"Children Have the Fairest Things to Say": Young Children's Engagement with Anti-Bias Picture Books

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated how an early childhood teacher and young children in a public White-predominant kindergarten classroom engaged in critical discussions of anti-bias issues including racism, White privilege, gender stereotypes, gender nonconformity, sexism, and homophobia. Through the use of interactive read-alouds using anti-bias picture books, the study's findings revealed that (a) the children could participate in thoughtful interactions during anti-bias read-aloud sessions and showed their complex understanding of race and gender issues; (b) the children needed substantial support to engage in activism against social injustices; (c) the children displayed a variety of responses to the discussion questions and activities related to gender-themed picture books as most children had difficulties resisting gender binary conceptions and stereotypes while some children, especially boys, were strongly empowered to embrace gender-nonconforming practices; and finally (d) some children internalized and enacted anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness, and racial/gender discriminatory actions to which the early childhood teacher often failed to either disrupt or intervene.

Keywords Anti-bias education · Interactive read-alouds · Picture books · Young children · Race · Gender · Intersectionality

Introduction

Early childhood education is among the most contested spaces when it comes to discussions of critical topics such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. The common narrative during this developmental stage is often about preserving childhood innocence and seeing children as too young and incapable of engaging in such discussions. This discourse of protection motivates the need to shelter children from "adult topics" despite the fact that bigotry, hatred, and discrimination are very much the reality of early childhood spaces (Robinson, 2013). The danger of such discourse, as explained by Bronwyn Davies, is that "in the name of protection, we fail to arm children with the knowledge they need to protect themselves" (Robinson, 2013, p. x). Taking a critical perspective, some early childhood researchers recognize young children as capable learners and social agents who have the rights to participate in civic movements and

sociopolitical discussions. They have long been advocating for engaging young children in difficult conversations on topics such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. (Boutte, 2008; Husband, 2012; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008).

A similarly child-inclusive discourse was established three decades ago when Derman-Sparks (1989) initiated and developed the anti-bias education approach. Anti-bias education stressed the importance of promoting diversity as an essential part of U.S. multicultural society by teaching young children about the nature of differences, respect for diversity, and tolerance for others. In the last decade, anti-bias education scholars moved further away from its multicultural roots and started acknowledging the systems of -isms in the U.S. society (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Iruka et al., 2020). Drawing from a myriad of empirical research, anti-bias scholars have made a significant claim that young children are not only conscious of racial/ethnic/gender/class/ability differences but also capable of actively producing social discourses that further discrimination, prejudice, and biases. In the landmark publication, *What If All the Kids Are White?*, Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2011) argued that anti-bias education is not only designed for diverse classrooms but also much needed in White homogenous classrooms.

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To build a just society, it is crucial to facilitate learning experiences in which White children have opportunities to become allies and actively join the collective social justice project. After all, fostering a commitment to social justice should start when children enter early childhood classrooms as preschool years are crucial in shaping young children's cultural and social understandings. It is also the first place where children "systematically face dominant sociocultural values and [are] expected to abide by and embody them" (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010, p. 269).

Considering the current sociopolitical context where the pervasive discourses of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia dominate, it becomes even more important to adopt the anti-bias approach in our early childhood classrooms. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2019) reminded early childhood educators that "because you care about children, care about helping them live joyfully in a diverse world, cannot bear to see children hurt or learning fear and bias, you feel that you have to do something" (p. 38). Answering this call, this research project was designed in collaboration with an early childhood teacher to purposefully engage young children in authentic conversations about racism, sexism, and homophobia through interactive read-alouds of anti-bias picture books. This case study seeks answers to the following research question: *How do the early childhood teacher and young children in a White-predominant kindergarten classroom engage with and respond to the interactive read-aloud sessions of anti-bias picture books and related activities?*

Theoretical Frameworks

Adopting an intersectional lens, the study design is informed by the principles of anti-bias education to closely examine the interconnected issues of race and gender in early childhood settings. Discussing intersectionality, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) explained that a single theoretical framework (such as Critical Race Theory, Feminism, Queer Theory, Disability Studies, etc.) is not enough to understand the complexity of social oppressions that operate across interrelated planes such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, and ability. Certain groups of people (e.g., Black transgender deaf girls) can simultaneously be subject to various forms of bias and marginalization, and their experiences and struggles cannot be fully understood through a single-axis lens. Hence, intersectionality should be adopted to better understand the dynamics of power relations, self-identities, and different forms of social oppressions that significantly impact both teachers' and students' lived experiences.

In the early childhood education context, many educators and researchers tend to look at children through developmentally appropriate perspectives (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) or, at best, address marginalized groups of students as a single cultural group (e.g., Black children) or in relation to a single social injustice problem (e.g., racism or sexism) (Farago et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2009). Early childhood researchers and educators often miss how children's schooling experiences are shaped and formed by multiple negative forces, including racism, sexism, ableism, linguicism, classism, heterosexism, transphobia, homophobia, and dehumanization. The intersectional framework opens new ways to address different biases, prejudice, and discrimination existing in a single context and acknowledge the complexity of both teachers' and students' intersectional identities and struggles. Some early childhood researchers recently used the intersectional framework to account for the diversity of childhood experiences. Exemplar studies include Zimmerman's article (2018) on kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's problem behaviors in relation to the intersectionality of race and gender, Morales et al.'s investigation (2019) of school bullying through the intersectional body size-gender lens, and Beneke & Cheatham's research (2020) on discourses of dis/ability and race in shared book reading. These studies illuminated marginalized children's schooling experiences and expanded early childhood research beyond the unidimensional aspect of social identity and oppression.

Following this new line of research, the present study is designed based on four core goals of anti-bias education, including:

- **Identity:** Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
- **Diversity:** Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.
- **Justice:** Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- **Activism:** Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

(Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019, pp. 7–8).

As the most well-circulated and well-accepted approach, anti-bias education has been embedded within a developmentally appropriate practices framework and promoted by the largest professional organization in the early childhood education field—the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The anti-bias approach is affirmed through NAEYC's position statement, Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education, issued in April 2019.

The statement acknowledges not only personal biases and interpersonal dynamics, but also systemic problems—"the uneven distribution of power and privilege inherent in public and private system… including early childhood education" (p. 4). The anti-bias principles have been incredibly influential, useful, and applicable as they were developed from an early childhood perspective for early childhood educators and young children. They cover a broad spectrum of social injustices that make them more aligned with an intersectional framework. Integrating intersectionality into anti-bias education helps early childhood educators recognize how the discourses of -isms strongly influence young children's learning experiences. Adopting intersectionality epistemologies is the most practical way to make the anti-bias approach more critical, inclusive, and transformative. Hence, this study closely examined the intersectional experiences and struggles of young children revealed through their engagement with anti-bias picture books.

