally. Both teachers are very busy preparing the classroom, providing toileting support to the students, and handling social conflict and problem-solving.

Many times, there is stress in the classroom due to student-toy conflicts or emotional meltdowns. A few students have behavior issues and keep all the teachers busy. The rest of the students play with each other or by themselves. Student teachers are not always supporting the lead teachers daily. Some days only two teachers work all day, and a substitute teacher gives the teachers lunch breaks. Some days, the classroom is loud and chaotic. It is easy to see the burnout in teachers. While I was observing the room, one lead teacher was out sick most of the day.

Students have a daily routine, and free choice time occurs all morning and some part of the afternoon time. I have been observing both classrooms during the free choice times most of

the time and a few times before and after lunch and nap time. One administrator comes and goes early in the morning, talks to the teachers, and sometimes gives bathroom breaks to the teachers. At the same time, the staff is limited in the classrooms. The harvest room follows a “High Scope” curriculum, which is student-initiated and teacher-supported. All the activities and routines with student evaluations are planned around this curriculum. Parents give the teachers information while they drop their children off in classrooms. Information exchange occurs through e-mail, conversations during pick-up and drop-off times, newsletters, and phone calls. Teachers are flexible regarding curriculum planning, follow-up, and lesson planning. Teacher Kay told me Harvest room teachers do not have a weekly lesson plan; teachers let the students have “free choice” time every day. The Nile room has a very flexible lesson plan, but it is not regularly filled out. They also have “free choice” time. The classroom circumstances also influence Mary’s picture book reading and meaning making with imagination through her play activities. I noticed several times while we were reading a book, Harvest students screaming, fighting, distracting children's attention, and occupying all students and teachers with conflict resolution creating a big scene in the class. It was hard to read and listen to the books and discuss the story's characters, plot, and scene with Mary. So, we stopped reading and waited for everyone to calm down. I also supported the ones in need of help to calm down around us. These were challenging times for our reading-aloud times.

The advantage of being a student in the Harvest classroom is that there is no general expectation that children will communicate in English. Most of the students are international and either bilingual or multilingual. Harvest teachers are very patient and kind and request students to use their words to express their needs in English since both teachers are monolingual. There are a few students with special needs, one with Down syndrome, one with speech delay and sight

issues, one who has been diagnosed as on the Autism Spectrum, and two with behavioral and emotional needs. Individual children come to the classroom with varied histories, showing many more sociolinguistic differences than sameness. In a flexible curriculum with flexible teachers and daily routine (if children are hyperactive, they end up in the gym), Mary's room is inclusive for children with all abilities. Children are generally accepted as they are and given enough time to learn and adapt to school. A few children receive special education services in school.

5.2.2 Diverse Texts as part of the reading materials/availability of the materials

Harvest Room and Nile Room have diverse picture books about student and teacher interests. Teachers follow the High scope curriculum and rotate the picture books in classroom libraries at least monthly. Depending on the student's interests, teachers also rotate the books in the classroom library with the school library. If a child is interested in butterflies, teachers Leila and Corina bring a few butterfly books, not necessarily in English language because of the international student population in the school; there are many books in different languages and from different countries. The school has a rich library available for the classroom students and teachers. A small room turned into a school library has ample cupboards from floor to ceiling covering one side of the wall. When I was observing the classrooms, the Department of Education donated free books to students and teachers, and these books were set up in the small gym for the families so they could take them home for free. Teachers seemed very excited about this opportunity. One teacher told me excitedly: "Look, Derya. We have free books from the Department of Education; you should come and get books for yourself about social justice. I took books about social justice for my classroom" excitedly.

The classroom library is available all day for both classrooms except the mealtimes and toileting times. There are also student-family and school-teacher donations to the school library.

Awena School is lucky to have a “Childcare Tuition Assistance Program office” in the building that permanently supports Awena School's teaching and learning materials. Teaching materials or financial resources with family counseling support are always available to all students and families. Being a part of the university makes Awena school lucky in resource availability. If there are plumbing or building issues, the university is ready to support the school immediately.

In the excerpt below, I show that students Emily, Bertha, and Mildred were reading a book: *Where are you from?* by Mendez, they started talking about their grandparents related to the story. These students were between the ages of 2 and a half and three years and two months and were aware of where they were from and where their grandparents were from. This excerpt shows that the students were listening to each other about where they were from and questioning their cultural background through the picture book reading about “diversity and identity awareness.” The book's characters, a grandfather, and a grandson, discussed their home origin. The little boy asked his grandfather where they were from. His grandfather responds to this question by saying. They are a part of the world, and he means that they are human beings. It does not matter much to know where they are from, but it matters to know that we are from everywhere in the world and a part of nature around us, such as where we see mountains, trees, sea, rivers, etc. This book is meaningful in teaching students about appreciating diversity, family, and identity.

I sat by the table in the housekeeping area before the bookshelf. I noticed a few students taking books and turning the pages. I asked Mildred, Emily, Bertha, and Nil if they wanted to read a book with me. Mildred smiled and sat by the chair near my chair, and so did Le. The other girls walked to the block area. Emily picked up the "Where are you from?" book and gave it to me, saying, "Read." I reminded her to say, "Read, please, " one more time. "She repeated that. I started reading the book while Mildred sat by my right and Le sat by my left side. I turned the page:

E: This is the kid and the grandpa (pointing at the picture).

D: Do you have a grandpa?

E: Yes.

D: Does he come to visit you in Madison?

E: Yes. He is not here. He is there.

D: Where does he live?

E: Wisconsin

D: Where are you from?

E: Wisconsin. Yes.

D: Are you from somewhere else?

E: No. California. I am from there (Her teacher told me she is from a different country, but her parents say she is from California).

Mildred: I am from Israel. I have grandparents, too. They are away. Not here. I like my grandpa. He is nice. He sometimes plays with me.

D: I am from Turkey. My grandparents passed away a long time ago. I have my parents (Nile Room observation Day 21/Jan 21 at 9:30 am)

This excerpt supports the idea that reading a book related to student identity and diversity,” Where are you from?” guided young students Emily and Mildred’s thinking and talking about their family backgrounds and hometowns/home countries. When students were talking to me, they seemed interested in the story and motivated to talk about their backgrounds. They were willing to share valuable information about their families and were aware of their identities. Although Emily, who had an immigrant family background, seemed confused about her hometown, this confusion might be a reason some immigrant parents do not like to share where they are from due to racism in this country because they do not know how “white” people would react to their home origin. They like to keep it a secret and say they are from where they reside (maybe California?) in the U.S.

5.2.3 Teachers and Peers: Scaffolding

The following excerpt from Harvest room shows that teacher scaffolding explicitly supports students in learning new vocabulary words, learning the names of different types of

construction equipment, using language, and critical thinking skills, discovering new images, developing imagination skills, and enhancing dialogical thinking and talking.

Ahmed was very excited, examining trucks and asking the names of each truck to teacher Kay I sat by him, and he started asking me about the names of the trucks.

A: What is this, Derya?

D: It is a pickup truck.

A: What is it for?

D: To carry the tools for farmers/construction workers or small or medium-sized items.

A: I like this excavator, Derya.

D: What is it for?

A: It is a digger and digs the dirt.

D: Ohh, it is good to know. I am learning the names of different construction trucks this morning. Thanks for helping me (Now, I am learning truck names that I have not known before because I am an ELL person).

A: Yeah. Look at this, Derya (excitedly) pointing at a roller in the page. It is fixing the road.

D: Yeah. Are they used on the farms, too? What do you think? What else do Rollers do?

A: I do not know.

D: Rollers can be used in constructing roads such as asphalt, concrete, and soil (I checked the information from the internet and found out they can be used in agriculture, too). They can be used on farms, too. The road roller shreds the soil, too. I pointed to the website from my iPhone (We researched the function of the rollers from the internet and learned together).

The above excerpt shows that student Ahmed was interested in construction trucks when I entered the classroom and had already looked at the pictures in the books and discussed the functions and names of trucks. Since he was interested in trucks, his teacher Kay moved to another area to support a student who needed help. I took her place and continued supporting student Ahmed. I created a space and time for him to reread about the trucks so he could become the literate individual he wanted. Vasquez (2014) claims that Comber, Nixon, and Reid (2007) argued “when we teach literacy, our role includes extending the repertoires of literacy and communications practices available to our students. This pedagogy of responsibility involves

classroom practice that is informed and structured by teachers. We provide our students with new, engaging, and different ways to communicate their ideas, questions, and understanding of the world around them from a critical literacy perspective (p.169).”

Teacher scaffolding is integral to reading, meaning making, and imagining picture books. I observed students and teachers utilizing or not utilizing the picture books together or separately in classroom libraries occasionally. I also observed students and teachers interacting with the books, having a dialogic talk, and relating the book reading to the classroom play and activities. When teachers closely support and follow the student reading and discussion related to the book reading times, students easily follow up with the activities related to the books or play related to the stories. Students also continue reading and talking about books for extended periods. When teachers do not engage with the children and books, students turn the pages, leave the books on the floor, and sometimes step on them and do a different activity unrelated to the stories.

Teachers must create equitable schooling for all students, and the discussion of controlling *what*, *how*, and *when* children learn and *who* gets to learn *what* continues to exist in today’s schools. Deliberate attempts to disrupt inequity in the classroom and society must become part of daily classroom life (Vaquez,2014, p.xiii).

The following teacher interviews show that all five teachers support Harvest room and Nile room students’ play, picture book reading, and imagining, but when it comes to “the concept of imagination,” a few teachers do not think young children can imagine or have difficulty imagining things. They believe they are too young to imagine certain things, such as the meaning-making of real-life events, when they read them in picture books. The following excerpt from my interview with teacher Kay shows that:

Question: How do your students express their imagination skills in the classroom? In what ways?

It is a challenge. We are trying to put more things out that are not strictly one thing. We got rid of the plastic food to see how it interacted with other materials in the kitchen. Some children cook with them often the same way "necklaces are always noodles" every day. Cardboard circles, cookies, and pancakes. They stick to that (Teacher Kay's Interview/1/17/2023).

Teacher Kay believes that young children have difficulty imagining. Although she supplies materials and resources to her classroom in different ways, she believes that her students cannot fully use their imagination skills. Another question about book reading and expressing imagination skills indicates that her students can express their imagination skills when the materials are provided, and students are guided through the planned activities related to play. Vygotsky (1978) claims that during play activities, children enter an imaginary, illusory world in which unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call "play." Imagination is a psychological process for the child; it represents a human form of conscious activity. Children create an imaginary situation in play activities (p.93). The following excerpt from an interview with a teacher shows that:

How do your students express their imagination skills related to their picture book reading to play activities? Can you give examples?

I know with The Apples on Top book. We did some teacher-led activities: We collected applesauce covers, recycled, and counted them. Pumpkin book: Pumpkins in the garden, we made pumpkin seeds like in the book. Usually, it is a teacher-led connection first. We introduce the activity; first, they do it next. They will repeat it independently.

The above excerpt shows that her students can express their imagination through picture book reading and play. I noticed conflicted assertions of teacher opinions about reading related to identity and diversity, imagination, and children's play.

Another excerpt from teacher Kay about the classroom talk and application of the read-aloud strategy during circle time revealed that she believed her three-and-a-half to 5-year-old

students were not at the level of having classroom talk about the story plot, theme, setting, characters, and morals.

Do you encourage your students to discuss story characters, plot, setting, themes, morals, conflict, resolution, and symbolism?

Yes. In a simple way. We talk about conflict in the story. Solving problems and emotions. We talked about story characters. Some kids can answer the questions; some kids cannot even answer the questions. They do not have a conversation about the book. They are not just there yet.

My student observations and student excerpts show that most students can have classroom talks about the meaning-making of picture books. As I shared before, in the Harvest room, student Mary, a multilingual student, discussed several picture book story themes, plot, setting, and story character analysis with her and me. If the students resist talking in large group time, there might be different reasons for that silence, such as students' shy personalities or not liking to talk in large groups or public. Since most students are ELL, it is customary to resist talking in a large crowd as a young child. Teacher scaffolding of literacy activities is crucial for ELL learners. Since most students live in the Awena community with no relatives or few family friends, these students depend on classroom talk to improve their second language skills.

Genishi and Dyson (2009) claim that in the Vygotskian view, learning happens first on the social plane. The teacher continually assesses where that moving plane might be so that children learn most readily through social interactions like H. room ELL students. We hope these learners, at first relative strangers to the teacher, begin to enter the official world of language and literacy learning while never abandoning their own playful, unofficial worlds (p.144). H. teachers need flexibility in creating child interaction times for small and large group interactions around books.

Peers also support reading, imagining, and meaning-making of picture books. When I see the peer scaffolding related to picture book reading, students stay with picture books longer and can extend the book reading activity to other play activities. Otherwise, students walk away and do other activities. Not just for teachers but also peer support is very important for H. and N. room students' language learning and imagining and the meaning-making of the picture books related to diversity and identity. Adult scaffolding and peer collaboration are crucial parts of bringing student learning to the next higher level of learning (p.131). Here is an excerpt as an example of peer collaboration from Harvest room: V.'s Read Aloud Time:

In the other part of the room, Virginia held a Ready to Fly book like a teacher reading aloud to her students. Hazel was sitting on the floor, and Virginia was sitting on a chair in front of Hazel, pretending to read it by turning the pages.

Virginia: Look, they dance with Mom and Dad (First page). They watch TV (Turns to the next page). She dances by herself. She changes her clothes. She goes to the library. The library lady gave a book to her. She danced. She dances with friends. Suddenly, Virginia stops reading the book and starts talking to Hazel about making ice cream with Scarlet. Virginia gave the book to Hazel. Hazel sat on the chair this time and started pretending to read the book to her. She said, "The girl in the picture dances, watches TV, and goes to the library (She noticed me sitting by them and stopped talking) (2/3/2023).

As we read from the above excerpt. Virginia and Hazel were doing read-aloud time and took turns with the book to pretend to be a teacher sitting on a chair while reading the book to each other. This reading collaboration shows that both girls try to make meaning of the identity and diversity theme book: *Ready to Fly*, describing the scenes they see in the picture book pages and talking about the story characters and what they do in the story. There is a language exchange. They both summarized the book. Both students use their oral language skills, cooperating, learning about other cultures and races, motivating each other, reflecting on reading, and imagining, engaging read-aloud, practicing shared reading, storying, integrating pretend-to-

play in literacy development, using classroom talk, building friendships,” learning taking turns” as part of the social skill development.

Teacher and peer scaffolding occur in both classrooms daily and influence the meaning-making, imagining picture books related to the play activities and social justice principles.

Excerpts from the classrooms support this observation.

5.2.4 Student Home background and students

Students from both classrooms are from diverse backgrounds. There are a few students who are initially from the U.S. Although the teachers in one classroom are not diverse, they have an appreciation and understanding of students' diverse backgrounds. All ability groups are welcome in both classrooms, except there are teacher perceptions regarding a few students' strengths and weaknesses. One teacher told me that a few children could be labeled with special needs due to their speech, following teacher directions, and attention span. Another two teachers in the next classroom referred two children to special education services due to chaos in the classroom. All students on the list for referral to special education programs are international students.

