

12-2012

# How Crucial are Multi-Cultural Texts to Social Awareness and Acceptance in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Setting?: A Study on Views on Family Structure

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### Recommended Citation

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# How Crucial are Multi-Cultural Texts to Social Awareness and Acceptance in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Setting?: A Study on Views on Family Structure

## **Abstract**

This study examined the impact that multi-cultural picture books have on students' views on different family structures in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting. Research was conducted in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten classroom in a whole and small group setting. Data was collected through informal observations, student work, and pre and post interviews. The findings showed that the students could benefit greatly from multi-cultural picture books when coupled with meaningful discussions and/or extending activities. In order to determine the full potential of using multi-cultural picture books within the classroom to impact students' views on different family structures, more research needs to be conducted.

## **Document Type**

Thesis

## **Degree Name**

MS in Literacy Education

## **Department**

Education

## **Subject Categories**

Education

How Crucial are Multi-Cultural Texts to Social Awareness and Acceptance  
in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Setting?:  
A Study on Views on Family Structure

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M.S. Literacy Education

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December 2012

### Abstract

This study examined the impact that multi-cultural picture books have on students' views on different family structures in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting. Research was conducted in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten classroom in a whole and small group setting. Data was collected through informal observations, student work, and pre and post interviews. The findings showed that the students could benefit greatly from multi-cultural picture books when coupled with meaningful discussions and/or extending activities. In order to determine the full potential of using multi-cultural picture books within the classroom to impact students' views on different family structures, more research needs to be conducted.

**How Crucial are Multi-Cultural Texts to Social Awareness and Acceptance in the  
Universal Pre-Kindergarten Setting?:**

**A Study on Views on Family Structure**

The first impacts on our views of the world are the beliefs of our parents and families. As we venture into the world, many other factors will help shape our opinions of the world and the people in it. I wanted to explore the impact that multi-cultural texts have on an individual's views of various family structures, specifically in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting. I chose this specific group of students because these students' views are generally that of their parents and/or families due to their lack of other influences and this fact will hopefully lead to a more conclusive finding regarding the impact of multicultural texts on the students' views on various family structures. This topic is important because family structure is consistently changing in our society. It is no longer just a birth father, birth mother, and birth children. It could be a family with adopted children, no parents, same sex parents, or even grandparents as the parental figures. It is imperative with the change in family structures in today's society, that we educate our children on the various types of family structures that may exist to help them become aware, understand, and hopefully accept people regardless of a student's family structure. Family and learning about peoples' differences are also big topics in the UPK curriculum.

If this topic isn't explored, then people who come from a family structure that is not the societal standard may be discriminated against. This fact has been demonstrated throughout the years in our society and in our schools. Bullying has been on the rise and only recently has there been a major effort to try to distinguish bullying in our schools by making them bully free zones.

Anti-bullying education has increased in the upper grades in school, but it is imperative to start the lessons in the Pre-Kindergarten classroom because this is when students start realizing that people are different and bullying starts.

If this topic is explored, then perhaps we could help ease the prejudicial views of some children to help open the door toward the acceptance of people from a family structure that isn't the societal norm. This education and acceptance is particularly imperative in today's society where the idea of family structure has veered from the traditional family structure comprised of a birth father, birth mother, daughter, and son. In today's society grandparents can be the parents, there are international adoptions, there are same sex parents, single parents, stepparents, and various other combinations. There have been a few well-known case studies where children were asked their views on people of different races, read multi-cultural texts, and then asked their views again. However, case studies dealing with students' views on family structures are less well-known. The Sociocultural-historical theory sets the foundation for my research question and capstone case study. There is a societal norm or dominant group and those that don't fall into that group are discriminated against and thought of being less than the dominant group. This fuels the fire for prejudice, racism, and bullying.

Picture books are used every day in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten classroom for many reasons. The stories are used to inform, explore, entertain, and comfort students. For that reason I wanted to see if picture books could be used to impact or influence a child's opinions, views, and behaviors. I specifically wanted to see if they could help positively impact their views on controversial topics such as different family structures. Theoretically sociocultural aspects of literacy are crucial in our society. Students belong to families and those families belong to various cultural groups and those groups help shape the ideals and values that they teach their

children. Children then take these ideals and opinions and apply them into their social interactions at school. This finding could be detrimental to a multicultural society if those opinions are discriminatory and prejudice. People create their opinions and views on the world and the people in it using a combination of their family values and their life experiences. Pre-Kindergartners don't have many life experiences so their views and opinions are mostly based on those of their families. This finding led to the question, "How does multi-cultural text dealing with family structure impact students' views on those family structures in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting?" I conducted an action research study where I read multi-cultural picture books (*The Family Book*, *and tango makes three*, *Robert Lives with his Grandparents*, *Do I have a Daddy?*, and *Star of the Week*) to children in Universal Pre-Kindergarten. Before the readings I had the students view seven pictures of different family structures (international adoption, 2 dads, grandparents as parents, 2 moms, single dad, traditional family, and single mom) and asked them if they thought it was a family and what they saw that made them think that. Then I had the students draw a picture of their own family and then a picture of a family that was different from theirs. I completed these interviews and student work both pre and post readings. I found that students needed to make a personal connection when drawing the family that was different from theirs (i.e. a friend's family or extended family), that picture books using animals instead of humans helped students connect to difficult concepts (same-sex parents), and that picture books pertaining to a student's life is more engaging than those using unknown topics. Teachers need to keep in mind that the most effective way to impact students and help them make societal changes is through a multicultural approach in the classroom and that reading multicultural picture books alone doesn't have the most effective impact, but the picture books coupled with meaningful

discussions and/or activities, presenting the concepts in a non-confrontational way, and helping students make personal connections may.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Literacy is comprised of all the various ways in which one can communicate with another. Kucer (2005) states that becoming or being literate means learning to effectively, efficiently, and simultaneously control the linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions of written language in a transactive fashion. This effective communication could be in written or verbal form. People who successfully control these four dimensions of written language in a transactive fashion, will be able to function within society and communicate effectively with other people in society.

Literacy acquisition is the way in which one obtains the necessary skills to become literate. A common belief is that literacy acquisition is directly linked to the intelligence and education level of the parents as well as how involved the parents are (i.e. reading to their kids at home and working with them on literacy skills). Kucer (2005) offers a contrasting conclusion:

In contrast to what is commonly thought, the development of literacy involves a number of very active participants. Children are less interested in imitating the language around them and more concerned with attempting to understand how the language system itself operates. Adults support these efforts by providing the child with language data, feedback, and structured, predictable environments. The driving force behind the efforts of both children and adults is the desire to make meaning, to interact, and to communicate with their discourse community. (p. 287).



Children develop their ideas and skills regarding literacy by participating in the world around them. What and who they are exposed to will impact and develop their ideas of the world and their ability to be literate.

Sociocultural-Historical Theory provides the framework to understand these complicated ideas of literacy and literacy acquisition in our diverse society. Larson and Marsh (2005) define sociocultural-historical theory as:

“a culturally focused analysis of participation in everyday life, in both formal and informal learning settings...in this view, literacy is a tool for interpreting what people from different communities do, not simply what they do not do when compared to a dominant group” (p.101).

In any culture or society there is always a dominant group that is known as the norm. This group sets the standards and guidelines for what is considered acceptable or proper in that culture. Anyone that doesn't fit into the dominant group is considered substandard and not the norm. The people outside of the dominant group can be discriminated against for being different. The world is constantly evolving and as such literacy needs to also. People need to observe the world around them and adjust their perceptions and views accordingly. People need to learn about cultures and people that are different from themselves in order to grow as a society. These analyses can help teachers gain a better understanding of their students and their diverse background in order to help them create and implement more meaningful activities and resources into their curriculum. Kucer (2005) offers a deeper insight on sociocultural-historical theory:

Each social group or community has its own set of guidelines for what is required to be a member in good standing. Put another way, membership has its price as well as its privileges. The group attempts to socialize-directly or indirectly, consciously or

unconsciously- the individual into thinking and behaving in particular ways that are appropriate to the group's views of itself and its relationship with the broader society.

These guidelines impact the individual's beliefs and behaviors, and they frame his or her interpretations of and interactions with others. The knowledge, values, and behaviors that an individual comes to reflect, therefore, are not simply the products of his or her own unique and independent psychological interactions with the world. They also are the products of interactions and experiences with the various significant social groups of which the individual is a member, as well as the groups' interactions and experiences with other groups in the world. It is for this reason that these various social groups have been labeled as interpretive communities. (p. 205).

Although this theory pertains to literacy practices, it is also evidence of the theory that prejudicial views on people who are different from the societal norm or that of our specific social group is created and formed not inherent.

