# *LITERACY &*
# *SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY*

**INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION**

CO-EDITORS

Leah Katherine Saal

Tynisha D. Meidl

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CONTRIBUTORS
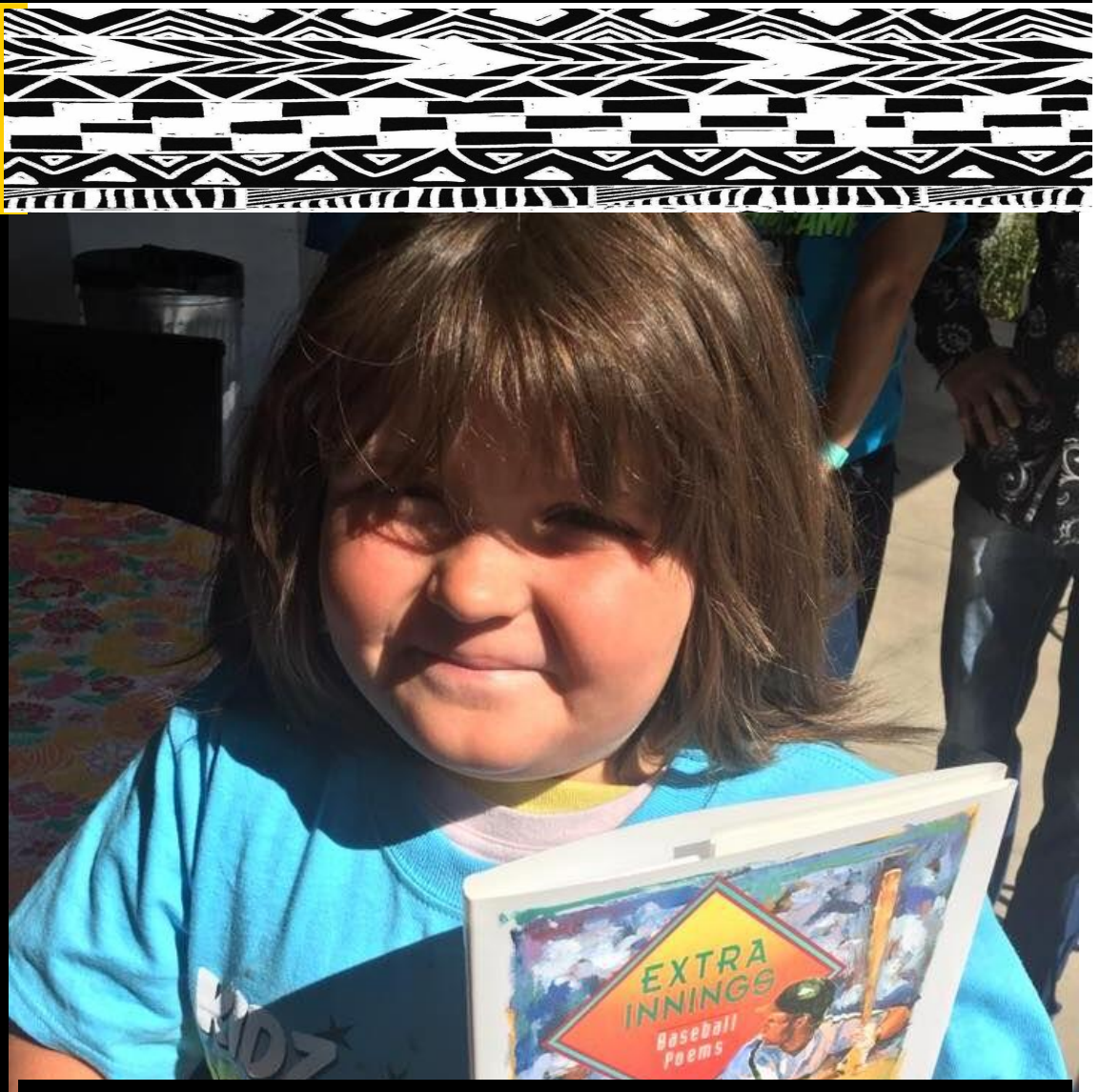
Autumn Smith

LaToshia Woods

Gary Homana

Ken Slesarik

April Halprin Wayland

Sherridon Sweeney

Lena Marie Rockwood

*LITERACY & SOCIAL ESPONSIBILITY*

## AIMS & SCOPE

Literacy & Social Responsibility eJournal is an international peer-reviewed forum published by the Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group of the International Literacy Association.  This journal provides a venue for educators to promote the intersection of literacy and social responsibility for life long learners through policy, research, and/or practice.

*EDITORS*

**Leah Katherine Saal, Ph.D.**
Assistant Professor, Literacy
Loyola University Maryland

**Tynisha D. Meidl, Ph.D.**
Associate Professor, Teacher Education
St. Norbert College, Wisconsin

*CONTACT US:*

**Website:**
http://www.csulb.edu/misc/l-sr/ejournal/ejournal.html

**Email Address:**
lsrejournal@gmail.com

**INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION**

# THE FUTURE OF LITERACY

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# *EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION*

**Leah Katherine Saal**

**Co-editor**

**Tynisha D. Meidl**

**Co-editor**

Welcome to Volume 10 of the *Literacy & Social Responsibility eJournal.*

After a decade in print, the *Literacy & Social Responsibility ejournal* (LSR) is excited to present the 10th volume of the journal. From its inception, LSR has intentionally created a space for marginalized voices. In this theme, we focus on how literacy research is poised to combat ignorance, inequity, and injustice. Particularly, this issue interrogates the ontological and methodological perspectives within literacy research and practice which serve to rarify or dismantle these dehumanizing practices and systems. As we are faced with violent discourses in popular media and education, we, in this iteration of the journal, question how researchers and practitioners, can "strongly emphasize a love ethic" (hooks, 2000, p. xvii) as we work together toward changing the things we cannot accept.

Issue 1 is comprised of three *Feature Articles* grounded in empirical data, two *Take Action Articles* focused on reinforcing and expanding notions of social responsibility through poetry and everyday practices, and one critical *Text Review*. Each of this issue's pieces explicitly or implicitly challenge current conceptualizations of what it means to study literacy and its outcomes. How do our conceptualizations privilege particular ways of knowing and doing literacy? Further, do our curricula emphasize an emancipatory or white supremacist/colonial framework? These are important questions we hope help to frame your thinking as you interact with the articles contained in this issue.

This issue begins with an article by Autumn Smith showcasing how equity audits can be used as a tool to identify invisible barriers to learning for marginalized populations in a school building or system. We continue with an article by LaToshia Woods which outlines how confronting construction of knowledge within the disciplines is a pressing issue for pre-service teachers. Her results highlight how effectively teaching comprehension is discipline specific and should draw from teachers' own funds of knowledge. We then turn to an article by Gary Homana which examines notions of citizenship in relation to literacy/ies. Specifically, he considers school climate and service-learning as a conceptual framework for the development of students' civic literacy and engagement.

In this issue's *Take Action Articles*, Ken Slesarik and April Wayland push us all to think about our roles in the current sociopolitical climate and how to act in the spirit of social responsibly in our classrooms, communities, and country. Finally, the book review featured in this issue illustrates the vital importance of critical literacy in the classroom and beyond.

In closing, we wish to thank the authors and members of the Editorial Review Board who shared their expertise, insights, and time to make this issue representative of our mission.

Leah and Ty

# Exploring Equity: One Literacy Leader's Case

Autumn Smith

*Loyola University Maryland*

*Abstract —* The purpose of this study was to evaluate how teacher's dispositions and corresponding decision making can affect student learning outcomes. The following questions were posed by the researcher and were that basis of this inquiry: How does the characterization of student learning behaviors and classifications correspond to student achievement?, What is the impact of teacher disposition and decision making on achievement?, What is the representation of student subcategories across labels?, and, finally, Does access to advanced academic programming or enrichment become limited given specific labels?

The action research project used both qualitative and quantitative research design (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, 2014; Mills, 2014; Pappas & Tucker-Raymond, 2011; Bianco & Leech, 2010; Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012). The researcher completed an equity audit to identify targeted data for specific groups of students, analyzed qualitative data of teacher questionnaires related to teacher dispositions, and collected qualitative data of a conceptual analysis to attempt to address how labels, classifications, and categorizations of students corresponds with student achievement or access to programming. The results reveal problematic institutional identification practices - potentially limiting access for minority students to advanced programing or enrichment.

*Keywords: equity audit, student labels, achievement gap, "at risk" learners, teacher disposition*

## Introduction

### Student Identifiers and Achievement

Labels, classifications, and categorizations of students' behaviors have greatly influenced how we, as teachers, determine students' academic potential and future success. We use data and statistics from standardized testing and other formal assessments, as well as norms of the culture of our schools to justify our reasoning in student placement and instruction. By placing such a heavy emphasis on the identification process of learning behaviors, do we minimize or limit literacy opportunities for students to begin to achieve their optimal potential? Educators must begin to be more reflective of their instructional practices and evaluate how one's implicit biases shape student learning and the acquisition of critical thinking skills for literacy success.

### Correlation of Student Identifiers and Teacher Disposition

Labels and characterizations are necessary and serve a purpose in planning instruction to meet students' needs; however, we, as educators, must be reflective of how the identification process influences our daily practices. Professor Linda B. Gambrell states the following, "It is critical to reading development that teachers offer students the experiences of progress and competence in reading" (Gambrell, 2011, p. 176). To teach reading effectively and to promote all learners we must set forth high expectations of all students and have the fundamental belief all are capable of achieving success. The process of planning and implementing reading lessons should outline instructional needs as well as accommodate individual learning styles and competencies. Furthermore, students must have the same experience of being engaged, challenged, and provided multiple opportunities to practice and develop higher level thinking skills. It is through this literacy experience all learners have the opportunity to achieve academic success that is both equal and equitable.

Effective literacy instruction requires teachers to have a range of methodologies, and the ability to plan, prepare and implement instruction that is individualized to meet each student's needs. Bringing cultural context and self-identification to education is critical in creating opportunities for adolescents to reflect on how he or she will define themselves individuality and as citizens as well as examine social injustices both locally and globally. In the *What's Hot…. & What's Not* literacy survey (Cassidy, Grote-Garcia, & Ortlieb, 2015), teacher preparation and certification as well as teacher evaluation for literacy were considered topics this past year. The researchers state the following, "Teacher autonomy, collaboration, inquiry, and reflection are always

the most valuable components of successful literacy instruction; thus, there is significance in both teacher preparation and certification as well as teacher evaluation for literacy" (Cassidy, Grote-Garcia, & Ortlieb, 2015, p.15). Providing access to a high-quality education for all learners is dependent on professional development and training of teacher professionals.

Teacher disposition can positively or negatively shape students' learning behavior with lasting effects as it relates to literacy proficiency. Researcher Holly Thornton believes teacher disposition goes beyond one's beliefs and values, in her definition "dispositions in action" moves beyond reflection, self-assessment, and perceptions to explicate how dispositions are manifested within the classroom and how they impact pedagogy and ultimately the the learning process, (Thornton, 2006, p. 56). Furthermore, Mary Kate Hallam states, "Teacher dispositions, ultimately, are about the teacher's ability to bring out a student's best, no matter what that best may mean on an individual basis", (Hallam, 2009, p.29). Students who know their teachers care are more likely to develop positive learning behaviors including: intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, strong work ethic, and ownership of their learning. Phyllis S. Hunter states the following about students as effective readers, "When kids are motivated to read, they'll be willing to work hard to improve their skills. That means that kids who have had trouble reading in the past can still have the chance to succeed", (Hunter, 2005, p. 10). These ideas are significant in understanding how teaching practices directly impacts student self-efficacy, motivation, and achievement within the classroom setting.

Many school systems nationwide are examining the correlation between teacher disposition and student achievement and are implementing various methods to ascertain attributes of socially conscious teaching including studies, professional development courses, surveys, questionnaires and interviews. Equity audits are another powerful tool for school systems to consider as well. These evaluative measures are being implemented to examine persistent achievement gaps by race and class in U.S. Public school systems. The goal of this study is to underscore programmatic equity within a specific school setting, meaning this study focused on the proportion of students disciplined or assigned to special education, gifted and talented programs, and bilingual education as well as identify the percentage of minority students labeled as "at risk" and or below grade level.

## Literature Review

Rojas-LeBouef and Slate (2012) state the following:
As Ogbu (2008) and Adams (1965) theorized, individuals are iInfluenced by their surroundings and the belief that their work is equivalent to other individuals' work, when individuals in our society begin to speculate that an

imbalance exists in the output (the amount of work) and input (over rewards or under rewards for accomplishment), then feelings of afflictions become present. (p. 4)

One of the auspices of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, now Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), as well as similar mandates and policies, has been to "reduce achievement gaps" between White students and minorities, in addition to holding schools across the nation at a higher level of accountability. However, many of these policies implemented to "reduce the achievement gap" have not improved the academic outcomes of students. Furthermore, numerous researchers have demonstrated that a "one-size-fits-all accountability model does not work in all conditions" (Sunderman & Kim, 2004b, p. 5 as cited in Rojas-LeBouef and Slate, 2012, p. 4) and that "educational programs that are provided under the NCLB law have not improved the academic needs of students" (Teale et al., 2007, as cited in Rojas-LeBouef and Slate 2012, p. 4). Research indicates the lack of success for these students can be attributed to social and systemic matters including racial stereotyping, socioeconomic status, availability to highly qualified teachers, test bias, and school climate.

### Defining What is Equitable for All Learners

To gain a better understanding of how to approach the vast and complex issue of promoting academic achievement of minorities and students within specific subgroups relating to academic ability, language acquisition, acculturation, and economic status the topic will be discussed in two components. The first component will address the categorization of minorities and the perception of self and others (teachers, peers, and community), and the second component will focus on school effectiveness. "Equity is a major influence in behaviors, expectations, and accomplishments of minority students" (Clark, 2001; Henderson & Kennedy, 2003 as cited in Rojas-LeBouef and Slate, 2012, p. 4). The following research summaries will focus on articles that address educational equity as it relates to students who are part of minority populations and special education.

David Becerra's 2012 study examines the educational barriers that exist for Latino students' grades K-12 and how the perceptions of classroom teachers may negatively affect student performance. The participants of the study were 3, 421 adults of Hispanic or Latino heritage who completed telephone surveys via the Pew Hispanic Center between August 7 and October 15, 2003 (Becerra, 2012). "The participants were given statements and asked to identify whether each statement a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason for low academic achievement among Latino students compared with white students" (Becerra, 2012, p. 171). The study examined the likelihood of choosing either "major" or "minor" reasons over "not a reason." The results of the study showed parents with higher incomes acculturation were "significantly more likely" to

perceive white teachers not understanding Latino culture as a major reason why Latino students do not perform as well as their white counterparts. Whereas participants with higher levels of linguistic acculturation perceived the same explanation as a minor reason for the existing achievement gap.

The generalizations and stereotypes associated with Asian Americans can also negatively affect self-identity as it relates to expectations of academic performance. Lee's case study focuses on Hmong American students' school experiences in the United States. The finding suggests that female Hmong students, particularly Hmong refugees, have had an easier transition into American culture than their male counterparts due to "teachers' perceptions of the subordinate position of the women of Hmong culture appeared to influence desire to help these students, therefore the girls' faith in education and optimism enabled Hmong female students to build positive relationships with their teachers" (Lee, 2015, p. 177). However, second-generation Hmong students, especially males who were acculturated to "Americanized" behavior were perceived by numerous teachers in the study as "bad kids" and the effects of poverty and racism negatively affected the way second-generation students viewed themselves and their future opportunities (Lee, 2015).

Equity in education for African-Americans continues to be a pressing issue for many school systems and our society as a whole, and is a pivotal point in understanding how perception negatively influences success, especially for African-American males. King (1991) coined the term "dysconscious racism" which is defined as an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given (As cited in King & McTier, 2015, p. 159). The article emphasizes the importance of recognizing how the media contributes and augments generalizations and stereotypes of African Americans through media sources and correlates to systemic racism in the education system. The authors focus on the suspension and expulsion rates of African Americans in multiple studies and how these statistics relate to teacher perceptions of black students.

Bianco and Leech (2010) suggest students with disabilities are less likely to be referred to a gifted program. In comparison to teachers of gifted students and general education teachers, special education teachers are less likely to refer students with disability labels to gifted programs than students with identical learning behaviors with no disability labels. Students with compliant behaviors are more likely to be referred than students who are quirky and may have organizational, social, and or processing issues. Teacher training for talent spotting should focus on student's gifted characteristics, strengths, and interests. "Teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities and their knowledge of gifted characteristics become a critical component for initial identification of potential giftedness among students with the disability label" (Bianco & Leech, 2010, p. 319).

"Labels are based on school performance data that homogenized school realities and transform labels into knowledge which infuses people's perceptions of educational quality." (Klaf, 2013, p. 297.) Many researchers suggest that the process used by school systems to identify students' ability and assess students' potential learning outcomes is subject to considerable bias. "Labels seem to generate differential expectations and performances within interpersonal interactions" (Sutherland, Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Freeman, 1983, p. 217). Labels and the identification process of learning behaviors have been influential in teacher-student relationships and is an area that will continue to need close examination and self-reflection of school professionals as a critical factor in student achievement.

**Teacher Disposition and Student Achievement**

Holly Thornton reveals in her 2006 article, "Dispositions in Action: Do Dispositions Make a Difference in Practice?", the term "teacher disposition" does not yet have a precise definition in the field of teacher education; however, organizations such as NCATE, NBPTS, INTASC have developed models to assess desirable qualities of teaching professionals (Thornton, 2006). "NCATE, defines dispositions as the "values and commitments' that define teacher performance" (Thornton, 2006, p. 54). Thornton also states, "the current approaches to assessing teacher dispositions often loosely equate to values, beliefs, attitudes, characteristics, professional behaviors and qualities, ethics, and perceptions" (Thornton, 2006, p. 54).  Many researchers have continuously emphasized the importance of the classroom teacher and share the same sentiments as Thornton.

The work of Hansushek (1992) states, "the difference between being taught by a good and bad teacher can translate into a full grade level of achievement in a single school year" (as cited by Borman & Kimball, 2005, p. 3). Student perception affects student achievement and is greatly influenced by the students' community, in particular the school climate. Weiner's (1986) theory of motivation and Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale's (1978) theory of learned helplessness proposes that the attributions students make for their success and failures can significantly affect their future performance of academic tasks" (Banks & Woolfson, 2008, p.49). The classroom teacher is pivotal in transforming deficit myths about learning, language and culture and creating opportunities for success of students who come from non-mainstream backgrounds and are at risk at performing below the school systems academic standards. Meaningful and effective instruction happens when teachers who are intentional and reflective of daily practices within their classrooms capitalize students' strengths and interests. "To turn students around teachers must first turn themselves around to see students differently and then to

respond differently" (Enriquez, Jones, & Clarke, 2010, p. 73). Flores, Cousin, and Diaz (1991) also explain that teachers are the key to successfully interpreting the identification of children at risk and should focus on how to see the strengths students bring as a positive experience for the learner, teacher, and class as a whole.