5.2.5 Daily routine

The flexibility of the daily routine is a significant part of both classrooms. There seems to be no push to focus on academic learning. Play is welcomed in both classrooms. As Paley told readers in her book, children's primary work is play. It is okay if a few children are not at the level of recognizing the words or letters of the alphabet. Reading times are part of free choice and large group time in both classrooms before nap time. Only Harvest room teachers allow their students to take a few books to their nap mats to read before nap time for 15 minutes. Nile room does not allow the young children to take books to their mats due to the hyperactivity of the

students on their mats before nap time, which is understandable for teachers who have experience with young children. Students are free to take books and ask teachers to read them in their free choice time unless teachers are extremely busy with other work, like greeting parents with students or responding to parent questions.

5.2.6 Teaching strategies/Reading Process as part of the classroom literacies

Teachers in both classrooms follow a High Scope curriculum, which is the teacher-supported and student-initiated curriculum of learning and teaching. I noticed that teachers do not follow a strict lesson plan or worry about creating one as a team in both classrooms. They are generally busy with housekeeping parts of the job, such as cleaning, toileting/diapering the students, preparing the room, setting up the tables for a snack, doing the dishes, and bringing the snack. The other parts of the job related to supporting student emotions and providing a safe classroom environment for the students also keep the classroom teachers busy so that they do not have any time left to have planning time or plan activities for the students.

When teachers need to talk about important things related to the students, they discuss these when they watch the students playing, or they e-mail the information to each other after students are gone or sleeping at nap time. When students have behavior conflicts, the teacher supports them by asking them what happened, and if the students need to take turns, they ask them to take turns or get the same toy from the toy shelf and share.

Teachers model self-regulation by teaching students to take deep breaths to calm down or comfort the children if they are anxious or upset; teachers also model gentle touch. They ask questions to get information about the incidents. They redirect the children to purposeful activity, if possible, avoiding conflict. They do not force the child to share a toy; instead, they ask the

child to respond to specific questions related to toy sharing. Teachers take the time to teach appropriate behaviors to the children.

Teachers and students use their words in both classrooms, generally in English. If the children speak their home language, both classroom teachers encourage this. Student home language is welcome in both classrooms. Harvest room teachers are white American teachers encouraging students to use English words. When students do not or cannot, the teachers tell them they only know English, and they cannot understand the children if they speak their home languages. In the Nile room, both international teachers welcome students' home languages; if students insist on speaking their home languages, the teachers use different techniques like gestures, mimes, google translation, and parent help.

Puppet shows, flannel board stories, digital media, and other multimodal literacies are used in both classrooms. Students with speech delays are supported with a daily routine and visual picture posters in both classrooms. Literacy is part of both rooms' daily routines. Students and teachers talk to each other, sing, read books, play, and do activities. The rest of the literacy activities are reading aloud, encouraging speaking to express needs, imagining, and pretending with dramatic play activities, inviting community members to the classroom, following student interests in choosing books, encouraging student choices, creating and posting visual posters or maps, using audiobooks, math, nursery rhymes, riddles, counting, coloring, and copying pictures or words, and letter recognition.

Teachers continually expose children to oral and written language. Listening skills are also part of the daily routine, such as following simple teacher directions. Storytimes and large and small group times are also parts of the daily routines; the students are encouraged to speak, listen, write, and read.

5.2.7 Purpose of Reading

The reading purpose in both classrooms is for fun and enjoyment. Students feed their curiosity about the world by reading picture books and using them as tools to enhance their knowledge about the world around them. Reading is never an activity that teachers force students to do. Reading is not used for punishment or giving time-outs in both classrooms. Behavior redirection is used in both classrooms to settle conflicts. Teachers do not take the reading privilege away from the specific students who showed negative behaviors.

5.2.8 Children's Play and imagining

Children enjoy play activities all day. They do not have tutoring about their academic learning skills from the teachers or have teaching sessions to learn alphabet letters or words as in public schools. Academic learning is part of the play activities. Children learn through playing with toys and materials in both rooms. Awena School is a play-based school. The following excerpt shows that Harvest room students enjoy play activities and imagining using several play materials/toys in a certain way:

The two students play with animals, people, cars, and blocks in their free-choice time. George played with animals on the floor. Virginia played with dolls in the house and dolls. Arthur played with cars in the block area. Virginia played with blocks and stacked them. She finally sat on top of the blocks happily. Virginia claimed that she was on top of a hill excitedly. She seemed to enjoy her playtime. I saw her once pretending to play drums with large blocks. She was full of joy. Arthur was playing with train cars on the floor with teacher Catherine. He said, "That is my train several times to her while pulling his train cars. Teacher Catherine pretended that her train cars were moving in a different direction than Arthur's train cars. She supported A. when A. was frustrated with disconnected train cars and tracks. Arthur seemed to enjoy his train cars moving slowly on the tracks. I moved to the kitchen area. George came and sat by me, offering me food in the kitchen with metal lids and kitchen food made of solid-colored flannel fabric. I pretended to eat the food George served, told him that it was very delicious and that he was a great cook, and he smiled at me. I thanked him for the food that he served (1/5/2023: Harvest Room)

The following excerpt shows that George pretends to feed her sheep at the sensory table with rice and spoons.

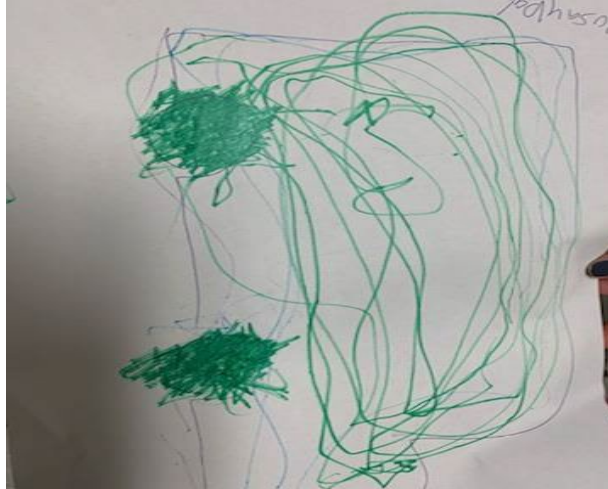
Mildred: " I am feeding my sheep" while she played at the sensory table with rice. She was putting rice in her small-sized sheep's mouth. The rice spread on the table from the sheep's mouth (12/1/2022).

5.2.9 Imagining and Reading

The following excerpts show that Harvest and Nile's room students utilized the picture books and actively engaged with them. Furthermore, they used their imagination skills to extend the story reading and comprehension to specific play activities with enjoyment and curiosity.

Children were singing the "Wheels on the Bus" song and asking teacher Serenity to draw a bus picture. Serenity drew one and asked them to draw their bus pictures. They all contributed to the drawing activity with their large circular scribbles. Nil and Mildred returned and read the Jerome by Heart book with me pointing at the picture and saying: "Bus." After reading the book, I asked if Mildred, Thomas, Bertha, Nil, and Ray wanted to draw a bus picture and color it with me at the art table. They all said: " Yes" and followed me to the art table. Mildred, Ray, Bertha, Thomas, Nil, Emily, Shelly, and Paul drew scribbles, circles, and lines in her bus pictures with colored markers.





The Nile Room children helped each other to lace the yarn in the holes on a picture of a bus. This activity was challenging for most students; several gave up and directed themselves to other activities.

After coloring and drawing on bus pictures, the Nile children moved to another table to lace the pictures I had created previously. This activity seemed challenging for the children to insert the yarn in the holes. A few of them were successful, and the rest walked away. It took not more than 2 minutes for a few children to try to insert the yarn in the holes (1/6/2023: Nile Room)

The following excerpt shows that Harvest Room students read a book with me and pretended to play with scarves (pretending to be a monster and covering the whole body or face/pretending to

wear a scarf to cover hair/pretending the scarf is a shawl to cover their shoulders) during read-aloud. They all seemed to enjoy playing with scarves.

Story Time:

Kay told me I could invite the children to read a book and do an activity with them. I told the children I would read a book and do a follow-up activity. I showed The Proudest Blue book to them. There were seven children on the floor. Ahmed started whining, saying, "I cannot see it." Before I started the story, I redirected the child. Virginia, George, Mary, Idris, Rose, Hazel, Leo, and I came to the floor. I summarized the story for them. I explained to them that two siblings were bullied by their school friends. After I read the story to them, I told them it is not O.K. to bully people. It hurts people's feelings when people are bullied. I showed how grabbing things from friends or making fun of their clothes was unacceptable. I told them I brought shawls to try if they liked to play with them.



Small Group:

A few children stayed with me and played with shawls, wearing them on their heads or neck. I told them they could use the shawls any way they liked. Idris showed family pictures to Kay and me while he was wearing the shawl on his head. He seemed excited about the activity. His father, his brother, and his mom were in the picture. His mom was traditionally wearing a headscarf. His father was wearing traditional white pants and a dress, too. His father was wearing a traditional hat with his white dress. The boys seemed proud of their family picture, jumping up and down and pointing at it.

K: "See your parents; they also wear a hijab." Ahmed and Idris smiled at her. Clean-up time started after 10:20 am; I helped them and left the room (1/24/2023).

5.2.10 Playing, imagining, and reading.

The following excerpts show that Harvest room students read the picture books and then were to pretend play related to the story. I witnessed the students reading the story with a teacher and pretending/imagining/creating a play activity following the reading process. We read *Not Quite a Narwal* book with student Hazel. After reading the book, she told me she wanted to draw a rainbow picture at the art table. She seemed excited about looking at the rainbow picture on one of the pages. She told me that she liked rainbows and wanted to draw one.

H: What are they doing?

D: They are doing Karate. It is a kind of sport. We continued reading the book. She paid attention to the girl who fell on the floor in the picture while she was running.

H: Ohh, no! She is sad!

D: Yes, she is. Why do you think she is?

H: She got hurt.

D: Yes, if you fall while running, it hurts. She fell while she was running and maybe could not win the race. This could make her sad. She wanted to win the race.

H pointed at the rainbow.

H: I want to draw a rainbow now!

D: O.K. Do not want to finish the book?

H: No.

She walked to the art table. She took paper and crayons and started to color her paper and drew straight lines parallel to each other. She showed her artwork to me proudly. I told her that she used bright colors and that her artwork looked colorful, like a rainbow. Virginia came to the table, picked up a paper with a box of colored pencils, and sat by her. She told me that her house was on fire. She had a firefighter Dalmatian puppy toy (small size) with her paper. She was holding it with one hand. Ida was gluing a colorful foam piece on her paper and calling it a rainbow (2/10/2023).

Below is an observation excerpt from Nile room where children pretend to play, read a story, and imagine:



Story Time:” Bullying at school.”

*Seven students were sitting and ready to listen to the story. I also shortened the sentences and described the pictures to them. I talked about” bullying,” and its meaning. I told them the story was about siblings and their school friends who were bullied. I told them about an example, such as grabbing other people’s belongings was unacceptable behavior. In the story, children were making fun of the little girl’s head/hair cover and making her sad. I started reading *The Proudest Blue* book. They did not ask questions. I directed the children to the small group area and showed them the shawls to use as dress-up props for pretend play. A small group of children followed me with curiosity.*

Small Group Time:

Mildred, Bertha, Simon, Ray, Nil, and Shelly joined the small group. I distributed the shawls and showed them how to use them. I told them they did not have to use it for their hair and could use it any way they liked. I put one shawl around my neck, hair, and shoulders. Mildred tried to cover her hair and seemed to enjoy the play. She walked around, and her teachers told her she was beautiful. One teacher modeled using the shawl for them to put around her shoulders. Two African boys used the shawl to cover his neck and hair. They all seemed attentive and showed everyone what they were wearing. One girl took a purse and pretended to be going shopping. Another left it on the floor and walked away after a few minutes. One girl was trying different shawls and looking in the mirror. She was saying, “Look at me, look.” Three children went up the climber with shawls and pretended to take the bus. We also played the “Peek-a-boo” game with the shawls. They enjoyed watching me, playfully scaring them. They all giggled (Nile Room:2/10/2023)



5.2.11 Reading and Identity

Several excerpts show that Harvest Room and Nile Room students interacted with identity and diversity books. Their interactions showed that they made meaning of the stories and related them to their identities. Most students were diverse and seemed excited about reading diverse books from different countries. Of seven Muslim students, four were followers of the Muslim religion (their mothers were covering their hair) and enjoyed reading books related to this religion and talking about the story's characters, theme, and vocabulary words. The students who did not talk about the books and did not seem very excited about them were not interested in them; one family I was familiar with was secular, and their child was not interested in reading books but more interested in playing with toys. He had speech and visual delays. He was on the referral list for special education services. The following excerpt shows that Nile Room student Arthur read a book with me and talked about her family related to the story characters:

We read the I Want You Grandma book with Arthur. She found the pink and orange roof house on the page. When I asked her to find them, she asked about vehicles like motorcycles, scooters, trucks, trains, and buses on the pages. She pointed them one by one.

Emily: "My sister and brother take the bus."

She said, "Ohh, they are running. "She pointed to the yellow apples on the page and asked what they were. I told her they were apples. She asked why the grandma and the granddaughter were going by train and bus. I told her that they wanted to meet each other. She pointed at Yumi and her grandmother, asking why they were running, and I explained the story to her. She told me that she did not have a grandmother. Shelly played with blocks with Catherine, and Arthur played with Ray and Thomas with Magna tiles. The rest of the students were eating snacks (1/23/2022).

The stories I have told of my interactions with children and those of their teachers interacting with children demonstrate the concerns this preschool has for attention to issues of diversity and identity and how they implement these concerns by strategically using picture books to stimulate children's conversations and imaginative play.

5.2.12 Reading and Diversity

Reading Fosters Diversity Awareness and Character Development

Numerous excerpts vividly illustrate the profound impact of reading on students from Harvest and Nile rooms as they engage with picture books centered on the pivotal theme of "diversity." These young learners, hailing from diverse backgrounds, eagerly embraced these literary explorations. The act of storytelling not only captivated their imagination but also spurred inquisitive discussions about the emotions and physical appearances of the characters within these narratives. An illustrative example is extracted from Harvest room:

Virginia showed me one of the Social Justice books I gave to the classroom teachers for story time: "Parker Looks Up." there were pages about Michelle Obama. She pointed at one of her pictures, calling her Barack Obama. When I asked who that person was, she told me Barack was the president's wife. I told her that Michelle was President Barack Obama's wife. She also showed me the story character Parker's picture in a nightgown, calling her Michelle Obama. V said she read the book as a class and liked it very much. Virginia was carrying the book around

the room and looking at the pages repeatedly while talking about the story characters and the pictures. Virginia is from Western Europe, and she seems amazed with this book by holding the book tight around the room and looking at the pictures.

