

# Cultivating Civic Engagement in the Early Grades with Culturally Appropriate Children’s Literature

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Democracy, by many accounts, is on the decline in the United States. Yoni Applebaum, writer for *The Atlantic*, argues that democracy’s decline is not entirely the fault of elected leaders, but of citizens who have failed to practice democracy. He writes, “Americans have fallen out of practice, or even failed to acquire the habit of democracy in the first place.” Although the November 2020 U.S. election had record-breaking voter turnout, democracy is, of course, about more than just voting. Applebaum suggests that a “revival” of democratic behavior is possible, though, and the best time and place for this to occur is in schools and with youth.<sup>1</sup> Many youth, specifically many Indigenous youth and youth of color, are already leading the way, having learned such skills from their communities or from high-quality civic education in middle and high school that encourages civic engagement.<sup>2</sup> However, we believe, along with other civic-minded scholars, that educators can take a leading role in fostering and reinforcing civic engagement and agency even in the early grades.



A number of education theorists propose that promoting civic engagement in classrooms is essential to supporting children in learning how to participate in shaping decisions that affect their lives.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, when children are exposed to opportunities and resources to explore and problem-solve around issues of injustice or unfairness, their participation can make a difference in not only their lives, but in their communities and the world at large.<sup>4</sup> In order to offer these opportunities and resources to children, schools must recognize that children are “citizens,” a term that we understand outside of its usual legal definition. Indeed, we do not mean to suggest a vision of citizenship as focused on patriotism, “obedience, conformity, and individualism,”<sup>5</sup> but instead use the term citizen to mean a person who “solves problems, takes responsibility for building communities, and believes in democracy.”<sup>6</sup> We see the taking of responsibility for building communities as best “expressed through care and concern for one another” in a more relational and “communitarian” way than typical legal expressions of citizenship might suggest.<sup>7</sup> We recognize that this term has baggage—that citizenship was once granted only

to White Americans,<sup>8</sup> that many conceptions of citizenship are limited to legal citizenship, and that citizenship education in the United States has often reproduced a coloniality that further marginalizes Indigenous people.<sup>9</sup> Yet, we use the term citizen to indicate active civic and community engagement that anyone can engage in, regardless of their legal relationship to the nation-state. This article shares one way that children's literature can be used to introduce young children to the concept of citizenship as civic action and engagement.

### Citizenship and Early Childhood Education

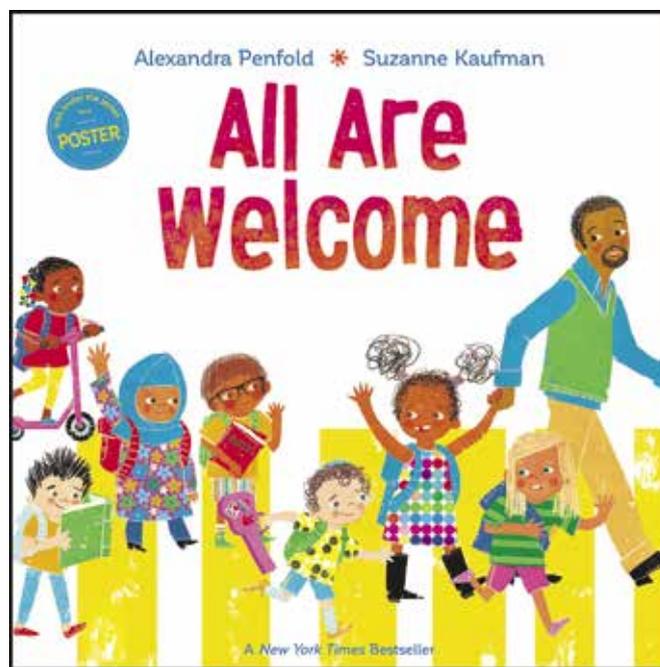
An NCSS Position Statement on social studies in the early childhood grades states, "Early childhood is a time when the foundations of social studies are established, and ... should explicitly attend to engaging and developing young children's capacity for citizenship, democratic or civic activity."<sup>10</sup> Further, this statement suggests that teachers include diversity, social justice, and anti-bias education as part of this civic learning, particularly as U.S. classrooms become increasingly diverse in terms of language, race, ethnicity, class, and national origin.<sup>11</sup> We know that democratic behavior is not a trait that children are born with;<sup>12</sup> instead, it is complex social behavior that is learned. This learning can take place as soon as children emerge from their private home lives to their first substantial encounter with the public—in other words, their school and classroom. Without such learning, educator Walter Parker warns, individuals might become "concerned myopically with private things and unmindful of common things," acting like ships without rudders. The Greeks called this unfortunate attitude a state of idiocy, which Parker explains is a term whose root means "private, separate, and self-centered."<sup>13</sup>