One can gain a wealth of knowledge through various resources, but one of the more common forms is through text. Kucer (2005) argues "therefore, the written texts that are actually produced and consumed within a society and the knowledge reflected in these texts are critical parts of the sociocultural dimension of literacy" (p. 225). Through reading, people can gather the obvious written meaning, but then can use their background knowledge and expand their understanding to gather the underlining meaning or message of the text. They can then take these new understandings and apply them to their own lives and possible change their previous views and actions. Larson and Marsh (2005) offer:

Learning occurs, therefore, through participation in social, cultural, and historical contexts that are mediated by interaction. Thus, children learn by participating in sociocultural activity, in both formal and informal contexts. (p. 105).

Children learn more effectively when activities and information are meaningful to their lives and their world. Through these interactions and connections children can learn real world implications that they can apply to their lives and society. Kucer (2005) concludes “the very nature of the texts encountered- and the understandings that children construct through transacting with the texts made available- significantly impact both literacy and concept development” (p. 225). The books that children are exposed to may help shape their ideas on acceptance and tolerance or could hinder that self-development and encourage prejudice. Teachers need to gain an understanding of their students and their backgrounds as well as what’s going on in society in order to create and implement multicultural texts and ideals into the curriculum.

### **Research Question**

Given that people gain their worldviews from their cultural group, this action research project asks, how does multi-cultural text dealing with family structure impact students’ views on those family structures in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting?

### **Literature Review**

In order to construct a comprehensive action research study, it is critical to examine the previous research that has helped formulate the core of this particular study. In the following literature review, an analysis of three distinct themes will be presented. The first theme is the lack of preparation and comfort level of teachers to educate diverse classrooms as well as use culturally responsive instructional approaches. Teachers, particularly those of non-diverse

backgrounds, do not feel as prepared or comfortable to teach culturally diverse classrooms or use culturally responsive instructional approaches. Next, the second theme builds on the previous theme by analyzing the presence of or break down of stereotypes in multi-cultural texts themselves. It is imperative that the literature that is used to help educate our students is of good quality in order to effectively present a culturally responsive instructional approach. Specifically researchers evaluate and identify stereotypes and other derogatory or counterproductive elements within multi-cultural texts. Lastly, the third theme that will be evaluated is the impact that literature has on children's views and behaviors. Texts can be used to help educate people on things that they don't have experience with or help people to heal or understand difficult topics. Texts can also influence our views on identity and of our world and the people in it. It is imperative to evaluate the effectiveness of current educational tools that are used within the classroom to decide whether or not it is beneficial to continue to use them or find other tools to replace current ones.

### **Lack of Preparation and Comfort Level of Teachers to Teach Diverse Classrooms and Use Culturally Responsive Instructional Approaches**

The majority of teachers have a good grasp on how to teach the academic elements of the curriculum, but many teachers struggle with cultural diversity, both teaching the topic and teaching students that are culturally diverse, especially if the teacher isn't from a diverse background. Johnston and Bainbridge (2008) found that Caucasian teachers were generally quick to support liberal humanism notions of diversity and tolerance, but some resistance emerged when their own identities seemed challenged. This finding leads to the idea that Caucasian teachers are in support of teaching diversity in the curriculum as well as a culturally diverse class, but their comfort level drops when what or who they are teaching goes against their beliefs

and lifestyle. Hammet and Bainbridge (2009) argue, “the current global situation, with waves of immigration, makes this an important time for examining what prospective and practicing teachers understand about multiculturalism and diversity in teaching and learning” (p.152). If teachers don’t have the correct information to implement cultural diversity into their curriculums, then it may not be effective. The first step is for teachers to understand what multicultural education is, Gorski (2001) states:

Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and addresses current shortcomings, failings, and discriminatory practices in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice, education equality, and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally. Multicultural education acknowledges that schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice. (p.1).

Through education, teachers can help students learn about different cultures and people that are different from them in a familiar setting. Multicultural education will help students better understand the world around them so that they will hopefully be more tolerant and accepting. Cristol and Gimbert (2008) found that “social learning and cognitive development models need to be understood when implementing curriculum designed to reduce racist beliefs and attitudes in young children” (p. 201). These findings illustrate two important ideas to take into account when planning curriculum, but many teachers lack this knowledge and as a result may not be implementing diversity into their curriculum or may have implemented it incorrectly.

Teachers at times may inadvertently be doing more harm if they aren't accurately teaching diversity within their curriculum. Glazier & Seo (2005) found that "if practitioners (particularly white-majority teachers) assume a monoculture in which there are those like "us" and "others," the use of multicultural literature may also reinforce notions of "culturelessness" among white European American student populations" (p. 686). This finding could also cause students who are from diverse backgrounds to feel self-conscious or ashamed of their own culture. Montero and Robertson (2006) found:

An impediment to promoting cultural pluralism in classrooms today is that the master narrative of instruction is formed by a predominantly mainstream academic discourse. Some 90 percent of public school teachers in the United States are Caucasian/White members of the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural majority, a statistic that has remained relatively stable for the past thirty-five years...The mainstream ideology inherently present in our education system invariably reinforces mainstream views towards race, sex, and class in the classroom. Moreover, the number of ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students is rapidly rising...As the ethnic composition of the teaching population remained stable, it is obvious that a mismatch exists between the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds of teachers, administrators, and policymakers, and the diverse students they serve. (p. 27).

This mismatch between the diversity level of educators and students can cause a massive disconnect in regards to knowledge about cultural diversity making teaching a diverse classroom or using culturally responsive instruction more difficult for teachers.

Universities and colleges throughout the country now offer classes in diversity for aspiring teachers. This type of class can be very beneficial for teachers that may feel

uncomfortable or hesitant in teaching cultural diversity or a diverse class. Otoy-Knapp (2005) found that:

A critical multicultural class had an impact in four different ways: 1) spurred a desire to become a change agent in light of a newfound awareness of structural inequalities; 2) it created an awareness of inequality at a superficial level; 3) it validated the voices of students of color; and 4) it allowed for honest reflection about personal biases. (p. 1).

All of these findings help provide evidence of the importance of educating teachers with the correct information, tools, and skills to effectively teach cultural diversity and culturally diverse classrooms. Hammett and Bainbridge (2009) found that many teachers have three main beliefs and understandings about diversity and education: First, multiculturalism is an add-on to curriculum planning and practice; Second, diverse/multicultural material is controversial in teaching practices and in schools; and third that concern for social issues, social justice, and equality can be turned off and on. These findings are proof of the need to educate teachers on diversity and how to properly and effectively teach it.

Multicultural literature provides an excellent medium for reflection on cultural issues by both teachers and children (Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009). Teachers receive a lot of training in how to create, implement, and assess academic lessons. However, in today's ever growing cultural diverse classrooms it is imperative that we also receive training in diversity and how to teach it. Wan (2006) found that the understanding, respect, and appreciation of various cultures are imperative for us to live peacefully as global citizens along with addressing tolerance and differences in our schools. With the increase in bullying in schools, it is crucial that teachers learn how to effectively teach tolerance and acceptance. Many teachers may lack the training and comfort level to be effective facilitators of this type of education. Howrey and Whelan-Kim

found that “the reading of multicultural children’s books enabled the future early childhood teachers to identify more closely with people of a culture other than their own and to develop knowledge, empathy, and commitment to improving the well-being of their future students” (p. 123). This finding is particularly important with the increasing numbers of students coming from a culturally diverse background. Boutte, Hopkins, and Waklatsi (2008) conclude, “in addition to teaching children to enjoy books, educators can actively help their young charges recognize and deconstruct prevailing inaccurate, incomplete, and negative images and information” (p. 941). This finding will help children identify prejudices and break them down in order to start toward the goal of tolerance and acceptance of those that are different from them.

There are three different types of environments that teachers can create in their classrooms in regards to diversity. The first is multiculturalism, which focuses on the creation of educational opportunities and positive attitudes toward differences (Banks & Banks, 2004). This type of classroom environment is the first step for teachers to take in creating a positive diversity curriculum. The second is anti-bias curriculum, which adds an emphasis on the individual’s actions in response to discrimination and prejudice (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). This approach is added to the multiculturalism classroom, which would be the second step towards the ideal diverse classroom. The last approach is interculturalism, which adds a new layer for addressing diversity through its attention to the bi-directionality that is needed in an authentic sharing of cultural contexts where students learn from each other and engage in an ongoing exploration of the historical and cultural contexts that influence individual development (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012). This ideal classroom setting is an important goal for teachers to set for their instruction. It is the final level in creating a diverse classroom and unfortunately



most teachers aren't able or willing to create such an environment. Ponciano and Shabazian state:

Intercultural classrooms, create space and time to sensitively discuss children's different background, cultures, family structures, and abilities. Time is set aside regularly in which children and teachers share significant items from home with the group. The classrooms are adorned with pictures of the group's children and families, students are using materials, playing in the classroom, and sharing aspects of their cultural context. There are customized, individualized picture books or photo albums of the children's families that show important people and pets. Cultural tools used in home-based daily routines, such as eating, are available. Teachers provide children with opportunities to share songs, stories, and language from their cultural context with their peers. (p. 27).