Virginia: Look at her (pointing at Parker, an African American child dancing in her tutu); I like her dress, Derya.

Derya: Isn't it pretty? What color is it?

Virginia: It is pink. I love pink color. It is my favorite color. I have a pink dress at home. (She pointed at the book page and asked me to read it. As I continued reading the book, she made comments about the pictures)

Derya: Really? Maybe you can wear it to school one day so we can see your beautiful dress at school.

Virginia: Sure. Is she going to the museum? She looks happy (She points at the page while I read the page about Parker going to the museum instead of dance class).

Derya: Yes. She seems happy to see her friend at the museum.

Virginia: The man has a beard! (she pointed at the man pictured with a mustache excitedly.)

I explained to her that it was a mustache, not a beard, so she continued describing her father's beard to me. I also showed her what a beard looked like from my iPhone, searching the internet.

Virginia: My father has a big beard, not a mustache. I like his beard and touching it.

Derya: How does it feel when you touch his beard?

Virginia: It hurts my fingers, not soft.

Derya: My father had a mustache for so many years and it hurt my skin when he hugged and kissed me.

There was silence for a moment. I continued reading the book. Later, on a page, Virginia recognized a woman with bushy and uni eyebrows. (She was Frida at the museum on the book page.)

Virginia: Look at her eyebrows!

Derya: This kind of eyebrow is called a uni eyebrow. (I pointed at Frida's Picture on the page)

Virginia: This is funny. Look at her eyebrows like here (pointing at her forehead)

Derya: Some people have eyebrows like that. It is okay to have different eyebrows. I used to have uni eyebrows, too.

Virginia points at Native American men's picture on the page and says:

Virginia: Look at the feathers. They are wearing lots of feathers. The girls are happy and talking (She points at the page where Parker talks to her friend)

I like this picture (She points at Michelle Obama's picture in a nightgown). She is pretty! I want a dress like that!

Derya: The lady in this picture is the ex-president's wife, Michelle Obama.

Virginia: Is she a president?

Derya: No. Barack Obama was the President before, several years ago. This lady in the picture is her wife.

We finished reading the book. Virginia walked to the art area to start another activity with stickers at the table. She told her friend sitting at the table that she was reading a Barack book.

The excerpt shows that Virginia's encounter with a storybook introduced her to characters of different races. This experience sparked intriguing inquiries about the characters within the narrative as she contemplated how their actions paralleled elements of her own cultural background. She found herself reflecting on her father's beard, which bore a resemblance to a character sporting a mustache, drawing connections between her family and the fictional world.

This page served as a poignant reminder of her father's physical features, precisely his facial hair. Virginia's keen observation extended beyond physical attributes, as she keenly noticed the varying appearances of individuals, occasionally finding humor in their differences or marveling at their beauty. Moreover, she astutely discerned the emotions the story's characters

depicted, which further heightened her awareness of the rich tapestry of diversity within the narrative and her own identity. A similar illustrative example is extracted from Nile's room:

"Our reading journey began with a delightful dinosaur book, followed by 'Our Class is a Family.' Turning the pages, we encountered a group of children showcasing a beautiful spectrum of skin tones. As a curious research participant-teacher, Derya pointed to a dark-haired girl pushing a white boy's wheelchair, initiating an engaging dialogue with Nil, a student in Nile's room.

Derya: 'She has darker skin than this boy. What color is his skin?' Nil: 'White. He is a white boy.' Derya: 'Indeed, the girl's skin differs from the boy's. What is she doing?' Nil: 'She is helping him by pushing his chair. Look at those wheels!' Derya: 'Isn't she an amazing helper, showing kindness to her friend? Don't you agree?' Nil: 'Yes, she is very kind.' Derya: 'She also shares her table with him. It is lovely to share with our friends.' Derya then pointed to the page where the boy was sharing a pencil with the same girl. Nil: 'Look, they are happy!'"

Nil's observations extended to the book's concluding pages, where she discerned the characters' emotions, from a boy's sorrow to the children's happiness. Her perceptiveness was particularly evident when she pointed at a weeping boy.

This excerpt underscores Nil's ability to comprehend and connect with the emotions and diverse identities portrayed in the picture book, "Our Class is a Family." It also examines the role of reading in heightening students' awareness of diversity and their capacity to view situations from varied perspectives. Nil's transformation in her approach to understanding her identity and diversity and promoting a socially just classroom is evident.

Furthermore, the excerpt sheds light on Nil's burgeoning empathy skills as she adeptly identifies and interprets the emotions of the story's characters. It is essential to emphasize the influence of renowned scholars like Vygotsky and Paley, who underscore the role of play in bolstering children's cognitive, language, and literacy development. Additionally, play is a therapeutic outlet for children to manage their emotions and energy, mirroring the benefits of book reading as a form of playful interaction.

Nil's awareness of the intricate web of emotions and her capacity to discern how these emotions vary across individuals and situations within the story are noteworthy achievements.

From the depicted scenario, it becomes evident that exposing students to diverse texts significantly contributes to their character development. In closing, we echo the wisdom of Derman-Sparks, who aptly states, "From early childhood, all people construct a sense of self, a combination of social and individual personal identities. This journey involves a continually evolving understanding of oneself and others and recognizing how identity is impacted by how others see you and how you see others. Social identities are both externally imposed and internally constructed. They powerfully shape who you are, and you powerfully shape your response to them" (Derman-Sparks, Olsen Edwards & Goins, 2020, p.24).

5.3 Connections with Social Justice, critical literacy, and imagination Theories

My research question, "How do young children understand and express social justice through literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education (ECE)?" is closely related to the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky. My research touches upon the notion of cognitive development in young children, specifically in the context of play. Piaget's theory, which posits that critical thinking skills typically develop later in childhood, is challenged by my findings.

My research suggests that very young children, as young as 2 to 2.5 years old, demonstrate awareness of their identities and diversities and critically think about real-world events through literacy practices, imagination, and play. This challenges the traditional timeline proposed by Piaget. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): My research aligns with Vygotsky's theory, emphasizing the importance of adult scaffolding and introducing children to real-world events and issues within their ZPD. My classroom observations support Vygotsky's

assertion that children can develop their imagination and critical thinking skills with appropriate guidance.

Research findings demonstrate that when exposed to real-world events through picture book readings and conversations with teachers, young children can engage in meaningful discussions and imaginative thinking, even at a very young age.

My research challenges some aspects of Piaget's theory by suggesting that young children are capable of critical thinking and understanding social justice issues earlier than traditionally believed. At the same time, it supports Vygotsky's theory by showing that young children can benefit from adult scaffolding and engagement with real-world events to enhance their cognitive development. These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into how young children understand and express social justice through literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education, forming a robust theoretical foundation for my research.

The inclusion of theories by Vygotsky, Paley and the mention of psychoanalytic theory (Play is a tool as part of psychoanalytic therapy for children) in my research context provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the role of play in early childhood development. These theories align with my research question and observations: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): Vygotsky's theory underscores the idea that play creates a zone of proximal development for children. This zone represents the space between what a child can do independently and what they can do with the help of a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or peer.

In my research, I observed how play activities in preschool classrooms facilitated cognitive, language, and literacy skills. This aligns with Vygotsky's concept. I witnessed children

engaging in play and reading simultaneously, supporting each other during reading and play activities indicating the potential for learning and development within their ZPD.

Paley's Perspective on Play: Paley's assertion that daily play is valuable for developing language and social skills resonates with my research findings. Through my observations, I noted how children in the preschool classrooms were actively involved in play and reading activities related to picture books. There are vignettes supporting children's intellectual conversations with each other. This supports Paley's view that play plays a pivotal role in children's development, including their literacy and social skills.

Psychoanalytic Theory and Play as Therapy: The mention of psychoanalytic theory adds another dimension to my research. Psychoanalytic theory posits that play serves as a form of therapy for children, allowing them to work through and discharge negative energy in a positive manner. My observations in the classrooms corroborated this aspect of the theory, as I witnessed children engaging in play activities as a means of releasing their negative energy while simultaneously interacting with books.

In summary, the theories of Vygotsky, Paley, and psychoanalytic theory provide a theoretical framework that supports my research question and observations. They highlight the significance of play in fostering children's cognitive, language, and literacy development, as well as its therapeutic value in helping children manage their emotions and energy. These theories enrich my understanding of how young children engage with literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education.

Although classical and modern theories explain play in terms of its existence and influences on young children, recent play theories explain children's play as a means of improving cognitive skills and creativity. Berlyne (1960) and Ellis (1973) discuss "arousal theory," explaining play

activities as satisfying the needs of the children to motivate themselves and respond to their curiosity skills. Likewise, Bateson's Metacommunicative theory (1955) suggests that children communicate with each other through play activities.

Overall, Cognitive adaptation theory explains how play contributes to children's cognitive development and how it helps individuals maintain their psychological well-being in the face of challenges, as argued by Sutton-Smith (1966) and Bruner (1972).

“Ethological theory” as argued by Smith and Connolly (1972) and Blurton Jones (1972) explains children’s play from an evolutionary perspective. It explores the role of play in children's development, socialization, and adaptation to their environments, drawing on observations of children's play behavior in natural settings and comparisons with play in other species.

While I was observing the children’s meaning making picture books and their play interactions related to the social justice books, I witnessed children having fun, motivating themselves, responding to their curiosity needs, trying to keep their psychological well-being in conflicted play situations, asking for help, or trying to solve a problem on their own.

Young children interact with each other, support each other, and enhance their critical thinking skills during the play activities. Briefly, children use their cognitive, physical, psychological, and social skills while playing.

My research question:” How do young children understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in preschool classrooms?” is connected to the Social Justice theories that I use in this study, such as anti-bias curriculum of Derman-Sparks and culturally relevant practices of Ladson-Billings. These two theories stem from the social justice framework and standards that enforce tolerance in education in schools. Young

children's play and meaning-making of picture books related to the social justice principles (identity and diversity) are connected to these theories. These children are already aware of their own identity and diversity. They feel proud of their identities, and their play shows that. Children question what they read and understand from these books and carry them to the play activities.

As Vygotsky mentioned in his theory, it is possible to see how children support each other and bring each other to their following ZPD levels. Children sing, talk, act, imagine, understand, and support each other during play activities and reading sessions. My explanation demonstrates a rich connection between various play theories and my research question, which centers on how young children understand and express social justice (S.J.) themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in preschool classrooms. Here's a breakdown of how these theories align with my research: Play Theories and Cognitive Skills: I've referenced several recent play theories that emphasize the role of play in improving cognitive skills and creativity. These theories, such as arousal theory, play as communication theory, cognitive adaptation theory, and ethological theory, provide a framework for understanding how play activities enhance children's critical thinking skills. My research question is closely connected to these theories as it seeks to explore how children engage with social justice themes through play, imagination, and literacy practices, indicating that play serves as a vehicle for cognitive and creative development.

Social Justice Theories: My research draws from social justice theories, particularly the anti-bias curriculum of Derman-Sparks and the culturally relevant practices (CRP) of Ladson-Billings. These theories are rooted in the social justice framework and standards that promote tolerance in education in schools. My research question explores how young children's play and meaning-making of picture books related to social justice principles, such as identity and

diversity, align with these theories. This connection highlights the importance of fostering awareness of social justice themes from a young age and how children's play activities can support these principles.

Succinctly, my research question bridges the gap between play theories that focus on cognitive and creative development and social justice theories that emphasize awareness of identity and diversity. It illustrates how young children's play and engagement with picture books can serve as a platform for learning, understanding, and supporting one another in the context of social justice themes. This interplay between play and social justice aligns with established theories and enriches our understanding of how young children navigate these important concepts.

My research question, "How do young children understand and express social justice through literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education (ECE)?" is intricately linked to the theories of dialogic thinking, critical thinking, and identity development put forth by scholars like Paley, Vygotsky, Lysaker, Vasquez, Souto-Manning, and Comber. Here's how these theories align with and support my research:

Incorporating Bakhtin's concept of dialogic thinking and talking into my research is a valuable addition to my exploration of young children's understanding and expression of social justice themes through literacy practices and play in early childhood education. Bakhtin's ideas on dialogic conversations and their relevance to my research can be summarized as follows:

Bakhtin's Emphasis on Dialogic Conversations: While Bakhtin's work is often associated with dialogic discourse in older age groups and adults, his insights on the nature of dialogue are relevant to various contexts, including early childhood education. Bakhtin's emphasis on the interactive and dynamic nature of conversations underscores their significance in facilitating

cognitive and linguistic development. Expanding the Application to Early Childhood: Although Bakhtin's work is not commonly applied to early childhood education, I am taking the initiative to extend its relevance to my research. By focusing on "how dialogic ways of bringing students talking together," I acknowledge the potential for dialogic interactions among young children and between children and adults in the context of my study.

Alignment with Existing Theories: My decision to incorporate Bakhtin's ideas aligns with existing theories, such as those of Paley, Vygotsky, Lysaker, Souto-Manning and Comber which stress the importance of dialogue and interactions in early childhood. This alignment reinforces the value of dialogic thinking and talking in fostering cognitive and linguistic development, especially concerning social justice themes.

Supporting My Research Question: By exploring how young children engage in dialogues with peers and adults to understand and express social justice themes, my research is grounded in a theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of dialogue in early childhood education. This approach strengthens my research question and provides a rich foundation for my study.

Concisely, incorporating Bakhtin's concept of dialogic thinking and talking enriches my research by emphasizing the interactive nature of conversations and their relevance to early childhood education. It aligns with existing theories and bolsters my exploration of how young children navigate social justice themes through dialogues, literacy practices, and play in the early childhood classroom. Dialogic Thinking and Talking: Scholars such as Paley, Vygotsky, and Lysaker emphasize the importance of dialogic thinking and talking in the early years. They highlight how conversations and interactions with peers and adults play a crucial role in cognitive and linguistic development.

My research explores how young children engage in dialogues, not only with adults but also with peers, as they understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices and play. This aligns with the theories that stress the value of dialogue in early childhood education. *Critical Thinking in Early Childhood Education*: Early childhood critical literacy scholars like Vasquez, Souto-Manning, and Comber advocate for critical thinking in early childhood education, particularly to support the identity development of marginalized young children.

My research delves into how young children use their critical thinking skills to comprehend picture books, seeing themselves in the stories as mirrors. This aligns with the scholars' theories, which emphasize the role of critical thinking in fostering self-awareness and positive identity development. *Integration of Reading and Play Activities*: My research reveals how young children's engagement with picture books extends beyond reading activities and spills into their play. This interplay between literacy practices and play demonstrates how the two are interconnected in early childhood. Scholars like Vygotsky also highlighted the connection between play and cognitive development, and my research supports this notion by showcasing how reading and play activities are intertwined.

In essence, my research bridges the theories of dialogic thinking, critical thinking, and identity development with the practical exploration of how young children understand and express social justice themes in the context of early childhood education. It underscores the vital role of dialogues, critical thinking skills, and the integration of reading and play activities in fostering positive identity development and social justice awareness in young learners.