To combat this potential state of self-centeredness, we suggest three read-aloud activities using children's literature to support students' growth towards active, inclusive engagement in the classroom, neighborhood, and the broader world. These read-alouds and activities promote civic learning that teaches elementary students how to value and respect diversity in their community, how diversity within a community can benefit the community as a whole, and how to act as civic agents for the betterment of their communities. By bringing in student voice and background knowledge, the activities create a space for children to share their own knowledge and experiences with civic and community engagement. We encourage teachers to ask probing questions and then listen to how student responses might reveal the assets that each child brings with them with regard to civic life, regardless of the child's background.<sup>14</sup>

### Focus on the Home Culture and the Local Environment

Children start to learn new information and improve their understanding by engaging in their local environments. As teachers, we should build on what children already know and understand. From this point of view, we chose books and cultur-

ally responsive practices<sup>15</sup> that showcase actions students can take in their local environments, even as the narratives in the books move from the classroom environment, to the neighborhood, and to the larger world beyond. Through culturally responsive practices, we used students' experiences and points of view as a tool to connect with their cultures effectively and as a bridge to reach a new concept of civic engagement. In light of critiques that the expanding horizons curriculum, by nature of its ever-widening scope from the local to the global, might "alienate young students from their local environments,"<sup>16</sup> we were careful to choose books and activities that honor the local and showcase civic action that students can take in any locale. The activities accompanying the read-alouds underscore the actions students can take in their local setting, encouraging them to connect to their own lives and context. In what follows, we share an overview of each book, along with lesson ideas that can support student learning around issues of civic and community engagement.



### Lesson 1: Understanding and Appreciating the Need for Diversity in the Classroom Community

We suggest teachers start this sequence by engaging students in a read-aloud of the *New York Times* bestselling children's book *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold. The book depicts a school community of children and families that includes racial diversity, and a range of physical abilities, as well as differing genders, religions, and family dynamics. The illustrations, by Suzanne Kaufman, show the members of the community caring, celebrating, and respecting each other. Both the illustrations and text provide windows that reveal other people's identities and mirrors that reflect students' own identities.<sup>17</sup> Taken together, the text and illustrations show a class of students who work together, share stories, eat different foods, find strength