Intercultural classrooms are ideal for creating a tolerant and accepting society. However, multiculturalism and anti-bias curriculums are good starting places to help guide teachers towards the ideal diverse classroom. These strides are particularly important when the teacher isn't familiar or doesn't have any experience with specific diverse family structures.

Despite the prevalence of families formed through adoption, teachers typically have little preparation for handling questions and conversations surrounding a child's family status (Meese 2012). This finding is particularly true if the teacher hasn't had any personal experience with adoption. Mattix and Crawford (2011) found that "through adoption picturebooks, children are provided with a terrain in which to explore the conceptual components that frame their identities and are presented with a space to examine the realities of adoption" (p. 313). Teachers that may feel ill prepared or less comfortable with teaching adoption may find picturebooks about adoption a less confrontational tool to introduce the subject that they may know little about.

Meese suggests that teachers emphasize similarities among children and affirm that all families are unique combinations of people who love or care for one another. Carefully selecting books that portray adopted families in a positive fashion will help ease the adopted child's anxiety because it will help shed some understanding of their unique family to their classmates.

Evans (2010) found that children can adapt more easily to the changes of our increasingly multicultural society if they learn to understand and respect all cultures and an effective way to do so is through using multicultural literature in classrooms to provide students with a practical way to build understanding and empathy. Children at a young age use picture books to help them learn about the world around them. If those books portray images and messages that illuminate tolerance and acceptance then that will help children gain those ideals. Glazier and Seo (2005) found that the use of multicultural texts coupled with dialogic instruction within a safe classroom context could provide students with both a window to other cultures and a mirror reflecting their own. This opportunity will provide students with the chance to really evaluate their own ideals as well as those of society in order to make decisions of changes they can make to become more tolerant and accepting. Evans states:

Cultural diversity is an integral part of our schools. As our society and schools become more diverse, it is essential to cultivate in children an awareness of and respect for this changing mosaic of cultures. Children can adapt to the changes in our increasingly multicultural society if they learn to understand and respect cultures other than their own. If schools have an obligation to individual students, to families, and to society as a whole to cultivate this cultural understanding, our curricula need to be focused on using innovative strategies that build awareness of how power, language, and meaning affect people and the lives they lead. Although, literacy instruction is a major component within

all curricula at the elementary level, implementation of new critical literacy practices with multicultural literature may provide teachers and students with the tools to ask tough questions about fairness, justice, and equality in their schools and community in order to help create the multicultural society we need. (p. 92).

Students will be impacted in some way with what they are taught. It is up to teachers to ensure that they are creating and implementing appropriate and effective cultural diversity lessons into the curriculum in order to impact students in a positive way instead of a negative way.

Reading children's literature may also break barriers for preservice teachers who perceive children's literature to be less threatening and initially more interesting and comprehensible than expository college textbooks (Wake & Modla 2008). This finding would lead one to presume that multicultural children's books would have a similar impact on students as well. There are various definitions of multicultural literature, when broadly defined, "multicultural literature is about people from diverse cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, who have been marginalized and are considered outside of mainstream of society (Morrell & Morrell, 2012, p. 10). It is not enough just to present multicultural literature alone. It must be accompanied with meaningful and relevant discussions and activities. Owens and Nowell (2001) argue that relevance has been and remains one of the most difficult obstacles for educators to surmount successfully and failure to provide relevance is often tantamount to an instructional disaster. Teachers need to make sure that what they are teaching is being taught in a meaningful way so that students will be more likely to comprehend and then be able to implement what they learn in the classroom into their real life. This task could prove to be difficult for Caucasian teachers that may not have a lot of experiences with diversity. Yoon, Simpson, and Haag (2010) state that teachers can use three main criteria for choosing multicultural texts: ideology through

inferred messages, representation of all people and valuing culture, and promotion of critical pedagogy and challenging the status quo. Keeping those three aspects in mind when choosing multicultural texts can help teachers feel more comfortable and confident with the texts they choose. Hall (2008) states “It is critical to be aware of our personal biases and to consider the children’s cultures when selecting books to read aloud” (p. 81), which is important to ensure that teachers are educating students on cultural diversity and not just pushing their personal agendas. Feeney & Moravcik (2005) argue that “teachers must select books with care, thoughtfully choose when to read them, read them with understanding and feeling, and discuss them sensitively with children” (p. 24). It is simply not enough to just provide a selection of books with people from different cultures and backgrounds in the classroom. Mendoza and Reese (2001) found three common pitfalls in selecting multicultural books for children:

Limited availability of criticism that addressed accuracy, authenticity, and related problems often leads to a major pitfall for teachers seeking multicultural books. Teachers are sometimes caught by the unexamined assumption that a book is multicultural and worthwhile if it has non-European-American characters or themes and is critically acclaimed in well-known journals. The second pitfall is that teachers also assume that a single book about a group can adequately portray that group’s experiences. The third pitfall is the mistaken belief that one can easily find a wide range of good-quality multicultural literature in libraries and bookstores, so that one has only to visit either venue to locate authentic and accurate representations of non-mainstream groups. (p. 5).

Teachers should keep these three common pitfalls in mind when selecting multicultural books to implement into their classroom. It is imperative that teachers take the time to choose multicultural books in a thoughtful and meaningful way for their students.

Teachers need to be thoughtful when selecting the books and then create meaningful discussions and activities around the text. Suh & Traiger (2000) cite four basic approaches to offer extensive opportunities for the teaching of values and moral behavior: “1) Inculcation: teaching values and providing constant reinforcement for desired behaviors; 2) Clarification: helping students to become aware of their own values; 3) Moral Reasoning: helping students develop careful, discriminating analysis to examine value questions” (p. 724). These approaches can help guide teachers when they are planning their educational goals for teaching multicultural education.

### **The Presence of or Break Down of Stereotypes in Multi-Cultural Texts**

There are many reasons why young children and their parents read books together- for fun, to share a peaceful moment, to promote an appreciation of literature and the act of reading, and to introduce new ideas and information (Kramer, Noorman, & Brockman, 1999). Read alouds are a common bedtime routine in the home or during the school day from a very young age. However, pleasure reading isn't the only use for picture books.

Picture books are a useful tool to use in order to help children learn about different cultures, but they are only effective and productive if they are of good quality and lack stereotypes and misconceptions that may result in prejudice instead of acceptance. Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep (2005) state, “children's literatures, including picture books, are ideological texts that typically ratify the social order and maintain hegemonic views of the world” (p.1007). There are many texts that cater to the societal norm as well as the societal view of life and people. Many teachers may not be aware of this fact and could choose a book that is promoting a societal ideal instead of multiculturalism. Although they have good intentions of promoting cultural pluralism, literacy teachers may not realize that certain multicultural texts deliver the messages

of underrepresented groups' assimilation into a mainstream culture, which is implicitly described as superior (Yoon, Simpson, & Haag, 2010). This finding is evidence of the importance of educating teachers on how to choose appropriate and high quality multicultural picture books.

Mendoza and Reese (2001) state:

Children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in early childhood classrooms. Picture books that depict the variety of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups within the U.S. society (known generally as multicultural picture books) allow young children opportunities to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds. (p.1).

High quality picture books can be a vital tool in helping children understand cultures or people that are different from them as a foundation for tolerance and acceptance of groups that may be outside of the societal norm.

Unfortunately, because heterosexuality is the societal norm, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities in picture books has been limited and books that do include such characters are among the most censored books ever published due to adults being too afraid or hostile to share such literature with children (Shimanoff, Elia, & Yep, 2005). When dealing with a younger audience, such as a Universal Pre-Kindergarten class, teachers may be more comfortable introducing LGBTQ characters in a less threatening or controversial way. This method of using less threatening and controversial ways of introducing LGBTQ characters could include picture books with stories using animals instead of humans. *And Tango Makes Three* is a book where the story is about two male penguins becoming parents, so the fact that the characters are animals rather than humans, may make their nonnormative, same-sex attraction

easier for teachers to present (Shimanoff, Elia, & Yep, 2005). This type of picture book could also make it more comfortable for parents to read to their children as well. Rowell (2007) states:

Picture books depicting gay and lesbian families can enhance the curriculum and make a contribution to young children's development. Families comprised of same-sex parents or those who have gay and lesbian family members or friends will feel that the people they know and love are evident in materials used in their child's school. Children from all types of families can develop their understanding and appreciation of the commonalities in loving relationships and homes. Including these books can help prevent or end harassment that often begins in preschool and kindergarten because some children are perceived as different by having two moms or two dads. (p. 29).