Paley, Vygotsky, and Lysaker mentioned the role of dialogic thinking and talking in the early years. Early childhood critical literacy scholars such as Vasquez, Souto-Manning, and

Comber also mentioned the role of critical thinking in early childhood education, especially in supporting the identity development of the young children marginalized in schools or out-of-school spaces. In addition to these, Comber recommended classroom activities include picture books, reading, discussing power and social justice issues, and questioning privileged groups and injustices related to my research question and Comber's critical literacy assertions which were directly related to my observations and data collection. She recommended that teachers create critical literacy spaces, interrogate the texts, and analyze and deconstruct them as the teachers of both classrooms and I practiced all these in both classrooms such as analyzing and deconstructing texts with the students together. Comber extends notions about activities with other curriculum subjects like art.

As part of my observations, the students and the teachers in both classrooms did activities related to picture book reading and art. Their theories also support the role of the development of critical thinking skills in young children. My research question is, "How do young children understand and express social justice through literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education (ECE)?" connected to these theories since young children can use their critical thinking skills to understand picture books. They see themselves in the books as mirrors. They get proud of themselves and carry this reading activity to play activities. Their conversations continue throughout the day.

My incorporation of the perspectives of scholars like Paley, Vygotsky, Lysaker, Vasquez, Souto-Manning, and Comber into my research enriches my exploration of critical thinking, identity development, and social justice themes in early childhood education. Here's how their ideas align with and contribute to my research: Dialogic Thinking and Talking: Scholars like Paley, Vygotsky, and Lysaker emphasize the importance of dialogic thinking and talking in the

early years. Their insights underscore the role of conversations and interactions in cognitive and linguistic development. This aligns with my research, which explores how young children engage in dialogues with peers and adults to understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices and play.

Critical Thinking in Early Childhood Education: Early childhood critical literacy scholars like Vasquez, Souto-Manning, and Comber advocate for the development of critical thinking skills in young children. Their work emphasizes the significance of critical thinking, particularly in supporting the identity development of marginalized young children. My research delves into how young children use critical thinking to comprehend picture books, particularly those dealing with social justice issues. This connection highlights the alignment between their theories and my research.

Practical Recommendations: Comber's practical recommendations for classroom activities that involve picture books, reading, discussing power and social justice issues, and questioning privilege and injustices align directly with my research question and observations. My research demonstrates how teachers in both observed classrooms implemented these activities, creating critical literacy spaces where students could analyze, deconstruct, and engage with texts. Additionally, the inclusion of art-related activities further illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of my research.

Development of Critical Thinking Skills: Collectively, the scholars I have referenced emphasize the role of critical thinking skills in early childhood education. My research contributes to this body of knowledge by showcasing how young children can develop critical thinking skills through interactions with picture books and discussions of social justice themes. This aligns with their theoretical perspectives and practical recommendations.

In short, the integration of these scholars' perspectives and recommendations enriches my research by providing a strong theoretical foundation and practical insights into the role of critical thinking, identity development, and social justice themes in early childhood education. Their work reinforces the importance of fostering these skills and awareness in young learners, aligning with the goals and outcomes of my research.

From the social justice standards and frameworks as part of the social justice theories, Learning for Justice is designed to increase understanding of differences and their value to a respectful and civil society that actively challenges bias, stereotyping, and discrimination in schools and communities. The four goals of anti-bias education demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities among students. Teaching tolerance is vital for children to develop empathy and respect for each other and learn about others' backgrounds.

My school observation around my research question "How do young children make meaning of picture books related to social justice principles such as identity and diversity, revealed that in both classrooms students and their teachers followed anti-bias education with culturally relevant practices. The most common themes followed by the young children were identity and diversity themes. Although teachers used all four principles daily during free play and other times, young children were aware of identity and diversity themes. A few vignettes show that children were aware of their own identities and proud of them. They were aware of how their own identity and languages differ from the dominant group.

My inclusion of the Learning for Justice (LFJ) framework and its goals for anti-bias education strengthens my research by providing a concrete framework for understanding and assessing the development of self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social

identities among students. Here's how the LFJ framework aligns with my research and observations:

LFJ Framework Goals: The four goals of anti-bias education, as outlined by LFJ, are crucial for fostering a respectful and inclusive society that actively challenges bias, stereotyping, and discrimination. My research question, which focuses on how young children make meaning of picture books related to social justice principles, particularly identity and diversity, aligns with the goals of anti-bias education. My observations in both classrooms demonstrate that teachers and students follow anti-bias education with culturally relevant practices.

Teaching Tolerance: Teaching tolerance is a fundamental aspect of anti-bias education. My research recognizes the importance of teaching tolerance to young children to help them develop empathy and respect for one another while learning about diverse backgrounds. My observations reveal that the young children in both classrooms were not only aware of their own identities but also understood and respected the differences in language and backgrounds among their peers.

Awareness of Identity and Diversity Themes: My research findings highlight that the most common themes followed by young children were related to identity and diversity. This aligns with the goals of anti-bias education, as it demonstrates the development of self-awareness and positive social identities among students. My vignettes provide concrete examples of how young children are aware of their own identities and proud of them, as well as how they recognize and appreciate the differences among their peers.

Incorporating the LFJ framework into my research strengthens the theoretical underpinning of my study and reinforces the practical application of anti-bias education in early childhood classrooms. It underscores the importance of promoting self-awareness, empathy, and

respect for diversity among young children, which directly relates to my research question and observations.

Ladson-Billings (1992,1995,1997,2009,2014) described CRT pedagogy as recognizing the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Hyland, 2010). Elements of CRT include student success, cultural competence, and understanding/critiquing social order. In CRT, cultural competence encourages students to maintain cultural integrity while becoming successful learners. While young children were making meaning of the picture books during the free play time, their cultural background and heritage were respected and welcomed by their teachers and peers. This welcoming environment encouraged their learning adventure during my observations in both classrooms.

Anti-bias education approach by Derman-Sparks (2015, 2010, 2020) described an anti-bias curriculum approach as a way to foster learning that teaches children to understand/accept/embrace all human beings with their personalities, identities, race, ethnicity, family background, religion, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and age differences. Derman-Sparks identified four goals for children through anti-bias education (ABE): identity, diversity, justice, and activism. During my observation in both classrooms, I could see students being aware of their own backgrounds and identities and when needed, especially in problem solving situations advocated for peers and questioned the fairness concept during conflict situations in the classrooms. My research question is also relevant to anti-bias curriculum theory, CRT, and social justice standards.

My research question is related to critical literacy, social justice, and picture book reading/imagining theories.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

“The tendency to assimilate other's discourse takes on an even more profound and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming. The text we read and memorize becomes our ideological interrelations with the world” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342).

The central focus of this dissertation has been to investigate the analysis of children's construction of meaning from picture books, with the aim of comprehending the social world as perceived by children when they engage in play, imagination, and the reading of multimodal texts within school environments that foster their play and critical thinking skills. This exploration is rooted in various theoretical frameworks, including sociocultural theory, play theory, critical literacy, and social justice theories.

Additionally, I delve into children's utilization of interpretive tools across different texts related to social justice themes, such as identity and diversity, to further their critical thinking and address social issues. In today's educational landscape, marked by an increasingly diverse student population in both preschools and public schools (Lopez Lopez, 2019 and 2018), social justice and anti-racist pedagogies have become indispensable. As Baratz and Baratz (1970) suggested, cultural differences should be considered distinctions rather than deficiencies. Negative attitudes towards African Americans and other marginalized groups contribute to institutional racism, with schools as integral components of this system. By examining the classroom context and environments within preschools, including classroom culture, play theory, critical literacy, social justice theories, and sociocultural theory, I have gained a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between teachers, children, literacy interactions, and play

activities. This insight has enabled me to unravel how children construct meaning from picture books in their play activities and their interactions with peers and teachers.

In this concluding chapter, I provide an integrated overview of findings from my research, followed by an exploration of play and imagination, sociocultural theory, social justice theory, and critical literacy theory, which I have relied upon in conjunction with the practices I documented. I discuss how reading picture books related to identity and diversity themes has encouraged young children's meaning-making of social issues and their connection with real-life events. I conclude with final remarks, an acknowledgment of my study's limitations, and a discussion of future research directions.

6.1 Overview of Findings

This proposed research study aims to demonstrate how scholarship on play and imagination can help create critical literacy and social justice opportunities for young children (2-5 years old). Conventionally, critical literacy is limited to older students. I explore how we might bring social justice pedagogy to early childhood classrooms. Today's world is full of various social injustices. In a world fraught with social injustices, integrating social justice-themed picture books into early childhood classrooms and play activities can serve as a beacon of hope for a more equitable future. Social imagination can help students imagine a socially just world through picture books. This case study's findings indicate that young children (ages 2-5 years) make meaning of children's picture books related to social justice themes such as identity and diversity. While they make meaning, they use their play activities, imagination skills, and funds of knowledge when the diverse texts come with teacher and peer scaffolding in early childhood classrooms. These findings support the importance of teacher scaffolding and the need to provide time and space for free play activities and diverse texts related to social issues in early childhood classrooms.

This research study can provide invaluable insights into early childhood literacy. There is no single research on children's imagination and reading picture books related to social justice themes through free play times as part of the daily routine in preschool environments. It is also important to recognize teachers' role in supporting student learning and connecting student meaning-making of picture books to real-life connections through play and reading.

Moreover, this study highlights children's capacity to raise awareness among their peers regarding ongoing global issues through picture book reading. Study findings suggest that diverse text choices by teachers and students encourage young children to consider multiple perspectives from authors of various backgrounds, including those from marginalized communities.

As Bishop (1990) articulates in her article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," these texts become windows and mirrors for young children from diverse backgrounds. Bishop (1990) recommends that teachers challenge the single stories we may hold about various topics related to real-life issues and include books that can challenge our students' preconceptions. She also suggests that all children benefit from reading books featuring characters from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Such books provide children with an opportunity to see themselves (mirrors) and learn about the experiences of others (windows) (pp. ix-xi).

The sociocultural context model I created for this study using the observational data sets shows that not just teachers but also peers, parents and siblings, home environment, texts, student background and culture, and the goal of reading all influence students' reading and meaning making of the picture books as Bakhtin (1981) claimed that language and meaning are not fixed or static but dynamic and constantly evolving through social interactions. Vygotsky (1978) asserted that people understand the world around them through dialogic conversations.

Therefore, books as textual interactions and dialogic conversations as part of social interactions shape our perspectives and support our cognitive development, allowing us to use our critical thinking skills.

The qualitative research method that I chose was effective in capturing the data. Conducting the research as a qualitative study allowed me to understand the phenomenon of play and how children performed literacy (Lysaker and Miller, 2012). I understood how children made sense of their play and interactions with picture-books from their perspective, spaces, language, and the sociocultural contexts that guided their actions. Through case study methodology, I could tell the complex stories of children's lived experiences in the guidance of social justice principles as part of play activities, reading, and listening to picture books with social justice themes. I observed and documented their play and how this kind of play influenced their text reading by using their imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills to promote social justice principles.

Future research directions should encompass studies on play, picture book reading, and imagination conducted across different age groups and in various settings because there is a lack of empirical data on the meaning making of young children's picture books related to social justice themes during play activities including imagining through reading and play. As educators, it is essential to empower the younger generation to become critical thinkers, innovators, and informed global citizens through the transformative power of literacy education. Empower the young generations to become critical thinkers, problem-solvers, and informed global citizens through the transformative power of literacy education. Literacy goes beyond reading and writing; it also involves critical thinking about global issues and connecting to real-life concerns.

Summary of key findings

I present Harvest and Nile room findings in this chapter. I aimed to spread “awareness” to young children about their diversity and identity, so I chose to pull out two common themes (Identity and diversity) that addressed my research questions. These two themes were practiced more commonly in Harvest and Nile rooms than justice and advocacy themes. Young children from both classrooms talked about their own identities, home culture, experiences, and language while playing, imagining, and reading the four themes in their respective classrooms. The second finding is that teachers promoted literacy/picture book reading and imagining related to play activities in the classroom contexts. Free play time seemed encouraging to children’s imagination, meaning-making of the books, and playing with the classroom materials. The third finding is that giving choices to students about their play activities, materials, and texts supported their imagination and meaning-making of the books related to play activities. Students appreciated having diverse books in their classroom libraries with excitement. Before I left the classrooms, I had to pick up the books and take them with me to bring them back the next day. A few children resisted and asked me to wait and give extra time to clean up the books. They also asked me to bring them back the next day. When I entered the rooms with the books, students ran to the bookshelf excitedly to see the books. Teachers appreciated my bringing diverse texts to the classroom libraries and thanked me.

The fourth finding is following an anti-bias education program as a preschool. This kind of education program supports student-centered and teacher-supported curriculum planning, strategies, text, and material choices in addition to encouraging student well-being, success, and diversity concerning imagining meaning-making of the texts related to play activities. The daily routine has morning meetings in both classrooms. Students greet, share, do activities, and discuss the daily agenda in these meetings. Students have a chance to get to know each other early in the

morning and have fun singing “greeting” in both classrooms. Nile room students and teachers sing greeting songs in different languages to welcome diverse student groups into the classroom.

Welcoming diversity and being proud of yourself as a student are part of anti-bias curriculum programs. In both classrooms, the daily routine as part of the anti-bias curriculum program allows and welcomes diverse students to be proud of their own culture and backgrounds. I noticed that students seemed safe and comfortable in their classroom settings. Teachers were flexible with daily routines, rules, lesson plans, student needs, and classroom management. Awena School follows a play-based curriculum. There is no pressure for students to focus on academic success.

As Paley (2004) mentioned in her book: *“A Child’s Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play,”* Awena school children’s primary work is “play.” Children develop and practice their cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language skills when they play. The fifth finding is that teacher support of critical thinking, and dialogic conversations contributed to student imagination of creating a socially just classroom environment. This finding shows that teachers promote the meaning-making of picture books and encourage student imagining related to play activities, encouraging student-student and teacher-student conversations. This way, pedagogical classroom spaces and practices can encourage or discourage student meaning-making of diverse texts in play activities. Teachers might need to redesign space and time to provide supportive classrooms for children utilizing diverse texts during play activities. Teachers also must enrich curricular activities around student needs and interests around diverse text reading, imagining, and playing. Students seemed curious, engaged, motivated, and excited when I organized lesson plans around text reading, imagining, and playing. It was meaningful to see their art and dramatic creations around the text, reading, playing, and imagining.