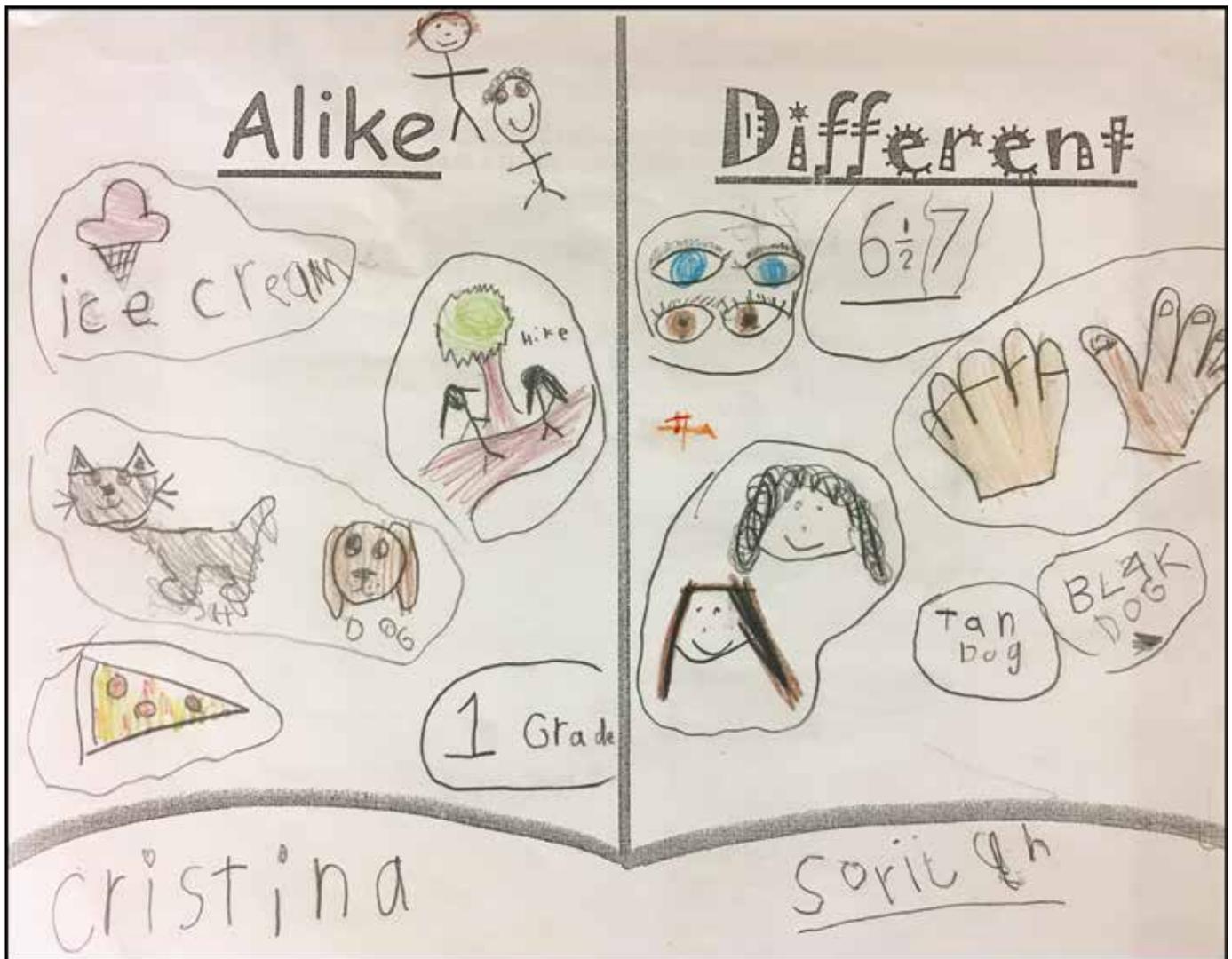
in diversity, learn from each other through everyone's unique talents, and find solace in a welcoming community. The book, then, supports the following learning goals:

- Children will understand that everybody is unique in their own way
- Children will become aware of and see the value of different aspects of identity

NCSS promotes similar outcomes. Theme 10 of the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, "Civic Ideals and Practices," guides this read-aloud, which supports students in learning how to live with and act towards others in a multiracial and multicultural community. This goal aligns with our focus on civic engagement, which requires a commitment to diversity if we are to successfully challenge injustices and protect the rights of all people. To support a diverse democracy, civic action must be practiced with a curiosity for discovering the assets in diversity. Reading and discussing this book is one way to begin developing that asset-based perspective in students.