Children thrive when they feel safe and secure. They feel safe and secure when they feel validated and reading books that are pertinent to their lives helps them develop that feeling.

International adoption is increasing in numbers throughout the years and with that comes its own challenges in helping adoptees discover their own identity. From a very early age children realize that they are physically different and need the right tools to help them work through these issues. Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey (2012) state that "race/ethnicity is part of adoptees' identity throughout their lifetimes and if adoptive parents are uncomfortable or ill equipped to address identity issues, then adoptees are left to their own developmental resources" (p. 68). Parents and teachers have important roles in children's lives and as such it is important that both groups are educated on how to use picture books to help adoptees discover their identity and work through their emotional strife. Through adoption picture books, children are provided with a terrain in which to explore the conceptual components that frame their identities and are presented with a space to examine the realities of adoption (Mattix & Crawford, 2011).

Through a read aloud, children both adopted and not can learn about what being adopted means and adopted children can work through their own issues with being adopted. Through Mattix and Crawford's (2011) study of adoption picture books they found "four major, yet overlapping themes emerged: the adopted child as "precious," the search for identity, the pursuit of adoption, and the need to establish a sense of belonging" (p. 313). There are numerous books pertaining to adoption, but it is crucial that teachers and parents choose quality literature in order for it to be a beneficial and effective tool. Research has shown that quality literature provides a sociocultural context in which social issues can be examined and a means by which to explore the worlds of self and others (Mattix and Crawford, 2011). Teachers can use picture books to help students understand that there are people that are different from them, but that isn't necessarily a negative thing. It could be beneficial to learn about these differences to better understand the world around them. Meese (2012) states that quality children's literature containing adoption themes should not perpetuate myths or stereotypical images. Unfortunately, there are many books that do just that. Teachers need to make sure that they carefully choose books that don't portray these stereotypical, mythical, negative, and untrue images.

Relationship issues, conflict resolution, and social skills are all concepts that parents and teachers strive to teach children. Picture books are a popular tool to help explain situations and how to deal with them. Recent research on children's sibling and peer relationships supports the notion that it is particularly important to encourage the development of prosocial behaviors even if this means devoting less effort toward reducing conflict (Kramer, Noorman, & Brockman, 1999). Conflict is unavoidable, therefore it is imperative that children are taught from a young age how to deal with conflict in a positive way. That way as children grow up and become adults, they will have the tools and skills necessary to help them resolve conflicts within the



various relationships they have throughout their lives. Additionally, using picture books that portray stereotypes could also be a useful educating tool in regards to teaching children to think critically about what they read. O'Neil (2010) argues, "guiding children in their construction of knowledge about their place in the society in which they live means helping them distinguish between useful cultural expectations and harmful restrictions of stereotyping for both themselves and others" (p. 47). Teachers can use picture books that include stereotypes to help teach children to identify and then challenge stereotypes.

Although children and their parents may not purposely read books to promote knowledge in a specific area, the potential still exists for them to learn from the experience (Kramer, Noorman, & Brockman, 1999). Each time a child encounters a character that is similar to them then they can relate to them and comprehend the story. Each time a child encounters a character that is different from them then they can be introduced to and explore cultural differences and start the process of acceptance and tolerance. Picture books can also help children cope with difficult issues in their lives. Hampton, Rak, and Mumford (1997) claim "books can provide therapy for children, helping them relate their individual problems to those of the characters in a book" (p. 11). It may be an effective tool to provide a book for students with characters that are going through something similar to help them cope and work through their struggles. Presenting the information in picture book form may be less confrontational and more accessible to children. Using books for therapeutic reading, also known as bibliotherapy, helps children relate to characters and therefore cope with their emotions (Lowe 2009), which can aide teachers and parents when navigating a child through a difficult time or issue. It is imperative to ensure that the tools teachers are using to help students work through or cope with an issue are of good quality, easily accessible, and meaningful to the child.

Kleinerman (2004) states, “the best literature for children reflects the nature of children’s internal worlds” (p. 406), which will help them navigate through their lives. There isn’t a definitive answer as to what degree literature can lead children to change their behaviors and attitudes, therefore, we need to be aware that there may be times that literature even when active learning opportunities are incorporated might not be enough to help a child so outside professional help may be necessary.

### **Impact of Multi-Cultural Texts on Children’s Views and Behavior**

Children’s literature has long been used by parents and teachers to impart social values and expectations, stimulate readers to question and rethink societal norms, as well as to entertain children (O’Neil 2010). Although, children enjoy being read to and find it a leisure or pleasurable activity, picture books can also play a vital role in teaching our children life lessons. Early literacy develops within networks of social and cultural expectations, human relationships and distinctive child-rearing beliefs and practices (Whitehead 2002). Universal Pre-Kindergarten is an ideal group in proving this idea because their beliefs and attitudes are formulated from their family values, the way they were raised, and what/who they have come in contact with in their short lives including picture books or other forms of media. Johnston & Bainbridge (2008) found that “picture books are one of the first points of contact for young children to interact with verbal and visual representation of national identity and they are an ongoing medium for literary engagement throughout children’s schooling” (p. 81). This fact portrays the importance of using high quality picture books to help educate children and introduce them to people and things they might not normally come in contact with. Araujo and Strasser (2003) found:

By age three or four, children have already begun to construct their gender and racial identity. Stereotypes, prejudices, and practices in homes, communities, and the media can

negatively affect children's feelings about themselves and others. Young children may develop "pre-prejudices," which is defined as beginning ideas and feelings in very young children that may develop into real prejudice through reinforcement by prevailing societal biases. Pre-prejudice may be misconceptions based on young children's limited experience and developmental level, or it may consist of imitations of adult behavior. (p. 179).

Young children are very impressionable and look to adults and their experiences to help them create their opinions and views of the world. It is crucial to start at a young age to set the foundation of tolerance and acceptance in order to prevent or decrease prejudice.

The changing structure of families has influenced learning patterns of children and challenged educators to incorporate some of the life skills traditionally learned at home into the classrooms (Chowdhary, 2004). Two major life skills that there is now a need to teach within the classroom is tolerance and acceptance. Chowdhary (2004) states:

Children's story books are powerful teaching and learning tools that can be used to broaden and deepen the understanding between and among generations on concepts that are central to family and consumer sciences. The content of children's storybooks reflects societal changes. They are one more tool to use in uniting generations for lifelong well-being. (p. 69).

With the vastly diverse country and society that we live in it is crucial for our children to learn tolerance and acceptance of those that are different from them.

One group of people that is immensely discriminated against and rarely accepted or tolerated is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LBGTQ) community. Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep (2005) believe that "thoughtful engagements with LBGTQ picture books, as a way

of teaching queerly, may potentially serve as wonderful educational experiences for children and adults alike” (p. 1018). LBGTQ education does not have to be done just in the classroom environment. LBGTQ education could also be introduced and explored in other community institutions or organizations. There are many reasons why LBGTQ education isn’t more commonly integrated into the curriculum, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that very young children can take on and learn about literacy, if it is based on the lives, passions, and dilemmas of real people, because their own unique routes to literacy predispose them to be open to human complexity and diversity (Whitehead 2002). Children can understand a lot more than most adults believe and will thrive in learning about acceptance and tolerance if given the chance.

Some of the stories that grandparents and other adults from previous generations tell contradict the information that is taught in schools regarding acceptance and tolerance of those that are different. Involving elder adults in interactive conversations or simply including these cross generational stories could be very beneficial to children’s learning process. If these stories are left out simply because they don’t coincide with our current curriculum, Marshall and Toohey (2010) state that “we run the risk of keeping the institutional violence of schooling in place through literacy and language practices that pay only lip service to the lives and experiences of children and their families” (p. 238). It is just as important to learn about and understand that some families have racist or prejudicial views, as it is to learn about other families’ cultural differences. This fact may help open the door to children wanting to learn about cultural differences in order to help change the already instilled set of ideas from their family values.

Children’s books can also prove to be counterproductive if they include stereotypes or portray types of people in a negative fashion. Previous studies reveal the reinforcement of gender

stereotypes by picture books children read during the formative years (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). This finding could lend understanding of why children have such concrete ideas of what a female or male should look like and how they should behave. Tsao (2008) states that:

Researchers agree that children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in children's development because these books are a widely available cultural resource, offering young children a multitude of opportunities to gain information, become familiar with the printed pictures, be entertained, and experience perspectives other than their own. In such books, males are habitually described as active and domineering, while females rarely reveal their identities and very frequently are represented as meek and mild. This valuable venue for children's gender development thus unfortunately reflects engrained societal attitudes and biases in the available choices and expectations assigned to different genders. (p. 108).