Another example is when we read “The Proudest Blue” book by Muhammad (2019), several students walked to the large area by the dress-up section to pretend to be wearing scarves I brought for fantasy play. Scarves were meaningful props to pretend. As part of the teacher support, I discuss, as Kuby (2013) mentioned, “Consciousness-raising moments” can happen at any time and in any way in an early childhood classroom with teacher scaffolding and support. When I read the texts to the students in small groups, large groups, or individually, I noticed that as a participant-researcher, I followed age-appropriate teaching strategies in this consciousness-raising process. I also noticed the critical role of teacher support; when I left the books on the bookshelf, children scanned the pages and left them on the floor quickly. They did not discuss the stories or request a teacher to read them. Teacher guidance is very significant to student learning here in this example. In sum, only leaving the books on the shelf does not support this consciousness-raising process for our students.

As Vasquez (2014) claims, the role of teacher scaffolding or student learning is part of the daily routines in early childhood classrooms. Teacher support also encouraged student interaction and problem-solving skills in both classrooms. Students had chances to develop social interactions with each other through empathy and respect. Reading texts from diverse backgrounds encouraged students to understand others. The texts supported student identity and diversity. I witnessed this through individual readings, small groups, large groups, and circle times. During art activities related to text reading, students talked about (male and female genders) dressing up as a mermaid, walking outside with a parent or grandmother, and showing off their costumes to everyone. At the same time, we read “Julian is a Mermaid” book by Love (2018).

The sixth observation reveals that older students relied on their advanced language skills. In contrast, their younger counterparts employed their artistic talents, simple language, concise sentences, mimetic expressions, and gestures to engage with the characters and narratives in various texts found in their classroom libraries when exploring their identities.

The seventh observation reveals that children's social imagination through diverse text readings is supported by their language, drama, and art skills in both classrooms. This research study revealed that critical literacy is not just for older children but also for younger children. Young children are also citizens of this country but not future citizens. They understand what it means to be a part of society. They are also aware of their own responsibilities when they get help and guidance from their teachers or adults around them. This study showed that the civicness of young children also depends on teacher support in school settings.

The eighth finding is that students in both classrooms, when they get the agency to do specific tasks related to the classroom duties, these students with agency show more responsibility to take specific tasks in the classroom. While students were reading diverse texts, they supported each other and helped each other to understand the stories. I witnessed excellent cooperation during the play times related to text reading. They also advocated for each other. The students who witnessed unfairness among the story characters advocated for them and tried to problem-solve for them. Children also justified what was wrong and suitable for their peers related or unrelated to text readings.

My research has achieved its intended goals, and the findings answer my research questions. My research question: "How do young children understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in preschool classrooms?" made me understand that using multiple theoretical lenses identified a practical definition of play using

play theories such as play experiences need to be fun, engaging, creative, control-free, intrinsic, accessible, motivational, meaningful and discharge negative energy for young children. Adults' role is significant in play activities for scaffolding and support reasons.

This study is essential since it fills a gap in the research on the pedagogical practices related to the convergence of play, imagination, picture-book reading, and social justice. No contemporary research includes all four concepts in early childhood education research literature. This study can deepen the connections between scholarly and practice.

In addition to this, this study can support early childhood social justice and imagination, including play activities in early childhood classrooms. Another importance of this research is the contribution of critical literacy education for young children (2-5 years). In both classrooms, children were excited to talk about their diverse backgrounds with pride. Picture books were the main tools for starting conversations about their identities and diverse backgrounds. They also talked about their home lives, family members, traditions, religions, and neighborhood experiences based on what they read in the diverse texts. They were able to connect the stories to their play activities. In both classrooms, they used their critical thinking and language skills to tell stories about their lives and what was happening around them related to the stories they read.

6.2 Future Research Directions

Research focusing on play, picture book reading related to social justice themes, and imagination can provide invaluable insights into early childhood literacy, particularly in today's world marred by various social injustices. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping young children's creativity, imagination, learning, and knowledge acquisition. They are responsible for connecting their students with real-life events through play and academic instruction.

This study makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the interplay between picture book reading and play activities, elucidating how these elements synergistically foster children's imagination and creativity. Moreover, it highlights their capacity to raise awareness among children regarding ongoing global issues through picture book reading.

When educators select diverse texts for their students, they provide a valuable opportunity for young learners to glean insights from multiple perspectives about the real world. The ability of young children to adapt and navigate the world's complexities is crucial for their future well-being. Introducing students to works by multicultural scholars further supports their comprehension of the world's diverse realities. Educators must introduce students to various texts that resonate with real-life events to cultivate a socially just world.

This study gives meaningful insights to pre-service teachers using diverse texts to guide their students' learning around social issues to connect them to real-life events. Using picture books as learning tools to illuminate students about specific topics, such as gender issues, diverse family structures, and LGBTQ issues, in addition to race issues, will support student learning. Another support can be paying attention to multiple perspectives instead of only to dominant narratives through diverse texts. Preservice teachers also learn to give space and time to free play activities in their respectful classrooms. Supporting the civicness of young children in early childhood classrooms also allows space and time for diverse texts. Future research directions should include studies on play, picture book reading, and imagination conducted across different age groups and in various settings. Play holds a significant role in the lives of children, especially at the kindergarten level, where playtime should remain an integral part of their learning experience. Children must have opportunities to engage in physical activity and enjoy themselves at school.

Theoretical implications: Ultimately, my research undertakes to establish a robust theoretical foundation and shed light on the critical contribution of picture books to the social justice curriculum. This diversified exploration will be instrumental in advancing our understanding of the intersection between literature, pedagogy, and social justice in early childhood education. Play and imagination can promote social justice education for young children. Dyson and Genishi (2009) claimed that when children play, they use their imagination, enjoyment, interests, needs, and curiosity in play activities. Playing with scarves, creating artwork related to text readings, and pretending to be a Mermaid for both female and male students are the signs of the children's imagining, playing, and reading.

As Piaget claimed, children were active learners in play activities, creating knowledge and exploring the world through their imagination; they passed through assimilation accommodation and adaptation stages to produce recently learned play skills (Mellou, 1994). Reading diverse texts in early childhood classrooms and connecting the stories from these texts to play activities would show how Piaget was right to claim children's active learning and create their own knowledge to understand the world around them. Another claim Piaget was that children would not think abstractly until 11 years old to solve problems and address proposed, future, and ideological problems (Pascal, 2014). This study showed the opposite of what Piaget claimed about young children's abstract thinking until the age of 11 years. Even two-year-old children were aware of their own backgrounds and diversity. They knew what was fair or unfair in the classrooms and the stories. Wanless and Crawford (2016) claim that even children as young as three months old know racial differences (p.9).

This study revealed that identity and diversity themes of social justice principles were utilized more than advocacy and justice themes in both early childhood classrooms. Children

were aware of their identity and diversity as part of the anti-bias education approach in both classrooms. Having space and time for critical literacy is significant for students learning to be connected with social issues around them. Critical literacy education in early childhood classrooms should actively nurture young children's civic awareness, encouraging them to be responsible citizens.

Empowering student agencies is paramount for effective learning in this context. Teachers are responsible for giving space and time to dialogic conversations in the classrooms, as Bakhtin (1981) mentioned the role of interactions between people in society in his essay. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that people understand the world around dialogic conversations. Therefore, picture books and student interactions with peers and teachers shape student perspectives and positively support student cognitive development. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes teacher and peer scaffolding and guiding students within their zone of proximal development to facilitate their progress in learning, can be effectively realized through engaging with diverse texts, fostering imagination, and encouraging creative play. Free play activities, diverse texts, available toys and materials, and classroom teacher-peer interactions support children's imagination, too. While Bakhtin focused on "dialogic exchange," Vygotsky claimed that the sociocultural environment influences the student's imagination, reading, and learning. I witnessed the role of the social environment in both classrooms to support student imagining, reading, and playing in addition to classroom talk supported by peers and teachers related to social justice themes in picture books.

Shank (2016) claims that early education's most influential and energetic learning tool is imagination. Imagination and literacy education must be integrated with the multimodal literacies in the public-school curriculum for young children. Storytelling is one of the

“imaginative-based pedagogies.” Drawing, painting, playing, and poems also support critical literacy development in children.

Social Implications:

In this dissertation, I aimed to share my experiences and insights into the realms of play, literacy, and imagination. In a world fraught with social injustices, integrating social justice-themed picture books into early childhood classrooms and play activities can serve as a beacon of hope for a more equitable future. I hope that educators will champion the cause of creating a socially just world within their schools by affording young children in their classrooms the opportunity to engage with social justice literature.

It is vital to empower the younger generation to become critical thinkers, innovators, and informed global citizens through the transformative power of literacy education. Being literate transcends the ability to read and write; it also encompasses critical thinking and a heightened awareness of the world's dynamics and challenges.

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<https://people.unisa.edu.au/>

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<https://www.learningforjustice.org/about>

APPENDIX A – Consent Forms & Interview Protocols

Administrative Consent Form

Paula Zipperer (Manager of Eagle’s Wing Child Care Programs) consents to Derya Gok (UW-Madison, PhD) conducting her research (Seeds of Hope: A Just Education for Young Children through Play, Imagination, And Picture Books in Early Childhood Education) at Eagle’s Wing Child Care Programs in Madison, Wisconsin.

This includes interviewing and observing students who are participating in the study.

Signed-----

Date-----

*Parent Consent Form*UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MADISON

Research Participant Information and Consent Form -Parent/Guardian

Title: Seeds of Hope: A Just Education for Young Children through Play, Imagination, and Picture Books in early childhood education (ECE).

Principal Investigator: Professor Dawnene Hassett (phone: 608-770-0399 | email: ddhassett@wisc.edu)

Graduate Student Researcher: Derya Gok (Phone: 608- 658-9291| email: dgok@wisc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

My name is Derya Gok, and I am a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studying how play and imagination are foundational to early childhood literacy success. Before becoming a graduate student, I was a teacher here for many years, and I am excited to be back! Your child is invited to participate in a research study about how children’s literature with social justice themes can be used for play and imagination in the classroom, promoting social justice principles. My fundamental research question is: “How do young children understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education (ECE)?”.

WHAT WILL MY CHILD’S PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to allow participation in this research, your child will take part in regular classroom activities such as play sessions and shared reading sessions. For the study, I will be bringing picture books related to social justice themes to keep in the classroom library for all children to use and look at as a part of their daily routine. The books will come from the School of Education library at UW-Madison and are chosen based on four themes for anti-bias education in early childhood: identity, diversity, justice, and action. My role as a researcher is to read these picture books with children, play alongside them, and observe them as they listen to, play with, and share their ideas with each other through art, play, reflections, and conversations. I will be there to scaffold their play to the vocabulary and concepts in the books, using guided-play activities in the classroom (i.e., student-directed, and teacher-supported free play with a focus on learning outcomes).

The children will be observed in free choice time while playing with their peers. As students play, read, and work, I will document their interactions/literacy performances as a participant observer through the field notes. I also will collect their understanding and thoughts about the books, which may be verbal, written, drawn, acted out, danced, and many other forms of artistic and intellectual representation. Student work related to the study will be collected, scanned, and returned to the students.

I will visit and observe the classroom approximately nine hours per week (three hours per day and three times per week) for four weeks, with a potential for follow-up. Total sessions will be 36 hours in a month. Your child's participation is entirely voluntary, and they may end their participation at any time without any consequences. Two other teachers will always be available in the room if your child decides not to participate in any one of the activities. I would also like to be able to interview your child. The interview would be documented by taking notes. If your child decides to participate in an open-ended interview with me, these will take no more than 10 minutes and occur during play time. The interview will not be recorded.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR BENEFITS TO ME OR MY CHILD?

There are no direct benefits, but there are risks to you or your child from participation in this study. These risks include the possibility for a breach of your child's confidentiality, that your child may reveal personal/sensitive/identifiable information to the researchers, and that your child may become upset while participating in the research activities.

HOW WILL MY CHILD'S CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

All data collected for this study will be stored securely on the UW-Madison campus. While there may be publications because of this study, any identifying information, including your child's name and the location of this study, will be changed to protect your child's confidentiality. I would like to be able to quote your child directly without using her/his name. If you agree to allow me to quote your child in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

The research team will be the only individuals with access to data. Your child's name will be changed to a pseudonym at the time when a member of the study team transcribes the observation notes. All data collected for this project will be retained indefinitely for possible use by the research team in future research. The data will all be de-identified prior to long-term storage.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think that participating in the research has hurt you, please contact me or the Principal Investigator, Professor Dawnene Hassett (contact info at top of form).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or have complaints about the research study or study team, call the confidential research compliance line at 1-833-652-2506. Staff will work with you to address concerns about research participation and assist in resolving problems.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your child's participation in this research, and voluntarily consent for them to participate. If you would like a copy of this form for your records, please contact me (dgok@wisc.edu).

Name of Child (please print): _____

Name of Parent: _____

Please initial on the line informing your consent of the following:

_____ I give my permission for my child to be interviewed by the study team.

_____ I give my permission for my child to be quoted directly in publications without using their name.

_____ Signature

_____ Date

*Teacher Consent Form*UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MADISON

Research Participant Information and Consent Form -Teacher Participant

Title: Seeds of Hope: A Just Education for Young Children through Play, Imagination, and Picture Books in early childhood education (ECE).

Principal Investigator: Professor Dawnene Hassett (phone: 608-770-0399 | email: ddhassett@wisc.edu)

Graduate Student Researcher: Derya Gok (Phone: 608- 658-9291| email: dgok@wisc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

My name is Derya Gok, and I am a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studying how play and imagination are foundational to early childhood literacy success. Before becoming a graduate student, I was a teacher here for many years, and I am excited to be back! You are invited to participate in a research study about how children’s literature with social justice themes can be used for play and imagination in the classroom, promoting social justice principles. My fundamental research question is: “How do young children understand and express social justice themes through literacy practices, imagination, and play in early childhood education (ECE)?”

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this research, you will take part in regular classroom activities such as play sessions and shared reading sessions. You and the children will be observed in free choice time while you interact with each other. As children play, read, and work, I will document their interactions/literacy performances through written field notes. I also will note or collect their understanding and thoughts about the books. For the study, I will be bringing picture books related to social justice themes to keep in the classroom library for all children to use and look at as a part of their daily routine. The books will come from the School of Education library at UW-Madison and are chosen based on four themes for anti-bias education in early childhood: identity, diversity, justice, and action. My role as a researcher is to read these picture books with children, play alongside them, and observe them as they listen to, play with, and share their ideas with each other through art, play, reflections, and conversations. I will be there to scaffold their play to the vocabulary and concepts in the books, using guided-play activities in the classroom (i.e., student-directed, and teacher-supported free play with a focus on learning outcomes).

You and the children will be observed in free choice time while you interact with each other. As children play, read, and work, I will document their interactions/literacy performances through written field notes. I also will note or collect their understanding and thoughts about the books, which may be verbal, written, drawn, acted out, danced, and many other forms of

artistic and intellectual representation. Student work related to the study will be collected, scanned, and returned to the students.

I will visit and observe the classroom approximately nine hours per week (three hours per day and three times per week) for four weeks, with a potential for follow-up. Total sessions will be 36 hours in a month. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may end your participation at any time without any consequences. I would also like to be able to interview with you as a teacher. If you decide to participate in an open-ended interview with me, these will take no more than 15 minutes and occur during play time. The interview will not be recorded but documented by taking notes.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR BENEFITS TO ME OR MY CHILD?