To meet these ambitious goals, we recommend that after teachers read the book aloud, they choose five or six of the book's characters for children to analyze closely. Teachers can ask general questions first, and then more detailed questions while often returning to the pages of the text for examples and evidence. During this process, teachers and students collaboratively record and display essential points about the topic on an anchor chart. Topics include the characters' physical traits, interests, and skills, all of which are depicted through illustrations. Having created a class anchor chart, the teacher can then support students as they identify what makes the characters similar and different from themselves. Teachers could then re-read the book, highlighting the point that even though all of the characters in the school community have differences, they can join together to make a welcoming and safe classroom environment. We suggest teachers ask questions such as:

- What would happen if everyone in the classroom was exactly the same?
- Why is it important that everyone has different



characteristics in the class?

- What can we learn from people who are different from us?

As an extension or as a next-day follow-up, students can draw self-portraits highlighting their own unique features (e.g., black hair), and depicting themselves doing an activity that they like to do (e.g., “Going to the auto shop with my uncle”). Self-portrait is a way that children can draw themselves through their own eyes.

Teachers can provide students with a list of prompts to help them think of their characteristics, such as physical descriptions of hair and eyes, as well as likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, and wants or needs—as revealed in students’ favorite activities (e.g., “We go to the store because we need food for meals”). Students could also use the character anchor chart from the previous activity to scaffold their thinking.

After students create their own portraits, they can work with a partner to compare their portraits using the two columns, “Alike and Different,” in a T-chart. The papers can be hung on the wall and students can examine the portraits. Teachers might ask the following questions:

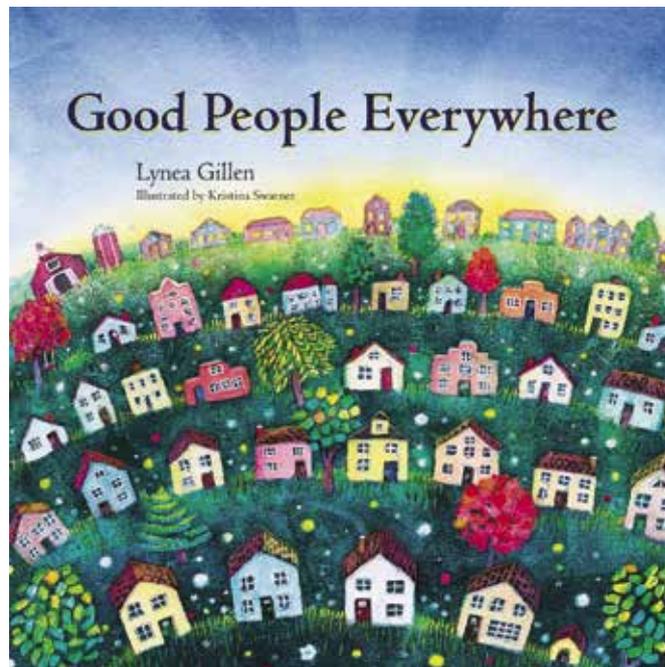
- What do you think about such very different portraits that have been created by you and your classmates?
- Are people ever put down or picked on because they are different somehow? Can you think of an example from a story, or from real life? Has that ever happened to you?
- Did you ever go to a birthday party or visit a relative where the food was different? Did you like that, or not? Tell us about it.

Students can also talk about how the differences between them in knowledge, skills, and abilities can actually be helpful to everyone in many different ways. For example, it would be helpful that Marie can speak Spanish when we visit a Mexican grocery store. Miko is tall, so he can reach the basketball on the top shelf. Samantha, who is in a wheel chair, can sing dozens and dozens of songs from memory, which we all enjoy.

## Lesson 2: Acknowledging the Valuable Contributions of Diverse Community Members

The second lesson revolves around the book *Good People Everywhere* written by Lynea Gillen with illustrations by Kristina Swarner. The book, a winner of the Mom’s Choice Award, Teacher’s Choice Award, and Moonbeam Children’s Book Award, begins with the words, “Today, all over the world, millions and millions of people are doing very good things.” The book provides children a variety of perspectives on how citizens (which we understand broadly as anyone working to build community), can act to create cultures of kindness, empathy, and care. Therefore, the book can be used to encourage children to

think of ways they can help others in their communities and see the valuable contributions of “ordinary people” everywhere. Some students may be reminded of people they know in their communities reflected in this book, people who might not be mentioned in traditional lessons about citizenship, such as the dancers who bring joy to their communities, carpenters who repair homes damaged by a storm, cooks who make meals for those without homes, and farmworkers who plant seeds and harvest fruits and vegetables.