Nursery rhymes are a great example of how gender and other stereotypes are prevalent. *Mistress Mary gardens*, which depicts a domestic role for women. An old lady lived in a shoe and had so many children she didn't know what to do, which depicts the stereotype of the woman's role to stay home, procreate, and raise children. The stereotypes also advanced in to future forms of stories as well. Tsao (2008) argues that "this discriminatory portrayal in many children's books also runs the risk of leading children toward a misrepresented and misguided realization of their true potential in their expanding world" (p. 108), which could in fact hinder their motivation to aspire to be different and change the societal norm.

In the early years, children start to develop their ideas of what their place in the world is. Picture books can help them understand differences and similarities among people. This idea could lead to valuable conversations that could help influence children's views and behaviors.

Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) found that a valuable resource for influencing children's attitudes is the reading of carefully selected books and the use of book related activities. There are a variety of positive outcomes of using multicultural texts. Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep (2005) suggests four main positive learning outcomes of using multicultural picture books: 1) Children will be able to express respect for a diversity of multidimensional identities for themselves and others; 2) Children will be able to name and appreciate different types of family structures; 3) Children will be able to recognize and respond constructively to emotional and physical violence; 4) Children will recognize representations of materialism and individualism in the stories and will be able to reconstruct them or create other stories with more of a focus on community and social good. All four of these learning outcomes will lead children down a path of acceptance and tolerance for people that are different from them.

How people or roles are portrayed in picture books and stories could affect the way people and society as a whole view those people. For example, Anderson and Hamilton (2005) found that fathers were significantly under-represented and portrayed as having little to do with the care of their children. This finding can have a negative impact by portraying the idea that the absence of fathers is expected and accepted. A risk of stereotypical portrayals is that they may socialize children and parents at important periods in their development, when parents identify their role in the spectrum from affectionate caregiver to deadbeat absentee, and when children form their expectations of their parents (Anderson & Hamilton). The negative or lack of images that picture books portray in regards to fathers could have an impact on how fathers are viewed and possibly even how fathers behave. In contrast, Young (2011) found that the picture book *and tango makes three*, where two male penguins hatch and raise a chick as part of their family at New York City's Central Park Zoo, portrays same-sex parents as loving, dedicated, and

nurturing. These positive images of same-sex parents (specifically two dads) could have a positive influence on children's ideas of fathers and same-sex parents.

Cairney (2011) found that there are four important points regarding stories: 1) The storybook still has an undiminished role to play in early literacy development even in the age of digital literacy; 2) Literature has a value well beyond its important utilitarian function as an excellent vehicle for the learning of literacy; 3) Reading is acquired in the context of relationships with other significant people; 4) Literature has the power to teach, enrich, and transform. With these findings in mind, teachers can justify the use of multicultural picture books within the classroom and throughout the curriculum. Gayle (2012) argues that using picture books to permeate the whole curriculum will develop positive feelings in all students towards their cultural heritage from wherever it originates so that they feel confident, develop their own sense of belonging and self-esteem, enable students to recognize the value of diversity within and between identities, groups, and communities, critically reflect on the shared and diverse values in society, and help teachers know their students better and therefore discover the true diversity within the classroom so that it can be celebrated. If teachers took the time to really get to know their students and their backgrounds then they could more accurately identify their needs and create an effective and meaningful curriculum. Using the intercultural approach, early education teachers can engage children in culturally familiar activities in addition to reading multicultural text; even daily routines can be filled with implicit or explicit cultural messages. Ponciano and Shabazian (2012) recommend:

Teachers should use children's home languages to read books (families can record themselves reading books if a teacher is not fluent in the home language). They can also implement an emergent curriculum, based on children's family traditions. During meals,

naps, and toileting, demonstrate intercultural understanding and competence. For example, some children may have been taught to dispose of used toilet tissue in the trash to avoid plumbing problems. Teachers should seek to understand the intention behind a child's actions before determining if the behavior must change. Teachers need to be careful not to impose their culturally learned behaviors on the children. Not all children are consoled with hugs at home. Others do not make eye contact. Teachers should introduce different cultures through stories and games. These activities especially help counter ethnocentrism and negative messages and promote images that convey the complexity of cultural, family, and individual differences. (p. 28).

Teachers, particularly at the early education level, need to set the foundation that children love school and feel safe enough to explore the academic and social components to the classroom and school in general. In order to accomplish this task, teachers need to create an environment where students feel safe and self-confident. Multicultural picture books and intercultural activities are an ideal combination to creating a tolerant and accepting classroom.

An important part of children's picture books are the illustrations in order to help children visualize the text. Joshua (2002) states that "pictures are symbols that have "value," independent of words, that potentially affect the reader's constructs of ethnicity and gender identification" (p. 125). Illustrations can sometimes speak louder than words. When a child listens to a story they are looking at the pictures while the adult is reading the story to them, so they are absorbing all of the direct and subtle details and information from the pictures. Illustrations may clarify and amplify the text, but they may not convey meaning until a reader develops some understanding of the culture (Wason-Ellam, 1997). If the illustrations don't depict the words exactly or if they include other details then the children will construct their meaning through what they already



know and make their own interpretations and send them messages that the author or illustrator may not have intended. For example, Joshua (2002) found that before the 1980s there were no fairy tales featuring African-American children and many popular stories that all children routinely read ignored African-Americans, depicted them in minor roles, or portrayed them negatively in both imagery and text. This finding could lead African-American children to feel devalued and could also lead Euro-American children to develop negative attitudes about others who are not of the same ethnicity and don't look outwardly similar to them.

The exact level of impact that picture books have on students' views, behavior, and attitude isn't entirely clear. However, there is enough evidence to support the use of them within the classroom as a tool in multicultural instruction. Cairney (2011) argues:

Reading literature offers children the opportunity to grasp meanings in narrative form that are important. The words of other people, whether spoken or written, allow us to reflect on the consequences and possibilities of our own experiences... Books allow us to reflect on these and other experiences and come to a greater understanding of our world and ourselves. As well, literature can act both as mortar to build rich personal and textual histories, and as a bridge between our lives and the lives of others. (p. 37).

Teachers can use picture books to introduce and explain complex or sensitive topics to children, which will open the door to dialogue and then lead to understanding, which will result in acceptance and tolerance. Travis (2006) states that "we need to publicize and document the positive effect that reading has on our students" (p. 41), which will result in a more comprehensive understanding of the impact that picture books have on students' views, behavior, and attitudes to help teachers create an effective multicultural curriculum.

Teachers have a powerful impact on their students' lives. They can be a positive or a negative force simply by what and how they teach. Gangi (2007) argues that "children of color make up almost 40% of the population in the United States, and 70% of the population of the world, yet too often their stories, their families, and their communities are minimized in classroom collections of children's literature, as well as in the books selected for reading aloud" (p. 97). This finding could be detrimental to the vastly multicultural society that America is becoming. It is imperative to the functioning of society that children get education in diversity in order to move forward toward tolerance and acceptance. Bishop (1990) theorizes that all children need both "mirror" books and "window" books- books that reflect back who they are, as well as books that open worlds larger than the one they know. When this theory is put into action, then teachers will be able to guide students towards tolerance and acceptance of the world they live in.

## **Method**

### **Context**

The center that I will be conducting my active research study at is located in Western, NY in a small town. There are 55 students that attend this particular Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program. The UPK program is designed to give students a head start on academic and social aspects of school before entering Kindergarten. This particular program is affiliated with the local school district therefore is free for all students that live in that school district. The curriculum is the same as one would find in a public school, but the facility and resources are different. The program currently follows the New York State Standards and is working to implement the Common Core Standards. The center also provides nursery school, pre-

kindergarten, and childcare services. Eight of the UPK students participate in wrap around childcare: these children are dropped off as early as 6:00am in the morning and then return to childcare after the UPK program that runs from 8:30am-11:15am in the morning. Some of those students are at the center until 6:00pm in the evening. The others either ride the bus to and from the center or their parents will drop them off and pick them up for the UPK program only.

The majority of students at the center are Caucasian. There is only one non-Caucasian student. According to a CACFP (Children and Adult Food Program) survey that was conducted by the center administrator, there are only 10 students that attend UPK that are considered low income that would qualify for free lunch.

### **Participants**

There were two different groups that participated in this study. The first group was my Universal Pre-Kindergarten class, which is made up of nine boys and nine girls who are four years old and Caucasian. There are three students that are considered low income that would qualify for free lunch. All of the students live in the same house as both of their birth parents.