There are no direct benefits, but there are risks to you from participation in this study. These risks include a possible breach of your confidentiality, and you may reveal personal/sensitive/identifiable information to the research team during your participation.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

All data collected for this study will be stored securely on the UW-Madison campus. While there may be publications because of this study, any identifying information, including your name and the location of this study, will be changed to protect your confidentiality. I would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow me to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

The research team will be the only individuals with access to data. Your name will be changed to a pseudonym at the time when a member of the study team transcribes the observation notes. All data collected for this project will be retained indefinitely for possible use by the research team in future research. The data will all be de-identified prior to long-term storage.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think that participating in the research has hurt you, please contact me or the Principal Investigator, Professor Dawnene Hassett (contact info at top of form).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or have complaints about the research study or study team, call the confidential research compliance line at 1-833-652-2506. Staff will work with you to address concerns about research participation and assist in resolving problems.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research, and voluntarily consent for you to participate. If you would like a copy of this form for your records, please contact me (dgok@wisc.edu).

Name of the teacher (please print): _____

Please initial on the line informing your consent of the following:

_____ I give my permission to be interviewed by the study team.

_____ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.

_____ Signature
_____ Date

Child Assent Form

Child Assent Procedure – Meaning-making of picture books

My name is Derya and I am learning about how kids and teachers understand about reading picture books through children’s play. I would like to listen and look as you and your teacher read and talk about the stories that you read during play time. Is that okay? Give me a signal to show yes/no (thumbs up or thumbs down, picture card, verbal).

Child 1: Y/N Notes

Child 2: Y/N Notes

Child 3: Y/N Notes

Child 4: Y/N Notes

Child 5: Y/N Notes

Child Assent Procedure - Interviews

My name is Derya and I am learning about how kids and teachers talk about books. I would like to ask you some questions that will take 10 minutes. I would like you to tell me about the book you just read and what you know about the book. If you don't feel like talking, you don't have to. If it is easier for you to draw your answers to my questions, that is okay too. You can stop at any time and that will be alright. Do you want to answer my questions?

Child 1: Y/N Notes

Child 2: Y/N Notes

Child 3: Y/N Notes

Child 4: Y/N Notes

Teacher Interview Form

Seeds of Hope:

A Just Education for Young Children through Play, Imagination, and Picture Books in early childhood education

Teacher Interview Questions

Interviews will be held with teachers every 2-6 weeks to discuss their thoughts on the play, specific conversations held during these play periods, what they feel their students are learning while playing, and any other topics regarding play and the research project. Interviews would take place in their schools, in a room of their choosing - including their classrooms, resource room, etc.

Interview questions for teachers in this study could include:

- 1) Would you tell me about the favorite children's picture books your students are reading?
- 2) Would you tell me about the activities in general that your students are doing (building with blocks/putting on dress-up clothes/pretending)?
- 3) How did your students decide what and who to play with?
- 4) Would you tell me about how your students resolved the conflicts with their friends during the play activities?
- 5) Would you tell me how your students decide to play with student A but not B?
- 6) Is there a reason your students do not want to play with B?
- 7) How do your students choose to play with specific toys r games? And why?
- 8) What are your student's likes/dislikes about the play activities? Why?
- 9) What did they learn when playing with A?
- 10) What did your student learn while playing this activity?
- 11) What does your student understand from the specific stories?
- 12) What do they like/dislike about the book?
- 13) Has your student ever experienced any of these challenges in their homes/families/neighborhoods?

- 14) Have they mentioned their emotions and behaviors related to the picture book stories?
- 15) How would your students handle this difficult situation?
- 16) Which story characters do your students talk about in general?
- 17) If your students were in the same situation as the story character, how would they react?
- 18) Why did your student pretend to be a firefighter/princess/doctor/teacher etc.?
- 19) Are your students aware of their own identities? Are they proud or not? How do they talk about it?
- 20) Are your students aware of each other's identities? How do you understand this?
- 21) Do your students talk about appreciating having different friends from different backgrounds?
- 22) Are they welcome to diversity? Do they have issues in the classroom related to differences?
- 23) Is there a group bounding in the class among students?
- 24) Do they cooperate?
- 25) What do they think about fairness? How do they experience fairness in the classroom? How do they resolve conflicts about fairness?
- 26) Does it make your student feel sad if there is an unfair situation in the classroom? Do they react? How?
- 27) Do they advocate for marginalized people? Do they talk about it?
- 28) How do they make meaning of different texts related to social justice issues? What do you think? Do you think they are aware of social justice issues?
- 29) How do they talk about real-life experiences based on what they heard or read from the texts connected to social justice issues?
- 30) How do they question their real-life experiences related to identity/diversity/justice/advocacy?

1. How can play, and imagination in ECE promote social justice principles such as identity, diversity, justice, and action?
2. How do children make meaning of different texts related to social justice issues?
3. How do children tell their real-life experiences based on what they read and heard from the texts?
4. How do children question their real-life experiences?

These interviews will be done with individual students and will be documented using observational notes.

Student Interview Form**Student Interview Questions:****A. Play:**

1. What did you play with?
2. Did you play alone or with a friend? Whom do you choose to play with?
3. Which play activities do you like? Why?

B. Imagination:

1. How do you imagine yourself as the story character?
2. What do you like about him/her/it? Or not like about him/her/it?
3. Is there a story you like to pretend from picture books?

C. Picture Book Reading:

1. Do you like reading books?
2. Tell me about the book you read with me.
3. What did you learn from this story? Have you ever experienced any of these in your home/family/neighborhood?
4. What is your favorite book? Why do you like it? What do you not like about it?
5. How would you do it at home/at school/in your neighborhood?
6. Do you read at home? Who does the story time at home?
7. Is there a book you like that reflects your home life and makes you happy?
8. Is there a book that you like to talk about?

D. Social Justice:

1. Where are you from?
 2. Are you proud of being...?
 3. Do you like playing with friends from different countries in your classroom? Why?
 4. How do your friends treat you in class?
 5. Do you miss your country/hometown? What do you miss? Things you like and things you do not like.
 6. What are your traditions/ culture/religious activities/ceremonies?
 7. What is a fair situation for you? What is unfair? How would you support your friend if your friend is hurt or another child grabs his toy?
-
1. How can play and imagination in ECE promote social justice principles such as identity, diversity, justice, and action?
 2. How do children make meaning of different texts related to social justice issues?
 3. How do children tell their real-life experiences based on what they read and heard from the texts?
 4. How do children question their real-life experiences?

*IRB Approval Letter 2022***Minimal Risk Research IRB
9/30/2022**

Submission ID number: 2022-1021

Title: Seeds of Hope: A Just Education for Young Children through Play, Imagination, and Picture Books in early childhood education.

Principal Investigator: Dawnene Hassett Point-of-contact: Derya Gok

IRB Staff Reviewer: Laura Conger

A designated MRR IRB member conducted an expedited review of the above-referenced initial application. The study was approved on 9/30/2022 by the IRB member. The study qualified for expedited review pursuant to 45 CFR 46.110 and, if applicable, 21 CFR 56.110 and 38 CFR 16.110 in that the study presents no more than minimal risk involves:

- (5) Data, documents, records, or specimens
- (7)(a) Behavioral research
- (7)(b) Social science methods

As part of its review, the IRB determined this study does not require continuing review either under federal regulations or institutional policy, or both. Please note, however, that although this study is not required to undergo continuing review, you must still submit the following to the IRB:

1. Changes of protocol prior to their implementation (unless the change is necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to subjects)
2. Addition of new study personnel
3. Funding updates
4. Reportable events (unanticipated problems, noncompliance, new information) in accordance with institutional policy
5. Closure report In addition, please be aware that the type of funding that supports a study or whether the study falls under FDA regulations can affect whether continuing review may be required in future.

To access the materials approved by the IRB, including any stamped consent forms, recruitment materials and the approved protocol, if applicable, please log in to your ARROW account and view the documents tab in the submission's workspace.

If the IRB required informed consent, please use only copies of the approved consent forms or information sheets to obtain informed consent; give all participants a copy of the consent document.

You have identified the following financial sources to support the research activities in this IRB application: None. If this information is incorrect, please submit a change to modify your application as appropriate.

Prior to starting research activities, please review the Principal Investigator and Study Team Responsibilities Investigator Manual, which includes a description of IRB requirements for submitting personnel changes, changes of protocol and reportable events.

If you have general questions, please contact the Minimal Risk Research IRB at 608-263-2362. For questions related to this submission, contact the assigned staff reviewer

APPENDIX B – Definition of Terms

Definition of Terms

Definition of Terms Before I delve into the young children's imagining and meaning-making of children's picture books related to social justice themes such as identity and diversity as part of their play activities in one of the university-based preschools and childcare centers in Madison, Wisconsin, the following terms and definitions are used throughout this dissertation to convey specific concepts, as follows:

Anti-Bias Education Curriculum

An approach that includes addressing issues of personal and social identity, social-emotional relationships with people different from oneself, prejudice, discrimination, critical thinking, and taking action for fairness with children. It also emphasizes adult anti-bias growth and understanding of the systemic dynamics of oppression (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, and Nimmo, 2015, p.3).

Critical literacy

Critical literacy centrally includes finding embedded discrimination in media (Blake, 2016). This is done by analyzing the messages promoting prejudiced power relationships found naturally in media and written material that go unnoticed otherwise by reading beyond the author's words and examining the way the author has conveyed his or her ideas about society's norms to determine whether these ideas contain among other discriminatory ideas, those concerning racial or gender inequality (Blake, 2016).

Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices

This is a term created by Gloria Ladson Billings (1994) to describe “ a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to transfer knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Coffey, 2008). Culturally relevant teaching or responsive teaching is a pedagogy (Gay, 2010) grounded in teachers' practice of cultural competence or skill at teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting (Diller and Moule, 2005). Teachers using this method encourage each student to relate course content to their cultural context (Scherff & Spector, 2011). While the term often deals specifically with the instruction of African American students in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1994), it has proven to be an effective form of pedagogy for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds inside and outside this nation. Making education culturally relevant is thought to improve academic achievement (Curwin and Lynda, 2003). Although most of this practice is undertaken in a primary or secondary school, Baumgartner, and Johnson-Bailey (2008) have experienced implementing and discussing culturally relevant teaching within a higher education environment.

Deficit View

Many teachers do not always consider the cultural lens that influences their interpretations of student actions, parent responses, or instructional styles. Instead, they often believe that culturally and linguistically diverse students fail in school because of their deficiencies or because their families do not value education, not because of social inequities, unfair school policies, or differential treatment in the classroom.

This ill-informed belief (deficit perspective) suggests that efforts to improve academic achievement should be focused on “fixing” students (i.e., Improving test-taking skills) rather

than shifting the school culture to support intellectual capacity building and identity-safe classrooms so that students can be successful.

Teachers' deficit-oriented attributions of student performance influence their instructional decision-making, not supporting student motivation and learning and giving fewer opportunities for culturally congruent ways of learning (Hammond, 2015, p.59).

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

DAP refers to using knowledge about child development, including age, individual, social, and cultural appropriateness, and children's characteristics and experiences, to make the best decisions during teaching to promote children's learning and development. In the absence of such knowledge, teachers may plan activities for students that are developmentally inappropriate, which it refers to as Developmentally inappropriate practices (DIP) that hinder their learning. DIPs are seen as rigidly academic and adult-controlled learning experiences. Paper pencil activities, rote learning, academically focused work, and large group-directed teaching are examples of DIPs (Betawi & Jabbar, 2019, p.40)

Dialogue

Bakhtin (1981) conceptualizes dialogue as a sense of power, positioning, and defacement. Dialogue builds consciousness: it increases the individual's awareness of society. What people speak and how they speak reflect our world's entire social discourse and ongoing cultural and political struggles (Aiseng, 2022, p.2)

Dialogical Becoming and Thinking

Bakhtin (1981) argued that a dialogic perspective is essential for understanding aspects of reading. According to Bakhtin, when an individual reads an author's ideas and feels the story characters' feelings/thoughts and self-voice, a conversation occurs between the characters, the reader, and the author. The reader engages with comprehensive and relational events during the reading process, and a dialogic exchange occurs.

Bakhtin (1981) claimed that all thinking is related to dialogue. Bakhtin's claim on an individual's talk in dialogue reflects the author's adaptation to reality. Internalization of conversation with others actively builds upon a reader's perspective of physical and social reality. Furthermore, the new perspectives collected from others within the self-result in a new multifaceted consciousness, creating a new social resource for the future. This is especially true with fiction, which fosters critical thinking and supports children's imagination skills.

Bakhtin (1981) used the term "dialogic" to introduce the concept of dialogism. Dialogism is the use of conversation or shared dialogue to explore the meaning of something. Bakhtin's dialog originated from interactions among scholars in the "Bakhtin Circle" in 1918; their thinking demonstrated that all language is dynamic, relational, and engaged in endless re-descriptions of the world.

For Bakhtin, meaning-making combines perspectives/ideologies, themes, or discourses and includes all voices. For example, young children retell stories from picture books. When children retell others' opinions/ideas, they also add meaning-making to the text (Harste, 2014). Bakhtin referred to this as "double-voiced" narration. Bakhtin (1981) stated, "The tendency to assimilate other's discourse takes on an even more profound and more basic significance in an

individual's ideological becoming. The text we read and memorize becomes our ideological interrelations with the world” (p. 342).

Diversity

We are all unique and worthy human beings with unique and worthy histories. As teachers, we do not have homogenous classes. Our classes are composed of diverse students in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, language, gender identity, socioeconomic status, ability, faith, family composition, and sexual orientation. This diversity calls for culturally relevant teaching, especially regarding literacy instruction (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016, p.2.).

Free Play

The term “free play” is frequently used to describe play that is child-directed, voluntary, and flexible and often involves pretend play, although it can also refer to other types of play (Pyle and Daniels, 2017, p.275).

Graphophonic Cues

Hassett and Schleble (2007) claimed that images and printed text work together in multiple ways. Readers extend three cueing systems, semantic, graphophonic, and syntactic, to negotiate multiple levels of meaning in a visual text. The text as a whole, with images, graphics, and placement of the print, helps change the sociocultural plane so that readers make sense of the text (p. 63). One of the three major cueing systems is the graphophonic cue system that supports reader comprehension of a text. This cueing system is concerned with using cues within words. These cues could include letter-sound relationships, phonics, shape or configuration, word patterns or phonograms, and words recognized at sight. In the comprehension process, the reader can use the graphophonic cueing system to discriminate between graphic symbols, words, and phrases (Wheat and Edmond, 1975, p.524).

Guided Play

With guided play, adults are a factor in one of two ways: they either create the play environment to support specific outcomes and then step back to let children play, or during child-directed play, the adult purposefully provides guiding questions or comments that highlight or support specific learning goals. In contrast, guided play vs. free play involves some involvement from adults, either before the play starts or very selectively during the play, to support specific learning goals. Adult scaffolding is essential in guided play (Weisberg et al., 2016).