Literature Review

Early childhood is a unique realm where the overwhelming discourses of care, love, and protection dominate, and can be used to justify the silencing of social injustices. Children are often seen and perceived as innocent, racially unconscious, asexual, and cognitively incapable of understanding complex matters such as race, gender, and sexuality (Howard, 2016; Robinson, 2013). These topics are mostly deemed controversial (Husband, 2012), developmentally inappropriate (Sonu & Yoon, 2020), and risky business (New, Mardell, & Robinson, 2005). For a long time, the early childhood field has been both exempted and marginalized from the social justice movement. In the last decade, an emergent body of early childhood literature has started to recognize that early practices are neither neutral nor apolitical, but that they strongly contribute to upholding the oppressive systems of -isms beginning at the earliest grade levels. This handful of studies has contributed significantly to a more critical perspective that moves away from the discourse of diversity and inclusion (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2016; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018; Willox & Brandt, 2018; Boutte & Bryan, 2019; Escayg, 2020). These scholars and their studies have started to advocate for confronting and eliminating systemic problems in early childhood classrooms.

Race and Racism: From Colorblind to Anti-Racist

Believing that children are too young to have racial consciousness or an understanding of race and racism, early childhood teachers tend to take the colorblind approach in teaching that "treats race as an irrelevant, invisible, and taboo topic" (Howard, 2016, p. 60). Colorblind ideologies call for neutral treatment and purposely ignore racial differences to promote equality (e.g., "I don't see color", "I treat all my students the same"). Ironically, colorblindness also helps constitute White innocence by erasing the legacies of slavery, segregation, and other forms of racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Tatum, 2017). Instead of eliminating racial inequality, colorblind ideologies function as another form of racism that "covers up continuing racist thought and practice that is often less overt and more disguised" (Feagin & Hernan, 2000, p. 93). Many researchers in this area have argued that the avoidance of discussions of sensitive topics makes racism, racial discrimination, biases, and White ideologies go unnoticed, unchallenged, and eventually become the social norms in young children's perceptions (Derman Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Husband, 2012; Boutte et al., 2011).

Contrary to the colorblind approach, the anti-racist approach is grounded on the belief that racism is permanently embedded in the U.S. education system. As Ladson Billings (1998) stated, to adopt the anti-racist approach is "to take bold and sometimes unpopular positions" to advocate for transformative actions in the classrooms (p. 22). To create meaningful discussions of race and racism with young children, many scholars recommend using critical literacy practices such as shared-readings of race-themed picture books (Kim et al., 2016; Beneke and Cheatham, 2019) or teaching history through drama and writing (Husband, 2012, 2019). Husband suggested that early childhood teachers should aim to explicitly teach about racial injustice and actively intervene by equipping students with "numerous models and methods" for combating injustices (2019, p. 10). Learning from these projects, the present study takes on the anti-racist approach to intentionally encourage young children to engage in meaningful conversations around racial issues.

Gender and Sexuality: From Silencing to Advocating

Receiving even stricter censorship compared to issues of race and racism, the topics of gender and sexuality are often considered taboo topics that should not be discussed with young children (Robinson, Smith, & Davies, 2017). Under the unspoken sacred mission of child protection, early childhood teachers often fail to recognize that gender and sexuality have always existed within every single aspect of early schooling. There is a myriad of evidence showing how explicit and implicit curricula contain consistent messages that actively promote a gender binary and heterosexuality (Wallis & Van Every, 2000; Blaise, 2005; Gansen, 2017), and further invalidate and discriminate against young children's gender nonconforming acts (Gunn, 2011).

Seeing gender as a sociopolitical construct, some critical education researchers have argued for the inclusion and open

discussion of gender and sexuality to counter the presumption of the universality of gender binary and heterosexuality in educational spaces. Scholars engaged in this work have been rooted in the anti-bias approach to enhance early childhood teachers' sensitivity and tolerance towards LGBTQ families and children (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019). While anti-bias education acknowledges the complexity of children's gender identity development and seeks to eliminate gender stereotypes, it still operates within the heteronormative structuralist framework that supports categorical binaries of both sex and gender. Epstein and Johnson (1994) reminded us that heterosexism "discriminates by failing to recognize differences. It posits a totally and unambiguously heterosexual world in much the same way as certain forms of racism posit the universality of whiteness" (p. 198). Sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and heterosexism are prevalent injustices that oppress and block our children from the healthy development of their identities. To eradicate the negative impact of gender oppression on young children, we must expand the anti-bias approach to disrupt the dominant heteronormative discourse in the field of early childhood education. This is the approach taken by this study in designing read-aloud sessions.

The Power of Picture Books

The use of picture books is one of the most effective strategies to help break the pervasive and problematic silence on anti-bias issues in early childhood classrooms (Husband, 2019; Vasquez, 2014). The valuable role of picture books has been studied in relation to fostering children's literacy development (Strasser & Seplocha, 2007), socioemotional learning (Harper, 2016), sociocultural understanding, and agency development (Mathis, 2016). The combination of texts and illustrations is both entertaining and engaging for young children. At the heart of picture books lies the powerful concept of representation: whose stories are told, how characters are presented, what kind of problems are posed, and how problems are resolved. Picture books, hence, can function to marginalize as much as to include, to oppress as much as to empower (Bishop, 1990). Research on children's literature has shown that children of Color rarely see positive, authentic, and realistic depictions of themselves and their lived experiences while White children suffer from the overexposure of Whiteness and Eurocentric ideologies (Boyd et al., 2015). It is crucial to note that representation is definitely important, but not enough. While many multicultural picture books have successfully made their entrance to the early childhood classrooms, early childhood teachers mostly use these publications to celebrate general concepts of cultural diversity, empathy, and kindness but often fail to connect them to larger social problems (Boutte et al., 2011).