There are eight participants that are not in my classroom, but in one of the two other Universal Pre-Kindergarten classrooms at the center. There was difficulty in having all of the students in the UPK program participate in the study, but I wanted more than just my class to be a part of the study. As a result, I decided to use eight of the students that attend UPK at the center and then stay at the center for childcare to also be participants of the study. The study for them was conducted in the exact same fashion, but due to the number of students it was more of a small group setting during the readings.

The second group was comprised of eight UPK students that participate in the center's wrap around childcare program before and after the UPK program. There are three girls and five

boys most of which are Caucasian four year olds. There is one boy that is not Caucasian (that student is mixed Hispanic and Black). Only three of those students come from low-income families that would qualify for free lunch. The majority of the students live in the same house as their birth father and birth mother. However, one girl lives with her grandparents while her mother is in rehab and two boys split time between their mother and father who are not together.

### **Researcher Stance**

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College completing my Master's degree in Literacy Education, Birth-Grade 12. I presently have my Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and am certified in Pennsylvania (Kindergarten-Grade 8) and New York State (Birth-Grade 6). Professionally, I am a Child Care Director and a Universal Pre-Kindergarten teacher during the week at the same center that I conducted my study. In this action research study, I was an active participant observer, which means that I was actively engaged in teaching and observing the outcomes of this study (Mills, 2011). Through the study as an active participant observer, I recorded my "observations in a systematic way during the school day" (Mills, p.75). As a result, I was able to effectively observe, record, then analyze, and synthesize the data.

### **Method**

During my study, I first interviewed each student in a one-on-one setting. I showed each student a picture of a family structure (traditional family, grandparents as parents, same sex parents, single parents, and an interracial adoption family) one at a time. After each picture, I asked, "Do you think this is a family?" I took notes on their responses. Then I asked, "What do

you see in the picture or what do you know that shows that this is/isn't a family?" I took notes of their responses. This interview was used as both a pre and post reading assessment.

I then had each student draw two pictures. The first picture was of their family and the second picture was of a family different from their own. Emphasis was put on identifying each family member. The prompt of drawing a friend's family, if a student was stuck on what to draw in the different family from theirs box, was used. This activity was done as both pre and post reading artifacts.

The third step was to read six different picture books dealing with different family structures in a whole group setting. I read the books using an active reading method, by asking students engaging questions and allowing comments during reading about the text. I also encouraged students to connect the readings to their own lives, the world, their personal experiences, and other texts they know. During the readings I observed and took notes of the students' reactions and responses both verbal and nonverbal. The five books that were used are: *The Family Book*, *and tango makes three*, *Robert Lives With His Grandparents*, *Do I Have a Daddy?*, and *Star of the Week*. *The Family Book* introduces all the different types of family structures, characteristics, and activities that people may have (Parr 2002). I chose this book because it has bright and fun drawings that look like a child drew as illustrations and introduces family differences in a non-confrontational way. *and tango makes three* is about two male penguins that hatch and raise a baby together (Richardson & Parnell, 2005). I chose this book because it introduced same-sex parents in a non-confrontational way because it used animals instead of humans. *Robert Lives With His Grandparents* is about an African-American boy who has to move in with his grandparents because his mother is going to rehab and it depicts how Robert feels ashamed that he lives with his grandparents until Grandma shows up at school and

nobody makes fun of him (Hickman, 1995). I chose this book because it depicted the exact family situation as one of the participants and the same race as another participant and because it addressed the idea of being ashamed of having a different family structure than everyone else. *Do I Have A Daddy?* is about a boy who is sad after a friend said something mean about him not having a Daddy and then has a heartfelt and informational discussion with his mother about why he doesn't have a Daddy (Lindsay, 1991). I chose this book because it was about a single parent family, which is a frequent family structure in today's society. *Star of the Week* is about a girl who was adopted from China and as she is making her Star of the Week poster for school she wonders about her birth parents (Friedman & Roth, 2009). I chose this book because international adoption is a difficult concept for many people to understand. After the readings I performed the post assessments and artifacts.

The entire study was completed over the course of three weeks. The books were read one each day for five days. There weren't any follow up activities during the study on the picture books in order to ensure the effectiveness of the picture books alone. Questions were answered if the students had any (which were noted in my observation notes).

### **Quality and Creditability of Research**

In conducting my action research study, it is imperative to assess and guarantee the study's quality and credibility. In order to do so, Mills (2011) has drawn on the work of Guba (1981) identifying credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as essential components of a qualitative research study's reliability. As a result, these four aspects have been comprehensively assessed and implemented into my study.

Mills (2011) defines “the credibility of the study as the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (p. 104). In my action research study, I implemented triangulation to ensure credibility. Mills (2011) defines triangulation as “comparing a variety of data sources and different methods with one another in order to crosscheck data” (p. 104). Through participant interviews, participant artifacts, and participant observation I practiced triangulation by collecting data using experiential, enquiry, and examination data.

Transferability is also an important part of a reliable research study. Mills (2011) state that “transferability refers to qualitative researchers’ beliefs that everything they study is context bound and that the goal of their work is not to develop “truth” statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people” (p.104). In this research study, the data that is collected is detailed and descriptive, which will permit comparison of a given context to other possible contexts to which transfer might be contemplated (Mills, 2011, p. 104). The data is also descriptive and specific to the context of this study so that others can make judgments about fittingness with other contexts possible (Mills, 2011, p. 104).

Mills (2011) states that “dependability refers to the stability of data” (p. 104) in a study. With this in mind, the triangulation process was used in regards to collecting data. This process is similar to the overlap method, which is the use of two or more methods in such a way that the weakness of one is compensated by the strength of the other (Mills, 2011, p.104). Using observation and then supplementing it with interviews and artifacts that could be used to aide understanding of what was observed accomplished this overlap. An audit trail is the process that makes it possible for an external “auditor” to examine the process of data collection, analysis,

and interpretation (Mills, 2011, p. 104). The audit trail was implemented through written documentation of the interviews and observations and the artifacts.

Finally, in order to address confirmability of data I practiced triangulation.

Confirmability of data refers to the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected (Mills, 2011, p. 104). Through the use of triangulation, people other than the researcher can compare and crosscheck data to ensure the accuracy. In addition, I also practiced reflexivity, that is, to intentionally reveal underlying assumptions or biases that cause the researcher to formulate a set of questions in a particular way and to present findings in a particular way (Mills, 2011, p. 105). I accomplished this by writing my reflections to my observations, the interviews, and the artifacts.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

In order to obtain the informed consent, I sent home a letter that explained my thesis and the rights of the participants. Parents were also notified that student names would be changed to pseudonyms and that the student's names would be removed or blackened on their artifacts. The parents then signed the permission forms and sent them back. I offered my contact information to answer any questions the parents may have about my study, but I didn't receive any inquiries. Due to the fact that the participants are younger than third grade, I asked verbal consent to work with them during the study. I let the students know what I am going to have them do.

### **Data Collection**

I collected three different types of data in order to accomplish triangulation. The first form of data that I collected was interviewing, which is in the enquiring category. This interview was used as both a pre and post readings assessment. I showed each student in a one-on-one



setting a picture of a family structure (traditional family, grandparents as parents, same sex parents, single parents, and an interracial adoption family) one at a time. After each picture, I asked, “Do you think this is a family?” I took notes on their responses. Then I asked, “What do you see in the picture or what do you know that shows that this is/isn’t a family?” I took notes of their responses.

The second forms of data that I collected were artifacts, which are a part of the examination category. Students drew a picture of their own family and then drew a picture of a family that is different from theirs. This activity was completed both pre and post readings.

The third forms of data that I collected were field notes, which is part of the experiencing category. I read five different books dealing with different family structures. During the readings I observed and took notes of the students’ reactions and responses both verbal and nonverbal. The five books were *The Family Book*, *and tango makes three*, *Robert Lives With His Grandparents*, *Do I Have a Daddy?*, and *Star of the Week*. *The Family Book* introduces all the different types of family structures, characteristics, and activities that people may have (Parr 2002). I chose this book because it has bright and fun drawings that look like a child drew as illustrations and introduces family differences in a non-confrontational way. *and tango makes three* is about two male penguins that hatch and raise a baby together (Richardson & Parnell, 2005). I chose this book because it introduced same-sex parents in a non-confrontational way because it used animals instead of humans. *Robert Lives With His Grandparents* is about an African-American boy who has to move in with his grandparents because his mother is going to rehab and it depicts how Robert feels ashamed that he lives with his grandparents until Grandma shows up at school and nobody makes fun of him (Hickman, 1995). I chose this book because it depicted the exact family situation as one of the participants and the same race as another

participant and because it addressed the idea of being ashamed of having a different family structure than everyone else. *Do I Have A Daddy?* is about a boy who is sad after a friend said something mean about him not having a Daddy and then has a heartfelt and informational discussion with his mother about why he doesn't have a Daddy (Lindsay, 1991). I chose this book because it was about a single parent family, which is a frequent family structure in today's society. *Star of the Week* is about a girl who was adopted from China and as she is making her Star of the Week poster for school she wonders about her birth parents (Friedman & Roth, 2009). I chose this book because international adoption is a difficult concept for many people to understand. After the readings, I performed the post assessments and artifacts.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was collected through pre and post reading interviews, pre and post reading student work, and observations and field notes. I first looked through all of the data to familiarize myself with the information that was collected. Then, I looked through all of the data a second time to begin coding the data to identify different themes and categories that fit together. The final time that I looked through the data was to look for any disconfirming evidence. The quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed by first looking at the data and deciding what data was imperative to the research question.