## Standardized Assessments and Correlation of Achievement

The third component of this literature review will focus on standardized assessments and correlation of achievement. "The principals' role has now shifted from being accountable for money and other resources to being accountable for student outcomes and achievement "(Lyons & Algozzine, 2006, p. 2). The perception of assessments and school effectiveness indirectly influences student-learning outcomes. Lyons and Algozzine's study of elementary, middle, and high-school principals in North Carolina school systems suggests that the "state's accountability program has had its greatest impact on how schools monitored student achievement, aligned the curriculum to testing programs, provided student remedial or tutorial opportunities, affected teachers' assignments and, emphasized the importance of instructional time" (Lyons, E., & Algozzine, 2006, p.11).

A follow-up study of earlier published analyses by Nicholas, Glass and Berliner looked at the relationship between high-stakes testing pressure and student achievement in 25 states, and as a result made the following statement, "The theory of action of No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, suggests that by tying negative consequences to standardize test performance, teachers and students in low-achieving schools will work harder and more effectively, thereby increasing what students learn" (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012, p. 2). In addition, another researcher, Reardon, 2011; Timar & Maxwell-Jolly, 2012), stated that high-stakes, summative tests do not identify the academic supports that students at risk would need to receive to enhance engagement. The study also proposes "summative assessments of school and district progress seldom identify how individual students can be helped to perform better on curriculum demands and on subsequent testing, and that by in large, test outcomes do not point to useful guidelines for how to design ensuing instructional practices relative to future test expectations" (American Educational Research Association, 2000; Hoffman, Paris, Patterson, Salas, & Assaf, 2003; Kohn, 2000 as cited in Pershey, 2011, p. 60).

Many researchers have criticized standardized assessments as being tools that further contribute to the existing achievement gap. Accountability pressure has shaped many school policies due to funding as a result of test performance further contributing to the inequality in monetary distribution among school systems (Dee & Jacob, 2009).

"Decades of policy interventions have not improved academic outcomes at scale for low-income students, a major goal of the high-stakes accountability movement, either did not occur or was only marginally effective in the years these policies have been in place" (Hopson, Schiller, & Lawson, 2014, p. 197). As a result, many minority students and specific subgroups continue to perform below curriculum standards in many states, an issue that is emphasized greatly through standardized assessments.

## The Critical Role of the School Climate in Promoting Equitable Education

"School climate is defined as the character and quality of life within a school that is shaped by its organizational structure, physical environment, instructional practices, interpersonal relationships, and overarching values, objectives, and customs" (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, as cited in Fan, W., Williams, C. M., & Corkin, D. M. 2011, p. 632). De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, and, Park's (2006) study provided evidence that minority and LEP students indeed experience inequities in educational opportunities that require redress in order to form a more just and equitable society by seeking to provide the best for all. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) also address how the gap in achievement across racial and ethnic groups has been a focus of education research for decades, and point out how the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Black, Latino, and American Indian students has received less attention. The article examines numerous case studies and synthesizes research on racial and ethnic patterns in school sanctions and considers how disproportionate discipline might contribute to lagging achievement among students of color. The researchers also examine the evidence for student, school, and community contributors to the racial and ethnic patterns in school sanctions, and it offers promising directions for gap-reducing discipline policies and practices (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010). The articles selected for this literature review affirm the need to closely examine how daily practices, perceptions and current policies affect student achievement.

## Methodology

### Purpose of this Study

This action research study used both qualitative and quantitative research design (Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, 2014; Mills, 2014; Pappas & Tucker-Raymond, 2011; Bianco & Leech, 2010; Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012). This study examined how labels, classifications, and categorizations of students' behaviors correlate with students' academic potential and future success. The intent of this action research is to examine how one school system identifies student learning behaviors and .to address and gain insight on the following inquiry questions: How does the characterization of student learning behaviors and classifications correspond to student achievement?, What is the impact of teacher disposition and decision making on achievement?, What is the representation of student subcategories across

labels?, and, finally, Does access to advanced academic programming or enrichment become limited given specific labels? The various subgroups created based on various attributes may give insight into how teacher perception and instructional practices correlate with student achievement and contributes to social injustices due to label, categorizations, and characterizations of student learning behaviors through the lens of a monocultural, Eurocentric society. Through this study, teachers at my site and beyond may have a platform to begin the dialogue around critical conversations of our own perceptions and how we value students. Further, these kinds of analyses can promote professional learning for transformative approach to educational equity via culturally responsive pedagogy.

**Setting: School Profile**

The focal point of this study is an elementary school located in an affluent suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. To maintain the anonymity of the school, it will be referred to as School A. The school considers itself to be a learning community, and, therefore, utilizes an updated school-wide process for data collection and analysis to drive high quality rigorous instruction that is student-centered and is aligned to common core standards. The demographics of the school consist of a diverse population of students of various ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and educational experiences. In recent years, the elementary school has undergone numerous changes including the redistricting of the school district boundaries to address the population changes. Further, the school was renovated in 2013 to include the first school-based wellness center in the county. In the 2014-2015 school year, School A, became a full Title I school and was able to receive additional funding from the government to support the needs of its community. Special programs and staff include Reading Recovery, Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), Regional Early Childhood Center (RECC), a Reading Support Teacher, a Math Support Teacher, three Reading Specialists, two Title I teachers, and a bilingual community liaison.

***Defining achievement for all learners within the school setting.*** "*Every student is inspired to learn and empowered to excel*" is the school's vision statement. School A has set the following goals 1) every student achieves academic excellence; 2) every staff member is engaged, supported and successful; 3) families and the community are engaged and supported as partners in education; 4) schools are supported by world-class organizational practices. Data-monitoring structures have been implemented to analyze and evaluate current instructional practices to promote positive learning outcomes for specific student groups. School staff members actively participate in weekly professional learning meetings to implement core standards and gain knowledge about rigorous tasks as well as review student data to determine strengths and set goals based on informal and formative assessments.

In school improvement plan 2014- 2015, specific attention was given to 2nd, 4th, and 5th grade Hispanic and African-American students. The process of identifying student groups with the lowest performance band on standardized assessments is extensive and entails weekly and quarterly discussions during progress monitoring meetings that involve teachers, interventionist, and administration. PARCC assessment are one criteria used to identify targeted subgroups, and the following data suggest Hispanic and African-American students are performing significantly below national, state, and county standards.

**Data Collection**

The researcher completed an equity audit to identify classifications of specific groups of students, collected qualitative data of a teacher questionnaire, and, finally, completed a qualitative conceptual analysis. Equity auditing is a tool used to examine persistent achievement gaps by race and class in U.S. Public school systems. This tool has been used to illustrate the significant achievement gaps among white and minority students. Researchers, Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly (2004) have developed a quantitative assessment that identifies specific subgroups based on race, social class, and student abilities. Many school professionals and researchers consider equity auditing as a critical tool that can be used to "uncover, understand, and change inequities that are internal to schools and districts in three areas-teacher quality, educational programs, and student achievement" (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). The school profile and student demographic data utilized in this study was accessed electronically via the School A System website and the 2015 Maryland Report Card website. Both databases provide information about enrollment, attendance, student mobility, classifications of students receiving special services and school teacher qualifications. Subcategories were then created based on the following student identifiers/characterizations: ethnicity (i.e., Hispanic, African-American, Asian, Caucasian), programmatic labels (i.e., students labeled as Special Education, Limited English Proficient, Gifted and Talented), instructional levels (Above GL, On GL, "At Risk"/ Below GL), learning behaviors, and Free and Reduced Meals.

The researchers also collected data from 15 school personnel, 13 teachers and two administrators. Participants completed a 20- item electronic questionnaire to collect data. The researcher contacted participants via electronic mail to complete survey, following consent. The researcher contacted all participants prior to survey to obtain consent by sending a letter describing the study as well as the consent form; and, following consent, the researcher shared a link via email to complete survey anonymously.

The research base supporting this research suggests this is an appropriate method of conducting the study. For example, research done in the area of mixed methods studies exploring differences among teachers' perceptions of

students' with disabilities and their willingness to refer them to a gifted and talented program found that students "in comparison to teachers of gifted students and general education teachers, special education teachers are least likely to refer students with disability labels to gifted programs than students with identical learning behaviors with no disability labels" (Bianco & Leech, 2010, p. 319). Further, Lleras and Rangel (2009) examined the effects of assigning Hispanic and Black students in low ability groups and how they compared to high ability grouped student in academic achievement, the finding suggests "students who were not placed in groups outperformed both African American and Hispanic students" (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012, p.14).

## Data Analysis

### Influential Factors that Shape Achievement

In analyzing both the Equity Audit and questionnaire, the researcher looked for patterns as it related to how categorizations, labels, and school climate impact student achievement within my current school. The audit form was organized to outline student demographics, teacher quality, programmatic identifiers, student achievement indicators, and gender identity and sexual orientation. The following descriptive statistics were calculated and explored: (a) number of students; (b) number of 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders who took the P.A.R.C.C. English Language Arts/ Literacy assessments; (c) percentage of minority students (defined for this study as African American/Black, Hispanic/ Latino, Asian, and multiracial students); (d) "At Risk" students (defined for this study as students not considered "on grade level"); (e) percentage of "Gifted and Talented" ( defined for this study as participants in mathematics courses 2 years above age instructional level of peers); (f) percentage of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students; (g) percentage of students with disabilities (tested and labeled); and (h) percentage of economically disadvantaged students (defined for this study as students eligible for free or reduced lunch.

To analyze the qualitative data, the researcher employed a priori coding to identify themes and patterns that materialized from looking at the data and sorted findings into categories, subcategories to concepts. The researcher was conscious of how it was important to remain open-minded and attempted to implement best practices to allow the data to drive the discussion piece of the action research paper. During this process, it was important to meet with my advisor and colleagues to receive input, as the researcher did not want own judgments or bias of what the data should represent skew my findings.

Qualitative research is a selective process. Miles and Huberman suggest researchers must employ safeguards against tunnel vision, bias, and self-delusion via a coding system (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). The data for this survey was anonymous as each participant was recorded as a number for individual responses, reducing risk of identify to all participants. Once the data was collected the researcher created a table to display teacher responses based on the scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree), and percentages were calculated. The teacher survey questions were then coded "by hand" into manageable content categories consisting of a word, set of words, or phrases based pre-determined themes from the literature review.  A list was generated from the conceptual framework and identifiable themes were determined (see Figure 2). The purpose of the a priori coding for this task was to highlight any discrepancies of teacher dispositions within the survey that may be considered factors relating to student achievement.  The descriptive codes were as follows: (1) Student Achievement (2) School Climate/ Environment (3) Professional Development (4) Student Behaviors.

***Understanding the relationship between student characterizations and achievement.*** An instances table was also created to account for "repeatable regularities" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69) and to help establish a pattern appropriate naming codes. The researcher again employed "hand coding" and accounted for the number of times a specific word, set of words or phrases based on Pre-determined themes aligned with the survey questions. Check coding was also implemented to ensure good reliability, two researchers coded the same data and discussed observations and clarified differences. The researcher also corroborated with several of her coworkers as she analyzed and collected data points to gain professional insight and confirm patterns and trends observed within the survey results.

## Findings

### Equity Audit Key Findings

Key findings from the School A Equity Audit are articulated below. Results from the data collected based on the descriptive statistics were used to identify the percentages of students by racial categorizations that were identified with the following characterization of learning behaviors: Special Education, "At Risk", and "Gifted and Talented" (See Appendix B for Figures 1, 2, and 3).

As illustrated by Figure 1, percentages of students with the label "receiving special education services" (SPED) by race are compared. Compared to the county's population percentages, School A has a higher proportion of African American, Hispanic and Caucasian students labeled as SPED when compared to the county. Further, Asian students are less likely to labeled as SPED when compared to the district. Interestingly, statewide, the percentage of students who receive labels of Special Education is congruent with district, state, and national percentages by racial category. Perhaps most discrepant, and inequitable, is the percentage of students to be labeled "At Risk" by School A.

Students are identified heavily according to their PARCC Language Arts/Literacy Assessments. Students who "Did Not Meet Expectations" on this assessment often receive the label of "at risk." As illustrated by Figure 2, percentages of students with the label to receive "at risk" by race are compared. Similarly, to the Equity Audit results around the "at risk" label, there is a significant portion of students of color, specifically students identified as Hispanic or Latino, who received this label as a result of their PARCC scores. Further, there is a larger percentage of students who did not meet expectations.

From this data, as outlined in in Figure 3 the researcher, sought to identify which groups of students were also labeled as Gifted and Talented. In this figure, the most inequitable percentages emerge. Although a diverse school, a significant majority of students labeled as Gifted and Talented were Caucasian. An inequitable percentage of students of color were identified with the Gifted and Talented label. Finally, if any student was labeled as socioeconomically disadvantaged, Special Ed, or an English Language Learner, these labels excluded them from a dual classification as Gifted and Talented. This data is particularly problematic as students' labels seem to be excluding them from advanced curricula and specialized educational strategies which promote higher order thinking and often deeper engagement in learning.

***The impact of dual labels in School A.*** Interesting findings emerged relating to characterization of learning behaviors/labeling and representation of minority students within this school setting. For students labeled for Special Education (see Figure 1), the percentage for minority students (African-American, Hispanic and Asian) was half (1st-5th grades) of the total population of students identified to receive special education services. For students who were identified as both Special Education and English Language learners the percentage was almost a fourth of students identified to receive special education services. The percentage of students identified for Special Education who also qualify for Free/ Reduced Lunch program was more than half of the special education population. Of the total population of the school 20% of students are characterized as "at risk" and/or below grades level (see Figure 2), of these students more 80% are students of color (African American, Hispanic, and Asian) and half of the students identified as "at risk" in the school setting receive Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS). Students identified as both English Language Learners and "at risk" represent more than a quarter of students who are marked "below grade level" on student data. Within this school setting students are labeled "gifted" if they are currently enrolled in the Gifted and Talented mathematics course (see Figure 3).

## Qualitative Key Findings

In analyzing the responses to the survey (see Appendix A), the following trends were noted based on the survey scale and percentages. Survey questions relating to the themes of professional development and student achievement were cohesive and habitually received higher ratings in the "Agree" ranking. This ranking indicates that most of the participants have a positive viewpoint of the school's current policies, procedures, and framework for professional development. Statements specific to the teacher's ability to plan and implement lessons, access to technology and other learning tools, and active participation in the learning process to promote student achievement had at least 60% of participants "Agree" with the following statements: Question (7) Student Achievement, (8) Student Achievement, (15) Student Achievement, (23) Professional Development, (26) Professional Development, and (30) Student Achievement. However, questions relating to school climate denoted some discrepancies: (Question 1) fairness in disciplinary procedures, (Question 5) fair treatment and respect for all cultures, and (Question 29) teachers comfort level to communicate with different types of parents all received higher percentage points for the "Disagree" ranking.

## Discussion

The findings within this study indicate that specific minority subgroups (African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians) are more likely to be characterized with numerous descriptive traits in comparison to their white counterparts. Furthermore, students of African-American and Hispanic descent are more likely to be identified with multiple descriptors (bi-, tri-, and quad- identifiers) by more than 62%. In other words, African-American and Hispanic students are 2 times more likely to be labeled as one or more of the following identifiers (Special Education, English Language Proficient, "At Risk", etc..), within this school setting.

This data exemplifies how teacher disposition can be an influencing factor of how student achievement is communicated within the school setting. The parallel between teacher disposition and student achievement must be examined to truly affect instruction that is inclusive of all learners of various backgrounds and experiences. To truly address the achievement gap for minority students and students with specific learning behaviors an instructional approach that values the whole learner is necessary to overcome the social challenges that impede academic success within the school setting. The implications of both the literature review and the findings within this study imply professional development, teacher certification, and evaluation processes must continuously be reexamined in regard to how dispositions influence potential outcomes of learners with specific identifiers and learning behaviors.

The results of the equity audit in this study are concerning. The characterization of learning behaviors of minority students is problematic as these students are more likely to be identified with labels that are associated with lower performing connotations, potentially limiting access to advanced placement courses. Based on the findings minority

students (African American, Hispanic, and Asian) are more likely to be identified as "at risk"/ below grade level and/or qualify for special education services. For example, African American are three times as likely to be identified for Special Education services and twice as likely to be identified as "at risk". The findings relating to Hispanic students illustrate a similar trend.  Conversely, minority students are underrepresented in advanced courses such as the "gifted and talented" mathematics course (see Figure 3).  These findings are troubling especially if you consider how labels correlate to teacher dispositions and student achievement. Research shows that teacher interactions with students perceived as 'low achievers' are less supportive and less motivating than those practices with 'high achievers' (Hallam, 2009). Further research is necessary to understand the effects labeling can have on teacher disposition and its correlation to student success.

Research has long been recognized that the labeling process is subject to considerable bias that occurs before, during, and after educational assessments and significantly influences student's identification, placement, and potential learning outcomes. Furthermore, student characterizations relating to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, instructional level, and behaviors appear to generate differential expectations and performances within the school setting (Sutherland, Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Freeman,2013). Based on the findings within this study, to ensure equitable measures and opportunities within the educational setting for all students, would require school systems to evaluate current student identification processes more closely. Specifically, as the identification processes' cross-representation of student identifiers and characterization of learning behaviors of minority students deserves further investigation.

**Closing the Gap**

The "achievement gap" for the Hispanic and African-American student groups is significant compared to their white counterparts and is an area of concern. Researchers have established students who are minorities and who come from low Socio-Economic backgrounds are confronted with inequity within schools because they are confronted with many obstacles (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012, p. 5). School and family resources, language, and cultural norms can influence student perception and motivation within an educational setting. Overrepresentation of these minority groups in ESOL and Special education can also be a factor in student academic performance.

By developing and implementing a cultural proficiency framework at the organizational level, opportunities are created to implement policies and practices that support social change and promotes equitable student learning outcomes for all learners. "In order to provide all students with an equal and high-quality education, we need to begin with the belief that all students are capable and worthy of learning to high levels of achievement" (Nieto, S., 2010, p. 30).

Research suggests students are often failed by public schools because of race/ ethnicity; language, immigrant status, social class, and other characterizations often position students with these descriptors negatively in society. When we understand the learner as a whole and consider their identities and abilities we gain a deeper understanding of what is possible for students to achieve.  The culture of a school can significantly impact how students of various cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds will transition into the dynamics of a school setting and has the potential to determine student success.  The programs, instructional practices, standardized assessments, and data monitoring structures put in place can greatly impact student success.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to offer insight about the populations served in this particular school setting as well as promote dialogue within the professional community to increase awareness of how labels, student identifiers, and the characterization of learning behaviors impinge on academic advancement.  The findings indicate that even the most elite school systems must acknowledge that racial disparities occur within the school setting.

Research suggests teachers need opportunities to explore their current dispositions as well as strengthen their dispositions in ways that would be supportive in the classroom. "Socially conscious teachers act as stewards and leaders; understand, respect, and value diversity; and are able to apply what they have learned to support diverse learners. In addition, socially conscious teachers are active learners who continuously seek out information from all sources, including family, community, and more formal sources" (Mueller & Hindin, 2011, p. 18). Enrolling in professional development workshops and courses that focus on the following topic areas: Cultural Proficiency, Developing Students to have a Growth Mindset and Family and Community Engagement courses can help teachers begin to develop professional practices that are student-centered and promote student engagement.