Taking a different approach, some education researchers have advocated for using anti-bias picture books as conversation starters to discuss critical topics such as race and racism (Husband, 2019; Kim et al., 2016; Yu, 2020), social class and poverty (Nenadal & Mistry, 2018), different abilities (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020; Giagazoglou & Papadaniil, 2018), and gender and sexuality (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Unlike multicultural literature, anti-bias literature explicitly presents social injustice issues in the forms of systemic racism, gender/racial discrimination, gender policing, transphobia, and homophobia, usually with a racialized/gendered/oppressed child as the main character. The emergence of recently published anti-bias picture books has opened the doors to directly addressing sensitive and vital topics. Coupled with shared reading strategies such as interactive read-aloud (Lennox, 2013), reading such "authentic and brave" literature can create great opportunities for classroom discussions that enhance students' awareness and understanding of social justice issues (Ballentine & Hill, 2000, p. 13). Hawkins (2014) suggested that teaching for social justice should start with raising students' critical consciousness, creating moments for meaningful reflections, and fostering active listening and collective thinking. From this perspective, shared reading of picture books is an effective strategy that can encourage reciprocal exchanges of knowledge between teachers and students, evoke students' curiosity, and enhance learning engagement. Contributing to this emerging scholarship, this case study presents a classroom-based implementation of an anti-bias read-alouds curriculum to create a safe space for young children to embark on the social justice journey.

Methods

The Classroom Case Study

This study was designed according to Dyson and Genishi's (2005) approach to case study research in the field of language and literacy development. Attempting to account for "mundane particulars" of a teacher's and young children's meaning-making process within a shared-context of a kindergarten classroom, the case was constructed around the focal points of shared-reading units (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3). The classroom for this case was selected through purposeful sampling (Miles et al., 2014) with the main goals of (a) establishing a collaborative relationship with the kindergarten teacher, (b) supporting the teacher's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity and her openness to anti-bias works, and (c) representing the student demographic as predominantly White reflecting the wider geographic location of the school neighborhood. Studying this case

provided insights into the dynamics of a typical kindergarten classroom where the White teacher, White students, and a small number of students of Color interacted and made meaning during "literacy events" using anti-bias picture books (Heath, 1983).

This public kindergarten classroom was located in a wealthy suburban area in the Northeast. The classroom population consisted of 21 students: 14 White; seven students of Color (i.e., Asian, Latinx, or mixed-race). There were no Black students in this classroom when the study was conducted. There were four students labelled as English learners and no student identified as having a disability. The classroom was run by a White heterosexual, cisgender female teacher named Ms. Byrd, who has been teaching in early childhood classrooms for more than 20 years. She believed strongly in building a positive classroom climate that is based on embracing diversity and inclusion. In this classroom context, pockets of diversity were present through the occasional read of multicultural literature and the implementation of a melanin unit, but social injustice issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia were not explicitly discussed. These were positive signs of a potentially inclusive learning environment where the seeds of anti-bias education could be planted.

Positionality

This study carried certain assumptions, beliefs, and biases centered around my role as a researcher. I am a cisgender married Vietnamese woman with children, which puts me in an advantaged position to conduct research in early childhood settings. I am often perceived as *harmless* because of the visibility of my race (Asian), gender (female cisgender), and sexuality (heterosexual—assumed through my "with a husband and children" status). Even though I am the non-threatening kind, I am *still* a person of Color who entered a White space with an agenda. By bringing in an anti-bias project, I certainly disturbed the general stereotypical assumption of a silent, apolitical, and compliant Asian, posing particular challenges and evoking discomfort from the school site. Thus, the study was influenced by my role as a researcher and how I was perceived in this setting.

Researcher-Teacher Collaboration

Learning from other researchers in their social justice-oriented projects, I was extremely aware of the challenges and difficulties in bringing the anti-bias approaches into the early childhood classrooms. I knew that building an alliance with the early childhood teacher was one of the most important tasks. Establishing a strong collaborative relationship with the early childhood teacher was prioritized. The lead teacher was consulted throughout the project, from book selection to curriculum development. The final implementation of read-aloud sessions and activities was done collaboratively.

Using the guidelines for anti-bias book selection (Derman-Sparks, 2013), the set of anti-bias picture books was developed and recommended to Ms. Byrd for her review and selection. The picture books present the negative impact of racial/gender discrimination and are written from the perspectives of the oppressed. These titles also show how the main characters investigate social injustice phenomena and resist either through personal transformation or participate in collective action. Still, Ms. Byrd deemed many titles as "too heavy", "too long", or "inappropriate" for this age group. After many rounds of discussions, we finally settled with three titles: *Race Cars* (Deveny, 2020) to discuss issues of racial discrimination and unfairness, *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991) to discuss race and gender issues, and *Sparkle Boy* (Newman, 2017) to discuss gender expression. Ms. Byrd also suggested one more gender-themed picture book called *Except When They Don't* (Gehl, 2019).[1] The discussion questions, pre-reading, and post-reading activities of four reading units were co-developed and the final versions were confirmed with Ms. Byrd. For a complete list of picture books, themes, discussion questions, and related activities, please refer to Table 1.

Data Collection

Prior to the study, I made multiple visits and engaged with students during both instruction time and free-play time to learn more about the school site and to get a sense of teacher-student and student–student interactions within the classroom environment. This also established my position as a participant-observant or an "additional teacher" in this context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study was conducted in the Spring semester after classroom routines were well established. Read-aloud sessions were already an integrated part of morning schedules. All students in this kindergarten classroom participated in whole-group reading sessions led by Ms. Byrd and small group related activities for each book conducted by me throughout an 8-week period. Each picture book was read and discussed at least two times.

During each 30-min weekly reading session, the teacher read a story, taught new vocabulary, provided visual aids to support story comprehension, and posed questions to facilitate whole group discussions. Following the anti-bias learning goals, the discussion questions were designed to affirm human differences and diversity, to help young

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[1] The data collection phase of this study was disrupted due to COVID-19 pandemic. Out of 16 planned reading sessions of eight selected picture books, we completed eight reading sessions of four picture books. The reported data were based on the completed reading units.