Before reading the book aloud, we encourage teachers to discuss the concept of community. Teachers could use this definition and these initial examples: A “community” is any group of people who are supporting each other in all sorts of ways. A community can be of any size. For example, a grandmother, mother, and child living together can be called a family, or a small community. This classroom can come to life as a community. Your neighborhood is a community. Some people like to see the whole world as one big community.

The teacher could then ask, “Can you think of some groups of people that you would like to call “a community”?” Possible responses could include: family, classroom, schools, neighborhood, city, country, continent, and world. The teacher can plan a station rotation by dividing children into groups, then having each group move from station to station, answering a question at each station. Alternatively, depending on the age of the students, the teacher may invite the class to brainstorm answers to the following questions, which could be listed on chart paper:

- Who are the people, places, and things that make up a family?
- Who are the people, places, and things that make up a classroom?

- Who are the people, places, and things who make up a school?
- Who are the people, places, and things who make up a neighborhood?

Then, after reading *Good People Everywhere* to students, the teacher can make connections between the examples offered by students (during the activities above) and the examples suggested by characters in the book. For example, the book shows parents preparing dinner or helping neighbors, and students are likely to have described similar activities occurring in their own lives.

The teacher could add examples from the book to the class-created chart, listing different people, places, and things who make up the various communities, as well as the types of positive actions the characters take to make their communities a better place. For example, in the book, farmers help the community by driving the products they grow to grocery stores. The teacher and students might add this example to the chart (under the fourth bullet in the list above). Connecting the book's narrative to students' classroom experiences, teachers can ask, "What can you do in your classroom to help others?" "What ways can your friends help others in the classroom?" We encourage teachers to use this opportunity to reiterate the importance of the different skills and strengths diverse individuals bring to their communities at every level.

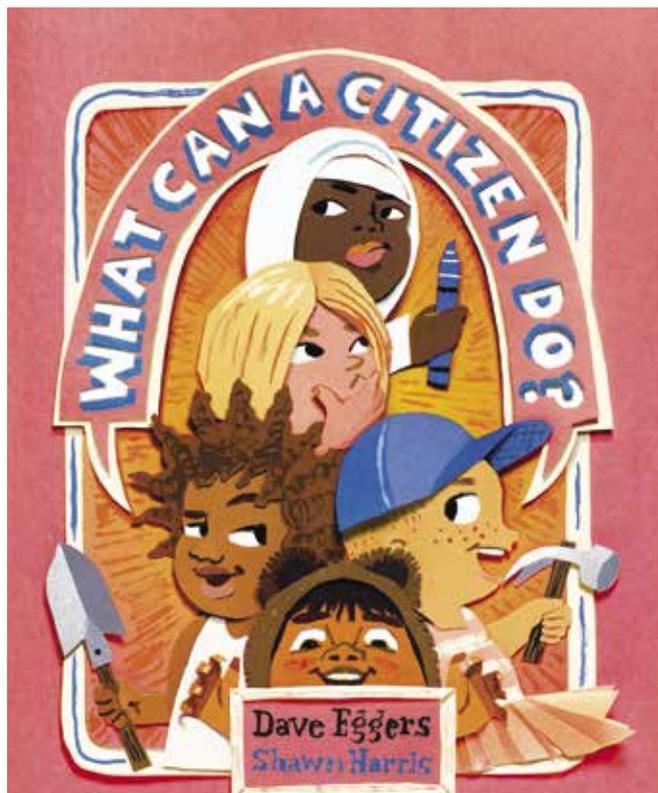
As an extension or follow-up activity, teachers could use the charts from the lesson to support students as they think about a member of their neighborhood or school community who is deserving of thanks for helping to build community. Connecting with English language arts standards, students could decorate thank you cards for the people in their neighborhoods and other communities who help their fellow human beings through everyday interactions. Then, students can reflect on their own role in the neighborhood or school community when the teacher asks, "How can you use your special skills, talents, and interests to help people in your community?"