Culturally responsive teaching in its most fundamental element is constructed to mirror students' cultural learning styles and tools (Hammond, Z., 2015). As educators it is our responsibility to set high expectations, motivate, engage, and advocate for all learners regardless of socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity and ability level. Providing student choice in text, creating a classroom library that is reflective of diverse backgrounds, conducting class meetings to discuss concerns within the classroom, and generating student surveys and questionnaires are practical ideas to implement within the classroom. These intentional instructional practices create a literacy rich environment that promotes student choice, is engaging for learners, fosters students to develop ownership of their learning, and enables them to reach their full literacy potential.

As a school system, we must create a climate that implements inclusive practices of all learners from various ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses. "Culturally relevant teaching is the kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students' culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge" (Drucker, 2003, p. 24). This study did affirm the researcher's belief that culturally responsive pedagogy is a conduit to enabling all learners to achieve success.

Offering professional development that promotes opportunities for educators to reflect on their own dispositions and instructional practices is critical to the success of all learners. Many school systems are adopting the cultural proficiency framework to enhance awareness of systemic inequities that occur within the school setting. This is a progressive step to culturally relevant pedagogy. However, to truly identify the invisible barriers the characterization of learning behaviors creates for specific subgroups would require utilizing tools such as equity audits to evaluate equitable practices countywide.

The data discussed in this study represents only one elementary school within the county. A more in-depth study to include all schools should be considered at the county level. In addition, a comparison of those findings to other school systems within the state would also be beneficial to begin the dialogue of how other counties are addressing similar issues. Administrators, teachers, and school staff must value all students' cultural backgrounds and provide opportunities to foster relationships with students and the community as a whole. The relationships we develop with our students and their experiences within the school environment greatly impacts how each student identifies self as a learner and his or her role in the academic setting.

Following this article, a series of steps for school personnel to "Take Action" are offered. Additional resources for professional development and classroom use are also provided.

### Appendix A

**Applications for Promoting Equitable Outcomes for Educators and School Staff:**

- Enroll in professional development workshops and courses that focus on the following topic areas:
    - Cultural Proficiency
    - Developing Students to have a Growth Mindset
    - Family and Community Engagement

- Create a safe learning environment that promotes student voice and risk taking

- Generate student and parent surveys

- Create a classroom library that is representative of various cultural backgrounds

- Goal-setting student-led conferences

- Conducting Class meetings on a daily or weekly basis

- Implementing formative assessments that measure student progress

- Be conscious of one's own cultural lens and disposition and be willing to examine how your instructional practices may influence characterizations of students.
- Enriched literacy activities: Book talks, book challenges, literature circle reader's response journals

- Classroom library that is reflective and values all cultures

**Applications for Promoting Equitable Outcomes at the Grade / Department Level:**

- Encourage parents to volunteer within the school setting.

- Plan and implement parent workshops/ conferences at alternative times outside of school hours and off-site locations.

- Create heterogeneous classrooms that consider heterogeneous and diverse groupings.

- Conduct equity audits within grade level to identify any deficits relating to student groupings and student learning outcomes. Overrepresentation of these minority groups in ESOL and Special education can also can be a factor in student academic performance.

- Collaborate with additional staff including (reading specialist, literacy coaches, and reading support teachers) to identify specific subgroups may need additional supports to plan and implement literacy interventions that focus on phonological awareness phonics/word study, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, spelling, oral language development and writing.

**Applications for Promoting Equitable Outcomes Schoolwide:**

- Create a vision statement that is inclusive of all learners.

- Conduct an equity audit schoolwide to identify deficits within each grade level and discuss patterns and trends as school to outline a school improvement plan for the school year.

- Identify subgroups that need additional resources and support then set goals to promote student achievement.

• Use data and statistics from standardized testing and other formal assessments, as well as norms of the culture of the school to justify reasoning in student placement and instruction.

• Implement data-monitoring structures to analyze and evaluate current instructional practices to promote positive learning outcomes for these specific student groups.

• Collaborate with other schools within the school system to discuss how similar issues are being addressed as a county.

• Create opportunities to work with community leaders and organizations to address needs within the community.

## Resources for Teachers

### Understanding Equity: Online Articles and Blogs

Berwick, C. (2017). Edutopia. George Lucas Educational Foundation. Can equity be taught? Retrieved from https://www.edutopia.org/article/can-equity-be-taught-carly-berwick

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S. Surbhi, Key Differences. (2016). Difference between equity and equality. Retrieved from http://keydiffer-ences.com/difference-between-equity-and-equal-ity.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2017). Equity of oppor-tunity. Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/equity

### Resources for Creating a Safe Classroom Environment for All Learners

Kriete, R., & Davis, C. (2014). The morning meeting book. Center for Responsive Schools, Inc.

Brock, A., & Hundley, H. (2016). *The Growth Mindset Coach: A Teacher's Month-by-Month Handbook for Empowering Students to Achieve*. Ulysses Press.

Safir, S. (2015). Edutopia, Education Equity. 3 practices to promote equity in the classroom.  Retrieved from https://www.edutopia.org/blog/practices-pro-mote-equity-in-classroom-shane-safir

Class Dojo. (2017). Create a positive classroom culture. Retrieved from https://www.classdojo.com/learn-more/

Teaching Tolerance, Perspectives for a Diverse America. (2016). Critical practices for anti-bias education. Retrieved from https://www.tolerance.org/class-room-resources

**Appendix B**

**Figure 1: Students Labeled to Receive Special Education Services**
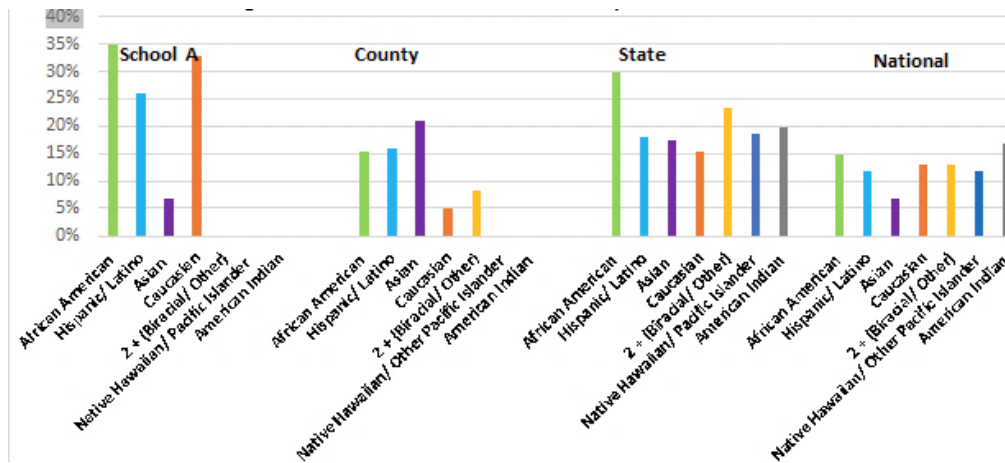




Figure 2: Students Who Did Not Meet Expectations on PARCC Language Arts/ Literacy Assessments
Results Comparison Chart Grades 3-5
2016
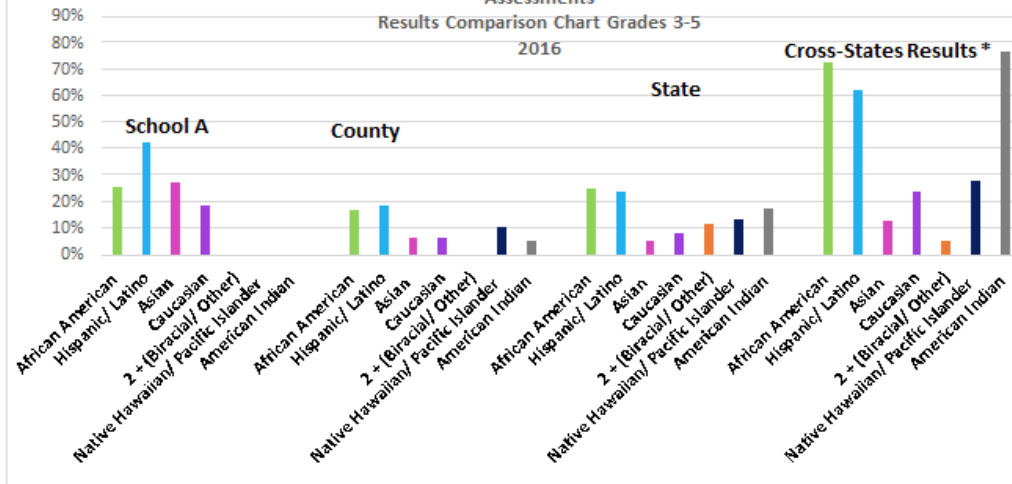
\* Results in Figure 1 include students in Colorado, District of Columbia, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Rhode Island. Cross-States results only include states for which sufficient data were available. Data retrieved from http://parcconline.org/assessments/test-



Figure 3: Percentage of Students in "Gifted and Talented " Mathematics Class of School
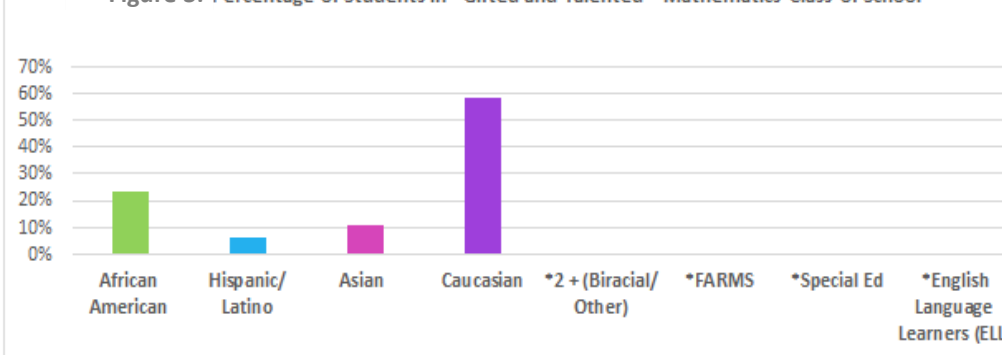
\*Indicates no students or fewer than 10 students in category, or indicates the percentage for the category is either ≤5 or ≥95 and the corresponding counts have been suppressed.

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## About the Author

Autumn Smith attended Notre Dame of Maryland University and graduated with a Dual Certification in Special Education (K-8) and Elementary Education. For the past twelve years she has worked as an elementary school teacher in a public school system. She is a recent graduate of Loyola University Maryland where she received her M.Ed. in Literacy. Her research interest includes supporting school systems to create and develop culturally responsive frameworks that utilize research-based practices and data to enable all learners to achieve academic success.

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# Why Project-Based Learning Approaches are Needed
# In Elementary Literacy Teacher Preparation

LaToshia Woods

*Arkansas State University*

**Abstract -** Expectations for students to develop twenty-first century skills in preparation for their futures have challenged traditional methods to teaching literacy within the content areas. These concerns should also be a consideration for elementary teacher preparation in literacy. Prior to completing coursework for teaching literacy in the social studies content area, thirty-one teacher candidates from three university campuses participated in a study where a phenomenological approach was employed to determine their beliefs about effective and ineffective approaches to teaching in social studies. Themes relating to project-based learning approaches were found to be frequently recommended by teacher candidates. for diverse groups of students in the United States.

**Keywords:** *pre-service teacher, content literacy, social studies, project-based learning*

## Introduction

All students deserve academic opportunities that effectively prepare them for citizenry. In order for this to happen they will need to be taught by teachers who have been prepared to facilitate the development of twenty-first century skills. Teachers who are experts at meeting this task are ones who prepare students through democratic forms of instruction. As a result, students are able to go beyond surface-level understandings to gain in-depth, applicable knowledge of the world around them (Duke, 2014; Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredrickson, 2013; Wineburg & Reisman, 2015).

Recently, multiple agencies have made concerted efforts to form a bridge between what students need instruction wise to become productive citizens in society and how the individuals who are preparing to teach those students are taught to effectively meet the instructional needs of a diversity of learners. In a broad-scale effort to ensure equitable educational opportunities across the United States, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, released the report, Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education, in 2008. This led to the creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) which were adopted by the vast majority of the United States in 2011. The CCSS too encompass purposes that include the development of twenty-first century skills as well as college and career preparedness. In 2008, the Association of American Colleges and Universities released a report regarding educational practices at the college level. It was insisted that underserved students must have ample opportunities to participate in high impact practices (i.e. students devoting time to inquiries such as are found in project-based learning approaches) because these practices increase depth of content matter understandings and student engagement. One clear mission for this report was ensuring that disadvantaged students received comparable access to the high impact practices as frequently and equitably as their counterparts. Additionally, the Buck Institute for Education and Getting Smart agencies presented a multipronged approach to eradicating inequities in public school education by publishing three, interrelated research reports regarding the preparation of future teachers, students within schools, and leaders within the workforce, for "a project-based world" (Lathram, Lenz & Vander Ark, 2016). These collaborations between the two agencies were a part of their advocation to ensure that students are prepared for college, career, and citizenship through frequent opportunities to experience in-depth engagement within their learning contexts. They determined that when implemented well, project-based approaches produced measurable outcomes for low-income students including fostering social-emotional learning and building work-necessary skills (Lathram, Lenz & Vander Ark, 2016). Furthermore, the authors insisted that failing to provide opportunities for all students to learn through project-based approaches is inequitable.

## Literature Review

### Project-Based Learning Approaches

Project-based approaches are "widely used and recognized as a tool to address educational inequity" (Lathram, Lenz& Vander Ark, 2016, p. 3). Studies have been

conducted to determine students' understandings of content and their attitudes toward learning after participating in project-based learning approaches (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010; Hertzog, 2007). In both studies it was determined that the students increased their knowledge of content matter as well as their general attitudes towards learning through project-based approaches. These approaches are also believed to provide students with more peer interaction throughout learning events than traditional instructional approaches (Parker & Lo, 2016; Parker, Lo, Yeo, Valencia, Nguyen, Abbot, Nolen & Vye, 2013). Within these approaches students are able to participate in learning experiences that address multiple content standards throughout and within contexts that are relevant to them (Duke, 2014). Within project-based approaches

> "…students work over an extended time period for a purpose beyond satisfying a school requirement- to build something, to create something, to respond to a question they have, to solve a real problem, or to address a real need….Along the way, teachers build knowledge and teach skills, but in the students' minds, the knowledge and skills serve to meet the project's goal" (Duke, 2014, p. 11).

According to the Buck Institute of Education (BIE), there are essential elements that should be included in project-based learning designs: a) key knowledge, understanding and success skills; b) a challenging problem or question; c) sustained inquiry; d) authenticity; e) student voice and choice; f) reflection, critique and revision; and a g) publicly presented product (Lathram, Lenz & Vander Ark, 2016). Larmer and Mergendoller (2010) and Miller (2014) suggest similar elements in their descriptions of project-based learning but also reference the inclusion of twenty-first century skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and the use of technology. Additionally, project based learning approaches tend to address multiple learning outcomes within one or multiple subject areas (Miller, 2014). Duke (2014) insisted that these approaches are often interdisciplinary with reading and writing experiences as key components, regardless of the content area (Duke, 2014).

## Advantages to Using Project-Based Approaches

Advantages to using project-based approaches have been noted in the literature. Project-based approaches have been noted to "lead to naturally relevant and differentiated instruction (Strevy, 2014, p. 463), and have been successfully used within both elementary and secondary grade contexts (Duke, 2014). When compared to traditional approaches to learning they are considered more engaging because the textbook and memorization of its content do not serve as the primary instructional method. Furthermore, project-based approaches are well-suited for addressing many of the CCSS for English Language Arts that

require students to participate in experiences relevant to research and the research process and for integrating literacy with the content areas (Duke, 2014; Condliffe, Visher, Bangser, Drohojowska, & Saco, 2016).

## Challenges with the Implementation of Project-Based Approaches

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of project-based approaches, some suggest that it is hard to determine a class time in the school day where one should fit project-based learning while others have concerns about whether or not these approaches are a wise use of instructional time (Duke, 2014). Thus, it often takes consensus on the part of multiple teachers for full implementation. When teachers are mandated to follow week-by-week curriculum maps, it can be difficult to enact project-based approaches (Hertzog, 2007). Further, planning and preparation as well as ongoing assessment are deemed by some to be more time consuming than when one uses traditional instructional approaches (Hertzog, 2007). Although the format of project-based learning integrates reading and writing in an organic manner, many of today's elementary classrooms are inherently separating the teaching of these subjects, making it difficult to fit project-based learning into their curricula (Duke, 2014).

## Success with the Implementation of Project-Based Approaches in Elementary Grades

In spite of noted challenges with implementing this approach, it initially gained popularity when educational researchers began to prioritize finding ways that teachers motivate students to learn and aid them in thinking more about the processes involved in completing academic tasks than just finishing assignments quickly (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palinscar, 1991). Further, there was a quest to engage students in cognitively complex tasks for the sake of teaching them the necessary processes to solve real-world problems. During this time there were studies about determine how children learn, trends towards integrated elementary school curricula, the success of group projects with young learners (Katz, 1994). One result of this time period was that project-based learning became an approach to learning with "considerable promise" (Blumenfeld et. al, p. 392) as many began to seek out methods to meet many of the aforementioned goals for student learning.

Although there are fewer studies concerning the use of project approaches with early elementary grade students than with those in the secondary grades, some have chosen to focus their explorations on elementary populations where the majority of the students are considered at-risk (i.e. Halvorsen, Duke, Brugar, Block, Strachan, Berka, & Brown, 2012; Hertzog, 2007). Particularly, in both the Halvorsen et

al. study of second graders and the Hertzog study of first graders positive results from the use of project-based approaches were found for academic achievement, connections to and understandings of events happening beyond the contexts of their schools, and for students' ability to apply the concepts presented to other parts of their learning day. In the Halvorsen et al. study, when the pre- and post-test results of students attending a low socioeconomic school (SES) were compared to students in the same grade attending a high SES school, statistically equivalent levels of achievement in reading and social studies were found. The Hertzog study, was a quest to transport the pedagogy of gifted programs to low-income, first grade general education classrooms. Besides the positive gains already noted, the entire school in which the study took place became a project-based learning site during the next school year. In sum, elementary students are capable of participating in and need access to project-based learning approaches. Claims that that elementary students do not necessarily need exposure these approaches puts them "at risk of not developing the characteristics necessary for full and effective participation in a democratic society" (Halvorsen, et al., p. 198).

**Why Project-Based Approaches Support Content Literacy**

The common belief tends to be that the literacy skills students develop in the early grades will propel them into advanced literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Duke & Block, 2012). This "vaccination model" (p. 46) approach to literacy instruction is based on the belief that students will not be faced with the ills of struggling readers as they persist beyond third grade if they receive ample literacy instruction in the early grades. It is further conceived that less literacy instruction is needed in the upper grades. This results in a false belief that deprioritizes the literacies necessary for building conceptual and content-specific comprehension abilities. Whether it is agreed upon or not, it is possible that the prioritization of a skill-driven reading curriculum kindergarten through third grades is contributing to the nation's fourth-grade achievement flatline in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; Duke & Block, 2012).