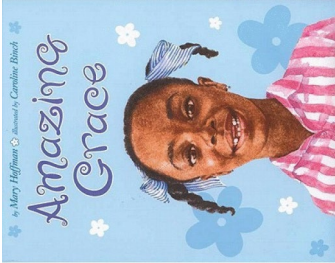**Table 1** Anti-bias picture books and related activities

Titles	Main themes	Discussion questions	Small group activities
Race cars Devenny (2020). *Race cars*. (C. Gordon, Ed.). Frances Lincoln Children's Books	Racism, White privileges	Which cars usually win the race? Why do you think the race committee was so upset that Chase won the race? When Chase is getting ready to cross the bridge, he notices a sign Bridge is for White cars only". What do you think it felt like for Chase to see that sign? How about Ace? What do you think it felt like for Ace to see that sign? Why did Chase not get any place? Did he not try his best? Was he not fast enough? Ace does not seem to notice all the obstacles that Chase has to go through to finish the race, the bridge, the different road. Why do you think Ace did not realize that? Why did the committee take down the signs? Why did Ace said that "I am sorry it took so long for me to realize how much harder it was for you to win this race, Chase? What might have happened if Ace realized this sooner? How did Chase feel when he finally won at the end of the story? Do you think children can be part of the committee? Why or why not? Can you think of any real-life situations when things are unfair to you or others? What would you do?	Play-pretend: students participated in pair to play with the race cars model
Amazing grace Hoffman (1991). *Amazing Grace* (C. Binch, Illus.). Dial Books	Racial/gender discrimination Intersectionality	Why did Raj say that? What do you think about this? Why do Natalie think that Grace could not be Peter Pan? What do you think about this? What did Nana show Grace at the theater? What do you see here? Have you ever seen a Black ballerina? How about you? What characters would you like to play-pretend as? How do you think you would feel if someone told you that you could not do something that you really wanted to do?	Play-pretend: students played with dress-up costumes and toys Drawing: students created self-portraits with their dress-up costumes

Table 1 (continued)

Titles	Main themes	Discussion questions	Small group activities
Except When They Don't	Gender stereotypes, gender non-conformity	Have you ever heard the word "gender" before? What does it mean? Do you agree with this? Is it true that boys only like blue and play with trucks and girls like pink, play with dolls, and have tea parties? Have you ever been told you can't do something because it's only for girls or only for boys? What did you think? How did you feel? What colors do you like? What are your favorite toys? What jobs do you want to do when you grow up?	Writing: students worked in small groups to respond to the writing prompt: "When I grow up, I will be…"

Gehl (2019). *Except when they don't* (J. Heinsz, Illus.). Little Bee Books

| Sparkle boy | Gender non-conformity, empathy, bullying | What do you think this book is about?
How do Jessie, Mama, Daddy, and Abuelita respond to Casey's interests in shimmery, glittery, sparkly things?
Why do you think Jessie suggests putting glittery nail polish on Casey's toes instead of on his fingernails? Why do you think Casey says no?
What happen at the library? How is Jessie's response to the boys at the library different from her previous reactions to Casey's love of shimmery, glittery, sparkly things?
Do you think all children can like or enjoy the same things? Why or why not?
If you heard or saw someone teasing or bullying your sibling or your friend, what would you do? What would you say? | Art & crafts: students made sparkle bracelets with small beads and strings |

Newman (2017). *Sparkle boy* (L. Newman, Illus.). Lee & Low Books

Table 2 Themes, codes, and examples

Themes	Anti-bias goals	Codes	Examples
Recognition of unfairness	Justice	Unfairness	"it's is actually not fair"
		Verbal condemn	"It's mean!", "I don't like them" (read-aloud discussion sessions)
Fostering child activism	Activism	Children as fair actors	"Because…because… children have the fairest thing to say….and we will say to the committee that it is wrong"
		Children as capable	"yes, we can"
		Children as too young	"we are too young"
		Children as incapable	"Chase is too fast for kids!"
		Children as powerless	"Children are not allowed" (read-aloud discussion sessions)
Gender (non)-conformity	Diversity	Gender-conforming	"Most people do not like that"
	Diversity	Gender binary—boy	"He just wearing stuff that boys don't usually wear, and most boys don't wear skirts, but he can if he wants to" (read-aloud discussion sessions)
		Gender binary- girl	"it's girl stuffs" (pre-reading small group activity)
	Identity	Gender expression—clothes	"I am a boy and…and I can wear what I want" (read-aloud discussion sessions)
	Diversity	Gender binary—clothes	Most students selected toys and costumes based on their identified gender (pre-reading small group activity)
		Gender binary—toys	
Anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness and intersectional struggles	Diversity	Anti-immigrant	"They might put something like the wall so that he [the Black car] can't go."
	Diversity	Anti-Blackness	"I just want the White car" (post-reading pair activity) "I don't like Black. Black is my least favorite color" (post-reading small group activity)
	Diversity	Racial/gender oppression	"He did not look like Cinderella" (post-reading small group activity)
	Diversity	White femininity/Black femininity	"They are kind of boyish" (post-reading small group activity)
	Identity	Intersectional struggles	"Because I have dark skin, and the princess has fair skin" (post-reading small group activity)

children recognize and describe unfairness, and most importantly, to provide guidance and support to foster activism. Across reading units, Ms. Byrd employed various interactive read-aloud strategies to engage students in the group discussions effectively such as restating, questioning, and scaffolding conversations. Ms. Byrd listened carefully to each student's response and asked inferential questions so the students could elaborate or provide examples drawn from their lived experiences and existing knowledge.

In addition to read-aloud sessions, students also participated in the pre-reading or post-reading activities which included play-pretend, art & drafting, drawing, and writing tasks that were specifically designed to fit each storyline. During the whole class read-aloud sessions, I took observational notes to record students' non-verbal/verbal responses and teachers' pedagogical strategies. All read-aloud sessions and small group activities were audio-recorded. In total, the eight read-aloud sessions and eight related small group activities generated approximately

200 mins of audiotape. All students' learning artifacts such as drawings, writings, and art products were photographed and attached to each reading unit.

Data Analysis

Data collected through the read-aloud sessions and small group activities, as well as photos of students' artifacts, were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo software for data analysis. Coding procedures were based on the iterative methods and qualitative coding recommendations proposed by Saldaña (2016). Both inductive and deductive coding methods were employed. In the first cycle of coding, I used descriptive coding techniques to highlight and analyze salient moments in the whole-class discussions during the read-aloud sessions and the children's conversations in the pre- and post-reading activities (Miles et al., 2014). In the second cycle of coding, I used a priori codes derived from four fundamental concepts of anti-bias education: identity, diversity, justice, and activism to organize descriptive codes.

After all the transcripts of the reading sessions were coded, I looked across units to identify common themes and select illustrative examples from the data. Table 2 showed how codes were organized and how themes were developed.