### **Findings and Discussion**

After conducting all of the research and collecting all of the data, three common themes are clear in regards to the impact of picture books on children's views on various family structures in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting. The first is that multi-cultural picture books alone aren't enough to impact students' views. The second theme is that picture books using

animals instead of humans help children connect to concepts. The third theme is that picture books pertaining to a child's life are more engaging than those about unknown concepts.

### **Picture Books Alone Aren't Enough to Impact Students' Views**

Students were asked to draw a picture of their own family and a family that was different from theirs before any picture books were read. Students were successful in drawing pictures of their own family members and their pets. Students used their friends' families or a combination of other extended family members to draw a family that was different from theirs. The five books that were read are *The Family Book*, *and tango makes three*, *Robert Lives With His Grandparents*, *Do I Have a Daddy?*, and *Star of the Week*. *The Family Book* introduces all the different types of family structures, characteristics, and activities that people may have (Parr 2002). I chose this book because it has bright and fun drawings that look like a child drew as illustrations and introduces family differences in a non-confrontational way. *and tango makes three* is about two male penguins that hatch and raise a baby together (Richardson & Parnell, 2005). I chose this book because it introduced same-sex parents in a non-confrontational way because it used animals instead of humans. *Robert Lives With His Grandparents* is about an African-American boy who has to move in with his grandparents because his mother is going to rehab and it depicts how Robert feels ashamed that he lives with his grandparents until Grandma shows up at school and nobody makes fun of him (Hickman, 1995). I chose this book because it depicted the exact family situation as one of the participants and the same race as another participant and because it addressed the idea of being ashamed of having a different family structure than everyone else. *Do I Have A Daddy?* is about a boy who is sad after a friend said something mean about him not having a Daddy and then has a heartfelt and informational discussion with his mother about why he doesn't have a Daddy (Lindsay, 1991). I chose this

book because it was about a single parent family, which is a frequent family structure in today's society. *Star of the Week* is about a girl who was adopted from China and as she is making her Star of the Week poster for school she wonders about her birth parents (Friedman & Roth, 2009). I chose this book because international adoption is a difficult concept for many people to understand. After the picture books were read, students were asked to draw a picture of their own family and then a family that was different from their own. There wasn't a change in how the students illustrated their families or a family different from theirs after the readings. The students still used a personal reference point to illustrate a family different from their own. Again, students drew their friends' families or a family comprised of members of their extended family.

Amanda (pseudonym) drew a picture of her family pre readings in Figure 1. She drew her Daddy, Mommy, Brice (older brother), and herself. She drew herself smaller than the other members of her family. Amanda also drew the female members of her family in pink and the male members of her family in blue.

**Figure 1** *Pre Readings My Family Drawing*



*Figure 1.* Amanda demonstrates that she understands the structure of her family by including and identifying each member and clearly drawing people like forms.

In Figure 2, Amanda draws a family that is different from hers pre readings. She drew her Aunt Jessica, Justin, Caleb, Amelia, and Logan. The parents in the family are drawn bigger than the others and the family members decrease in height according to age.

**Figure 2** *Pre Readings A Different Family Drawing*



*Figure 2.* This drawing indicates that Amanda used a personal connection to draw a family different from hers. She drew a family made up of extended family members.

In Figure 3 Amanda drew her family post readings. She drew her Daddy, Mom, Bryce (older brother), and herself. She again paid attention to the detail of height in her family. She also used pink in the drawings of the female members of her family and blue to draw the male members of her family.

**Figure 3** *Post Reading My Family Drawing*



*Figure 3.* Amanda demonstrates that she has a clear idea of her family structure.

In Figure 4, Amanda draws a family that is different from her own. She drew Willow's Dad, Willow's Mom, Willow (a friend), and Marin (friend's younger sibling).

**Figure 4** *Post Reading A Different Family Drawing*



*Figure 4.* This drawing appears to demonstrate that Amanda needs a personal reference or connection like extended family members or in this case a friend's family in order to draw a family that is different from her own. Amanda didn't choose to draw a family structure that was from one of the stories.

As a researcher, I had anticipated that the post reading pictures would consist of families they learned about from the picture books (*The Family Book*, and *tango makes three*, *Robert Lives With His Grandparents*, *Do I Have a Daddy?*, and *Star of the Week*). Through reflection, I have realized that the fact that I read one book a day over the course of one and a half weeks and didn't do any post reading activities to extend on what they learned could have impacted their lack of connection to the specific families from the picture books. This finding is similar to the findings of Glazier and Seo (2005) who discovered that the use of multicultural text coupled with

dialogic instruction within a safe classroom context can provide students with both a window to other cultures and a mirror reflecting their own. As a researcher, I made the decision to not do any extending activities after the reading, to ensure that the picture books themselves impacted the students' views on the family structures. The data implies that children need more than picture books alone in order to have an impact on their views. The picture books need to be coupled with meaningful discussions and/or extending activities to have more of an impact on students' views. Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) also found that a valuable resource for influencing children's attitudes is the reading of carefully selected books and the use of book related activities. This finding will help teachers develop a more meaningful multicultural curriculum.

Children in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting need more than just exposure to multi-cultural texts. Carefully selected multi-cultural picture books accompanied with meaningful discussions and/or extending activities are needed in order to have more of a lasting impact on students' views, opinions, and behaviors.

### **Picture Books Using Animals Instead of Humans Help Children Connect with Concepts**

The participants were broken up into two different groups. The first being the Universal Pre-Kindergarten students that aren't in my class, but attend child care at The Children's Center. The second group is the students in my Universal Pre-Kindergarten class. Their interview responses to the pictures of various family structures were documented and then graphed according to their answers pre and post readings. There is one non-Caucasian male who lives with his single mother and one female participant that lives with her grandparents instead of her parents in the Child Care UPK Participants group. The rest of the students are Caucasian and

live with both their birth parents and siblings (if they have any). All of the students in my Universal Pre-Kindergarten class are Caucasian and live with both of their birth parents and siblings (if they have any). One female participant has very involved grandparents, but she lives with her parents.

Students were interviewed about seven photos of seven different family structures. The pictures in Appendices A-G depict a variety of family structures. The family structures were an interracial adoption family, two dads, grandparents as parents, two moms, a single dad, a traditional family, and a single mom. Students were asked if they thought the picture was of a family and what they saw that made them think that it was or wasn't a family. The students were then asked the same questions using the same pictures before and after the picture books were read to them.

As seen in Table 1, the children that attend childcare at the center had only one family structure that their opinions were impacted in a positive light after the readings. The picture with two moms changed one person's mind to believe that it was a family. The opinion on other family structures either stayed the same or changed their minds in a negative light after the readings (before the readings they thought it was a family and after the readings they said that it wasn't a family). This finding may mean that the students didn't connect personally or understand the concepts from the picture books.

Table 1

*Number of Students that Thought Picture Made a Family in Child Care*

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Pre-Readings</u>		<u>Post Readings</u>	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
International Adoption	6	0	5	1



Two Dads	4	2	4	2
Grandparents as Parents	6	0	4	2
Two Moms	4	2	5	1
Single Dad	4	2	3	3
Traditional Family	6	0	5	1
<u>Single Mom</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>

As seen in Table 2, my Universal Pre-Kindergarten class mostly stayed the same in their views on family structures both pre and post reading. There were three family structures that reading the picture books may have had a positive impact on the students' views. The number of students who answered yes they thought it was a family increased with the interracial adoption, two dads, and two moms pictures.