As students move along the "continuum of literacy learning" (Shanahan & Shanahan, p.41), the need for advanced literacy instruction including specialized understandings across content areas increases. One reason is that upper elementary students must read and write about complex texts within the disciplines (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Furthermore, at some point an appropriate shift has to be made to aid students in focusing on skills for improving how they read text to developing comprehension of what they are reading within a text. This concept must be applied to writing for the sake of verbalizing, and applying their new-found understandings in a variety of ways.

Consequently, "early schooling presents an opportune time to lay a strong foundation for social studies and content literacy (that is, reading and writing to learn content)" (Halvorsen et al., 2012, p. 200), and, regardless of the content area students are learning, their content literacies are improved through participation in project-based approaches (Miller, 2014). Duke and Block (2012) recommend instructional approaches for elementary teachers that "simultaneously seek to develop conceptual and content knowledge along with literacy skills" (p. 63) as effective ones for content literacy development. Further, the types of assignments that teachers choose to have students complete greatly influences their understandings of the content itself (Parsons & Ward, 2011). "If…students read social studies material to address real problems and relate history and citizenship to everyday life, they are more likely to conclude that reading and social studies are worth expending the required effort" (Duke & Block, p. 462). Conclusively, project-based approaches are authentic learning tasks for content literacy because they relevantly provide for the use of content for real-world reasons (Parsons & Ward, 2011).

**Teacher Preparation and Project-Based Learning Approaches**

The methods that were once used for preparing teachers will not adequately support the kinds of learning experiences that today's students need for their futures. Twenty-first century skills such as collaboration, communication, and creativity are deemed essential for students to possess in order to be college or career ready (Miller, 2014; Halvorsen et al., 2012; Lathram, Lenz & Vander Ark, 2016). Consequently, colleges and universities must alter their preparation programs so that they do not primarily consist of "approaches traditionally associated with objectivism, behaviorism, and transmittal models of teaching… [but instead] place emphasis on active learning and the needs of students" (Roessingh & Chambers, 2011, p. 60). As many elementary teacher preparation programs insist that they adhere to constructivist approaches, they must not only provide teacher candidates with adequate opportunities to engage with course content but also to participate in "plentiful opportunities for practical application of [the] expanding professional knowledge" (Roessingh & Chambers, 2011, p. 67). Typically, elementary teacher candidates complete many projects before they finish their degrees, but most have not authentically experienced project-based learning (Strevy, 2014). Adequate exposure to project-based approaches can aid preservice teachers in shifting their views of the teacher's role in helping students learn (Strevy, 2014). Roessingh and Chambers (2011) suggest that preservice teachers who experience project-based learning understand the underlying tenets of the models better and develop valued dispositions that "the next generation of teachers for the classrooms of the future" (p. 60) need.

Strevy (2014) noted that many teacher candidates have been exposed to "cute curriculum where a particular topic permeated the environment as well as the curriculum without any appreciable connection to learning or relevancy" (p. 464). The design of these curricula do not allow for the depth and authenticity that project-based learning models can provide. As states who have adopted CCSS have the challenge of creating ample experiences for students to participate in process and question-driven research investigations, project-based learning approaches provide an appropriate framework for students to meet standards and actively engage in research. Project-based approaches also tend to lead to "naturally relevant and differentiated instruction" (Strevy, 2014, p. 463) for students.

## Methods

### Research Design

Instead of framing the study around the researcher's beliefs about what teacher candidates need to know to successfully teach content literacy through social studies, a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2006) was used to analyze the 31 narratives of elementary teacher candidates from three university educator preparation programs in the Southeast United States who were just beginning their content literacy coursework. These particular candidates chose to write about learning the content area of social studies and the strategies they would use to teach social studies to elementary students. Based on the concept the researcher was interested in exploring, candidates who were enrolled in content literacy courses at their university campuses were purposefully selected to participate in this study.

The phenomenological approach necessitated that the researcher distance herself from her preconceived ideas about content literacy in order to understand the beliefs and previous learning experiences of the teacher candidates. As a university professor, the researcher felt that written narratives were an open-ended means to understanding what practices teacher candidates believed were most effective for teaching literacy within the content area of social studies. The candidates were prompted to share experiences such as how they were taught social studies, what made social studies difficult to learn and why they believed it was difficult. They were also encouraged to recommend strategies or venues for learning the discipline that they believed would make it easier to learn. In order to ensure that the teacher candidates were not influenced by the researcher's philosophies about teaching content literacy and social studies, the study was conducted at the beginning of the semester.

The narratives were reviewed in search of collective themes that were reoccurring among the responses of the teacher candidates (Creswell, 2006). Significant quotes and phrases were highlighted and compared across narratives. Clusters of meaning were derived from the quotes and phrases, and these were translated into collective themes. Based on the evidences, multiple themes were derived, and substantial, overarching classroom instruction-related themes were constructed. Validity was obtained through the use of an additional reviewer to promote cross-checking of the date for the sake of intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2006). Verification was achieved through searches of the literature on the topic, adhering to the phenomenological method, and using an adequate sample of narratives. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple transcripts from separate sets of students enrolled in courses at three university campuses. The researcher recognized her own philosophies could influence the candidate's responses and did not interact with participants while they completed their narratives. Further, the narratives were assigned numbers so that the narratives would not be name identified by the researcher who taught one of the course sections at one of the university campuses.

## Findings

***Theme 1: Descriptions of traditional approaches to social studies instruction.*** Traditional approaches to social studies instruction were described by the teacher candidates. Their recollections were characterized by methods that placed a heavy reliance on textbooks as the source of content information, notetaking, and lecture as the primary teaching method. Some of their comments are as follows:

> *I…never encountered a teacher that… [was] excited about social studies. It…[was] never presented to me in a fun or exciting way. All of my teachers read straight from the book, while the students were required to take notes. (Participant 2)*

> *[We would] be given a chapter to read with no aid for how to take notes, what material was important, or how to categorize all of the material in a logical format or sequence. (Participant 5)*

> *If I were helping someone learn [social studies], I might try to incorporate… and encourage group work…. (Participant 8)*

After reviewing the teacher candidates' descriptions of social studies instruction, it was interesting to note the similarities among their responses. It became clear that most of the teacher candidates had been subjected to a similar type of instruction regardless of where they had previously attended grade school. In other words, the same methods of instruction seemed to be used for social studies in a variety of school systems and possibly across several states. In general terms, candidates' descriptions of the instruction

that had been used to teach them social studies could be broadly conceptualized as traditional approaches.

The findings suggest that these teacher candidates did not want to teach the same way they were taught. Furthermore, they believed that alternatives to the traditional methods for teaching social studies (and content literacy for that matter) could serve as more optimal learning experiences for students. Clearly, there is evidence that aspiring teachers have a strong tendency to teach how they were taught (Olitsky, 2013; Kennedy, 1999), but learning alternative teaching approaches could ward off the tendency of a new teacher to resort to traditional methods of instruction.

**Theme 2: Traditional approaches lack opportunities for engagement.** Many of the experiences provided by the teacher candidates were instructional practices that were not engaging to them (the learners). The participants further elaborated on what it felt like for them to experience traditional teaching practices when they were in grade school:

> In my years of elementary school, we normally learned social studies straight out of the book. It was very boring to me. (Participant 1)

> …Social studies…was presented to me in a boring manner…. [We] read the textbook [and] tested on Friday. I hope that I never do this to a child. (Participant 6)

> I always remember my teachers just standing in front of the class lecturing while we just sat there and took notes. It was…boring….. (Participant 17)

Because traditional teaching methods for social studies tend to prioritize memorization of dates, events, and locations (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015), the instructional methods used to accomplish these goals can be redundant, can minimally prioritize comprehension, and can often include instruction that promotes surface-level understandings of the content (Duke, 2014). These candidates were opposed to instructional approaches that they deemed unengaging, redundant, and, in their terms, boring. One could conclude that these teacher candidates would be interested in learning alternative methods of instruction that could engage their students and, if provided with alternative approaches, might consider using those approaches in their own classrooms.

**Theme 3: Depictions of project-based approaches.** Although the teacher candidates did not use the term project-based, several gave description of the approaches that they would have liked to have experienced in school or that they had an interest in using with their future elementary students.

The following are a few examples of these descriptions:

> Hands-on learning or integrating different subjects together may help a student learn more efficiently. (Participant 1)

> If I were to help learners in…social studies, I would provide experiences… [in which] students could be engaged. I believe engagement would allow students to be more involved in the learning thus giving them a deeper understanding. (Participant 3)

> Any activities that require students to move and interact with each other will help them be engaged…[instead of] bored! (Participant 2)

> Students need hands-on learning…If I were to teach someone this subject, I would try to make history come alive. (Participant 7)

> [Finding] more hands-on activities would be a great way to teach this content. Some students, including myself, learn better and remember through hands-on. (Participant 9)

> If I were to help someone learn this content, I would use strategies such as relating the information to other texts/experiences, using vocabulary, and providing hands-on materials. (Participant 11)

> If I were to aid in the learning of social studies… I would make sure that it was necessary for all of my students to become involved. Reenact scenes, hold debates or discussions, dress the part and require projects. I believe that the hands-on approach is far more productive. (Participant 13)

> I want to…. [rely on more than just] reading textbooks to gain knowledge of history. I want to help students enjoy learning. (Participants 14)

These teacher candidates expressed a desire to learn alternative ways to teach social studies. Because their descriptions were characteristic of several project-based learning elements, it was concluded that the teacher candidates desired to learn about and experience project-based approaches in order to use these approaches in their own classrooms. Although it will be imperative for the candidates to develop an appropriate level of content

competency for social studies outside of their teacher preparation coursework, they will likely increase their base for content literacy within their preparation programs. Although the researcher will include project-based approaches to learning in her course section, it is possible that the candidates in other course sections may not. Nevertheless, the comments from the teacher candidates confirmed their interest in finding out more about using project-based approaches in order to teach social studies.

## Summary

The responses of the teacher candidates detailed vast distinctions between project-based learning approaches and traditional approaches to teaching social studies in the elementary grades. The descriptions of their experiences demonstrated that there are recognizable differences between traditional and project-based approaches that students who experience the approaches can recognize. The candidates clearly expressed how they did and did not want to be taught by their teachers. Furthermore, they were able to distinguish characteristics between how each approach is enacted within classrooms and what it feels like when one experiences traditional instructional approaches.

The concepts of literacy that are to be prioritized within coursework for elementary teacher preparation programs is not agreed upon. Generally speaking, there appear to be differing perspectives on whether it is important to spend time most of the time in literacy coursework preparing teacher candidates to teach students how to read or also spend time on teaching students how to read to learn (Duke & Block, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Contrary to the beliefs of some, both are necessary. Preparing teacher candidates to use approaches such as project-based ones is also necessary because these approaches provide teacher candidates with both efficient and effective ways to meet mandated standards and to use integration of literacy to promote in-depth understandings of the content areas. Understanding how to teach the essential elements of learning to read and how to teach students to read to gain knowledge and understand what they read should both be priorities within the literacy coursework of teacher preparation programs.

## Conclusions and Implications

Decisions about what should be taught within literacy coursework for elementary teacher preparation programs cannot be solely based on the preferences of particular entities in positions of power. In order to ensure that future teachers are being prepared for the students of today, then decisions about what teachers need to know must be grounded in what is known about what students today need to know how to do in their futures (Roessingh & Chambers, 2011; Lathram, Lenz & Vander Ark, 2016). It has been

suggested by multiple stakeholders that teaching methods must change in order for students to be afforded equitable access to the best educational experiences and careers possible (Duke & Block, 2012; Halvorsen et al., 2012). This is true. Further, the proposed priorities for elementary teacher preparation in literacy must lead to students to applying content and literacy concepts within the school context and throughout their lives (Parsons & Ward; Duke & Block). Based on these considerations there are at least three questions to be considered by those involved with the design of literacy coursework within elementary teacher preparation programs: How important is it to prioritize content literacy in elementary teacher preparation? Within what course or courses will teacher candidates learn about instructional approaches such as project-based ones that ensure that elementary candidates can prepare their students to use twenty-first century skills? How will teacher candidates receive opportunities to not only experience but also apply project-based approaches within their preparation programs?

Preparing elementary teachers through coursework that primarily focuses on teaching students to learn to read is not adequate because teaching elementary students to learn to read will not automatically result in them reading to learn (Duke & Block, 2012). Purposeful and intentional forms of instruction must exist in order for persist successfully into advanced levels of literacy. A prioritization of b content literacy and project-based approaches within elementary teacher preparation programs should be considered. If by chance it is insisted that these two approaches are not the most important ones that elementary teacher candidates need to learn about before they begin their careers, then one must ask what the end goal of literacy is within the scope of K-12 education. If the end goal is having citizens in our society who are prepared and ready to lead, then the route that must be taken for students to be able to formulate effective understandings of content and have strong decision-making abilities must be considered. Can twenty-first century skills such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking become fully developed before students become adults if we do not choose to prioritize these concepts in elementary grade instruction? No. Learning to read undeniably benefits students, but learning to read alone will not guarantee productive citizenship.

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## *About the Author*

LaToshia Woods is an assistant professor of reading at Arkansas State University where she also serves as the graduate reading program coordinator. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy within the Department of Teacher Education. Her research interests include disciplinary literacy, teacher beliefs about literacy practices, literacy teacher preparation, and student motivation/engagement in reading.

# School Climate and Service-Learning's Relationships to Civic Literacy: An Analysis of the CIVED U.S Dataset

Gary Homana

*Towson University*

**Abstract -** This article presents school climate and service-learning as a conceptual framework for the development of students' civic literacy and engagement. A collection of scales related to school climate dimensions are used to analyze the IEA Civic Education Study. These scales examine the relationship between school climate and service-learning predictors and adolescent students' civic knowledge, beliefs about democracy, and community, social movement, and conventional participation. Regression analysis was utilized to examine the relationship of the civic literacy predictors and population groups, as well as potential interactions. By studying how these measures may differentially affect civic literacy, we are better able to understand how to make schools a context for positive civic development and engagement for diverse groups of students in the United States.

***Keywords***: civic literacy, school climate, service-learning, social and civic responsibility, diversity

Positive school climate and service-learning can create the conditions for students to develop as competent, responsible, and capable citizens (Barber, Sweetwood, & King, 2015; Homana, Barber, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-d'Alessandro, 2013). Civic literacy requires that students possess skills that include critical reading and writing nested within socio-cultural practices such as problem-solving, decision-making, communication and conflict resolution (Hess & Avery, 2008; Levine, 2007; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). Importantly, civic literacy skills fostered in positive school climates encourage positive interrelationships, group cohesiveness, leadership and student empowerment ultimately leading to action and change in schools and communities (Campbell, 2008; Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Schools are socio-cultural structures composed of heterogeneous groups of people with different views and experiences. Schools are also viewed as mechanisms for the reproduction of class and other types of privilege (Bourdieu, 1997; Portes, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 2000). When educational systems are characterized by school climates which marginalize groups of students, they become a challenge to civic development. Conversely, educational systems can become sites which foster a range of civic literacy competencies—the knowledge, skills and dispositions that young people need to develop into politically aware and socially responsible individuals.

Although some students are provided rich learning opportunities to engage in meaningful civic literacy practices, other students are provided few, if any, of these types of learning experiences (Barber, Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Ross, 2015; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2010). This is a particularly prevalent problem in schools comprised largely of students of color related to academic opportunities to engage with civic literacy practices (Ochoa, 2013; Sonnenschein & Galindo, 2015), preparation for electoral participation (Jacobsen & Linkow, 2012; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017), and the development of social and political attitudes and practices (Diemer & Rapa, 2015; Lopez, 2013).

Existing disparities in knowledge and outcomes around civic literacy are also reflective of students' experiences and perceptions of their school's climate. Early research suggests, for example, that youth of color do not perceive their schools to be as open and supportive as other students, which would likely affect academic and civic outcomes (Laosa, 1989; Walsh, 1987). More recent research suggests that civic literacy among diverse groups of students is indeed a concern, especially regarding opportunities for open discussion, civic knowledge and engagement, and classroom instruction (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). This paper is unique in its examiniation of the relationship of school climate and service-learning predictors to civic literacy/education among diverse population groups in the United States. From a teaching and research perspective, exploring this relationship provides a fruitful endeavor—understanding and improving how schools can enhance civic literacy for all students.

## Literature Review

### Conceptualizing Civic Literacy

Civic literacy includes a range of competencies necessary for active engagement in a democratic society. Civic literacy can be viewed as promoted through formal and informal civic practices. Formal civic practices are most often associated with explicit teaching and learning focused primarily on the development of civic knowledge emphasizing political structures and processes, taxation, and the Constitution and Bill of Rights (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) Other more traditional aspects of formal civic literacy focus on learning on what could be viewed as conventional norms of civic participation, such as voting or the value of joining a political party (Galston, 2001). The goal for these types of formal civic practices is to provide students with information about the political process that will enable them to be informed voters and participants in civic life (Carnegie Corporation of New York & Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education, 2003). Focusing only on the political concepts and terms is insufficient, however, especially when addressing the social and cognitive development of students' understanding of civic and social responsibility (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004). Rather, a wider range of civic skills, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as an array of informal civic practices, such as cultivating healthy normative structures in schools to support student civic literacy are equally important.

An array of civic literacy skills is crucial for students' future engagement as civic and socially engaged members of society. Central to these skills are students' abilities to problem-solve, communicate, make decisions, and engage in deliberation predicated on critical reading, thinking and writing embedded in social practice (Bean, 2011; Lazere, 2010; Wade, 1995). Informal civic practice in schools can foster a range of these types of skills that are at the center of this analysis. Norms of community participation, for example, could be considered as a bridge between formal and informal civic practice because engagement centers on activities such as soliciting money for a cause, gathering signatures for a petition or engaging in community efforts such as recycling (see for example, Flanagan, 2013; Hahn, 2005; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Levine, 2007). Informal civic practices also foster norms of social movement participation where students engage in peaceful protest activities that align with their beliefs towards issues related to laws, the environment, and human rights (Kennedy, Hahn, & Lee, 2008). Equally important are norms of democracy that are vital for the country's democratic health and sustainability (Abowitz & Harnish; 2006; Husfeldt & Nikolova, 2003). These norms include, for example, attitudes about the value of the rights of others, the availability of alternative forms of information from different and competing political perspectives, and the existence of multiple civic associations to which people can belong. This broad view of civic literacy embraces positive school climate for valued educational opportunities that support student participation in local community organizations, school based activities such as service-learning, and other civically engaged extracurricular activities such as student councils and school newspapers (Campbell, Levinson, & Hess, 2012; Carnegie Corporation of New York & Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, 2003; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics & Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011).

At the same time, a civic literacy gap continues to exist based on race, ethnicity and income (Homana, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2010). People of color have historically been disadvanged in terms of opportunities for civic literacy due to slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other state and federal policies ranging from the denial to vote to running for political office (Alexander, 2012; King, 1995; Kolchin, 2003; Spring, 2014).

Today, inequality in civic literacy is evident in disparities of knowledge, skills and behaviors. Since 1998, for example, the gap in civic knowledge on standardized test scores between students of color and white students has consistently been about 27%, (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). This test, however, reflects cultural and economic bias since the content is overwhelmingly skewed toward the privileged by the middle class, white scholars and policymakers posing barriers for equitable educational opportunities for the poor and people of color (Levinson, 2010). Students of color, and those who are poor, are therefore disadvantaged because they are less likely to have opportunities to develop formal civic competencies necessary for full democratic engagement. While churches and places of worship have historically served to help address the social and the civic needs of communities of color, the prevalence of underfunded and underresourced schools, students leaving school without graduating, and low economic opportunities for students who do graduate only serve to accentuate the problem (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011; Coley & Sum, 2012; Pancer, 2015).