To validate the process of data analysis, I employed a triangulation method to cross-check the children's responses to (i) discussion questions posed during read-aloud sessions and (ii) their conversations and actions in pre-reading and post-reading activities. To establish trustworthiness and embrace the collaborative aspect of this project, I also shared thematic findings with the lead teacher as a form of member check (Kirk & Miller, 1986). After getting the lead teacher's comments, I went through the findings and incorporated the lead teacher's perspectives on the interpretation of students' responses during discussion sessions. After that, I confirmed and finalized the findings.

Findings

Across reading units, the findings demonstrated that the students of this kindergarten classroom were active meaning-makers who possessed a complex and sophisticated understanding of racial and gender issues. They were able to immediately detect and verbally condemn unfairness presented in the stories. However, the students needed substantial support to move beyond recognizing unfairness and to actively responding against discriminatory actions. The study's findings also showed a variety in students' engagement and responses with anti-bias picture books. While most students had difficulties resisting gender binary perspectives and stereotypes, a few students, especially boys, were strongly empowered to embrace gender-nonconforming practices. Problematically, some students' verbal responses also provided concrete evidence of their internalized anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness, and gender discrimination, which often went undisrupted and without intervention by the early childhood teacher.

Young Children's Complex Understanding of Racial Issues and Recognition of Unfairness

In the reading unit of *Race Cars*, the children were exposed to the issues of unfairness and White privilege, "the invisible knapsack of unearned assets" (McIntosh, 1989, p. 1). When the first red flag of a racist act happens (i.e., the White-car committee adds a sign that says "White cars only" to prevent the Black car from crossing the bridge), most students immediately recognized that the situation was completely unfair for the Black car. They raised their objection against the White-car committee: "*It's mean*" and "*I don't like them*". At the same time, they also understood the benefits and

privileges from the White car's perspective. Consider this exchange and dialogue as an example:

> Ms. Byrd: Why do you think he was feeling sad, Nancy?
> Nancy: When people, um... when people don't like other people from other races sometimes they put signs, or they put tapes, or they put little nets so they can't cross and... and if there's no way to get then other race cars will get to win.
> Ms. Byrd: All right, let's see what happened. But Chase and Ace were still happy for each other. How do you think his best friend Ace might've felt about this sign? What do you think he was thinking about? What do you think, Hannah?
> Hannah: He is happy.
> Ms. Byrd: So why do you think he was happy?
> Hannah: Because it said White cars only.
> Ms. Byrd: Oh. And can you say a little bit more about that?
> Hannah: Because the Black car was sad because he couldn't go 'cause it said White cars only. But, but the White car was happy because it said like White cars only so, so then he can win faster.
> Ms. Byrd: Okay. That's one idea. How about you Wendy?
> Wendy: I'm thinking that the White car was feeling sad for his friend. He'll feel a little happy cause he could go across, but it wasn't fair for the other cars and… and the property [committee] do not care about... it is actually not fair because you have to be nicer to other people.

As shown in this vignette, students could critically engage with a complicated situation in which the White car, who is a good friend and a fair player, was completely unaware of the Black car's discriminatory experiences. Students' responses demonstrate conflicted feelings, as explained by Wendy: "*sad for his friend*" and "*a little happy*" [for himself]. Many students drew an immediate connection between the White/Black cars and White/Black people even though the teacher did not explicitly mention this. Another student, Nancy, proposed that other potential racist acts ("*sometimes they put signs or they put tapes or they put little nets*") were also motivated by hatred and discrimination ("*when people don't like other people from other races*"). Both Hannah and Wendy showed their comprehensive understanding of two different perspectives: the oppressed and the privileged. To Wendy, fairness is equivalent to "*being nicer to other people*", a sentiment that echoes the well-circulated discourses of kindness and niceness in this early childhood classroom. Being nice, problematically, means not causing any harm to others, but it does not imply activism (i.e., taking a stance and acting to correct an unfair situation).

Fig. 1 Black car/White car experiment

Reflecting on the reading session, Ms. Byrd acknowledged the students' "*insightful comments*" that showed their complex understanding of racial issues. They were able to make connections to real-life situations beyond the scope of the story. Commenting on the students' responses, Ms. Byrd said: "*It gave me a new perspective on how my students viewed anti-bias issues in their own 5 and 6-year-old way*". For both the teacher and students, the reading session provided a unique learning experience that fostered the children's critical thinking and helped them examine how kindness and fairness sometimes do not go hand in hand.

Fostering Child Activism

The findings revealed that the students could undoubtedly produce verbal responses to condemn unfairness, but they did not propose a solution to change the unfair rules or to disrupt the discriminatory system. It was evident in both read-aloud sessions and observation data of the students' participation in the post-reading activity—the Black Car/White Car Experiment. This activity followed the read-aloud session described above and results from this activity demonstrated how students might choose to act upon their own interests rather than working towards achieving "fairness for all".

In the post-reading activity, I set up a car racing model designed to follow the exact racing track depicted in the story. The students participated in this post-reading activity in pairs. Each student had a chance to enter the race as both the Black and the White car in two different turns. The Black car's track was purposely blocked by a small obstacle to slow it down and prevent it from reaching the finish line first. After experiencing two times playing as both Black and White cars, students were asked which car they preferred. Most students (18 out of 21 students) chose the White car, even Wendy, the most eloquent student in advocating for the Black car during the shared reading session.

Me: Why did you choose the White car?

Wendy: There is something in there [pointing to the tunnel part of the racing track] ... in... um.. in the Black car track… I just want the White car
Me: You can remove it, remember, just like in the story, if we remove the sign, the Black car might win

Responding to my suggestion, Wendy looked at me with surprised eyes. It seemed that she could not believe that it was an option for her at all. Obviously, she selected the car that had a higher chance to win even though it means that her partner would get the Black car. In that situation, to most children, the White car was not only a toy or a model of a fictional character but a play-pretend capital that had the most advantages and was directly linked to their self-interests. The students' participation in this activity prompts the question of how to help young children recognize that sometimes we must give up our own vested interest to achieve fairness for all.

After a few days, more obstacles (e.g., wooden blocks, a plastic cup, a small rag) were added to the Black car's track in my absence. It was much easier for the students to focus their ideas on proposing different ways to block the Black car rather than taking away the discriminatory signs or obstacles on the track. To the children in this classroom, the White car committee represents an authoritative figure who has all the power to set rules and regulations that should not be challenged and abolished. It reminded us that children are often discouraged from speaking or acting against authoritative figures (e.g., parents, teachers, adults in general) or even being part of the decision-making process. For these reasons, Ms. Byrd and I decided to add some discussion questions to help the students think critically about the unfair system and imagine their proactive involvement in hypothetical scenarios (Fig. 1).