As a closing, students can individually complete the statement, "I will help my community by..." and draw a picture of their action to create their own class book similar to *Good People Everywhere*. These activities support Theme 6 of the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: "Power, Authority, and Governance," as young children learn what it means to be part of a just community as well as how to balance their individual rights and responsibilities as citizens.

### Lesson 3: Recognizing the Value of Civic Action and Understanding the Role of Citizens

The third lesson centers on the book *What Can a Citizen Do?* by Dave Eggers, with illustrations by Shawn Harris. This is a book that elaborates on community issues including voting, decision-making, and cooperation as it promotes democratic and civic ideals. The illustrations represent children from differ-

ent religions and races. Through words and text, the book shows that everyone in this world can contribute to their communities and make the world a better place. Moreover, Eggers's use of the phrase, "A citizen is just like you," emphasizes that a citizen can be anyone, regardless of nationality, birthplace, or age. This notion of citizenship reclaims the term from its exclusionary legal use and reframes citizens as "co-creators of democracy."<sup>18</sup>



We encourage the teacher to begin the lesson by creating a T-chart or an anchor chart on the board. One column can be labeled, "Who is a citizen?" The other column can be labeled "What can a citizen do?" Then, teachers should read the book aloud to the class, pausing to add entries to the T-chart, and ultimately leading students to define citizenship expansively, as well as develop a list of civic actions that young people could enact. For example, the book shows children writing letters, planting trees, helping neighbors, and even righting an overturned wild turtle.

As a closing, students could individually think about what civic actions they can take as citizens. The teacher could then provide every student with a large, blank puzzle piece (cut perhaps from a large circle), on which they can draw or write a civic action they could enact to make their classroom, school, or community a better place.

Ultimately the students can work collaboratively to fit the puzzle pieces together on a large bulletin board or classroom wall, similar to how the young people in the book each contribute to building a treehouse. The puzzle creates a visual reminder of ways students can be citizens, and the teacher can emphasize the importance once again of the benefits that come

from diverse talents and skills, as we need all of the differences in a community to create a cohesive whole. We need all the pieces of the puzzle.

## Differentiating the Lessons

Teachers can also try to include immigrant and refugee parents to support their children's learning at home by using translanguaging strategies.<sup>19</sup> To create a translanguaging classroom, the books used in the activities can be translated to students' home languages through an online translation application (although it's always advised to have a fluent speaker of the language check these computer-created translations, if at all possible). Teachers can encourage students to read other children's books with their parents at home using books written in English as well as the home language. This preview activity can enable children to familiarize themselves with the academic language such as "citizen" and "community" in their home languages, so when teachers read aloud the same book in English to the whole class, the concepts behind English vocabulary words will already be familiar. Teachers can also consult bilingual, immigrant, and refugee parents while preparing bilingual displays for classroom walls.

## Conclusion

Students in the elementary grades may not be in a position to engage in the types of justice-oriented civic engagement generally reserved for older youth and adults, such as organizing community marches or protests, voting, attending a town hall meeting, or deliberating in sophisticated ways about current events.<sup>20</sup> What they can do, however, is begin the essential learning necessary for justice-oriented citizenship later in life, such as coming to understand the value of diversity in communities, the ways individuals can use their diverse strengths to benefit their communities, and how, together with others, citizens can build something meaningful using their different abilities and drawing upon their different life histories. We see this learning as helping young people avoid self-centeredness and aloneness, and grow an awareness of their own civic agency. Developing these democratic dispositions at an early age, we believe, can support students' ability to solve problems of injustice as they continue throughout their lives.🌍

## Notes

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