Of note, however, recent political events such as demonstrations in support of the DREAM Act and opposition to Congressional candidates may reflect an awakening of civic responsibility. For example, preliminary voting results in the 2017 Alabama special U.S. Senate election indicate that 98% of black females and 93% of black males appear to have shifted the results toward the democratic candidate (The Washington Post, 2017). Nonetheless, the results also highlight the voting turnout gap by race between black and white voters (29% and 66%, respectively) (The Washington Post, 2017).

This study adopts a conceptualization of civic literacy emphasizing the value of a range of civic competencies that students acquire through participation in the formal and informal curriculum of schools. Development of civic competencies lead not only to knowledge about political systems but critical skills to assess political and social claims;

democratic dispositions that embrace the rights of disadvantaged populations, including the right to protest; and a commitment to participate in a range of collective socially responsible activities, such as working with others to solve problems in schools and neighborhoods.

## Service-Learning, School Climate, and Civic Literacy

***Service-learning.*** Service-learning has been defined in multiple ways (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2008; National Commission on Service-Learning, 2000). For this study, however, service-learning is considered broadly, as a teaching methodology that integrates academic study with real community needs to enhance student learning (National Youth Leadership Council, NYLC, 2008). The definition recognizes the following components of service-learning: student planning and action, reflection and evaluation, and recognition and celebration supported by NYLC and other advocates of the work such as the Naitonal Commission on Service-Learning. Important for this study is service-learning's ability, as a pedagogical method, to foster students' active involvement in learning and action and develop a range of skills and abilities such as problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Conway, Amel, & Gerwein, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mitchell, 2008). As such, service-learning promotes an understanding civic and social responsibility as outlined in the conceptualization of civic literacy. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that service-learning, is increasingly seen by some as a way to educate for social justice and, as such, has the potential to transform schools and communities. The social justice perspective enables students to critically investigate, reflect and respond to societal problems (Butin, 2007; Cipolle, 2010; Mitchell, 2014).

***School climate.*** Among early researchers and theorists, conceptualization of school climate has varied across the literature. Moos (1979), one of the earliest persons who developed this notion, conceived of school climate as the social atmosphere—a setting or learning community in which students have different experiences depending on the routines, rules and conventions established by the teachers and administrators. Others, such as Deal and Peterson (1999), have used the term school culture interchangeably with school climate. Deal and Peterson's concept suggest that culture, and therefore climate, develops over time and is tied to the rituals, taboos and traditions of the school. In spite of its extensive development as part of cultural psychology, the socio-cultural orientation to climate has played a limited role in investigations of how students develop civic literacy, particularly during the elementary and secondary school years.

Homana, Barber, & Torney-Purta (2006) conceptualized the connection between school climate and civic literacy, expressing school climate from a socio-cultural perspective—defined as "the impressions, beliefs, and expectations held by members of the school community about their school as a learning environment, their associated behavior, and the symbols and institutions that represent the patterned expressions of the behavior" (p. 2). This study builds on that work in order to more fully understand the potential role of school climate and service-learning and their implications for students' civic literacy.

***Service-learning and school climate for civic literacy.*** There are a number of commonalities between school climate and service-learning for realizing civic literacy. For example, students' perceptions of supportive classroom discussion and opportunities for collaboration can influence civic knowledge, participation in political dialogue, support for democratic values, and future voting intentions (Campbell, 2008; Geller, Voight, Wegman, & Nation, 2013; Thomas & McFarland, 2010). In addition, learning to address community problems in school through service-learning has revealed a host of positive outcomes in civic knowledge, skills, dispositions and engagement (Conway, Amel, & Gerwein, 2009; Furco & Root, 2010). As such, positive school climate and service-learning can be viewed as supporting one another in the development of student's civic literacy.

This study addresses an expanded conceptualization of the work developed by Homana, et al., (2006) to examine the relationship of school climate and service-learning predictors and adolescent students' civic literacy, while also exploring whether the relationship varies for students of diverse backgrounds. The work analyzes data from the Civic Education Study (CIVED) (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001), the most recent international dataset to include the United States, to understand the civic behaviors, attitudes, skills, and knowledge of adolescent students across 28 countries. CIVED utilized a comprehensive attitudinal and cognitive instrument developed and validated by a group of multinational scholars. Although a 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Study was conducted by Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, and Losito (2010), the United States chose not to participate in that study. Therefore, the CIVED measures are uniquely positioned for this type of school climate and service-learning analysis.

## Positive School Climate for the Development of Civic Literacy

Learning in schools is embedded within socio-cultural experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1986;). As such, schools are powerful places where classroom activities foster normative expectations and the types of positive interactions that can support the development of civic literacy. Unfortunately, too often students, especially those from historically disadvantaged populations, do not experience the types of learning environments that actively promote democratic practices to facilitate exploration of individual and group ideas and ways to coalesce around

common civic concerns (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

The creation of a positive classroom and school climate is crucial in this process. Positive school climate requires a shared commitment for the values and processes necessary in the academic and civic development of students (Homana, et al., 2006). With the student as a prime focus, it supports the role of competent and caring school leadership and teaching staff, as well as the importance of an open school ethos to foster a sense of responsibility and efficacy among all its members. Homana, et al., (2006) argue that the formation of positive school climate requires the recognition and dedication of all school members to the creation of a healthy school environment not only for academic success but the civic development of every student. Their work identified seven components of positive school climate for civic literacy:

- Meaningful learning of civic-related knowledge that builds on and enhances academic and participation skills;
- Cooperation and collaboration in approaching civic-related learning and problem-solving;
- Mutual trust and positive interactions among diverse students, faculty and administrators;
- Student input in planning and skills in participatory problem-solving that is valued;
- Deliberation and dialogue about issues that are thoughtful and respectful; and
- Engagement within the school community and commitment to learn about and interact with the broader community.

Important for this study are characteristics of classrooms and schools that reflect opportunities for students to engage not only in formal civic activities, which might include writing long answers to political questions, but participating in learning opportunities reflecting the positive school climate components identified by Homana, et al. (2006). Instructional practice that moves beyond traditional teaching approaches, such as lecturing, is crucial in this process. Teaching strategies such as debates, deliberations, role plays and mock trials can encourage active construction of civic knowledge and increase students' deep inquiry and higher-order thinking on civic issues (Carnegie Corporation of New York & Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, 2003; Hess & Avery, 2008). Moreover, civic activities presented in a supportive, collaborative environment seem to lead to improved civic outcomes including increased knowledge, a sense of political efficacy, and the adoption of democratic norms (Homana & Barber, 2006).

Educating for civic literacy requires teachers to create open classroom environments that encourage positive relationships, group collaboration and student voice. These classrooms emphasize discussions among students beginning in the classroom but extending to other school activities

(Torney-Purta, 2002). In these classrooms teachers present different sides of an issue, students feel free to express their opinions, and they feel free to disagree with one another. When teachers create open classroom environments for these types of discussions students can interact to sustain mutual agreement on common civic concerns (Homana, et al., 2006; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013). This type of practice supports the development of meaningful civic knowledge relevant to action (Campbell, 2008; Homana, 2009).

Additionally, opportunities for students to work together in school on issues that they care about can increase a range of civic literacy skills and behaviors. In other words, learning to develop confidence in the value of school. Early evidence suggests students believe that more change happens when they work together or when students organize to solve problems (Torney-Purta, et al, 2001). More recently, research suggest that collective student action can lead to increased civic knowledge and confidence about the effectiveness participation in peaceful protests, and youth forums (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Keating & Janmaat, 2016).

These components of positive school climate closely align with the pedagogical goals of service-learning (Carnegie Corporation of New York & Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, 2003; Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics & Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessndro): active instruction that is meaningful and authentic; classrooms and schools where students co-construct new knowledge while building on their past experiences; learning environments that create bridges to civility based on the well-being of others; respect for student decision-making and the ability to shape their own learning; ongoing opportunities for students to listen to one other, acknowledge different ideas, and build consensus; and aligning concepts such as inequality, social justice, and responsibility to solving school and community problems. Utilizing a school climate and service-learning framework, this study explores the development of civic literacy and civic engagement among diverse groups of students.

## Methods

The central research question for this study investigates whether participation in each of the school climate and service-learning measures is associated with civic knowledge, norms of democracy, conventional civic participation, social movement participation and community participation. And, if so, whether these associations vary by race.

This analysis explores how service-learning and school climate can influence adolescent civic knowledge and perceptions of democracy, as well as expected community, social movement, and conventional participation across

diverse groups of students. Regression analysis is used to provide insight into how school climate and service-learning may differentially affect the civic literacy of students based on race, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The intention is to build on a growing foundation of literature about how to make schools a context for positive civic literacy development for all youth in the United States.

## Data Sources

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (CIVED) (Torney-Purta et al, 2001) provides an ample and archived source of data on the civic behaviors, attitudes, skills and knowledge of approximately 90,000 14 year-old students from 28 countries. The focus of this current study is on items from the United States portion of CIVED data used in conjunction with the school climate and service-learning framework as they predict civic knowledge, skills and dispositions.

The multi-dimensional aspects of the CIVED are consistent with the definition of civic literacy used in this study. The study reflected a socio-cultural construct that placed the student in the center of public discourse about goals and values with family, school, peers, and other formal and informal communities. Social stratification by gender, ethnicity, language and ethnic status were also incorporated into CIVED. Perhaps, most relevant for this current study, the CIVED provides a diverse set of measures to examine the relationship of school climate and service-learning as way to understand educating for civic literacy.

## Sampling and Variable Selection

Nationally representative samples of students in the United States were selected as data sources. A total of 2,811 students in 124 schools participated in the survey. This analysis utilizes moderator-variable style regression to examine service-learning and school climate among diverse groups of students as they predict each of the five civic literacy-related outcomes of interest discussed below. This analysis also examines the interactions between school climate and service-learning variables to explore if and how they influence civic literacy differently across the groups.

The five civic literacy outcomes (dependent variables) for the analysis include civic knowledge, norms of democracy, norms of conventional participation, norms of social movement participation, and expected community participation. The independent variables represent five school climate civic dimensions (interactive class activities, traditional class activities, media activities, writing long answers to questions, confidence in school participation, and open classroom discussion) and include two service-learning racial groups on the service-learning and school climate measures.

measures (learning in school to solve community problems and participation in a group volunteer activities). See Appendix for a description of all variables.

To improve reliability, this analysis also incorporates various IRT scales (Husfeldt, Barber, & Torney-Purta, 2005). A series of items tailored specifically to measure civic literacy across diverse racial groups in the United States allows for comparisons to be made between groups of students. For this analysis, four groups of students were identified: Asian, Black, Latino and White. Controls for socioeconomic status and gender are also considered in the analysis.

## Data Adequacy

To prevent power concerns related to small sub-samples, missing data were imputed for predictors at the student-level (using the mean for continuous variables, and the median of similar cases for dichotomous variables). Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for predictor and outcome variables for the entire sample, including the imputed missing data. (See Table 1).

## Results

Prior to the regression analysis, two separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to explore two different relationships. The first analysis explored the relationship between race and the service-learning and school climate predictors. The second analysis explored the relationship between student race and civic outcomes.

After the ANOVAs were completed, several follow-up regression analyses were conducted using the service-learning and school climate predictors along with race, gender, and SES in association with civic literacy outcomes. This allowed investigation of independent effects of the variables, as well as possible interactions between school climate and service-learning and the other variables. Again, the purpose of this investigation was to understand "How does the relationship between service-learning and school climate and civic literacy outcomes differ among students of different racial backgrounds?"

## Service-Learning and School Climate by Race

Across all groups of students statistically significant differences ($p < .01$) were found on three of the eight service-learning and school climate measures: participating in a group volunteer activity; perception of open classroom for discussion; and confidence in the value of school participation (see Table 2). Post-hoc analyses were conducted to determine exactly where significant differences existed between the means of the different

The post-hoc tests reveal that Latino students have lower mean scores related to volunteer activities, positive school climate, and confidence in the value of school participation than all other groups. White and Black students have similar mean scores relevant to "involvement in group volunteer activities." At the same time, White students have higher classroom discussion mean scores compared to all groups, while Asian students have higher "confidence in school" mean scores compared to all groups.

### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

| Dependent Variables | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Civic Knowledge | 2786 | 105.01 | 22.18 |
| Democracy | 2737 | 10.08 | 2.04 |
| Community Participation | 2500 | 10.19 | 2.04 |
| Conventional Participation | 2475 | 10.45 | 1.97 |
| Social Movement Participation | 2734 | 10.26 | 2.32 |
| **Independent Variables (Student)** | **N** | **Mean** | **SD** |
| Volunteer in Group to Help the Community | 2585 | 1.50 | 0.50 |
| Contribute to Solve Problems in the Community | 2416 | 2.85 | 0.77 |
| Interactive Activities | 2811 | 0.35 | 0.48 |
| Traditional Activities | 2811 | 0.64 | 0.48 |
| Media Activities | 2811 | 0.73 | 0.45 |
| Write Long Answers | 2811 | 0.35 | 0.48 |
| Perception of Open Classroom Discussion | 2811 | 10.44 | 2.15 |
| Confidence in Value of School Participation | 2811 | 10.05 | 2.06 |

### Table 2: ANOVA Results of Service-Learning and School Climate Measures by Race

| | N | Group Volunteer Activities | Solve Community Problems | Interactive Activities | Traditional Activities | Media Activities | Write Long Answers | Open Climate | School Participation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Race** | | | | | | | | | |
| Asian | 157 | 1.46 | 3.01 | 0.38 | 0.61 | 0.80 | 0.46 | 10.54 | 10.59 |
| Black | 429 | 1.52 | 2.93 | 0.32 | 0.58 | 0.73 | 0.38 | 10.25 | 9.92 |
| Latino | 430 | 1.38 | 2.80 | 0.32 | 0.64 | 0.69 | 0.31 | 10.21 | 9.81 |
| White | 1597 | 1.52 | 2.85 | 0.37 | 0.66 | 0.73 | 0.36 | 10.64 | 10.18 |
| **Total** | **2762** | | | | | | | | |
| F | | 5.21** | 2.21 | 1.58 | 1.71 | 1.70 | 2.25 | 3.84** | 6.59** |
| df | | 5, 2552 | 5, 2373 | 5, 2756 | 5, 2756 | 5, 2756 | 5, 2756 | 5, 2756 | 5, 2756 |

** $p < .01$

## Civic Literacy by Race

An ANOVA analysis was also conducted examining civic literacy by racial diversity (Table 3). Results indicate that statistically significant differences exist on two civic outcomes—civic knowledge and beliefs about democratic norms. The largest difference among the groups occurs in civic knowledge–which includes both knowledge and interpretative skills. Specifically, Asian and White students have higher mean scores on civic knowledge than Latino or Black students while White students have higher mean scores than all other groups of students.

The difference among all of the groups' related to beliefs about the norms of democracy is less pronounced than those found in the analysis of civic knowledge; however, statistically significant differences were found. Again, the analysis suggests that the largest differences are between Asian and White students compared to Latino and Black students.

.**Table 3: ANOVA Results of Civic Literacy Outcomes by Race**

| Race | N | Civic Knowledge | Democracy | Conventional Participation | Social Movement Participation | Community Participation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asian | 157 | 105.39 | 10.30 | 10.08 | 10.08 | 10.55 |
| Black | 429 | 92.88 | 9.53 | 10.57 | 10.41 | 10.41 |
| Latino | 430 | 97.08 | 9.55 | 10.22 | 10.11 | 10.28 |
| White | 1597 | 111.71 | 10.43 | 10.21 | 10.13 | 10.48 |
| Total | 2762 | | | | | |
| F | | 64.98** | 19.91** | 2.16 | 2.47 | 2.09 |
| df | | 5, 2743 | 5, 2686 | 5, 2684 | 5, 2455 | 5, 2432 |

** $p < .01$

**Table 4: Regression of Civic Literacy Outcomes**

| | Civic Knowledge | | Democracy | | Conventional Participation | | Social Movement Participation | | Community Participation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | s.e. | b | s.e. | b | s.e. | B | s.e. | B | s.e. |
| Constant | 76.58 | 3.04 | 6.13 | 0.28 | 6.73 | 0.27 | 4.95 | 0.31 | 5.00 | 0.27 |
| Books in home | 3.85** | 0.34 | 0.23** | 0.03 | 0.10** | 0.03 | -0.09** | 0.04 | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| Gender | -0.36 | 0.63 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.22** | 0.07 | 0.37** | 0.06 |
| **Service-Learning and School Climate** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Group Voluntary Activity | 4.29** | 0.89 | 0.27** | 0.09 | 0.38** | 0.08 | 0.42** | 0.09 | 0.85** | 0.08 |
| Solve Community Problems | -3.12** | 0.67 | -0.10 | 0.06 | 0.48** | 0.06 | 0.47** | 0.07 | 0.43** | 0.06 |
| Interactive Activities | -1.55 | 0.91 | -0.19 | 0.09 | 0.42** | 0.08 | -0.06 | 0.10 | 0.20* | 0.08 |
| Media Activities | 3.76** | 1.02 | 0.15* | 0.10 | 0.06 | 0.09 | 0.18 | 0.12 | -0.01 | 0.09 |
| Traditional Activities | 1.07 | 0.95 | 0.09 | 0.09 | -0.08 | 0.09 | 0.30** | 0.10 | 0.05 | 0.09 |
| Write Long Answers | -0.38 | 0.89 | -0.02 | 0.09 | 0.21** | 0.08 | -0.01 | 0.09 | 0.23** | 0.08 |
| Classroom Climate | 1.11** | 0.21 | 0.13** | 0.02 | 0.05** | 0.02 | 0.08** | 0.02 | 0.09** | 0.02 |
| School Participation | 0.95** | 0.22 | 0.18** | 0.02 | 0.07** | 0.02 | 0.22** | 0.02 | 0.12** | 0.02 |
| **Race (White is reference group)** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Asian | -2.16 | 1.81 | 0.00 | 0.17 | 0.03 | 0.17 | -0.32 | 0.19 | 0.32** | 0.17 |
| Black | -13.93** | 1.45 | -0.64** | 0.14 | -0.04 | 0.14 | 0.50** | 0.15 | 0.29* | 0.13 |
| Latino | -18.59** | 4.87 | -0.52** | 0.13 | 0.07 | 0.12 | 0.15 | 0.14 | 0.32** | 0.12 |
| **Significant Interactions** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Solve Comm. Prob. * Latino | 3.55* | 1.60 | | | | | | | 0.36* | 0.14 |
| Write Long Answers * Black | | | | | | | | | 0.54* | 0.25 |
| Confidence in Part. * Asian | | | | | | | | | 0.26** | 0.08 |
| $R^2$ | 0.20 | | 0.14 | | 0.12 | | 0.16 | | 0.22 | |

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

## Multiple Regression Analysis

The regression analysis revealed several statistically significant relationships that provide further insight into the research question. The analysis also provided information relevant to important interactions for the relationship of specific service-learning and school climate measures and civic literacy for certain racial groups. All of the civic literacy outcomes have statistically significant relationships with the service-learning and school climate measures—civic knowledge, expected community participation, and beliefs about the norms of democracy, conventional participation and social movement participation (Table 4).