Table 2

*Number of Students that Thought Picture Made a Family in my UPK Class*

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Pre-Readings</u>		<u>Post Readings</u>	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
International Adoption	10	7	13	4
Two Dads	9	8	11	6
Grandparents as Parents	12	5	11	6
Two Moms	10	7	11	6
Single Dad	12	5	12	5
Traditional Family	15	2	15	2
<u>Single Mom</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>4</u>

This finding could lead one to believe that using picture books using animals instead of humans when dealing with particularly difficult issues may make it easier for students to comprehend due to the increase in the number of students that changed their mind in the post readings interview to state that they did believe the pictures depicting two moms and two dads were families. Shimanoff, Elian, & Yep (2005) found that *And Tango Makes Three*, a picture book about two male penguins becoming parents, may make their nonnormative, same-sex attraction easier for teachers to present because of the fact that the characters are animals rather than humans. This finding could also lend to the idea that children are able to accept and process the idea more easily because it doesn't use humans and the concentration can be placed on the concept and not whether or not it is morally correct.

Another interesting finding is that one of the male participants from my Universal Pre-Kindergarten class is highly racist against African-American people as evident in his pre and post readings interviews. When shown the picture of the African-American traditional family, the participant stated, "No that isn't a family because they are black. I don't like black guys" (Interview, October 22, 2012). His mother has confirmed this prejudice as a family value at a parent-teacher conference stating, "I was wondering about this browned skinned girl that Kyle says he plays with at school because we don't like black people" (Parent-Teacher Conference, October 24, 2012). It appears that this participant's family values outweighed the picture books because after the readings when shown the picture of the African-American traditional family, the participant said, "No, that isn't a family because I don't like blacks" (Interview, November 1, 2012).

The data shows that it may be more effective to use picture books using animals instead of humans to introduce more difficult or controversial concepts to children. When the element of

humans and race is taken out of the picture then it may help some students concentrate more on understanding the concept and less on whether or not it is morally acceptable according to their family beliefs.

### **Picture Books pertaining to a Child's Life are More Engaging than Unknown Concepts**

Field notes were taken on the observations of the students while the picture books were being read. All of the students except two are from traditional family structures where they live with both of their birth parents and their siblings (if they have any). This fact proved as a challenge to engage students and help them connect the picture books about different family structures to their lives, which is the way that students in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting learn. The only picture book that caused significant student engagement was *Robert Lives With His Grandparents*, which is about a boy who lives with his grandparents while his mother goes to rehab because there is one student who is living that exact situation. Gertrude (pseudonym) was completely engaged demonstrating extreme interest and focus. She was looking very closely at the pictures with her mouth open and smiled when Robert realized that it was ok to have a grandma at school with him (Field Notes, November 1, 2012). During the readings of the other picture books the other students were listening, but not overly interested or focused compared to other read aloud stories and compared to Gertrude's reactions.

The interesting finding is that although that participant was thoroughly engaged in the picture book pertaining to her current family structure, she has consistently insisted that the only family structure that is actually a family is the traditional family where there is a mother, a father, and siblings. This finding has been evident in her interviews and drawings. In Figure 12

she drew a picture including her mother and her father. She hasn't seen her father since she was born and she hasn't lived with her mother in over a year.

**Figure 12 Gertrude's My Family Drawing**



The drawing in Figure 12 may mean that a child's hopes or wishes or even peer pressure could play a huge factor in what a child thinks is correct. Since all of her classmates come from traditional family settings, it appears that the societal norm is more powerful than multi-cultural picture books in shaping Gertrude's idea of what a family structure is.

In contrast, Gayle (2012) found that using picture books to permeate the whole curriculum will develop positive feelings in all students towards their cultural heritage from wherever it originates so that they feel confident, develop their own sense of belonging and self-esteem, enable students to recognize the value of diversity within and between identities, groups, and communities, critically reflect on the shared and diverse values in society, and help teachers know their students better and therefore discover the true diversity within the classroom so that it can be celebrated. This finding may shed light on the fact that more multicultural texts dealing with this particular student's family structure may help give her the confidence to feel proud of her family structure where her grandparents are her parents.

Picture books do provide insight into cultures and lives that are different from what students are used to, but extending activities (meaningful post reading activities) appears to be an important component to a successful multicultural classroom. It also appears that consistently using multicultural texts has a great impact on students' views than short spurts or sporadic readings of multicultural texts.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This action research project would infer that reading picture books dealing with different family structures does not impact a student's opinion on those family structures in a Universal Pre-Kindergarten setting. The data showed that there wasn't a significant change to the students' opinions before and after reading multicultural picture books to them dealing with different family structures. This finding implies that family beliefs may have more of an impact on children's opinions, but it could also imply that teachers need to do more and take a multicultural approach in their classrooms to make up for the lack of multicultural exposure that they may have at home. Gorski (2001) states:

Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and addresses current shortcomings, failings, and discriminatory practices in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice, education equality, and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally. Multicultural education acknowledges that schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice. (p.1).

There are a lot of life lessons that students learn outside of school and traditionally that has been the responsibility of the parents to teach their children these lessons. However, progressively through the years this responsibility has shifted more to teachers. For that reason it is imperative that teachers understand, learn how to, and effectively implement multiculturalism into the classroom.

The data also implies that students used a personal connection when drawing a picture of a family different from theirs. They drew a friend's family or a family made up of extended family members. There wasn't one student that drew a family from one of the picture books. This finding could be explained through the findings of Glazier and Seo (2005), who discovered that the use of multicultural text coupled with dialogic instruction within a safe classroom context can provide students with both a window to other cultures and a mirror reflecting their own. This finding may mean that teachers, need to have meaningful discussions with students to help them connect to and thoroughly understand the concepts.

The data may also depict that students may be able to understand and connect to stories using animals instead of humans to explore more difficult or unfamiliar concepts. The two family structures that students changed their opinions about after the readings are same sex parents (two moms and two dads). *And Tango Makes Three* is a story about two male penguins that hatch and raise a baby penguin together (Richardson & Parnell, 2005). This book was chosen specifically because they used animals instead of humans and it was a less confrontational way to introduce the topic. My theory was that it may make it easier for students to explore and accept the concept if the characters were animals instead of humans because they could concentrate more on the concept and less on their moral ideals. This theory is similar to Shimanoff, Elia, and Yep's (2005) finding that *And Tango Makes Three* is a book where the

story is about two male penguins becoming parents, so the fact that the characters are animals rather than humans, may make their nonnormative, same-sex attraction easier for teachers to present. The data also implies that if characters are of a different race than the students then they may not be able to connect with them. The number of students that thought grandparents as parents were a family declined after the readings. It may be possible that students couldn't relate to the character in the story because they don't have that living situation or because the characters were African-American and only one participant isn't Caucasian and his race is unknown. These findings imply that teachers need to be more thoughtful and creative in the way they present controversial information about multiculturalism. Students may need a less controversial introduction to begin their exploration.

Picture books are used every day in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten classroom for many reasons. The stories are used to inform, explore, entertain, and comfort students. For that reason, I wanted to see if picture books could be used to impact or influence a child's opinions, views, and behaviors. I specifically wanted to see if they could help positively impact their views on controversial topics such as different family structures. Theoretically sociocultural aspects of literacy are crucial in our society. Students belong to families and those families belong to various cultural groups and those groups help shape the ideals and values that they teach their children. Children then take these ideals and opinions and apply them into their social interactions at school. This could be detrimental to a multicultural society if those opinions are discriminatory and prejudice. The most effective way to impact students and help them make societal changes is through a multicultural approach in the classroom. I found through my action research study that reading multicultural picture books alone doesn't have the most effective

impact, but the picture books coupled with meaningful discussions, presenting the concepts in a non-confrontational way, and helping students make personal connections may.

After reflecting on my action research project there are a few things I would do differently if I were to do it again. The first is that I would like to broaden my participants. I would be interested in seeing if picture books impacted students from different backgrounds (i.e. urban, suburban, rural) differently. The fact that I used mostly Caucasian children from middle class traditional families may have impacted certain aspects of the study. I would also include meaningful discussions and possibly activities to follow the readings to help the students further their connections and understandings. After completing my action research project and conducting all of the research, I am still left wondering how effective picture books and a multicultural approach in the classroom to impacting students' prejudices. I would like to learn more about racism and prejudice and how strong the impact of family beliefs is versus a multicultural classroom. I end my study wondering even if multicultural texts don't have as big of an impact on students' opinions, should they still be read?

Children enjoy picture books and they are a vital tool for Early Childhood Teachers in the classroom. Social awareness and skills and Family are important components to the Universal Pre-Kindergarten curriculum. Therefore, it is only natural that teachers combine the two together when teaching about the diversity in family structures that exist in today's society. It is imperative that teachers use a multi-cultural instructional approach in their classrooms and use both multi-cultural picture books and meaningful discussions and/or extending activities to help increase the impact that these lessons may have on the students. Increasing effective multi-cultural instruction will help decrease prejudice and hopefully increase the level of acceptance of those that are different than the societal norm.



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**Appendix A**



**Appendix B**





**Appendix C**



**Appendix D**



**Appendix E**



**Appendix F**





Appendix G