The second time that the book *Race Cars* was read, the students were already familiar with the story and were excited to retell key events in their own words. To set up the stage, Ms. Byrd reminded the students that the White car committee reversed the rules and removed the signs so the Black car can enter the race, rescue the White car, and win.

"*Is it fair that the car committee gets to make all important decisions?*" she asked. "*Noooooo!!!*" most children said loudly and firmly. "*Do you think children like you can be part of the committee?*" Ms. Byrd posed the critical question and asked the children to show their thumbs up (Yes) or thumbs down (No). Some students believed that children could be part of the committee. Most did not think so as shown by this interaction:

> Ms. Byrd: Why do you think that way? [Ms. Byrd asked the students whose answers were yes]
> Molly: Because... because… children have the fairest thing to say....and we will say to the committee that it is wrong
> Jimmy: Maybe we can tell the committee how Chase feels when he is not allowed to enter the race
> Ms. Byrd: How about other ideas? [Ms. Byrd asked the students whose answers were no]
> Some students: No… no… we are too young
> Kevin: There might be an age limit, maybe…maybe 14
> Yesin: Chase is too fast for kids!
> Nancy: And… and... children are not allowed to...to… be in the committee

In the above snapshot, Molly and Jimmy raised important points regarding the role of children. Their dialogue shows their understanding that children have a role to play and could make a powerful contribution if they were to be part of the committee. Moreover, Molly disrupted the pervasive adult-centric discourse that often places children in ignorant and irrational positions by emphasizing that: "*children have the fairest things to say*". In fact, "fairest" reflected a state of sound and informed judgment. By being the fairest, Molly expressed the idea that children have the absolute power to speak against injustice. Nevertheless, other children in the same context did not share Molly's ideas. Taking a closer look at the reasons proposed by the students, I recognized that the differences in their responses seemed to relate to age ("*age limit*" and "*young*"), physical capacity (drive "*fast*" cars), and power ("*not allowed*"). The students' answers may reflect common messages children often get from adults about their own capacities and limitations. It mirrors the socially constructed image of a sheltered, young, and power-less child in adult-centric views. That helps explain why the students, despite their immediate recognition of unfairness, did not attempt to propose any solution to change the unjust rules and advocate for the Black car.

Gender (Non)conformity

This section presents multiple examples of the students' engagement and responses to the gender reading unit. The findings showed how the children have internalized gender biases and how they both conformed to and subverted gender norms. The gender-themed picture books and discussion sessions functioned as powerful catalysts to motivate some children, especially boys, to embrace gender-nonconforming practices.

For the pre-reading activity, I brought in various types of dress-up and toys and set up a play-pretend area so the students could act out the characters that they chose. The girls demonstrated slightly more flexibility as some were willing to play with cars and superhero figures when encouraged to do so. On the contrary, the boys did not attempt to cross-dress or play with toys traditionally determined as "girl toys" (e.g., dolls, tea set, pastel-color mini-figures). It is consistent with other studies' findings showing that boys tend to strongly adhere to gender norms, as boys often face stricter censorship and harsher punishments for having gender-non-conforming behaviors (Schope & Eliason, 2004). Gender policing practices against boys are rooted in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, which is mostly defined and built based on the norms of anti-femininity (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015). Besides, boys' gender-nonconforming behaviors are often interpreted as early signs of homosexuality; hence, they are severely stigmatized and condemned (Schope & Eliason, 2004).

After getting a sense of the students "doing gender", I joined the class reading of *Except When They Don't*, which tackles the problems of gender stereotypes and presents gender nonconformity in terms of clothing, toys, games, and career choices. During the reading, students raised different opinions of what gender norms and stereotypes are and how gender-nonconforming behaviors are often perceived as abnormal and unaccepted. "*Most people do not like that*", Mandy said. Expressing through their hand gestures, most students agreed with Mandy. It showed how the students understood gender censorship and the restricted rules of the binary gender system. It is important to note that the students seemed to change their perspectives as the reading proceeded. More students, especially the boys, started to question and even disrupt the binary model and verbally accepted fluid gender expressions. The book sparked a robust discussion in which many boys voiced out their nonconforming desires ("*I like tea party*"; "*My favorite color… is… is… pink sparkles…*"; "*Oh, I love nail polish…*"). Kevin firmly concluded at the end of the reading: "*So you can be anything you want*".

To illustrate the students' sophisticated understanding of gender, the following excerpt is presented from our interactive shared reading of *Sparkle Boy,* which was perceived as "*the most controversial*" book in this program by Ms. Byrd. The book was about a gender-nonconforming boy who loves anything shimmery, shiny, and sparkly.

> Ms. Byrd: What do you all think Casey's mother means when she said, *I think Casey looks like Casey*

"Children Have the Fairest Things to Say"

"I am Elsa" by Sam   "I am Tinkerbell and Peter Pan" by Molly

Fig. 2 "I am Elsa" by Sam "I am Tinkerbell and Peter Pan" by Molly

Carl: Because he can wear anything he wants…'cause.. because boys can wear anything they want. They can even wear shimmery stuff

Ms. Byrd: What do you mean? What is it about shimmery stuff that makes it not suitable for Casey, in Jessie's opinion?

Carl: It's..it's… 'cause it's girl stuff

Molly [looking at Carl and explaining]: No, it's still him, but he just wearing stuff that boys don't <u>usually</u> wear, and most boys don't wear skirts, but he can if he wants to.

Ms. Byrd: What do you think Sam?

Sam: He can wear what he wants. I am a boy and… and I can wear what I want.

This close-up revealed a complex moment when the boy, Carl, moved back and forth between supporting gender-free fashion choice ("*boys can wear anything they want*") to gender-binary labeling ("*it's girl stuff*"). Molly recognized Carl's struggle and immediately intervened by offering a more nuanced answer to explain the story scene. In this scenario, another boy, Sam, made a text-to-self connection and claimed both his gender identity ("*I am a boy*") and his control over his own gender expression ("*I can wear what I want*").