A central goal of this analysis is to explore whether significant interactions between racial diversity and the school climate and service-learning framework exist as they influence civic literacy. Interactions, however, can be difficult to find. Therefore, a more flexible p-value of 0.05 is employed when exploring interaction terms to provide a more rounded perspective of the potential of the relationships.

*Civic knowledge*. Even after controlling for gender and books in the home, service-learning and school climate have significant relationships to civic knowledge. The service-learning measures—participation in group volunteer service and learning in school to help solve problems in the community—are significantly associated with students' civic knowledge. However, participation in voluntary service is positively associated with civic knowledge, while learning in school about how to solve problems in the community is negatively associated with students' civic knowledge. Three school climate measures—engagement in media activities, open classroom for discussion, and confidence in participation in school—are positively associated with students' civic knowledge. Civic knowledge scores overall among Black and Latino students is lower than that of White students. In other words, the two service-learning predictors and school climate measures do not explain diversity gaps seen when examining civic knowledge. In fact, the inclusion of these predictors demonstrates a significant gap in civic knowledge between White students and Black and Latino students.

The relationship between learning in school to solve community problems and civic knowledge does appear to be different for Latino students compared to the other groups of students. A significant interaction (p = .025) suggests learning to solve community problems in school is a positive predictor of civic knowledge for Latino students (while it was a negative predictor for the sample as a whole). In particular, Latino students who believe that they have fewer opportunities in school to learn to solve community problems have lower civic knowledge scores compared to White students. However, Latino students who believe that they have more opportunities to learn in school to solve community problems score higher on civic knowledge compared to White students with similar beliefs. This is illustrated graphically in Figure 1 (all figures consider the predictors at the mean).

*Democracy.* One service-learning measure (participation in group voluntary service) and two school climate measures (open classroom discussions and confidence in the school participation) are significantly associated with students' beliefs about the value of democratic norms (such as rights to express opinions freely, elections of political leaders, and demands for political and social justice). However, similar to civic knowledge differences among racial groups regarding beliefs about democratic norms persist. In particular, this analysis found that Black and Latino students have less positive beliefs about the norms of democracy than do White students. Unlike the analysis of civic knowledge, there is no evidence of significant interactions of racial diversity, service-learning, and school climate influence on students' beliefs about norms of democracy.

*Conventional participation.* Both service-learning measures (participation in volunteer group activities and learning to solve community problems in school) and four of the school climate measures (participation in interactive activities, writing long answers to civic and political questions, open classroom for discussion, and confidence in the value of school participation) are significantly associated with the students beliefs about the value of conventional civic and political participation such as voting or joining a political party. Similar to the finding related to the norms of democracy, no significant interactions were found.

*Social movement participation*. The regression analysis revealed that both service-learning measures are significant predictors in the development of students' beliefs about social movement participation—such as promoting human rights, protecting the environment, and protesting unjust laws. Similarly, three school climate measures, writing long answers to civic, social and political questions in class, open classrooms for discussion, and confidence in the value of school participation are significantly influential on the development of students' beliefs about engaging in social movements. Notably, Black students are significantly more likely to express positive beliefs about social movement participation than White students.

*Expected adult community participation.*
Participation in group volunteer activities, learning in school to solve community problems, participation in interactive learning activities, open classrooms for discussion, confidence in the value of school participation, and writing long answers to civic, social and political questions in class are significant predictors of students' expected adult community participation (e.g., collecting money for a cause, collecting signatures for a petition, and following political issues in the media). Importantly, Asian, Black, and Latino students are significantly more likely to participate in their communities as adults compared to White students. These

findings point to the potential positive influence of the framework to understand differences among these groups of student on this civic measure and how schools can play a role in this process.

A number of significant interactions have been found related to this part of the analysis. First, Latino students who believe that they have fewer opportunities in school to solve community problems have similar levels of expected community participation as adults compared to White students. Yet, Latino students who believe that they have more learning opportunities in school to solve community problems have statistically significant higher levels of expected community participation as adults compared to White students who also believe that they have these higher levels in school learning opportunities (p = .02) (see Figure 2).

Second, Black and White students who report that they less often write longer answers to civic, social and political questions in class have about the same levels of expected community participation. However, Black students who responded that they have more of these opportunities have statistically significant higher levels of expected community participation compared to White students who report higher levels of these opportunities (p = .04) (see Figure 3).

Third, Asian and White students who have low or average levels of confidence in the value of school participation report similar levels of expected adult community participation. However, Asian students who report high levels of confidence in the value of school participation have statistically significant higher levels of expected community participation compared to White students who report similar levels confidence (p = .00) (see Figure 4).

***Gender and socioeconomic status***. Although not the central focus of the study, the regression analysis suggests that gender and socioeconomic status are significantly associated with the development of civic literacy among students. Socioeconomic status, for example (measured by the variable "books in the home") appears to support the research of Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, (2001) and Homana (2009) regarding the influence the more traditional aspects of civic literacy—civic knowledge, democratic concepts, and conventional participation. At the same time, there is a small but statistically significant negative relationship between socioeconomic status and norms of social movement.

Gender appears to make a statistically significant difference on two civic literacy variables—norms of social movement and expected community participation. In both, females are more likely to participate than males. This is consistent with previous CIVED research (see for example, Barber & Torney-Purta, 2009). In general, therefore, no new contributions to learning have been identified regarding either socioeconomic status or gender in this study.
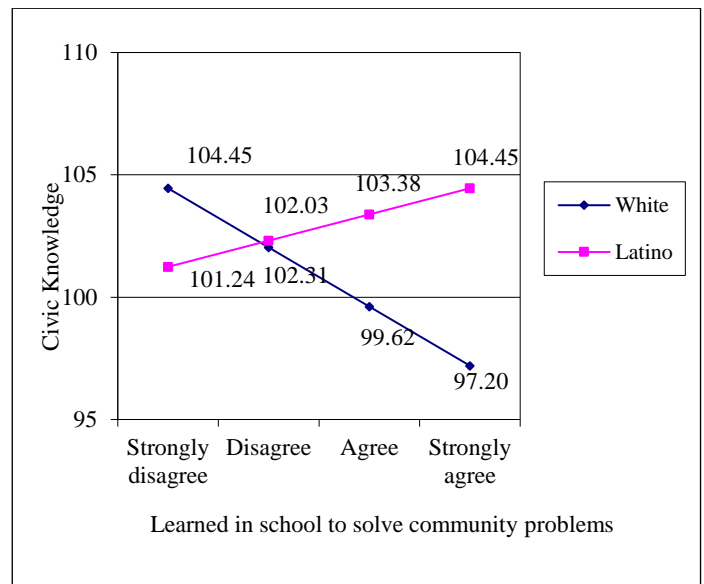


*Figure 1.* Learned in school to solve community problems and civic knowledge. Illustrates the relationship between Latino and White students.
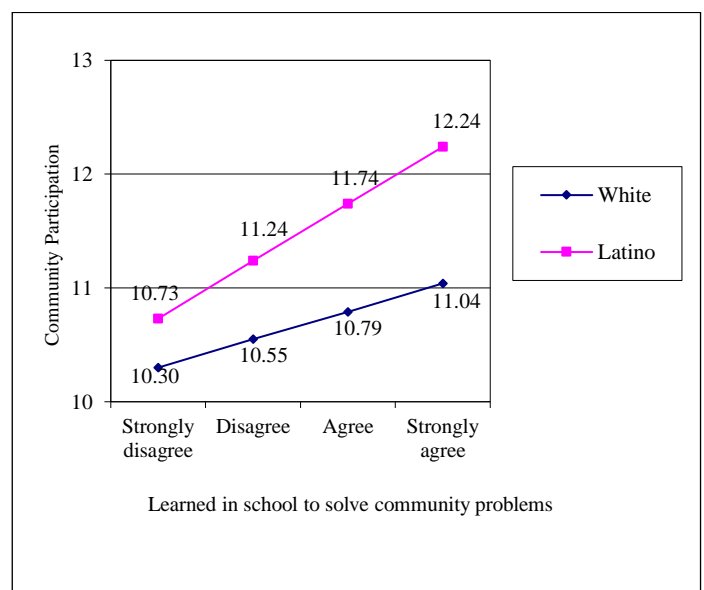


*Figure 2.* Learned in school to solve community problems and expected community participation. Illustrates the relationship between Latino and White students.
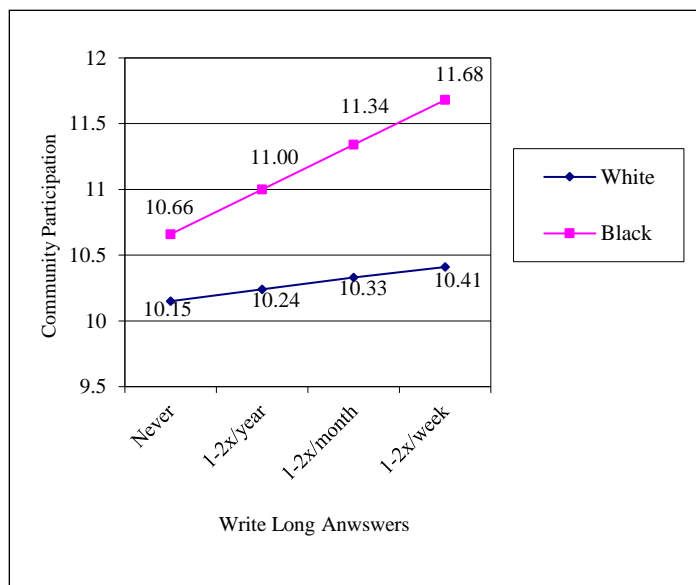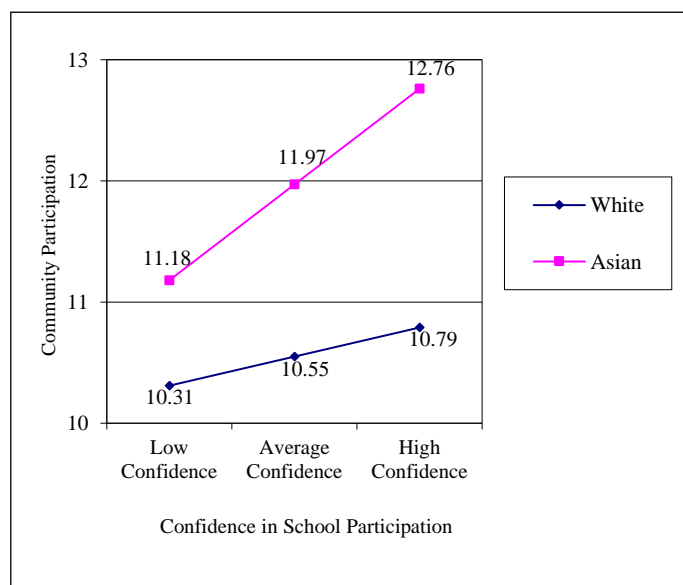
## Discussion and Implications

This analysis has resulted in several key findings important for understanding the role of school climate and service-learning for civic literacy in the United States. Results reveal that different groups of students do indeed perceive their experiences with service-learning and school climate differently. In other words, race plays a role in students' civic literacy and engagement, and both service-learning and school climate have distinct advantages and disadvantages for students of different backgrounds.

Particularly troubling are the consistent civic literacy gaps found to exist due to race. The ANOVA analyses reveal important patterns. Asian and White students have more positive perceptions, or interactions, with the school climate and service-learning measures than do Black and Latino students. These patterns hold for most of the civic outcomes.

The regression analysis suggests that both measures of service-learning—participation in a group volunteer activity to benefit the community and learning in school to solve community problems are key predictors for many of the civic literacy engagement outcomes. These findings support the reviewed research regarding the importance of combining learning in school with actual service in the community. Among the school climate variables, two predictors consistently influence civic literacy across most groups in positive directions—open classroom for discussion and confidence in the value of school participation.

At the same time, the regression analysis reveals that the relationship between the service-learning and school climate predictors and civic outcomes among the diverse racial groups of students becomes more mixed, depending on the outcome. For example, White students score higher on civic knowledge and have more positive beliefs about the norms of democracy than other groups of students. At the same time, Black students display significantly more positive beliefs regarding the value of social movement participation than White students. Asian, Black and Latino students all have expectations of greater community participation than White students (holding other factors constant).

### Relationships' Role

Service-learning and school climate have distinct and important roles to play in the development of civic literacy among diverse groups of students. More specifically, participating in school-based volunteer activities, learning in school to solve community problems, engaging in classroom discussions to examine and address issues, and valuing school participation can serve as critical components to develop civic literacy among students.

Schools serve a critical role in supporting relationships that promote trust and mutual respect among its diverse



Figure 3. Write long answers to civic, social and political questions and expected community participation. Illustrates the relationship between Black and White students



Figure 4. Confidence in school participation and expected community participation. Illustrates the relationship between Asian and White students.

members, encouraging a positive sense of school belonging, and supporting meaningful learning as a basis for active participation in a democratic society. This analysis re-inforces the fact that schools are central in positive student development for responsible civic literacy and engagement. While the study suggests that other student characteristics are important to consider, the results provide evidence of the need for schools to promote positive school climate and service-learning for civic literacy. For service-learning, the results point to the need for schools look to ways that foster, high quality connections between what is learned in school and students' participation in activities that benefit the community—a process supported by service-learning advocates. Equally important is fostering in school positive school climate dimensions such as open classroom discussion, the value of school participation, and new ways to engage students in active learning for improved civic outcomes. As this study suggests, service-learning and school climate should not be considered separate entities but rather complementary components that can strengthen and improve the civic literacy of all students. It is incumbent upon schools, and the members in them, to assess and improve their policies and teaching practice in order to create and sustain high quality service-learning and positive school climate so that all students, regardless of race, are afforded the opportunities to participate and interact in meaningful learning that supports their involvement in and attitudes towards democracy.

As this analysis also indicates, racial gaps exist that cannot be completely explained away by the service-learning or school climate measures. While the picture regarding the academic aspects of civic outcomes is particularly disconcerting for Black and Latino students, in terms of civic literacy the analysis suggests that closer examination of ways to link practical outcomes, such as working for social justice, with the academic outcomes across all groups is a worthy goal. At the same time, more thorough examination of the school climate and service-learning measures and their influence on what is occurring among the different racial groups that leads to certain outcomes in civic literacy are also fruitful enterprises for future work. If open classroom for discussion, for example, is used to encourage students to explore their views, and the views of others on social and political issues, what is occurring during this learning process between or among diverse groups of students? How does the learning environment encourage and support all points of views and/or challenge privledge or bias viewpoints embedded within service-learning or school climate indicators? And, how can civic knowledge and beliefs about democracy be improved for all groups of students? What role does culture and identity play across different groups of students and how should teaching for civic literacy adapt to the realities underlying these needs, especially in historically disadvantaged populations?

## Implications for Teaching

Positive school climate for civic literacy should promote supportive and collaborative instruction that engages all students in learning that is meaningful, interactive, learner-centered, and inclusive. This instruction focuses on text related to important civic dilemmas and moral concerns that students care about. One approach central to service-learning, for example, is the use of reflective journals where students can capture their individual impressions, ideas, and assumptions about social, political, cultural and economic issues. These journals are ongoing and serve as safe places where student can explore and record their assumptions, challenges and beliefs focusing on both free writing and focused discussion questions. For example, students could write in their journals about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and social protest movements such as Black Lives Matters. At the same time, individual reflection is not sufficient for a civically literate and responsive society. Collectively, students should be engaged with one another in critical thinking and analysis based on what they record in their journals. This collaborative learning allows students to hear one another's ideas, build on and challenge ideas, and begin to come to consensus on issues. In this way, individual students move beyond their own perceptions and begin to think and work collectively toward solving concerns in their schools and communities.

Civic literacy also requires students to move beyond the academic work accomplished in their reflective journals and collaborative discussions. Positive school climate related activities can facilitate opportunities for students to develop action plans, implement those plans and utilize decision-making skills to address issues such segregation, inequality and oppression within schools and their community. For this reason, active participation to challenge practices and policies related to the lack of resources in schools, inadequate housing, LGBT rights, and poverty could be part of their advocacy work. Students could utilize their civic literacy skills on social media to organize peaceful protests around causes of importance to them, develop brochures that address local issues like food deserts, and write letters to newspapers, community action groups and policymakers expressing their concerns and possible solutions to issues. Through these types of civic literacy practices, students learn that being a member of a democratic society is both a moral and ethical responsibility, one which empowers them to develop their voice for change and ultimately moving them from novice to active and expert citizens.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study are important for several reasons. First, they illustrate the powerful connection of school climate and service-learning within the overarching school structure to identify and examine not only civic

literacy, but to build a broader sense of school belonging among all students through the establishment of democratic values. Second, developing more nuanced understandings of these relationships and their effects on various racial groups can provide new insights into the possibilities for improved civic literacy and engagement, teaching strategies that promote positive civic outcomes, and the policies that support their successful implementation so that all students become politically and socially responsible individuals. Third, this study points to the critical need to continue to understand, create, and support a positive school environment that emphasizes collaboration, trust, and respect for all students based on positive shared values, relationships, and learning activities leading to improved civic literacy and engagement.

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## About the Author

Gary Homana, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Towson University in Maryland. His research interests include the social organization of classrooms and schools. He is particularly interested in the intersection of civic literacy, service-learning, school climate and communities of practice for improved teaching and learning. He has been in involved in several national research studies and projects including the National Commission on Service-Learning, chaired by Senator John Glenn, a study on improving teacher preparation, and a comprehensive arts-in-education whole-school change model designed to transform school culture. Dr. Homana served as special assistant in education to Maryland's Governor where he was involved in numerous education initiatives including a statewide education program serving 6,000 youth and adolescents. He began his career as a music therapist working with autistic children in Boston.

# Reaching Homeless Children With Poetry

Ken Slesarik

*Educator & Poet*

*"**A typical student may have struggled in one or more academic areas but I made sure without a doubt that every student felt valued and capable.**"* - Ken Slesarik

After many years facilitating an after-school poetry club for reluctant learners and performing assemblies and workshops for homeless students I was prompted to ask the question: is teaching poetry to homeless and reluctant learners different than teaching the average child?

My involvement in working directly with homeless children was a result of my wife Julie and a dear friend of ours named Nicole who is very involved with the homeless cause. I get immense joy from helping children and the opportunity to volunteer presented itself. It was very fulfilling and this lead to my wanting to more directly use my talents as a speaker and children's poet with this population. I started doing poetry segments at Nicole's summer camps for homeless children. I also looked for Title 1 schools and schools that might have a higher percentage of students in need, homeless or otherwise where I would share my "Heroes and Poets" assembly program. My wife and I would also volunteer at fundraisers that support homeless children and attend activities with them such as horseback riding or swimming in a water park where I was always quick to bring poetry into the equation. Homeless and displaced children are not easily identified, but in my area, we have a school that specifically caters to that population, where 99% of the kids live in shelters or at best a motel room. It was very exciting for me to directly impact about two hundred of these kids at their school with my program.