High Scope Education Curriculum

The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum, an approach that supports young children's learning and enables children, particularly those at risk, to achieve tremendous school success and, later, more excellent adult socioeconomic status. High Scope education discusses the central principles of curriculum: active learning, positive adult-child interactions, child-centered learning environments, consistent daily routines, and team-based child assessment (Schweinhart, Weikart, & Hohmann, 2002).

Identity

From early childhood, all people construct a sense of self, a combination of social and individual personal identities. This journey involves a continually evolving understanding of oneself and others and recognizing how identity is impacted by how others see you and how you see others. Social identities are both externally imposed and internally constructed. They powerfully shape who you are, and you powerfully shape your response to them (Derman-Sparks, Olsen Edwards & Goins, 2020, p.24).

Imagination

Vygotsky explained “imagination” as the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play. For example, if a child is playing the role of a mother, play is constructed in such a way that there are imaginary situations. Imagination is a new psychological process for the child; it is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Imagination arises from action. A child creates an imaginary situation in play (Vygotsky, 1978, p.93&95).

Institutional Racism (Structural Racialization)

Institutional racism is a form of racism expressed in the practice of social and political institutions. It is reflected in disparities regarding wealth, income, criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education, among other factors. Race-neutral policies and practices across social, political, and economic institutions create racialized outcomes (Hammond, 2015, p. 160).

Multimodality

Multimodality is an interdisciplinary approach that understands communication and representation to be more than about language. It has been developed over the past decade to systematically address much-debated questions about societal changes, such as new media and technologies. Multimodal approaches have provided concepts, methods, and a framework for collecting and analyzing visual, aural, embodied, and spatial aspects of interaction and environments and the relationships between these (Bezemer, 2012).

Play

Dyson and Genishi (2009) identified language as a child's play; Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) characterized the play as “intrinsic” and “self-initiated”: the primary way children learn about their world using their experiences. Souto-Manning (2016) identified “play” as “expanding knowledge of the world and a literacy facilitator” (p. 67). Lynch, Pike, and Beckett (2017) explained that play is not only a childish or trivial pursuit. It helps us understand our existence's meaning and contributes to the whole child development (p.18).

Play-Based Education

Play-based learning is the dominant approach to early childhood education today. It promotes children’s cognitive, social, emotional, psychological, and physical development. A play-based approach is characterized by learning through exploration, discovery, and trial and error (Drew, 2023).

Pretend Play

Pretend play is called fantasy play or imaginative play. Children choose an imaginary scenario in which they take on and act out roles and then determine a set of rules from these roles. For example, when playing “grocery store,” children take on clearly understood roles of cashier, shopper, and announcer, determining their actions (Mraz, Porcelli, and Tyler, 2016, p.15).

Pretend Reading

Young emergent readers often regard print as a prop for retelling a memorized story (Clay,1967). This early form of reading is pretend-reading or emergent storybook reading (Sulzby, 1985). Although many emerging readers can match their spoken rendition of a

memorized story to the pages of a book, they are often unable to match their retellings to the print on the page (Reutzel, 1995).

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension consists of three elements: The reader, the text, and the reading activity. This three-way interrelationship occurs within a larger sociocultural context that is shaped by the reader and interacts with each of the elements iteratively throughout the process of reading (Kirby, 2003).

Read Aloud

Reading aloud: reading a story from a book, live, verbal and non-verbal, interactive, to a group of listeners (Roos, 2023).

School-to-prison pipeline

Winn et al. (2011) and Musser et al. (2021) focus on restorative practices of public schools in redirecting youth related to disciplinary issues in another way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Critical literacy may be beneficial in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline so that youth focus on their literacy education for their success at school. Literacy education is a right for everyone, including marginalized students (Winn et al., 2011 & Musser et al., 2021).

Semantic Cues

Capable readers use three cue systems: semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic. Teachers need to teach and assess all three cueing systems. When the student reads the sentence, a teacher needs to ask if the sentence the student reads makes sense to the student in terms of the sentence's meaning. Story structure, illustrations, background knowledge, and book knowledge support semantic cue systems (Hassett, 2021). Semantic cues refer to the meaning in language that assists in comprehending texts, including words, speech, signs, symbols, and other meaning-

bearing forms. Semantic cues involve the learners' prior knowledge of the language, text, visual media, and prior life experiences(<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/docs>).

Social Imagination

Johnston (2012) explains social imagination as the foundation of civil society. It is what makes relationships work (or not) and is the foundation of legal and political practices. It should not be taken for granted. It combines mind-reading, moral reasoning, self-regulation, solving problems, and building social relationships (p.73- 75).

Social Justice Education and Definition of Social Justice

Learning for Social Justice (1991) describes social justice education as redefining what it means to have educational equality. Social justice in education demands equity for all students but also allows space for student growth through diversity. Social justice promotes equal economic, employment, and educational opportunities in a nation where everyone feels safe and secure.

Social Justice Principles

There is no generally accepted definition of social justice. The contemporary understanding of this normative concept has its roots in political philosophy. However, different disciplines – including sociology, social psychology, law and jurisprudence, and human geography – have contributed to its theoretical underpinnings and to defining its fundamental elements. The fundamental principles of social justice are equality, equity, rights, and participation. Social justice is a normative concept centered on fairness and the principles of equality, equity, rights, and participation. While there is no consensus on the meaning and scope of the term, social justice is commonly associated with the creation of a just society, with the underlying assumption that justice implies human welfare through equal rights and sharing of

benefits, fair treatment, recognition of cultural differences, and equitable access to resources and opportunities (Khechen, 2013,p.4-5).

A. EQUALITY: Fair access to goods and services is a fundamental principle of social justice.

Based on the belief that all human beings are equal before God and the law, the notion of “fairness” as related to access is often linked with the notion of “equality” to imply that all people, regardless of their gender, race, age, class, language, religion, and occupation, are entitled to benefit from public goods and resources. These include access to livelihood, capacities, education, information, health services, employment, and job opportunities. In democratic societies, the concept of equality also includes the political sphere, with effective decision-making processes in place to ensure an equal voice for all citizens (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

B. EQUITY: The principle of equity derives from the recognition that the concept of fairness as equal or uniform distribution is not always possible or implementable, mainly because of existing injustices that have prevented or reduced the ability of specific individuals or groups to gain equal access to public goods, resources and opportunities in the first place (Khechen, 2013,p.4-5).

C. RIGHTS: Rights as a critical principle of social justice can be divided into the following two sub-groups: (a) legal rights, which include inherited rights, and other lawful rights, such as the right to receive payment for one’s jobs according to agreed terms; and (b) moral rights, which include people’s fundamental human rights, liberties and such entitlements as the right of “giving people a say in affairs that concern them” and the right of certain groups to particular geographic territories. In socially just societies, even without legal guarantees, moral rights are protected by

adequate procedures, norms, and rules, some of which are universally accepted, as is the case with human rights, for instance (Khechen, 2013,p.4-5).

D. PARTICIPATION: Participation in the context of social justice means involving people in decisions that govern their lives. This includes engaging them in deciding on the kind of public services needed in their areas and ensuring their full participation in political and cultural life (Khechen, 2013, p.4-5).

Syntactic Cues

Using the syntactic cueing system, the reader would transfer his oral language knowledge to printed materials. He would recognize that the occurrence of certain words or structures can enable him to make predictions about future structures. Using syntactic cues would include inflectional endings, grammatical relationships, and punctuation markers. The reader's use of the syntactic cueing system would reflect the dialect (Wheat and Edmond,1975, p.524-525).

Teaching Tolerance

Teaching tolerance is vital to children to develop empathy and respect for each other and learn about others' backgrounds. Teachers can encourage anti-bias education programs by allowing students to work/play with and support one another. Like adults, children also experience differences and similarities in relating to one another; therefore, teachers need to maintain an anti-bias classroom. Anti-bias teachers are committed to the principle that every child deserves to develop to their fullest potential (Learning for Justice,1991).

APPENDIX C – Picture Books

1. Identity Picture Books

2. Diversity Picture Books

3. Justice Picture Books

4. Advocacy Picture Books

1. Identity Picture Books:

- Barnes, D. (2017). *“Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut”* (G. C. James, Illus.). Denene Millner Books, Agate Publishing,
- Bogan, C. (2017). *“Where is Rodney?”* (F. Cooper, Illus.). Yosemite Conservancy.
- Brown, M. (2022) *“Marisol McDonald does not match!”* (S. Palacios, Illus.). Children’s Book Press.
- Bruchac, J. & London, J. (1997) *“Thirteen Moons on Turtle’s Back: A Native American Year of Moons”* (T. Locker, Illus.). Puffin Books.
- Byers, G. (2018) *“I am enough”* (K. A. Bobo, Illus.). Balzer and Bray Publishing.
- Cherry, M. A. (2019) *“Hair Love”* (V. Harrison, Illus.). Kokila Publishing.
- Curry, P. (2019) *“Parker Looks Up”* (V. Strickland, Illus.). Aladdin Publishing.
- Elliot, M. (2016). "Milo's Museum" (L. Davick, Illus.). Puffin Books.
- Love, J. (2018). "Julian Is a Mermaid" (J. Love, Illus.). Candlewick Press.
- Mallard, K. (2019). "Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story" (J. Nelson, Illus.). Roaring Brook Press.
- Mendez, Y. (2019). "Where Are You From?" (J. Suarez, Illus.). HarperCollins.
- Muhammed, I. (2019). "The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family" (H. Aly, Illus.). Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

- Myers, T. (2009). "Looking Like Me" (G. Lewis, Illus.). Jump at the Sun.
- Nyong'o, L. (2019). "Sulwe" (V. Harrison, Illus.). Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Perry, R. (2016). "Skin Like Me" (A. Cunha, Illus.). Aya Press.
- Phi, B. (2017). "A Different Pond" (T. Bui, Illus.). Capstone Young Readers.
- Robinson, C. (2020). "You Matter" (C. Robinson, Illus.). Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Scotto, R. (2018). "Jerome By Heart" (C. Maurey, Illus.). Enchanted Lion Books.
- Sima, J. (2017). "Not Quite Narwhal" (Author & Illustrator). Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Gomez-Hassett Racial Equity Initiative		The Theme of Identity
author	illustrator	title
Barnes, Derrick	Gordon, Gordon	<i>Crown</i>
Bogan, Carmen	Cooper, Floyd	<i>Where's Rodney?</i>
Brown, Monica	Palacios, Sara	<i>Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match/ Marisol McDonald no combina</i>
Bruchac, Joseph & London, Jonathan	Locker, Thomas	<i>Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back: A Native American Year of Moons</i>
Byers, Grace	Bobo, Keturah	<i>I Am Enough</i>
Cherry, Matthew	Harrion, Vashti	<i>Hair Love</i>
Curry, Parker & Curry, Jessica	Jackson, Brittany	<i>Parker Looks Up</i>
Elliott, Zetta	Wong, Purple	<i>Milo's Museum</i>
Love, Jessica	author & illustrator	<i>Julian Is A Mermaid</i>
Mailliard, Kevin	Martinez-Neal, Juana	<i>Fry Bread</i>
Méndez, Yamile	Kim, Jaime	<i>Where Are You From?</i>
Muhammad, Ibtihaj	Aly, Hatem	<i>Proudest Blue, The</i>
Myers, Walter Dean	Myers, Christopher	<i>Looking Like Me</i>
Nyong'o, Lupita	Harrion, Vashti	<i>Sulwe</i>
Perry, LaTashia	Jackson, Bea	<i>Skin Like Mine</i>
Perry, LaTashia	Jackson, Bea	<i>Hair Like Mine</i>
Phi, Bai	Bui, Thi	<i>A Different Pond</i>
Robinson, Christian	author & illustrator	<i>You Matter</i>
Scotto, Thomas	Taltec, Olivier	<i>Jerome By Heart</i>
Sima, Jessie	author & illustrator	<i>Not Quite Narwhal</i>

2. Diversity Picture Books

Ada, A. (2004). "*I Love Saturdays Y Domingos.*" (E. Savadier, Illus.). Publisher:

Dragonfly Books.

Barnett, M. (2012). "*Extra Yarn.*" (J. Klassen, Illus.). Publisher: Balzer + Bray.

Boelts, M. (2018). "*A Bike Like Sergio's.*" (R. López, Illus.). Publisher: Balzer + Bray.

Curry, P. (2019). "*Parker Looks Up*" (V. Harrison, Illus.). Aladdin Publishing.

Ewald, W. (2002). *"The Best Part of Me: Children Talk About Their Bodies in Pictures and Words."* (W. Ewald, Illus.). Publisher: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Gomi, T. (2018). *"I Really Want to See You Grandma."* (T. Gomi, Illus.). Publisher: Chronicle Books.

Lennon, J. (2019). *"With a Little Help from My Friends."* (P. McCartney, Illus.). Publisher: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Ludwig, T. (2013). *"The Invisible Boy."* (P. Barton, Illus.). Publisher: Knopf Books for Young Readers.

McGhee, A. (2017). *"Come with Me."* (G. Potter, Illus.). Publisher: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Mr. Mault's Class (2018). *"The Best Part of Me."* (Mr. Mault's Class, Illus.). Publisher: Little Brown Books for Young Readers.

Myers, T. (2009). "Looking Like Me" (G. Lewis, Illus.). Jump at the Sun.

O'Leary, M. (2016). *"A Family Is A Family Is A Family."* (Q. Leng, Illus.). Greenwood Books Publishing.

Olsen, S. (2016). *"Our Class Is a Family."* (S. Olsen, Illus.). BookBaby Publishing.

Smith, C. (2003). *"I Am America: Rise and Shine."* (B. Collier, Illus.). Publisher: Jump at the Sun.

Sotomayor, S. (2019). *"Just Ask! Be Different, Be You, Be Brave."* (R. López, Illus.). Publisher: Philomel Books.

Woodson, J. (2012). *"Each Kindness."* (E.B. Lewis, Illus.). Publisher: Nancy Paulsen Books.

Woodson, J. (2018). *"The Day You Begin."* (R. López, Illus.). Publisher: Nancy Paulsen Books.

Yamada, K. (2018). *"What Do You Do With A Chance?"* (Mae Besom, Illus.). Publisher: Compendium Inc.