The combination of reading gender-themed picture books and engaging in the class discussions actively promoted positive messages of acceptance and celebration that encouraged some students to break free from dominant gender ideologies. In the post-reading activity, all children drew portraits of themselves dressing up as their

chosen fictional characters. A handful of portraits revealed potential signs of gender nonconformity and the multiplicity of the children's gender identities. For example, Sam, a White boy, drew himself dressed up as Elsa, the snow queen, and Molly, an Asian girl, expressed her desire to be both Tinkerbell and Peter Pan (Fig. 2).

These gender-related reading discussions and activities revealed that all children benefited from open discussions of gender issues, disregard of their developing gender identities. Avoidance of gender topics usually stems from adult-centric perspectives of keeping the early childhood classroom "a place of safety and innocence" and censored issues are seen as "threats to this safety zone" (Allen et al., 2008, p. 315). This silence is motivated mostly by adult fear rather than a true account for young children's understanding, capacities, and lived experiences.

Anti-Immigrant, Anti-Blackness, and Intersectional Struggles

Another set of findings demonstrated how the students also expressed their biases and negative attitudes with regards to diversity, especially related to issues of immigration and race. Data showed examples of students' discourse including -ism that seem to be internalized and enacted in the classroom. Some of these incidents were not mediated by the early childhood teacher and were mostly ignored which may result in negative consequences for students of Color in this classroom.

Anti-Immigrant

In the discussion of *Race Cars*, the students talked about how the White car committee's decisions contributed to a system of discriminatory acts. Contributing to the discussion, Valentina, a Latinx student from an immigrant background, said: *"They might put something like the wall so that he [the Black car] can't go."* At this moment, the teacher and I were stunned to hear the student mentioning "the wall" during the reading. It echoed the nationally circulated anti-immigrant discourse legitimized by the Trump administration. I found the moment significant and vital to follow up, but Ms. Byrd decided otherwise. Even though she looked at me in surprise, Ms. Byrd did not ask more questions to investigate if "the wall" was mentioned randomly or directly related to Trump's "Build the wall" rhetoric. *"I am not sure how to approach that. I think it was too political for the kids to understand"*, Ms. Byrd shared her thoughts with me after the reading session.

Anti-Blackness

Another missed opportunity for extending and reframing the discussion happened when Nancy, a White student, expressed her unfavorable feelings towards Blackness: *"Like I don't like the Black car. That's why I am saying no [to changing the unfair rules]"*. It is important to note that it was not the only time that Nancy revealed her anti-Black biases. There were many instances where Nancy explicitly said: *"I don't like Black, Black is my least favorite"* and insisted on supporting the committee's decisions of preventing Chase, the Black car, from winning the race. *"Why don't you want to change the rules?"* I asked Nancy. *"I just don't like Black, it looks ugly"*. *"Don't you think the rules are unfair for the Black car?"*, *"No, I don't think so"*. I shared my concerns with Ms. Byrd, but she dismissed the significance of Nancy's anti-Black attitudes. Because the reading sessions were conducted within the race-neutral zone set by Ms. Byrd, Nancy's anti-Blackness could have been misread as trivial.

Intersectional Struggles

In this classroom context, while some students seemed to be empowered by the reading sessions, other students, especially students of Color struggled to gain peer-acceptance in relation to both racial and gender identities. Below is an excerpt from a post-reading small group activity. The children were discussing their dressing-up portraits. Noticing that Timon did not share much, I shifted my focus to him:

Researcher: How about you, Timon?
Timon [mumbling]: I want to... I like to be Cinderella.

Nancy [yelled at Timon]: You could not be Cinderella!
Researcher: Why not?
Nancy [raised her voice and said firmly]: He did NOT look like Cinderella!

It was assumed that Nancy's objection against Timon dressing up as Cinderella was based on her understanding of gender conformity. As a participant-observer, I decided to investigate further and convinced Nancy that it was absolutely fine for Timon to dress up as Cinderella if he wanted to.

Researcher: You said that Timon could not be Cinderella. How about other princesses? Could he dress up as… say… Belle?
Nancy: [thinking and smiling, shaking her head, mouthing "No"]
Researcher: Let me show you a photo of them, and you will tell me what you think
[opening my laptop and showing Nancy the picture of the 10 Disney princesses]
Nancy: maybe…, maybe he can dress up like this one [pointing to Pocahontas] or this one [Tiana] and this one [Mulan]
Researcher: Why did you choose them?
Nancy: 'cause… 'cause they are kind of boyish
Researcher: Would you like to dress up like them?
Nancy: No

This moment stood out to me as Nancy's response revealed how she thought of those princesses of Color. Their dark skin tones and their characteristics as active, strong-willed, and independent obviously made them more "boyish", or less feminine, hence, less ideal in Nancy's eyes. This snapshot demonstrated how a young White girl like Nancy still rooted for the idea of White femininity and used it as a proxy for ideal girlhood, which eventually led to the exclusion of femininity that extends to girls of Color. Nancy's internalized gender bias and her own perception of White femininity strongly influenced her actions: she suppressed her friend, Timon (*"you could not be Cinderella"*) and explicitly stated her judgment, which was based on Timon's gender embodiment (*"You do not look like Cinderella"*).

Another moment of intersectional struggle emerged when I interviewed Ali, one of the few students of Color in the classroom. Ali is an active and humorous boy who loved to sit next to me every time I came to the classroom to observe the reading sessions. He is also a South Asian child who has the darkest skin tone among his peers.

Researcher: Ali, do you think it would be okay for boys to dress up as princesses?
Ali: Yeah, it is okay.
Research: How about you? Would you like to dress up as princesses?

Ali: No, I cannot.
Researcher: Why can't you?
Ali: Because I have dark skin, and the princess has fair skin… and... and my dark color...

Again, Ali's responses in this exchange were unexpected. I assumed that Ali, like other boys, objected to the idea of him dressing up as female fictional characters because of his adherence to gender norms. But it suggested that, to Ali, his race is a more dominant identity marker that somehow restricts him from dressing up as the characters with fairer skin tones. After our talk, I showed Ali some photos of boys of Color dressing up as princesses and male ballerinas of Color. He smiled and seemed to be more relieved but did not say anything to me.

Findings from these conversations and responses debunked the popular claim that young children do not have racial and gender awareness and do not possess racial and gender biases. The children in this kindergarten classroom, on the contrary, showed the nuanced readings of their intersectional identities and complex understanding of both race and gender issues.