I gradually grew into working with homeless children and it was relatively seamless. In April of 2011, I came across an article by children's author Janet Wong talking about the possibilities of e-book publishing in regard to children's poetry. I was especially impressed by her



**Figure 1.** Ken Slesarik encourages a young poet

enthusiasm for promoting the genre. That got me thinking about how I could promote poetry and make a difference in the lives of children. I then presented a proposal for a poetry club at a Title 1 elementary school in Phoenix, Arizona and "Poetry Rocks" was launched. Most certainly, not all the students were homeless by any means but nonetheless many had significant issues and homelessness was among them. A typical student may have struggled in one or more academic areas but I made sure without a doubt that every student felt valued and capable. This "laboratory" is where I developed my assembly program and its main premise that heroes are strong, brave and kind and we strived to live that premise. For this school year, I took a break from "Poetry Rocks" to concentrate on my own writing and speaking but I wouldn't trade those five or six years for anything.

The reasons for homelessness are many and varied. They may include such things as job loss, divorce, domestic violence, addictions and other traumatic life events and the common element they all share is untold suffering. In my opinion, if we can distract a homeless child from their weighty circumstances even for a few fleeting moments, then we should consider that a win. If we can further build on that and cultivate a love of poetry then even better.

I often use the Power Book series from Pomelo Books when teaching poetry but regardless of how strong the curriculum, if children are preoccupied by environmental concerns such as their next meal or home circumstance then they will naturally be less interested in poetry and school in general. That's where we, as agents for social change come in.

### A Typical Power Book Lesson

I think it's important to mention that prior to a poetry lesson I scan the room and read body language to see if anyone looks stressed or defeated and either directly or indirectly I try to cheer them up. I often bring a snack of some sort and that helps. Eye contact and genuine concern along with enthusiastic greetings such as a "high five" or "knuckles" set the tone. At this point we will do some sort of warm up such as holding an expansive, open pose, as recommended by Harvard Professor, Amy Cuddy. I also get good results out of doing a "Poetry Rocks Haka" where we do a few choreographed moves designed to make us feel strong and capable.

Now we get into the lesson with a "Powerplay Activity" that gets us thinking. It is not really poetry related but fits in nicely with the other steps and promotes self-awareness. We will then read a themed, outside poem or poem from another poetry book and a response poem and finally a mentor text poem. All of these are provided in the books. It is important to note that we don't just read the poems. Depending on the topic we will celebrate, read as if on helium, in slow motion, echo read, read in two voices and along the way we might discuss a word or poetic attribute. Step five is a writing prompt so we dive in and write. We will then revise and perform our poems where respect and being a good audience is a must and I model that. Not every kid will buy into the way I present the les-



**Figure 2.** Ken Slesarik with a young student

son one hundred percent but I'm confident this playful approach, along with high expectations, reaches more kids and even the most withdrawn is better off for it.

Great curriculum can make a not so great poet good and a good one even better but it takes compassionate and caring educators to build those relationships to in turn squeeze the juice out of whatever talents and abilities students already have and then to nurture and cultivate more talent. My end goal or purpose for teaching poetry to homeless and reluctant learners is not only to bridge any gaps in academic performance but to spark creativity and confidence that spill over to other aspects of the child's life. That is social change. That is meaningful.

### Memories, Lessons and Bonds

The stories you hear from these children are heartbreaking as you can imagine but the memories and bonds formed are priceless. One summer at camp I met an energetic and sweet, fourth-grade child named Tanya. Despite her circumstances, she was grateful and happy. She was front and center for the poetry lessons and really embraced the activities. I was delighted when she won a signed book of poems from author and anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins as part of my couplet challenge. For the next two days at camp she followed me around with her poetry book in hand. She chose to eat her meals with my wife and I and was constantly handing me scraps of paper with poems she had written. I teared up when she mistakenly called me "Dad" and embarrassingly giggled on a few occasions. I'll never forget when she showed up at the sponsored church activity, not with the provided bible but with her cherished poetry book. It was slightly irreverent but priceless. I was glad to connect with her again when I visited her school with my assembly program. I've learned that children are resourceful and I hope I provide a positive role model. I've learned that giving goes both ways and if we fail to let someone do something nice for us we deprive them the opportunity to replicate.
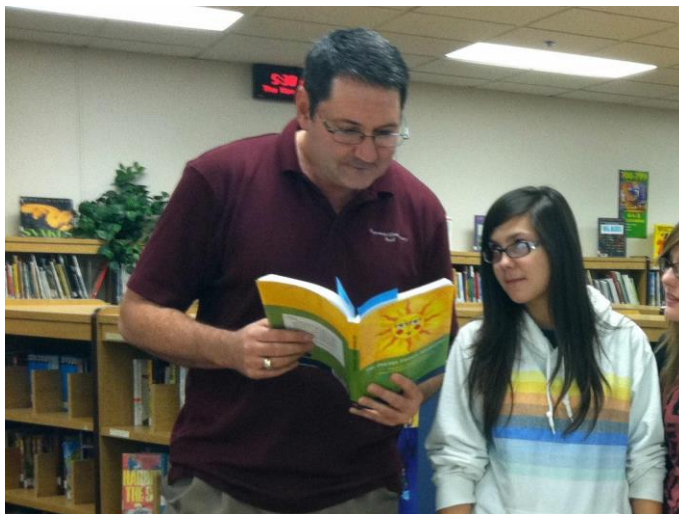
I've shared the genre with the homeless, the medically fragile, autistic kids, children with emotional and behavioral challenges, students with various learning disabilities as well as the average and gifted populations. I've concluded that regardless of IQ and life circumstance it's not how far a child gets that is most important but rather how far they come in proportion to where they started.

As you are working with students and introducing them to poetry and in turn writing with them it is very important to disproportionally praise on the smallest effort to keep them coming forward as you bring them along. We do what is called a power clap. It is a quick and effective way for the class or group to acknowledge one another while you still maintain control of your group. On the count of 3 let's give yourself one power clap. One, two, three Clap!

Not to minimize the complexity of humans at all but I read an article about how dolphins are trained. It seems some dolphins will completely shut down if a harsh tone is used with them and almost nothing will bring them out of their funk. Researchers have discovered that when those dolphins make even the smallest step towards a desired aim it is important to immediately reward them with a bucket of fish on their head as if in celebration. This disproportionate reward will break the funk. As a caution to you fish do not work very well for humans. I tried it on my wife but it had the opposite effect.

I have had great success using the Pomelo books with students but it is the human element of building a bond that has made the difference. In my experience, children never tire of smiling, expanding, raising their voices when it's appropriate and in general feeling good and escaping their realities for the safe sanctuary of poetry.



**Figure 3.** Ken Slesarik speaks at an assembly.

## Heroes and Poets

An avenue for me to reach out to students is my "Heroes and Poets" assembly program where I stress the im-portance that heroes are strong, brave and kind. Go ahead and take a strong breath with me now. One, two and three (breath). Nice! Now go ahead and sit like you are brave. Whatever that means to you go ahead and adjust your body. Finally, I stress that you can be strong and brave but if you are not kind and have the greater good in mind, then you are not a hero.

### Heroes and Poets Program Highlights

1. In a playful and kid-centered manner I introdce the three virtues of a hero that I want to elicit in my audience. Heroes are strong, brave and kind.
2. Walt Disney would have his animators step into a squared "magic box" marked with masking tape. I do a very powerful, modified version of that and children start to realize just how strong, brave and kind they really are.
3. Often, I will call on a very shy and reserved child to assist me in reciting a poem or poems and through a series of questions and teaching my "hero move" I turn that shy and reserved kid into a rock star.
4. My program is filled with tons of my originally written, high quality poems and I proceed to demonstrate my number one poetry writing technique where I put on a cape and "strut" like a superhero before putting pen to paper.
5. My program builds to a crescendo and before I'm through every person in the room, from the most gifted to the most challenged is feeling strong, brave and kind.
6. I proceed to expand on the idea beyond poetry to empower and challenge them to be their best before their next classroom test, sports game or when interacting with each other.

Why teach poetry to reluctant and struggling learners anyway? One reason is the performance aspect inherent in the genre. Poetry is meant to be spoken and the link between public speaking and self-confidence is unmistakable.

In returning to our question, I ask again, is teaching poetry to homeless and reluctant learners different than teaching the average child?

My answer is twofold, it is not different in that good teaching and strong curriculum are cross categorical and most of what works for a reluctant learner applies to and can only enhance the poetic skills of the average child and the two are different because we must consider the unique child and their individual circumstances to build that bridge with a compassionate hand.
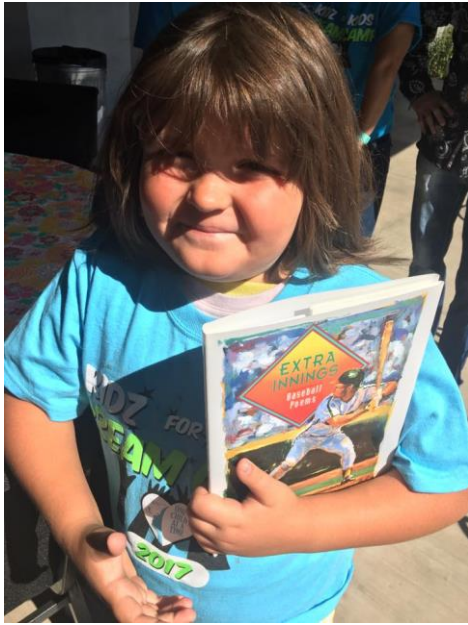
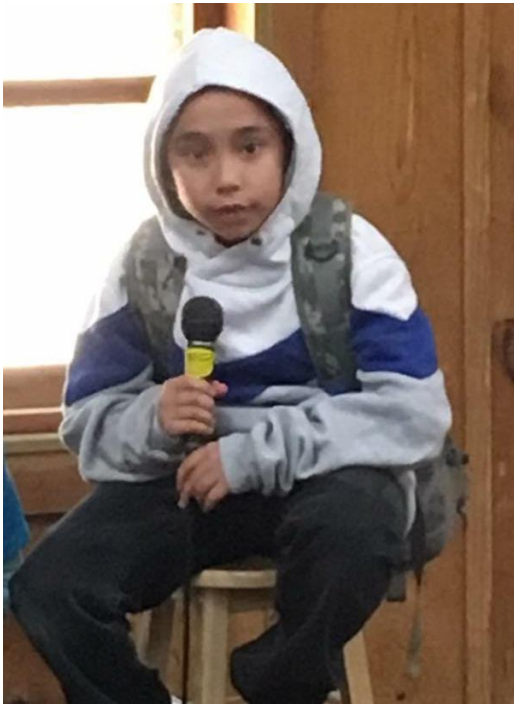**Figure 4.** A young reader with a book of baseball poems

multiple grades. The accepting, overall tone of this anthology is a great addition to any classroom library.

My goal at the ILA conference, as well as in this short article was to share some of my experiences. However, my overall goal was to encourage you to fearlessly introduce your own brand of literacy and never give up on those often-faceless students who may have been dealt a bad hand. My advice to those wanting to help is to contact homeless organizations in your area. With a short proposal, you can bring your own brand of literacy to children weather it is poetry, short stories, picture books or young adult novels. We all have a story to tell and what better audience to share it with than homeless or displaced children.



**Figure 5.** Sharing Stories.

### A Highly Recommended Book

The Poetry Friday Anthology K-5 Edition (Pomelo Books) promotes diversity and acceptance and has something for all students. I highly recommend it and it includes two of my own original poems. I use this in poetry groups and the topics are grade leveled but poetry does not come with a Lexile level so you can use most of the poems with

## *About the Author*



Ken Slesarik is a special education teacher and children's poet from Phoenix, Arizona. His "Heroes and Poets" assembly program has been well received by teachers, students, parents and administrators. When not teaching, or visiting schools Ken writes poetry for children with poems published in several world-wide anthologies and magazines. Ken's mission is to empower students through the medium of poetry and he is a poetry advocate to children and teachers alike.

http://kenslesarik.com/

# Sample Lesson

WEEK 6: ON THE GROUND                                    SECOND GRADE

## THE WOODLAND VOLE
### by Ken Slesarik

The Woodland Vole
prefers to stroll,
walking leisurely.

A tiny soul,
the Woodland Vole,
don't chase it, let it be.

The Woodland Vole
just doesn't know,
when fleeing fast and free,

how very slow,
the Woodland Vole
can seem to you and me.

poem copyright © 2012 Ken Slesarik
from *The Poetry Friday Anthology*
by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong
© 2012 Pomelo Books

Learn more about Ken and his poetry
at **KenSlesarik.com**.

### Take 5!

1. To prepare for reading the poem aloud, **display an image of a woodland vole and talk about this unique, mouse-sized animal** that lives in the woods and loves apples. Search Flickr.com or other sources for quick images to share.

2. **The title, "The Woodland Vole," is repeated in each stanza of the poem—the ideal opportunity for students to chime in** on that line as you read the rest of the poem aloud again.

3. For discussion: *What does it feel like to be small?*

4. The repeated use of the title, "The Woodland Vole," is a key building block in this poem. Each stanza in this poem includes an end-rhyme with the word *vole* —even a "slant" rhyme or "almost" rhyme in *vole* and *know* and *vole* and *slow*. **Challenge the kids to identify each rhyming pair (*vole/stroll; soul/vole; vole/know; slow/vole*) and then share the whole poem aloud again.**

5. Pair this poem with another about a small, slow creature, **"The World's Most Ancient Ant" by Jack Prelutsky** (Kindergarten, Week 6, page 32).
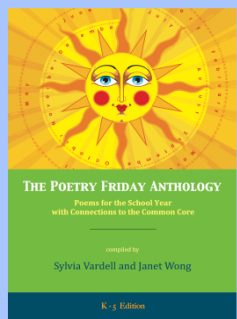
# Social Change Through Everyday Actions

April Halprin Wayland

Author

**"If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito."**
- Betty Reese

At one time or another, we have all felt the desire to make a positive impact in our world. It can seem overwhelming, as though the world needs so much more than an individual can possibly give. However, when we take a closer look at our everyday actions it becomes clear that even small efforts or changes – made mindfully – can make a big impact!

## Reconsider Everyday Actions

• BYO chopsticks, straws, spork to restaurants.

• Science says save the toilet seat liner.

• Donate art supplies and books to teachers in poorer districts at the end of the year.

• When you travel, bring magazines with you to give to children you encounter. One friend [of the author] brings National Geographic, saying it's one that those from a disadvantaged culture will understand. He says, 'If all overseas travelers to Asia do this, nearly 5 million young people per year could benefit. (Estimate based on National Travel and Tourism Office's (NTTO) Visitor Arrivals Program)."
• Join a neighborhood free-sharing site, help connect your unwanted or unused items to people who might need them in your area!

• Do your friends and family really need more stuff? (see: www.storyofstuff.com) Instead, consider honoring birthdays, anniversaries, etc., with a donation to a non-profit in their name.

• When you buy or order books, local independent bookstore (or go to IndieBound, which will direct you to your local store.) If you don't—if we don't—local indies could wither and die.

## Educate Your Community

• Ask Authors for Earth Day to come to your school! Director/Founder Brooke Bessesen has created an amazing way for authors to connect to students—each author "does one school visit a year with a unique twist: the author donates at least 30% of that day's speaking fee to a non-profit conservation organization as directed by a student vote. Students research a list of five conservations nominees selected by their author and then vote for their favorite—the author writes a check to the winning organization. Our mission? To empower young readers to shape the world around them!"

• Check out 50 Books about Peace and Social Justice compiled by the CCBC.

• I finally admitted that I don't like precinct walking door-to-door; it scares me. So I created www.AprilsBallot.com (the site may not be visible until a month before each election), where I post how I plan to vote and why, with links to more information. (In California, there were 17 propositions on the 2016 ballot—yikes!). I only endorse candidates and take positions on issues that are on my own ballot. Some people print my ballot and take it with them to the voting booth.

• One friend [of the author] writes: "Something I try to do is to be caught reading a book with an obviously diverse cover and content. For children's books I love re-reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. One of the big downsides of electronic reading is the loss of incidental public sharing of reading content."

## Use Existing Tools

• Register to vote…and then vote! (https://vote.gov/)

• Join a group of like-minded individuals, such as a huddle (http://bit.ly/2jGTtIo) or local Indivisible groups (https://www.indivisibleguide.com/act-locally/)

• Try the free app www.5Calls.org  to call legislators; it offers scripts & one touch dialing.

• ResistBot.io, an exceptional tool, is also free. Its tag line is, "I'll help you contact your officials." Using your phone, draft original content, then send an email, fax, etc. The more you use it, the more "privileges" you unlock (now it will send my content as an actual letter with a stamp and my signature upon my request; sometimes it offers to try and place exceptional letters in my local papers).

### Ask a Friend or Two to Help You

• In January of 2007, we organized a simple candlelight vigil for peace on the Manhattan Beach, CA pier. And just before Valentine's Day, 2007, four of us organized the "No More Broken Hearts" rally and march for peace. In preparation, 45 volunteers gathered at my house to cut out 3,000 red hearts, writing the name and age of a fallen U.S. soldier on each. The next week, after the rally, 350 of us held those hearts high as we marched towards the center of town. Afterwards, a friend wrote: "These gatherings allow people to stand up…to feel they are NOT powerless to speak up."

### Become a Conduit

• People want to find out what can they do. I send emails to citizen activists sorted by where they live, so I only send what's relevant in their part of the country (to join my list, email aprilwayland@aol.com).

### Light a Fire

• In 2008, author Bruce Balan and I founded Authors and Illustrators for Children, a political action committee (www.AllforC.org) over 1,000 authors & illustrators dedicated to a free, truthful, and safe America for all children.

### Speak Softly

•  Understand that how we speak, how we frame ideas, can change lives. Consider reading linguist George Lakoff's book, Don't Think of an Elephant!  Lakoff's concept of framing changed the way I think, speak and the way I take in new ideas. (And please check this book out of your library or order this book from your local indie—see last item under "Reconsider Everyday Actions," above).

•  Be mindful of how we use language. Linguist George Lakoff advises (paraphrased): No more helpless/hopeless talk. No more anger, fear and cynicism. *Remember: Don't think of an elephant! Don't use the opposition language, or repeat their positions, even to negate them. Use ideas you believe and real facts that are contextualized and morally framed. Avoid isolated facts and numbers. The best resistance is positive persistence.*

### Heal Yourself First, The World Second

• One friend, a professor and expert on immigration law, writes: "This may seem either too Zen or too goofy, but I think of the past eight months as a constant conversation between two versions of "me".  One is trying to respond quickly and effectively to crises as they happen…The other "me" has to take a long-term or at least medium-term view of things.  We're in this …for the long haul.  I don't just mean 2018, or 2020 — it's the arc of U.S. history, and of world history for that matter…This requires not only self-care… but also self-awareness.  Here I'm thinking first about taking stock — understanding what you do well, and doing those things where you're able to make a difference by virtue of contacts, skills, or just being in a certain place at a certain time.  But I'm also thinking about understanding what you don't (yet) do well, and working on those things.  As a simple example, I used to be pretty uncomfortable working with media, but I resolved to get better, and I think I am (at least somewhat), and I'm more comfortable with it and have a better sense of how working with media matters. Sometimes, you do what seems to need doing in the moment.  At other times, you need to step back and think long-term, and that includes self-care (think music, or whatever else allows you to reflect and rejuvenate).