Gomez-Hassett Racial Equity Initiative		The Theme of Humanity
author	illustrator	title
Ada, Alma Flor	Savadier, Elvira	<i>I Love Saturdays Y Domingos</i>
Barnett, Mac	Kassan, Jon	<i>Extra Yam</i>
Boeifs, Maribeth	Jones, Noah Z.	<i>A Bike Like Sergio's</i>
Ewald, Wendy	author & illustrator	<i>The Best Part of Me</i>
Goni, Taro	author & illustrator	<i>I Really Want To See You Grandma</i>
Lennon, John & McCart	Cole, Henry	<i>With a Little Help from My Friends</i>
Ludwig, Trudy	Barton, Patrice	<i>The Invisible Boy</i>
McGhee, Holly	Lemaître, Pascal	<i>Come With Me</i>
Mr. Mault's Class	author & illustrator	<i>The Best Part of Me</i>
O'Leary, Sara	Leng, Qin	<i>A Family Is a Family Is a Family</i>
Olsen, Shannon	Sonke, Sandie	<i>Our Class Is A Family</i>
Smith, Charles R.	author & illustrator	<i>I Am America</i>
Sotomayor, Sonia	López, Rafael	<i>Just Ask</i>
Woodson, Jacqueline	Lewis, E. B.	<i>Each Kindness</i>
Woodson, Jacqueline	López, Rafael	<i>The Day You Begin</i>
Yamada, Kobi	Besom, Mae	<i>What Do You Do With a Chance?</i>

3. Justice Picture Books:

Sotomayor, S. (2019). *"Just Ask! Be Different, Be You, Be Brave."* (R. López, Illus.).

Philomel Books Publishing.

Mendez, Y. (2019). *"Where Are You From?"* (J. Kim, Illus.). HarperCollins.

Muhammed, I. (2019). *"The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family."* (H. Aly,

Illus.). Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Willems, M. (2013). *"A Big Guy Took My Ball."*(M. Willems, Illus.). Hyperion Books for Children.

Willems, M. (2011). *"Should I Share My Ice Cream?"* ."(M. Willems, Illus.). Hyperion Books for Children.

4. Advocacy Picture Books:

Barnett, M. (2012). *"Extra Yarn."* (J. Klassen, Illus.). Balzer and Bray.

Olsen, S. (2016). *"Our Class Is a Family."* (S. Olsen, Illus.). BookBaby.

Woodson, J. (2018). *"The Day You Begin."* (R. López, Illus.). Nancy Paulsen Books.

Woodson, J. (2012). *"Each Kindness."* (E.B. Lewis, Illus.). Nancy Paulsen Books.

Ludwig, T. (2013). *"The Invisible Boy."* (P. Barton, Illus.). Knopf Books for Young Readers.

Perry, R. (2016). *"Skin Like Me."* (A. Cunha, Illus.). Aya Press.

Mendez, Y. (2019). *"Where Are You From?"* (J. Kim, Illus.). HarperCollins.

Muhammed, I. (2019). *"The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family."*(H. Aly, Illus.). Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

APPENDIX D – Tables

TABLE 1: Data Collection Timeline and Procedures

This table details my involvement with a university-based preschool and childcare center over the three months of the study.

Academic Year	Month	Procedures
Year 1(2022-2023)	October	IRB Approval: 10/6/2022
Year 1(2022-2023)	October 6- November 4, 2022	Permission to conduct a research study at the site: #611 Eagle Heights Drive, Madison, Wisconsin 53705 (Manager response waited for at least three weeks)
Year 1(2022-2023)	November 10, 2022	Selection of focal classrooms/Meeting with staff/Parent-Teacher consent Forms distributed
Year 1(2022-2023)	November 17, 2022	Signatures were collected for the consent forms and participated in an “Open House “in one classroom to introduce this study
Year 1(2022-2023)	November	Classroom observations started/Familiarize self with school, introduction to staff, observations of both classrooms/Formal data collection: Visits to the school every day until January 31, 2023 (UW-Madison starts classes) Begin formal data collection, Observing/Classroom
Year 1(2022-2023)	December	photos every day (M-F) per month focusing on literacy, play/imagination/social justice themes in both classrooms/lesson planning
Year 2(2023-2024)	January 22, 2023	Semi-structured interviews with teachers & students/observing/participating/Lesson Planning/Familiarizing self with classroom members and routines /Follow up observations /Selection of focal teachers Ms. C/Ms.L/Ms.K/Ms.S/Mr.D- /Observing/ /photos of both classrooms

Year 2(2023-2024)	January-February 28, 2023	Participating & planning small and large group times/Photographs of H.&N. children's written and constructed products/Follow-up interviews with participants/After January 31, 2023, school visits were 2-3 days a week from 7:30-11 am: 3,5 hours.
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TABLE 2: Lesson Plans/Activities

This table shows the participant researcher's small and large group activities in both classrooms.

	Activity Name/Topic	Materials	The Activity Process/Structure	Interested Student Numbers	Learning Goals
H. Room	1. Playing with Dollhouse and dolls 2. Drawing a rainbow. 3. Yoga bug activity 4. Magic of sharing Activity 5. Playing with dolls and blankets with baby stuff” baby bottles/clothes/crib.”	1. Dolls from different ethnicities, blankets, and baby bottles. 2. Colored pencils, glue, paper scraps, foam shapes, and white paper	1. We read the” Family is a Family” book, and one student talked about having a baby sister and mentioned how her mother cared for the baby. 2. We read the “I Am Enough” book, and one of the students wanted to draw a rainbow at the art table.	3	1. Empathy & Social Processing skills/ Awareness of other races/sameness or differences 2. Supporting identity development and enhancing self-esteem. 3. Supporting students' large motor skill development. 4. Friendship/cooperation and sharing 5. Appreciation for diversity and supporting identity development. 6. Social processing skills/awareness of others/diversity/identity/adopted children and learning about others’ lives.
	6. Pretend play: Cooking in the kitchen for the babies	3. Yoga book for toddlers 4. Flannel board pieces” train cars”& flannel board: Storytelling with train cars and sharing them. 5. Baby stuff, dolls, crib,	3. We read the “Yoga Bug” book with three students, and they wanted to copy and exercise the movements in the book. 4. We read” The Magic of Sharing	2	
					3

		<p>medical kit, and blankets in small sizes.</p> <p>6. Kitchen toys. Housekeeping area, toy fridge, toy stove, pots, and pans.</p>	<p>book and played with train car flannel board pieces together.</p> <p>5. We read the” Magic of Sharing” book and two female students wanted to play with dolls of different ethnicities. We talked about the skin colors of the story characters and our own skin colors: We noticed similarities and differences with the story characters.</p> <p>6. We read” To the Moon and Back for You” by Serhant, and students wanted to pretend to cook for the babies in the kitchen.</p>	<p>4</p> <p>2</p> <p>2</p>	
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N.Room	<p>1. Playing with Dollhouse and dolls</p> <p>2. Drawing/coloring on bus pictures</p>	<p>1. Dolls from different ethnicities, blankets, baby bottles, and kitchen food with baby clothes.</p> <p>2. Markers and bus pictures.</p>	<p>1. We read” Family is a Family book, and two students seemed excited about looking at the pictures which had babies; and I asked them if they were interested in playing with dolls, they agreed to play with me.</p> <p>2. We read the “Jerome by Heart” book, and students paid attention to the bus picture in the book.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>3</p>	<p>1. Empathy & Social Processing skills/ sameness or differences</p> <p>2. Friendship/sharing/love</p>
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TABLE 3: Lesson Plans/Activities

This table shows the participant researcher's small and large group activities in both classrooms.

	Activity Name/Topic	Materials	The Activity Process/Structure	Interested Student Numbers	Learning Goals
H. Room	1. Decorating Mitten cut outs with stickers	1. Mitten cutouts/stickers/markers/W	1. We read “ The Best Part of Me” By Ewald: Children talk about their best body parts.	5	Awareness to own body parts and identity Friendship/kindness/sharing
	2. Friendship Cards	e traced hands and measured hand sizes	2. Students read about the” Kindness makes me stronger” book	2	
	3. Animal Puppets	2. Markers and cards with stickers	3. Students were reading the book” Five little monkeys” and took puppets to pretend to be animals and not be friendly.	4	Friendship/ kindness/sharing
	4. Sensory Play” cotton balls and animals.	3. Puppets	4. A. read the” Duck duck moose” book and walked to the sensory table to play with a moose toy with the other animals.	1	Developing fine motor skills/sharing toys at the table/developing language skills/pretending/using language/cooperation/enhancing knowledge about animals.
	5. Snowman art	4. Sensory table: cotton balls, marbles, animals, and shapes on the table. 5. Construction paper in different colors, snowman body parts, and glue sticks. Colored pencils, markers, scissors, and small fabrics were cut into small pieces.	5. Students read” The giving	3	Fine-motor skill development, creativity, sharing materials, and
	6. Christmas tree, snowflakes drawing with bingo markers, and regular markers.	6. Markers, paper, stickers.			

			<p>snowman” by Zheng and did snowman art.</p> <p>6. We read Morrison's “ I Got the Christmas Spirit” book, created Christmas trees and snowflakes, and drew a house with students.</p>	2	<p>talking/learning about helping people and being kind.</p> <p>Creativity, fine motor skills, diversity and identity, sharing, cooperation, helping people in need, and welcoming different religions.</p>
N.Room	<p>1. Decorating Mitten cut outs with stickers</p> <p>2. Friendship Cards</p> <p>3. Drawing own mermaids: Open-ended art</p>	<p>1. Mitten cut-outs/stickers/markers/ We traced hands and measured hand sizes</p> <p>2. Markers and cards with stickers</p> <p>3. Markers and papers</p> <p>In the “Julian is a Mermaid” book.</p>	<p>1. We read “ The Best Part of Me” By Ewald: Children talk about their best of body parts.</p> <p>2. Students read about the” Kindness makes me stronger” book</p> <p>3. Students read the book and drew their own mermaids.</p>	6 4 5	<p>1. Awareness of own body parts and identity</p> <p>2. Friendship/kindness/ Sharing</p> <p>3. Gender differences/diversity/identity</p>

TABLE 4: Lesson Plans/Activities

This table shows the participant researcher's small and large group activities in both classrooms.

	Activity Name/Topic	Materials	The Activity Process/Structure	Interested Student Numbers	Learning Goals
H. Room	1. My Hair 2. Narwal Puzzle 3. Pretend Play: Scarves 4. Dancing	1. Markers and large white paper to share to draw our own hair 2. Glue, blank white paper, Narwal body parts 3. Scarves 4. Dress up clothes	We read “Hair Love” By Cherry and talked about our hair types and colors 2. We read the” Not Quite Narwal” book and talked about friendship/students glued Narwal's body parts on a white paper. 3. We read “ The proudest blue” book and pretended to wear scarves. 4. Students read” Ready to Fly” book by Townsend and pretended to dance in dress-up clothes and pretended to teach and do read-aloud time	2 4 9 2	1. Identity awareness/ Being proud of what we have as part of our bodies 2. Friendship/empathy 3. Diversity/Identity 4. Students did memory reading and pretended to read with working on large motor skills Diversity and learning to never give up/ identity

N.Room	<p>1. My Hair</p> <p>2. Narwal Puzzle</p> <p>3. Lacing bus and fire truck cards that I created</p> <p>4. Ice-cream making with play dough toys and popsickle sticks</p> <p>5. Pretend Play” People toys” & the doll house with dinosaurs</p>	<p>1. Markers and white large paper to share to draw our own hair</p> <p>2. Glue, white blank paper, Narwal body parts</p> <p>3. Laminated Bus cards with holes in the edges & Yarns in different colors.</p> <p>4. Play dough and popsickle sticks</p> <p>5. Dinosaurs, people and doll house</p>	<p>1. We read “hair Love” By Cherry and talked about our hair types and colors</p> <p>2. We read the” Not quite Narwal” book and talk about friendship/students glued Narwal body parts on a white paper.</p> <p>3. We read the “Last stop on market street”. Children wanted to play with bus stencils that I created. They laced them with a yarn.</p> <p>4. We read “Should I share my ice cream” book by Mo Willems.</p> <p>5. We read “ When dinosaurs ruled” book and pretended playing with dinosaurs and dolls.</p>	<p>5</p> <p>8</p> <p>6</p> <p>6</p> <p>2</p>	<p>Identity awareness/ Being proud of what we have as part of our bodies</p> <p>2. Friendship/empathy</p> <p>3. The story is an inclusive story to kindness, empathy, gratitude, and finding joy in unexpected places, and celebrates the special bond between a curious young boy and his loving grandmother. N. students were interested in transportation vehicles such as buses. They cooperated and helped each other to lace the cards/a few gave up doing it.</p> <p>4. Sharing and cooperation.</p> <p>5. Sharing/Cooperation/Kindness/Family/Friendship</p>
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TABLE 5: Lesson Plans/Activities

This table shows the participant researcher's small and large group activities in both classrooms.

	Activity Name/Topic	Materials	The Activity Process/Structure	Interested Student Numbers	Learning Goals
H. Room	1. Pretending baking/cooking for family and friends 2. Building 3D structures with Magna Tiles 3. Unicef cards/Memory Game 4. Mermaid puppets: Glueing and coloring them. 5. Moustache Drawing Activity	1. Picture Book and kitchen toys 2. Picture book and building a house for the grandma with magna tiles 3. Unicef picture cards” People from different ethnic backgrounds in traditional clothes.” 4. Mermaid puppets and markers/glue 5. White paper, colored pencils	1. We read “Fry Bread” book 2. We read the “I really want to see you grandma” book 3. We read” I am Enough” book by Byers 4. We read” Julian is a Mermaid” book and discussed what mermaids were. 5. K. and R. read the” Extra Yarn” book, and R. asked if they could draw a mustache for her dad at the art table.	2 1 2 5 1	1. Friendship/sharing/cooperation as part of the social skills 2. Family ties/Love/Empathy/Feeling a part of the family/Identity/Diversity 3. Appreciation for diversity and identity/Sameness and differences: Characteristics of people from different backgrounds 4. Gender differences.” Are mermaids girls?” 5. Developing fine motor skills, creativity, and artistic skills following the reading activity” extra yarn” book and supporting the student's Identity development. The student wanted to draw a mustache for her father, and she wanted him to have one since he did not have one like the story character in the “extra yarn” book.

N.Room	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Biking in the classroom 2. Unicef cards/memory game 3. Animal cut-outs and coloring them with crayons 4. Pretending to take a bus and missing it and taking an airplane and missing it, too. 5. Handprints 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bike book and trikes 2. Unicef picture cards” People from different ethnic backgrounds in traditional clothes.” 3. The book and the animal cutouts with crayons 4. Book and the purses with dolls. 5. Book and paint with white paper. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We read “A bike like Sergio” book 2. We read” I am Enough” book by Byers 3. We read the ”Elephant Learns to Share” book. 4. We read the” Is this the Bus for Us” book, and two students had to pretend to play with purses and dolls, running/walking around to take the bus or airplane in a hurry. 5. We read” The best part of Me’ and did handprints. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2 4 3 2 5 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social processing skill/Sharing/cooperating with friends/friendship 2. Appreciation for diversity and identity/Sameness and differences: Characteristics of people from different backgrounds 3. Sharing/Empathy/Friendship/Cooperation 4. Awareness of people from different ethnicities: The story characters are students of color taking a bus together and helping each other: Cooperation. 5. Identity and diversity
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TABLE 7: Sociocultural Context: Factors that influence students' meaning-making of picture books.

Community/School