Discussion

To disrupt the typical discourse of colorblindness and children's inability to understand complex issues related to diversity in early childhood classrooms and to promote a social justice stand, the present study designed and implemented an anti-bias interactive read-aloud curriculum in collaboration with an early childhood teacher in a public kindergarten classroom. The findings of this classroom case study confirmed the great potential of using anti-bias picture books as conversation starters to engage young children with difficult, but important conversations about biases and their perspectives on race, gender, and intersectionality. The majority of students actively participated in the reading sessions, shared their diverse opinions, and offered insightful comments. Hence, it is a false belief to claim that young children, in this case, 5-year-old kindergarteners, are too young to have racial and gender awareness or are unable to engage in discussions of anti-bias issues. On the contrary, children are very much aware of racial and gender differences and are capable of learning and contributing to a critical conversation related to race, gender, intersectionality, and diversity (Husband, 2012; Boutte et al., 2011; Park, 2011; Kim, 2015). It is part of early childhood teachers' responsibility to create a safe dialogic space that allows for fostering young children's thinking about social injustice issues (NAEYC, 2019). The implementation of these read-alouds provided a window into the children's complex

understanding, critical thinking, and their potential engagement in activism. Despite these findings, the research also confirms that young children need to be encouraged to take an action-oriented stance and teachers need to provide guidance and support to children so they can move beyond recognition of unfairness to actively disrupt unfair treatments and unjust systems.

The results of this study also shed light on the diversity of responses and differences among children in this classroom—some students were empowered by the reading sessions while others struggled to navigate the classroom environment to express their intersectional identities freely. Problematically, some students' verbal responses also provided concrete evidence of their internalized racial and gender biases to which the early childhood teacher often failed to either disrupt or intervene. It reflected that Edwards and Derman Sparks (2020) referred to as "the hurtful power of silence" when adults either intentionally filtered sensitive topics or refused to engage young children in serious discussions of such topics. We must acknowledge that young children's lives are influenced by contradictory and biased messages from multiple sources (Derman-Sparks, 2008; Boutte, 2008). Hence, both the lack of adult support and the lack of access to important anti-bias knowledge place children in a vulnerable position where racist, sexist, homophobic ideas can dominate and impact children's learning and living experiences (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2016). Blocking children from sensitive topics not only means underestimating their capacity but also takes away their learning opportunities and hinders their healthy development of racial, gender, and sexual identities (Robinson, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2013).

Implications for Practice

The findings from this classroom case study demonstrated the challenges that early childhood teachers often face in adopting the anti-bias approach. In this case study, this was the very first time that the early childhood teacher used anti-bias picture books to explicitly engage her students in race- and gender-related discussions. The anti-bias approach was not discussed in her teacher education program and professional training sessions and has not been part of the school's agenda. These reading sessions helped the teacher realize that her students were not racially innocent nor did they naturally and willingly adhere to their assigned gender. The project led to positive changes not only in the students and the classroom climate, but also in the teacher herself. The project established a crucial first step for the early childhood teacher to start adopting and prioritizing anti-bias education in her classroom. In addition, the collaborative relationship between the researcher and the early childhood teacher certainly reduced the anxiety and resistance levels that often

occur in anti-bias projects (Farago et al., 2015; Rands, 2009) and provided needed support to the early childhood teacher in this difficult mission.

Even though the early childhood teacher recognized her students' insights and capacities, she still struggled to respond appropriately to some children's negative and biased comments and actions. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2019) reminded us that anti-bias education is not contained within the vacuum of "occasional activities about diversity and fairness topics" but underpins "everything that happens in an early childhood program" (p. 1). From this perspective, early childhood teachers should pay close attention to children's daily conversations and interactions and be courageously supportive to help children resist the negative messages of -isms. The findings also imply an urgent need for early childhood teacher educators to prioritize anti-bias education in teacher education programs to better prepare professionals on how to address anti-bias topics in meaningful ways.

In the early childhood context, there exists the complex matrix of White supremacism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia and a child, despite being negatively impacted by it, is always projected as an outsider (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2016). Early childhood education, hence, remains the site of struggle for young children when dominant discourses such as Whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and monolingualism constitute what Foucault called "the regimes of truth" to prescribe and predetermine individual beliefs and practices (Cohen, 2008; MacNaughton, 2005). This is especially true for children of Color who are increasingly members of these early childhood settings. To disrupt the hidden but pervasive matrix of -isms, early childhood teachers should intentionally design and enhance the anti-bias curriculum to explicitly counteract racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic messages that our children are currently exposed in their daily lives. Early childhood teachers should adopt the action-oriented stance and work towards eliminating discrimination and oppression to achieve the anti-bias goals of fostering young children' positive identity development, embracing diversity, advancing education equity, and advocating for child activism. That is what truly constitute the commonly shared message of keeping early childhood a safe and equitable space.

Directions for Future Research

Even though many anti-bias picture books have been published in the last few years, most titles are not selected and adopted for shared readings in early childhood classrooms (Pomerantz, 2018). We should recognize that early childhood teachers are gatekeepers who possess the power to include as much as they have the power to exclude; to solely determine what to teach, what to read, and what to discuss.

These decisions are often masked under the cloak of protective discourse, but mostly driven by fear or what critical early childhood researchers referred to as the "moral panic" (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2016, p. 56). In this particular case, the picture books with topics such as racial/sexual violence, bullying, homophobia, and transphobia were treated as dangerous knowledge that might contaminate young children's innocence. These titles were purposely censored and excluded. Hence, it is important to direct our future research to investigate early childhood teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards anti-bias picture books to better understand their rationale behind book selection and/or censorship. Considering anti-bias picture books as valuable pedagogical resources, it would be beneficial to understand the challenges and struggles of early childhood teachers in engaging with such potential publications. Identifying the barriers in both ideological and realistic realms helps teacher educators and researchers think about how to best support teachers in this difficult journey.

Conclusion

This case study confirms that if implemented carefully and strategically, an anti-bias read-aloud curriculum has great potential to encourage young children's thoughtful interactions with picture books and engagement in critical discussion of anti-bias and social justice issues. Given today's current sociopolitical context, anti-bias education is no longer an add-on option, but must be considered a priority and should be integrated into every early childhood classroom. To adopt a social justice stance, early childhood teachers must escape the illusion of inclusion and seriously consider that the knowledge usually deemed as risky, controversial, and inappropriate is actually essential to our children's development of positive identities, critical consciousness, resistance, and activism. As educators who shape the minds and attitudes of our students, we must have the courage to speak up against social injustices, to read brave literature, and most importantly, to listen, as our children have the fairest things to say.

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