• Meditate. Check out my favorite (free!) meditation app, Insight Timer. You have the option of quiet, timed meditations of any length, or meditating with various sounds (I love sound of monks chanting in a hall), or any of the 8,000+ guided meditations from one minute to more than an hour recorded by meditation teachers from all over the world. I've used many of the sleep meditations, a terrific 12-minute meditation for headache pain led by an Australian teacher, as well as meditations on anxiety, forgiveness, gratitude, morning, etc.

• A friend writes: "The next time you see someone using their phone to film something outrageous, instead of gawking, use that as a visual trigger to actively shape the situation for the positive."

• Be inspired to act by David Hernandez's poem in Alison McGhee's blog post.

**Two Articles Worth Reading:**

1. Social Justice League FTW
From the ShelfTalker blog, PublishersWeekly.com, by Leslie Hawkins of Spellbound Books. This article includes a list of ten books related to social justice for 5-10-year-olds. Here's a taste*: "Over the last few months, Spellbound has been collaborating with one of our local independent toy stores on a series of workshops for kids called the Social Justice League…It's been a great way to introduce kids to ways they can make a difference and be better citizens."*

2. Creativity: One Little Thing
From TeachingAuthors.com, article by author JoAnn Early Macken. Inspired by research for her book, *Take A Closer Look at Plastic*, JoAnn explains how she helped start a movement: "*all over the world / many little things add up: / one big difference.*"

## An Eclectic Bibliography:

Fleischman, Paul. *Cannibal in the Mirror*, photos by John Whalen (Twenty-First Century Books, 2000). Each spread briefly describes a "primitive" custom...the facing page is a photo of present day America. Fascinating.

Gutman, Dan. *Recycle This Book ~ 100 Top Children's Book Authors Tell You How To Go Green*, (Yearling, 2009). One or two-page breezy essays speak directly to young readers.

Hazen, Barbara Shook. *Tight Times*, ill. by Trina Schart Hyman (Viking, 1979).  Beautiful and understated book about poverty from a child's POV.

Johnson, Crockett. *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (HarperCollins, 1955). Shows kids how to be resourceful!

Levy, Debbie. *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark*, ill. by Elizabeth Baddeley (Simon and Schuster, 2016).  This book makes me want to stand up straighter and fight for justice.

Markel, Michelle. *Brave Girl ~ Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909 ,*ill. by Melissa Sweet (Balzer and Bray, 2013). Beautifully written and inspiring. "in America...the bravest hearts may beat in girls only five feet tall."

Rex, Adam. *School's First Day of School*, ill. by Christian Robinson (Roaring Book Press, 2006). This book could be a conversation-starter with kindergarteners about how it feels to be in other's shoes.

Vardell, Sylvia & Wong, Janet. *Here We Go ~ A Poetry Friday Power Book,* ill. by Franzi Paetzold (Pomelo Books, 2017). Designed to help kids think about social change. A must-have in every classroom.

Wayland, April Halprin. *More Than Enough ~ A Passover Story*, ill. by Katie Kath (Dial, 2016). Set on the day of a family's Passover Seder, this book is about staying present and being aware of the blessings in each moment.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Each Kindness*, ill. by E.B. Lewis (Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin, 2012). A powerful book about how our actions affect others.

*This list of suggestions is adapted from a handout originally created for a conference session run by author Janet Wong and Dr. Sylvia Vardell of Pomelo Books at the International Literacy Association's annual conference.*

## About the Author

April Halprin Wayland is an author of poetry and picture books. Among her other life roles, she identifies herself as a traveler, hiker, gardener, folk musician and cloud collector. She teaches in the UCLA Extension Writer's Program and teaches workshops all over the world. She is active in local and national politics. She lives in California with her son, husband, and pets. Learn more by visiting her website at http://www.aprilwayland.com.
Photo: Webb Burns, aprilwayland.com

# Vasquez's
# *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum*

Sherridon Sweeney

*University of South Florida*

Vasquez, V. M. (2016). *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Critical literacy is a bipartisan concern. In the context of polarized political wrangling, drastic potential education reforms, movements toward and against globalization, and the immediacy with which information is made publicly available through the affordances of Web 2.0, scholars and educators from all political positions can agree that the time is now to teach children how to critically engage with the world around them.

Enter *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Continuum*, a book by Vivian Maria Vasquez (2016) in which she argues all the world is text and can therefore be read. Furthermore, she posits the world must be read through a critical lens, with an eye for reimagining unequal relationships of power and control.

In a text written for practicing teachers but accessible (with support) to preservice teachers, Vasquez's (2016) central claim is that teachers can develop a critical curriculum if they attend to the interests and concerns of children's worlds and use those interests and concerns to create learning opportunities, "rather than building [learning opportunities] from a content area" (Vasquez, 2016, p. xxii) or a standardized curriculum. According to Vasquez (2016), this approach to instruction creates space for children to: 1) Examine the relationship between language and power, 2) resist, disrupt, and reimagine dominant social narratives, and, ultimately, 3) participate differently and more powerfully in the world.

Vasquez (2016) repeatedly demonstrates the practical application of her theoretical orientation toward critical literacy throughout each of the 13 chapters of her book, and identifies a wide range of relevant literature and instructional strategies to build her reader's understanding of what constitutes a critical curriculum. In chapter one, she begins with a brief overview of her critical literacy perspective and offers several critical frameworks/models for the reader's "theoretical toolkit" based on the work of respected scholars in the field of critical literacy, including Allan Luke, Peter Freebody, Jerry Harste, Barbara Comber, and Hilary Janks.

In chapters two through 12, Vasquez (2016) uses vignettes to highlight one critical literacy project per chapter that was facilitated either by Vasquez herself or an actual classroom teacher. These critical literacy projects were completed with children who ranged in age from preschool to late elementary school, and span a wide variety of subject areas including mathematics, science, social studies, drama, music, art, media literacy, new technologies, and health and physical education.

Because she only focuses on one project per chapter/vignette, Vasquez (2016) goes into great detail about how the teacher in each vignette enacted critical pedagogy. She is also intentional about tying the teachers' actions back to the theoretical framework introduced in chapter one. Although the detail and tight focus of each vignette give readers a thorough account of one specific instance of a teacher creating and implementing a critical curriculum, this aspect of the text could also prove to be a limitation for newer teachers who do not have extensive teaching experiences to help them make connections to their own novel teaching situations. In other words, experienced teachers will perhaps find Vasquez's use of one single vignette per chapter more helpful than individuals with more limited teaching experience.

One of the most powerful and clear examples of how children's interests and wonderings can serve as the center from which to build critical curriculum is described in chapter five. In this chapter, Vasquez (2016) presents a vignette in which she describes how one first-grade teacher responded to a child's curiosity when he asked why some types of weather were missing from a weather song their class sang every morning. Given the question the child raised, the teacher created a project that allowed the whole class to investigate other types of weather that could possibly be included in the song, then helped the children revise the song to include those additional types of weather.

During this process, the children in the class observed a weather graph and weather cards in their science kit that, like the song, again only included certain types of weather.

This lead them to the realization that other (unknown) individuals were making decisions about the scope and sequence of their learning-a discovery that created space for them to consider issues of power and control in their own local context. Ultimately, the children acted upon their realizations by attempting to redesign the weather curriculum for themselves and their peers.

*Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum* closes with the author's final thoughts about the purpose behind teaching from a critical perspective, ideas she emphasizes repeatedly throughout each chapter. The final pages of the text provide the reader with additional resources related to critical literacy, including information about influences on critical literacy across time, influential theoretical orientations, new directions in the field, and further reading suggestions.

The organization of Vasquez's text is consistent and predictable, and her writing style is clear and concise. One of the most productive aspects of this book is how each chapter closes: The author provides reflection questions that attempt to guide the reader in attending to her/his current classroom practices or brainstorming ways to implement the teaching method(s) introduced in the chapter. The reflection questions lead to a "Try This" section, in which the author offers her own suggestions for ways to enact what she discussed in the chapter. A "Resource Box" closes each chapter out and accomplishes exactly what its title implies by providing additional resources to support the development of the reader's critical pedagogy.

Vasquez's vision for instruction aligns directly with the goals behind democratic and global education (e.g., Banks, 2003; Johnston, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2009), making it a vital and timely read for any educator. The text is replete with practical examples of how critical curriculum can be created and enacted across all content areas in K-6 classrooms, with teaching ideas educators can read about one day and implement the next. As a text that attempts to focus on the theoretical underpinnings and practical execution of critical literacy, *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum* delivers on the promise of its title by explicating many vital tools, dispositions, and resources teachers need to teach from a critical standpoint.

Whether an educator has always approached instruction from a critical literacy perspective and they are in search of ways to refine or grow their practice, or they're just getting started with critical literacy, this book has something to offer everyone. Current events across the globe suggest the time is now for teachers to relentlessly enact a powerful pedagogy of critical literacy in their classrooms, and *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum* is the book to help them do that.

## REFERENCES

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Johnston, P. H. (2012). *Opening minds: Using language to change lives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Souto-Manning, M. (2009). Negotiating culturally responsive pedagogy through multicultural children's literature: Towards critical democratic literacy practices in a first grade classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 9*(1), 50-74.

Vasquez, V. M. (2016). *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum*. New York, NY: Routledge.

## *About the Author*



Sherridon taught 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade in Hillsborough County, Florida for seven years before leaving the classroom in 2016 to pursue her Ph.D. in Literacy Studies at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include pre-service and in-service teacher language as a tool for promoting equity in literacy instruction, critical literacy, and global partnerships.

Currently, Sherridon works as a Literacy Content Coach for the USF Urban Teacher Residency Partnership Program (UTRPP) as well as the USF Cambridge Schools Experience Study Abroad program. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, spending time outside, and all things literacy.

## 2017 AWARD WINNERS

## Award Criteria

The following criteria are used to evaluate the books:

- Overall literary and artistic quality
- Appeals to the intended audience
- Fosters respect and understanding of diverse populations
- Promotes equity, justice, peace, and/or social responsibility
- Presents social issues in their complexity
- Addresses social responsibility towards individuals, communities, societies and/or the environment
- Invites reflection and socially responsible action by the reader
- Analyzes causes of past injustices and/or challenges recent injustices by opening the imagination to other possibilities

*By: Lena Marie Rockwood, Ed.D.*

*Assistant Principal, Revere High School*

*Revere, MA*

**The Literacy and Social Responsibility Special Interest Group** (SIG) of the International Literacy Association awarded the **2017 Social Justice Literature Awards** at the International Literacy Association's 2017 Conference in Orlando, FL.

**An award was given in four categories**: **Fiction, Fiction Picturebook, Nonfiction and Nonfiction Picturebook.** *Book Uncle and Me* by Uma Krishnaswami won in the fiction category. *Splashdance* by Liz Starin won in the fiction picturebook category. *Blood Brother: Jonathan Daniels and his Sacrifice for Civil Rights* by Rick Wallace and Sandra Neil Wallace won in the nonfiction category. And, *Growing Peace: A Story of Farming, Music and Religious Harmony* by Richard Sobol won in the nonfiction picturebook category.

The Literacy and Social Responsibility SIG initiated this award in 2012 to recognize outstanding works of children's and young adult literature that illustrate, in their complexity, issues of social justice and that foster socially responsible action by children, young adults and others

**Read on to learn more details about each of the 2017 Winners!**

## Fiction

## Book Uncle and Me

By Uma Krishnaswami

Yasmin loves to read! Her plan is to read one book every day for the rest of her life. Her friends don't understand her love for reading. She visits the corner lending library run by Book Uncle almost every day to help keep up with her goal. Book Uncle is a retired teacher and his goal is to find the "right book for the right person for the right day" and he has provided Yasmin with just that each day. Yasmin is upset when she visits one day to learn that Book Uncle is no longer able to set up his lending library without a permit and he is packing his things. She finds it hard to think about not having Book Uncle's library to visit as she has visited for as long as she can remember! She is reminded of the story in her recent book, borrowed from the library, about how a flock of doves work together to escape from a hunting net. But what can she do – she's just a kid? This story inspires her to take action and rally the community to protest the new rule requiring a permit for the library which results in uniting the community. The love of reading is a prominenet theme of this book.



## Book Uncle and Me

Uma Krishnaswami, Author

Publisher: Groundwood Books

149 pages

ISBN-13: 978-1554988082

Age Range: 7 - 10
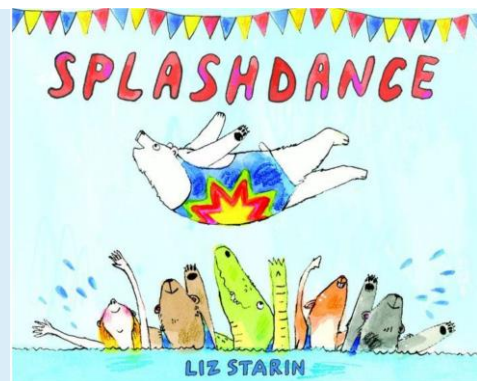
Grade Level: 2 - 6

Lexile Measure: 0580

## Fiction Picturebook

## Splashdance: A Picture Book

By Liz Starin

Ursula, a polar bear, and Ricardo, her human partner, have been training for a water ballet competition. They arrive at the pool one day to learn there is a new rule at the community pool – No Bears Allowed! Ursula tries to disguise herself but when she arrives at the pool she finds Ricardo already has a new partner! Sad, she continues to practice in the pond where she meets a group of animal swimmers. They perfect a routine and find a way to participate in the community pool competition. This results in a new rule – Everyone is welcome!

## Splashdance: A Picture Book

Liz Starin, Author and Illustrator

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR)

32 pages

ISBN-13: 978-0374300982

Age Range: 4 - 8

Grade Level: Preschool – 2nd
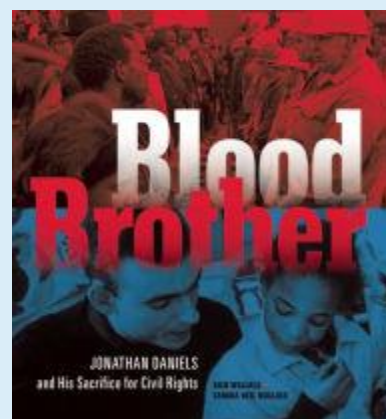
Lexile Measure: 390

## Nonfiction

*Blood Brother: Jonathan Daniels and His Sacrifice for Civil Rights*

By Rick Wallace and Sandra Neil Wallace

Jonathan Daniels was a white seminary student from New England who traveled to Alabama in March, 1965 to participate in the march from Selma to Montgomery. He stayed after the march to register voters and help fight for equal and fair treatment of all people. He was aware of the danger involved and even purchased a life insurance policy as a result. This is a biography that provides facts of Jonathan Daniel's life along with his passion for social justice in the world. The authors share his life story, what led him to this work, the trial of his murderer and the impact these events have had on our legal and political systems. A very powerful story that illustrates the impact of one person's actions.

*Blood Brother: Jonathan Daniels and His Sacrifice for Civil Rights*

Rich Wallace and Sandra Neil Wallace, Authors

Publisher: Calkins Creek

352 pages

ISBN-13: 978-1629790947

Age Range: 11 +

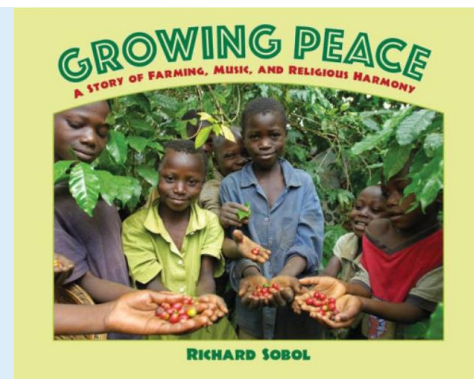Grade Level: 5 – 12

Lexile Measure: 1030L

## Nonfiction Picturebook

*Growing Peace: A Story of Farming, Music and Religious Harmony*

By Richard Sobol

This book tells the story of J.J. Keki, a Ugandan musician and coffee farmer. He was visiting New York City on September 11, 2001 and witnessed the events of 9/11. This event had a remarkable impact on him and his beliefs as they related to the discord between religions. When he returned home he noticed that the children in his village played together without regard to their individual religious beliefs. As a result of his efforts to unify the village, he formed the Peace Kawomera Growers coffee cooperative. This effort helped to bring all members of his village together by working toward a common purpose and goal. They would work together as they bridged their religious differences to find harmony and peace in their work.  The story includes beautiful pictures of the places the author writes about in this book. This truly is a story of 'growing peace' in the world.

*Growing Peace: A Story of Farming, Music and Religious Harmony*

Richard Sobol, Author

Publisher: Lee & Low Books, Inc

40 pages

ISBN-13: 978-1600604508

Age Range: 7 - 12

Grade Level: 2 - 7

Lexile Measure: 890L

*Literacy & Social Responsibility,* a peer-reviewed eJournal of ILA, provides an international forum for educators, authors, and researchers from all levels to promote the intersection of literacy and social responsibility for learners of all ages. Some topics of interest include: community engagement, service-learning, informed and participatory citizenship, social justice, activism, the transformative power of literacy, and/or stewardship - among others. Manuscripts highlighting an appreciation for sociocultural and/or linguistic diversity of participants and researchers are encouraged. Manuscripts containing hyperlinked digital supplements/data displays are particularly welcome.

**Types of Manuscripts Considered:**
• **Full-length manuscripts** should not exceed 5,000 words excluding all references, figures and appendices (approximately 20-25 pages), and should not be published or under consideration for publication or public dissemination by another entity. Submissions must be blinded by (1) removing authors' names and affiliations from bylines, (2) blinding references to authors' published work, and (3) masking any geographic or institutional affiliation, or links to personal websites.
• **Book reviews** of professional literature and children's/adolescent literature are typically 750-1500 words and can focus on a single text or multiple, related texts. Reviews of children's/adolescent literature should suggest themes relating to community engagement, service-learning, informed and participatory citizenship, social responsibility, activism, the transformative power of literacy, and/or stewardship.

**In submitting manuscripts, please attend to the following guidelines.**

1. The submission has a separate cover letter stating that the manuscript has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration for another journal and that requirements for the manuscript type along with the 10 listed guidelines have been followed.
2. The submission has a separate title page with institutional affiliation, position, and contact information (physical address and email address) as a separate document.
3. A running head is used to identify the manuscript, along with page numbers, throughout the document.
4. An abstract of no more than 120 words is included along with 4-6 key words.
5. The submission file is in Microsoft Word format.
6. All URL addresses are active (live).
7. The text is double-spaced; uses a 12-point Times New Roman Font and employs italics rather than underlining (except for URL addresses).
8. The text adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements of APA 6th Edition. For references, the authors should use the special hanging indent option found in the Paragraph sub-menu of the Format dropdown box.
9. Authors of accepted manuscripts must also provide written permission/ releases for use of material from another source (including student's writing samples, text or figures excerpted from another published work, etc.). Releases must also be provided for use of any person's words, likeness, or images/video.
10. Accepted authors agree to submit a current photo and bio.

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**Editors' Contact Information**
Leah Katherine Saal, lksaal@loyola.edu
Tynisha D. Meidl, tynisha.meidl@snc.edu